



The Irish Association
of Non-Governmental
Development Organisations

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Tuesday 23rd March 2021

Introduction

Chair, deputies and senators, I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity for members of Dóchas, the Irish network of international development and humanitarian organizations, to meet and brief you on the impact that Covid-19 has had on the progress towards gender equality globally.

The last time Dóchas appeared officially before the committee in October of last year, this committee discussed Ireland's implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals both in Ireland and overseas. SDG 5 - Achieving Gender Equality - means we commit to ending all forms of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against all women and girls everywhere. It means recognising the value of unpaid care and domestic work. It means ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life. It means ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights and economic rights and resources.

Above all, SDG 5 means that governments must adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels.

I am particularly pleased we are meeting you this month as it coincides with a number of global events on gender equality. The 65th session of the [United Nations Commission on the Status of Women \(CSW65\)](#), the UN's largest annual gathering on gender equality and women's empowerment is currently taking place, and the [Generation Equality Forum](#), organized by UN Women and co-hosted France and Mexico will begin at the end of March having been delayed by a year because of COVID.

It is timely also that we discuss this issue today as the Citizens Assembly here in Ireland resumes its work to explore recommendations to advance gender equality. Our efforts at home are inextricably linked with efforts at the EU, regionally, and internationally to ensure women's rights.

It's over 25 years since the landmark **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action** were agreed at the Fourth UN World Women's Conference when 189 states, including Ireland, declared their: "Determination to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity". Since then we know that progress on gender equality has been too slow despite some positive steps forward.

Not a single country today can claim to have achieved gender equality, nor can any country claim to be one where women feel completely safe on our streets as the recent tragic death of Sarah Everard walking home in London demonstrates. This must change.

Today however, we wish to focus on the specific impacts that Covid-19 has had on women and girls across the world and we ask this Committee to become a champion for them.

The UN secretary general, Antonio Guterres recently said that gender inequality was the world's biggest human rights scourge, "The crisis has a woman's face," he said. "Violence against women and girls in all forms has skyrocketed, from online abuse to domestic violence, trafficking, sexual exploitation and child marriage." We also know that woman's jobs are 2 times more vulnerable than men's and indeed we are currently seeing large volumes of women leaving the workforce as a result of the current pandemic.

To speak to these issues in more detail, I'm delighted to be accompanied today by colleagues from Plan International in Jordan, Christian Aid's partner ABColumbia and the Irish Family Planning Association (the IFPA), who will speak about the impact of the pandemic on girls' education, displacement, conflict and reproductive health.

What each theme has in common is that there has to be a renewed urgency to finding gender transformative policy responses that not only build back better, but in a more equal way. We need to ensure that Ireland in every facet of its foreign policy, positions gender equality at the centre of its approach towards a healthy and peaceful world. In effect, Ireland must deliver on Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

We ask this committee to:

- Ensure there is a more robust tracking of Ireland's progress in furthering the SDG agenda in its partner countries and internationally, including tracking data on marginalized groups, including women and girls, and people living with disabilities.
- Support the **EU's Gender Action Plan (GAP) III** and call on the Irish Government to swiftly operationalize it, including the commitment to allocate 85% of ODA to programmes which have gender equality as their principal objective, and to support the implementation of a gender responsive recovery plan.
- Support Ireland's international commitment in its '**A Better World**' policy to addressing girls' education as a priority. We need a clear roadmap that outlines how Irish Aid intends to commit to and spend at least **€250m over five years to global education**
- Work with the Irish government to ensure it uses its voice on the UN Security Council to encourage all countries to **fully implement the commitments in the Convention on the Rights of all Forms of Elimination of Discrimination against Women (known as CEDAW)**. Ireland needs to be a champion of not just Women, Peace and Security, but also of gender equality more broadly.

I will now hand you over to Muna Abbas, Head of Mission and Country Director with Plan International in Jordan who will speak to you about the situation in Jordan with respect to girl's education, Covid-19 and displacement.

Girls Education, Jordan

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education in history. Most governments around the world have temporarily closed schools and other learning spaces in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. At the peak of the pandemic, these nationwide closures impacted more than 1.5 billion students, or over 90% of the world's student population, from pre-primary to higher education in 200 countries.¹ This unprecedented disruption to education has the potential to roll back the gains made on girls' education in recent decades. While global figures showing gender parity in education are often cited as a great success story for gender equality, these figures mask large regional, national and local disparities. On average, just two in three countries have achieved gender parity in primary, one in two in lower secondary, and one in four in upper secondary education enrolment.²

¹ UNESCO. 2020. Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by COVID-19. Paris, UNESCO.

² UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). 2020. UNESCO Institute for Statistics Database. Montreal, UIS.

