

UN chief: Legal equality for women could take 300 years as backlash rises against women's rights



by Edith M. Lederer, Associated Press #WomensHistoryMonth

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UNITED NATIONS

Legal equality for women could take centuries as the fight for gender equality is becoming an uphill struggle against widespread discrimination and gross human rights abuses, the United Nations chief said on International Women's Day.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told a packed U.N. commemoration Friday that "a global backlash against women's rights is threatening, and in some cases reversing, progress in developing and developed countries alike."

The most egregious example is in Afghanistan, he said, where the ruling Taliban have barred girls from education beyond sixth grade, from employment outside the home, and from most public spaces, including parks and hair salons. At the current rate of change, legal equality for women could take 300 years to achieve and so could ending child marriage, he said.

Guterres pointed to “a persistent epidemic of gender-based violence,” a gender pay gap of at least 20%, and the underrepresentation of women in politics. He cited September’s annual gathering of world leaders at the U.N. General Assembly, where just 12% of the speakers were women.

“And the global crises we face are hitting women and girls hardest — from poverty and hunger to climate disasters, war and terror,” the secretary-general said.

In the past year, Guterres said, there have been testimonies of rape and trafficking in Sudan, and in Gaza women and children account for a majority of the more than 30,000 Palestinians reported killed in the Israeli-Hamas conflict, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health.

He cited a report Monday by the U.N. envoy focusing on sexual violence in conflict that concluded there are “reasonable grounds” to believe Hamas committed rape, “sexualized torture” and other cruel and inhumane treatment of women during its surprise attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7.

He also pointed to reports of sexual violence against Palestinians detained by Israel.

International Women’s Day grew out of labor movements in North America and across Europe at the turn of the 20th century and was officially recognized by the United Nations in 1977. This year’s theme is investing in women and girls to accelerate progress toward equality.

Roza Otunbayeva, the head of the U.N. political mission in Afghanistan, told the Security Council on Wednesday that what is happening in that country “is precisely the opposite” of investing in women and girls.

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