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## **WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY: TIME TO TAKE A DIFFERENT PATH<sup>1</sup>**

By Helga Konrad<sup>2</sup>

Over the past 75 years, we have seen significant progress in realizing human rights: we have witnessed the end of colonialism and the advancement of social justice. We have witnessed the dismantling of apartheid and combating discrimination, including racism, sexism and homophobia. We can see these days increasing acceptance and understanding of the LGBTIQ+ community – and last but not least, the recognition of women's rights as human rights.

But we know, of course, that many, too many people around the world continue to suffer from human rights abuses, including discrimination, violence and exploitation – and therefore, we will have to continue to advocate for the protection and promotion of these rights for all – a commitment that is clearly expressed in CoNGO's<sup>3</sup> slogan: DEFINING THE PRESENT, SHAPING THE FUTURE, MAKING THE CHANGE NOW.

No other political, social or cultural issue of comparable magnitude is as fundamentally questioned as

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote speech delivered at the First Global Commemorative Celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of CoNGO (Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations) held at the United Nations Vienna International Center, in Vienna, Austria on 28 April 2023.

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<sup>3</sup> CoNGO refers to the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, an international NGO in general consultative status with the UN.

the discrimination of women. “The equal participation of women is the paradigm shift we need,” said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the most recent UN conference on the Status of Women. “Women’s equal participation is the game changer we need,” he stressed.

The demand for equality between women and men is as old as the first proclamations of human rights in the Age of Enlightenment. There was, for instance, Olympe de Gouges, who pointed out that the French Declaration of Human Rights of 1789 concept was dominated only by male thoughts and interests. As an alternative, she wrote the “*Declaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*,” by which she demanded equal rights of women regarding liberty, property, security, the right to residence against suppression and the right to participate in the creation of law.<sup>4</sup>

Women, however, remained excluded from the creation of law, the studies of jurisprudence, and the performance of the legal professions at least until the 20th century. At the time when women were finally entitled to participate in political decision-making, the structure and content of the law and judicial process were already highly developed. Therefore, it is unsurprising that an evident lack of equal opportunities for women in performing their rights still exists today.

Although formal equal rights for women and men as a matter of principle seem to be beyond dispute nowadays, their application may – because the lives and social conditions of women and men are different – lead to disparities in society, e.g., with regards to the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work, share of income or benefits within social security systems. Therefore, even formal equal rights – with a view to substantial equality in society – have to be examined and – if needed – be amended.

Through the years, women have progressed in various areas: We have witnessed some women presidents, prime ministers, Nobel Prize winners, parliamentarians, community leaders, CEOs, etc. But serious challenges persist – cultural attitudes that debase women, gender violence, limited access to qualitative healthcare, and laws that favor men – to name a few.

Irrespective of national and international laws and instruments adopted decades ago, which outline internationally accepted, binding standards regarding the rights of women applicable to all women in all societies and all spheres of life, even though many laws and instruments have been developed and created at national levels (despite some undeniable progress), women are still exposed to manifold discrimination in almost all fields of activity in their daily lives.

The enlightenment of our modern societies about the all-dimensionality of inequality and unequal treatment between women and men has not yet progressed as far as would be desirable. Women are disadvantaged in the social and economic spheres. The labor market is still divided into a women’s labor market, which is frequently characterized by stagnation and marginalization, and a men’s labor market, which is dynamic and where pay is higher. Women are passed over and disadvantaged, irrespective of their education, professional training, their performance and their commitment.

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<sup>4</sup> See: Anna Sporrer, Grundrechte für Frauen im internationalen Kontext, Vereinte Nationen, Europarat, Europäische Gemeinschaften, in Mesner/Steger-Mauerhofer (Hg.), Der Tod der Olympe de Gouges – 200 Jahre Kampf um Gleichberechtigung und Grundrechte, Wien 1994, S 79ff.

Too many women worldwide are refused the right to self-determination about their bodies. Genital mutilation is still the rule in many countries on our globe. Women are still burned, killed in disputes over dowries or forced into marriage. Female fetuses are forcefully aborted, and women are outcasts because they have borne girls. Women are exposed to sexist forms of violating their dignity and their right to physical and mental integrity, such as torture, sexual abuse, and rape (often as part of war strategies), not the least trafficking in women and girls.

Women and girls have to suffer structural violence, often facing significant economic barriers, including limited or no access to credit. There are still substantial income gaps between women and men. Women are underrepresented in political leadership positions, and their voices are often excluded from decision-making processes. Women's access to healthcare is often limited by so-called cultural and socioeconomic factors and gender-based discrimination. Gender stereotyping perpetuates harmful norms and limits opportunities for women and girls.