Evidence from past crises shows that girls are particularly vulnerable in the face of prolonged school closures. School closures have been found to exacerbate girls' and women's unpaid care work, limiting the time available to learn at home.³ The gender digital divide and girls' reduced access to information and communication technology (ICT), even in contexts with high mobile and internet coverage, also translates into reduced learning opportunities during school closures.⁴

In the longer term, the global disruption to education presents the opportunity to **build back equal** and establish a *new normal* for girls.

Conflict, Peace and the role of Women – A perspective from ABColombia

Agenda 2030 for the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognises that development cannot be achieved without addressing violent conflict and building peace.ⁱ In 2016, more countries experienced violent conflict than at any time in nearly 30 years. If current trends persist, by 2030—the horizon set by the international SDGs—more than half of the world's poor will be living in countries affected by high levels of violence.ⁱⁱ Much of this violence is due to reoccurring violence and protracted conflicts.

COVID-19 is adding to economic, health and societal fragility, exacerbating existing pressuresⁱⁱⁱ. The United Nations Security Council called for a global ceasefire at the beginning of the pandemic in recognition of the fact that in contexts where violence is concentrated or on the rise, mitigating the impact of COVID-19 requires a focus on preventing violent conflict and building peace. However, with few exceptions, the call has gone unanswered by violent actors.^{iv}

ABColombia is a partner of Christian Aid Ireland - a partnership of people, churches and local organisations committed to ending poverty worldwide and recognises that without a clear focus on peace, there can be no sustainable development.

For the next few minutes, I am going to focus on Colombia. Ireland has a long history of supporting peace in Colombia – not only through Irish Aid, but also through Irish politicians and other experts who assisted the negotiators both prior to and during official peace talks. Eamon Gilmore also took on a key role for the European Union, that of Special Envoy for the

³ UNFPA. 2020. State of the World Population Report 2020. New York, UNFPA

⁴ UNESCO. 2020. Gender Dimensions of School Closures. Paris, UNESCO.

Colombian Peace Process. It is therefore good to see Ireland taking up a seat on the UN Security Council. As Colombia appears every three months on the agenda, it will give Ireland the possibly of further consolidating the important investments it has made to date on peace in Colombia. **This is particularly crucial as we are approaching, in November of this year, the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Peace Accord.**

Colombia is at a very fragile point in the peace process. According to the Ministry of Defence, compared to the last year of the peace negotiations the number of victims of massacres in Colombia quadrupled in 2020 and combats increased by 65%.^v Neo-paramilitary and other illegal armed groups have strengthened their social and territorial control in areas vacated by the FARC. January of this year was recorded as the most violent month since the peace deal was signed, with over 11,000 people displaced due to armed groups, particularly, the neo-paramilitary groups seeking to expand their control over communities, territory, and illicit economies. 90% of those displaced belong to ethnic communities from the Colombian Pacific, an area rich in natural resources. The majority of those displaced are women. Increased targeted killings have also resulted in over 400 human rights defenders since the signing of the Accord and 261 FARC former combatants being killed by these armed groups.

The Coronavirus pandemic has played into this context and we have seen it particularly impacting on women aggravating inequality and poverty. Women's participation in the labor market has fallen to the levels of ten years ago, as the pandemic hit particularly hard informal work in which women were engaged. Domestic violence against women increased as did femicides with 444 femicides in 2020.

Women human rights defenders have particularly suffered, with armed groups taking advantage of the pandemic. According to the Human Rights Ombudsman (*Defensoría del Pueblo*) there was a 140% increase in the attacks against Women defenders and a 20% increase in killings when compared to 2019. Confinement as a measure against the coronavirus has meant those threatening women defenders, have been able to easily locate them and many women defenders have been shot in, or near, their homes.

The Peace Accord recognised that it was not possible to establish peace without addressing the disproportionate impact of the conflict on women, which exacerbated poverty, left many women as heads of households, widened the inequality gap and saw sexual and gender violence perpetrated as a weapon of war. Therefore, one of the unique features of the Colombian Peace Accord is that it wove into all of the agreements specific gender provisions. These gender provisions have the potential for structural change by reducing gender

inequalities and furthering the rights of rural women. Which is why in considering gender, development and human rights in Colombia, the Peace Accord is an important road map not only for peace building but also for good governance policies especially for women. Comprehensive implementation of these programs would contribute to gender empowerment and equality.

However, and I cannot say this strongly enough one of the major challenges threatening to undermine the Colombian Peace Process is the **escalation of violence**. Ireland's focus whilst on the Security Council should be on mechanisms that will support Colombia to address this.

Colombia is a country which, compared to many other complex situations of conflict around the world, has a real possibility of achieving peace. It needs a country like Ireland to throw its weight and experience behind achieving the appointment of an expert group on organised crime that can offer the technical expertise needed at this time.

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights - the Irish Family Planning Association

A Better World, Ireland's Policy for International Development, which is grounded in human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, recognises sexual and reproductive health and rights as central to gender equality and to universal health coverage. It commits Ireland to advancing and protecting the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, including actions on sexual and reproductive health.

