

“Equality bodies engaging with UN mechanisms: the Universal Periodic Review”

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Statement by
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Good afternoon colleagues, partners and friends,

As UN Human Rights Regional Representative for Europe, I am very pleased to welcome you all to this webinar on engaging with the UN human rights mechanisms, which focuses on the Universal Periodic Review. I would also like to thank my colleague, the Chief of the UPR Branch, Gianni Magazzeni, for kindly sharing his insights and expertise.

Over a year has passed since our joint conference on combating sexual harassment, and it is really nice to be together again, albeit virtually. Today’s webinar comes at a time when we have realized that the pandemic has not only laid bare the devastating impact of inequalities, it continues to aggravate them; a time when we witness again that progress achieved in rights and equality are never acquis once for all, but need to be vigilantly protected and defended; a time when it is as clear as ever that rights actors must better support one another, at the national, regional and international levels.

From the very birth of the United Nations, equality and non-discrimination have been at the heart of its purposes and objectives, as the Charter reaffirmed ‘faith in the fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person’, without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. Building on the famous first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - ‘*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*’ –, international human rights law has been expanding and strengthening legal protection against discrimination.

Over the last 75 years, the UN has enabled the adoption of dedicated treaties, the development of guidance and jurisprudence by the expert committees created to monitor those treaties, the appointment of experts mandated to look into the situation of specific groups or themes and make recommendations for improvements, and the creation of the Universal Periodic Review, a peer review of all human rights in all countries. All these efforts to promote and protect equality are essential, as discrimination has proven to be a phenomenon more subtle, more corrosive and more resilient than anyone had possibly thought when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in 1948.

2020 has been a sad reminder of this never-ending struggle. It started with anti-Asian incidents at the beginning of the pandemic; continued with the eruption of Black Lives Matters protests on

both sides of the Atlantic after the killing of George Floyd; and witnessed the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on some groups in European societies: women, Roma, people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, and, dramatically, older persons.

2020 also saw attacks on migrants' rights and on equal rights of LGBTI persons in various EU countries, controversies around protecting freedom of religion while combating violent extremism, and shocking footages of police violence against migrants and people of African descent. On a more positive note, this year is ending with people mobilizing *en masse* for women's rights.

No doubt, 2020 has been a wake-up call for the need to persist in our struggle against the scourge of discrimination. It thus comes as a relief and hope that a momentum was reached at EU-level this year, with the adoption of policy documents with a direct bearing on inequality. Internally, the EU Gender Equality strategy, the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan, the EU Roma strategic framework, and the first-ever EU Strategy for LGBTIQ have seen the light. In EU foreign affairs, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the new Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action, all attest to the existence of political will, at the highest level of EU institutions, to strive for progress on the non-discrimination and equality agenda, within the EU and beyond.

For sure, Equality Bodies will play a critical role in ensuring that these regional commitments are translated and monitored at the national level, so that they bring positive change in people's lives and advance recognition, justice and inclusion.

However, I believe that as National Equality Bodies, you can also play an important role by expanding and deepening your engagement with the international human rights mechanisms and making greater use of the international standards, findings and recommendations coming from the UN bodies.

A study on the [Future of Europe](#) which our Office commissioned to human rights expert Olivier de Schutter highlights the importance of the coherence between the international, regional and national systems of human rights protection. Better coherence can foster legal certainty for States and domestic courts, by avoiding mismatch and accountability gaps in some areas.

For instance, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights is silent on several rights protected under international law, particularly in the area of economic and social rights. Strengthening fundamental rights and equality impact assessments, using indicators based on the international standards, can serve to compensate this mismatch and gaps. More generally, ensuring that the UN human rights treaties, the standards developed by the UN human rights mechanisms, and their findings and recommendations, are better taken into account at the regional and national levels, will also help to preserve the legitimacy of the UN human rights architecture as well as national institutions. In both regards, European equality bodies are uniquely placed.

Today, we will focus on the Universal Periodic Review, which is a unique mechanism, as States have the possibility to accept recommendations. Because of the buy-in from States, it can thus be expected that national authorities have made a political commitment to implementing the recommendations they have accepted in a period of five years.

I hope that today's webinar will be followed by others, which will focus on engaging with other UN mechanisms of relevance to your work. Each one of us can make a difference. Together we make a change. Thank you.