

To: Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in Geneva and New York;  
Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary General

Cc: Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights;  
Hilary Gbedemah, Chair of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all  
forms of Discrimination Against Women

### **Joint Open Letter on Threat to CEDAW Session**

We are deeply concerned by the likely postponement of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) session scheduled for the final quarter of 2019. We also note that the shortfall in funds has affected the ability of the CEDAW Committee to implement its mandate under the Optional Protocol to CEDAW.

This comes as a heavy blow in the wake of ongoing pushback against human rights, including tremendous opposition to women's human rights, on a global scale. Ethno-nationalism and religious extremism are increasingly emboldened by sensationalist media pushing xenophobic narratives, with women and girls rendered particularly vulnerable. The very existence of LGBTIQ people is in many places considered a threat to the fabric of society, while threats to their safety and well-being are excused. We have recently seen a UN Security Council resolution<sup>1</sup> fail to specifically uphold women's right to autonomy over their own bodies, even as survivors of sexual violence in conflict.

Submissions to the CEDAW Committee by civil society organisations and women's human rights defenders have long been included and valued, presenting a clear picture of the realities on the ground and enabling the Committee to hold states parties accountable. The CEDAW review session is an increasingly rare space in which civil society organisations and women's human rights defenders can articulate, and access support for, the struggles they face in their home countries. At a time when civil society spaces are shrinking in many national contexts, it is all the more crucial that impunity for human rights violations can continue to be challenged at the UN level.

We understand that financial cutbacks have occurred due in large part to delays by UN member states in paying their contributions, and note that CEDAW is only one of six treaty bodies whose sessions face postponement<sup>2</sup> – all of which will have a negative impact on women, girls, civil society organisations and activists. We are deeply concerned both by this financial situation and by the resulting deprioritisation of state accountability under international human rights law. Additionally, the considerable efforts put into aligning the Sustainable Development Goals with human rights could be rendered ineffective by this weakening of the treaty body system.

As of 10 May, only 44 UN member states had paid all their assessments due.<sup>3</sup> We would like to commend Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, China, Cuba, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Gabon, Georgia, Germany, Guyana, Hungary, Iceland, India, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Malawi, Malaysia, Monaco, Nauru, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Poland, Rwanda, Samoa, Singapore, Slovakia, Solomon Islands, Sweden, Switzerland and Tuvalu for having done so. We express concern however at the glaring absence on this list of members of the Human Rights Council and Security Council, of members of the G7, and of entire regions which remain unrepresented.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/resolution/resolution-2467-2019/S\\_RES\\_24672019\\_E.pdf](https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/resolution/resolution-2467-2019/S_RES_24672019_E.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24621&LangID=E>

<sup>3</sup> <http://undocs.org/en/A/73/443/Add.1>, para. 26.

Now more than ever, we need to see decisive action to reverse this downward spiral. We call upon all member states to pay their membership fees in full without further delay.

We additionally call upon the United Nations Secretary General to:

- prioritise funds dedicated to ensure the operational mandate of treaty bodies;
- ensure the CEDAW review sessions will not be jeopardised by the shortfall; and
- prioritise sustainable financing for the treaty bodies in the agenda and ongoing deliberations of the General Assembly.

This is a signal that deliberations in the UN's 2020 treaty body system review cannot be business as usual. We are at a critical point, and we need multilateralism to stand up for justice and equality and strengthen the ability of individual states to do the same.