According to A Better World, "access to health services, including access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, is fundamental for realising sexual and reproductive health and rights and transforming women's health outcomes." The pandemic has had devastating impacts on women's and girls' access to these basic health services.

In a 2020 policy brief on the impact of the pandemic on women,⁵ UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, outlines the unique health needs of women and girls, and the social norms and gender stereotypes which act as barriers to access to services. According to the report,

⁵ UN Secretary General (2020), The impact of COVID-19 on women, available: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>

the diversion of attention and critical resources away from essential sexual and reproductive health services can result in exacerbated maternal mortality and morbidity, increased rates of adolescent pregnancies, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.⁶

Last November, Minister Brophy launched the 2020 State of World Population (SWOP) report.⁷ Published by UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, the report estimated the impact of the pandemic on girls. According to the report, programmes designed to promote gender equality by ending child marriage and female genital mutilation are facing serious delays in implementation.

At a conservative estimate, a one-year average delay in interventions to end child marriage could lead to over 7 million more child marriages over the next decade that otherwise could have been averted. In addition, the SWOP report projected that the pandemic-caused economic downturn could result in an estimated 5.6 million additional child marriages taking place between 2020 and 2030. The total effect of Covid-19 is therefore projected to result in 13 million additional child marriages.

According to the State of World Population report, if the pandemic causes a two-year delay in female genital mutilation-prevention programmes, 2 million female genital mutilation cases would occur over the next decade that would otherwise have been averted. Progress towards the elimination of FGM by 2030 (Sustainable Development Goal Target 5.5) could be reduced by one third.⁸

Analysis conducted in 115 low- and middle-income countries in January 2021 by UNFPA and Avenir Health suggests that while many countries were able to maintain or restore access to essential health services, an estimated 12 million women may have been unable to access family planning services during the pandemic, with disruption of supplies and services lasting an average of 3.6 months. As a result of these disruptions, as many as 1.4 million unintended pregnancies may have occurred before women were able to resume use of family planning services.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Against My Will: Defying the Practices that Harm Women and Girls and Undermine Equality, available at: [SWOP Report 2020 | UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund](#)

⁸ UNFPA, Avenir Health, Johns Hopkins University (USA) and Victoria University (Australia) (2020), Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage, available: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf

⁹ UNFPA (2021), *Impact of COVID-19 on Family Planning: What we know one year into the pandemic*, available: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID_Impact_FP_V5.pdf

The forthcoming session of the **Commission on Population and Development (April 2021)** will focus on the impact of Covid-19 on sexual and reproductive health in the context of population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development.

The report by the UN Secretary General in advance of the Commission noted the need for innovative solutions to prioritise the coverage of sexual and reproductive health care, including family planning, emergency contraception, the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, post-abortion care and, where legal, safe abortion services to the full extent of the law.¹⁰

FGM, child marriage and unintended pregnancy have devastating impacts on adolescent girls—impacting their physical and mental health, their ability to stay in education, their capacity to reach their full potential. Investment in sexual and reproductive health, including programmes that support the elimination of harmful practices; support the right of women and couples to choose the number and spacing of any children they choose to have; reduce unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion through the provision of comprehensive sexuality education; contraceptive services and supplies and safe and legal abortion care, will have transformative impacts on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

UNFPA, in its 2020 pandemic response plan identified a funding gap of \$276.5 million USD, which would be required to meet the sexual and reproductive health needs of those in humanitarian, fragile and development contexts.¹¹

Ireland is a consistent supporter of UNFPA, which oversees implementation of the ICPD agenda, and contributes core funding of €3.5 million a year. In addition, Ireland supports reproductive health initiatives through its bilateral programme. That support must be maintained and increased if efforts to build back better are to meaningfully address gender equality.

All that is left to say is thank you to the Chair and Committee members for listening to us today. We look forward to our discussion and any questions you may have.

¹⁰ UN Secretary General (2021) *Report of the Secretary-General: Commission on Population and Development Fifty-fourth session*, available: <https://undocs.org/en/E/CN.9/2021/2>

¹¹ UNFPA (2020) Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic UNFPA Global Response Plan, available: [UNFPA Global Response Plan Revised June 2020 .pdf](#)

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- ⁱ UN (2015), “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, United Nations General Assembly, New York
https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf
- ⁱⁱ OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2015. *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions*. Paris: OECD.
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/ba7c22e7-en/1/3/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/ba7c22e7-en&csp=89578a182071559ff79c670c40753038&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book>
- ^{iv} ACLED (2020), *Call Unanswered: A Review of Responses to the UN Appeal for a Global Ceasefire*, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Madison, WI, <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/13/call-unanswered-un-appeal/>.
- ^v Colombian Ministry of Defence, *Logros De La Política De Defensa Y Seguridad*, septiembre 2020