In many countries, including our Western democracies, violations of women's rights and discrimination is more often the rule than the exception, until today. Women's rights are frequently not recognized as human rights. The numerous infringements of women's rights in the private sphere are not even perceived as human rights violations. The so-called 'family' violence, male violence against women (and often children) — the worst form of discrimination — will inevitably come up in any critical argument about gender relationships.

Even if we agree that not all men are wielding their power over women, that not all men are perpetrators, and that not all women are directly exposed to sexist or structural forms of violence and discrimination, the fact is that the massive violation of women's rights and widespread discrimination of women in all spheres of life does have an impact on all men and all women. This means that it is not about individual destinies. Discrimination is always collective and has a strong structural component. Denying these structures only reproduces them.

We do not need significant sociological studies to conclude that the structures of our prevailing gender relationship, namely asymmetry, hierarchy, polarization and power, have not been thoroughly shaken by national or international laws and conventions, including the Universal Declaration for Human Rights of 1948. The fundamental ideas behind human rights and women's rights, namely, freedom from poverty and violence, equal working and living conditions, self-determination and responsible participation in all society, are the benefits women worldwide are still waiting for and have not yet been translated into practice, at least not for women.

This indicates that the road to an egalitarian gender relationship is littered with obstacles, conflicting interests and contrasting circumstances and that we are not yet living in "gender democracies." The responses to this ultimately undemocratic situation must consist of a clear and serious commitment of all relevant stakeholders and decision-makers to changes in the societal structure in the interest of gender equality.

Economic recession and tight labor markets are often used as a pretext to favor and sanction the attempts to halt or at least to break the process of achieving equality for and ending discrimination against women. Again and again, women feel, with varying degrees of intensity, that the achievements of women's policies are still not secure nor safeguarded and that we cannot satisfy ourselves with the hard-won progress that has been made to date.

We must also be aware of and recognize the introduction of the term “gender mainstreaming,” which means that women’s policies are infused into the existing systems of gender injustice and violence that exist and continue to be present in the gender relationship and that the profound grievances endured by many women are being marginalized and hidden, just as the political nature of discrimination which is based on gender. Just as structural inequalities cannot be eliminated through mentoring and coaching (how to style or color yourself), can “gender mainstreaming” not replace a sustainable, broad-based approach to achieving gender equality.

The equitable sharing of family work between women and men, the expansion and further development of female employment so that women can live independently, and the ending of violence against women have for many decades formed the central feminist consensus of women's policies. We cannot ignore or avoid this integrated consensus if we want to move towards natural, “de facto” gender equality.

“The desire for harmony is the arch enemy of rational cognition processes,” stated the German feminist Frigga Haug. I fully agree with her in this regard. I want to encourage all of us to undertake both a creative and, at times, argumentative, discomfiting discussion and analysis of the prevailing conditions and policies designed to eliminate gender as a factor determining people's chances in life.

In this context, the 75th anniversary of CoNGO may also be understood as a call for concerted action against and resistance to the entrenched, patriarchal structures by systematically (and ruthlessly) dismantling the opponents' tactics – in the EU and around the world.

“If we want to change the existing conditions, then the common understanding of equality, freedom and justice must be constantly revisited and rethought. Otherwise, we will reproduce gender inequalities and conditions for violence at another level.” (Erna Appelt)

The motto of CoNGO, 'Defining the Present, Shaping the Future, Making the Change Now' is a powerful call to action that highlights the importance of our collective responsibility for the present and future state of our world and the willingness of NGOs to play a crucial role in defining it by bringing attention to social, economic, environmental and gender issues that affect millions of people worldwide.

CoNGO's multilateralism is a fundamental principle of international cooperation for addressing complex and pressing challenges. It is essential to achieve shared objectives by promoting inclusivity and diversity, which can help build trust, foster collaboration, and promote more sustainable and equitable outcomes. It ensures that stakeholders, organizations, and politicians are held accountable for their actions and activities and promotes efficiency by enhancing the impact of their work. By working together, we may also generate new ideas and solutions.

It is essential to recognize the interconnectedness of gender, race, poverty, and environment and adopt a holistic approach to addressing these issues. It will also mean addressing emerging challenges to human rights, such as the rise of authoritarianism, the impact of new technologies (including artificial intelligence), and the implications of climate change for human rights.

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