

Celebrate women leaders on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response and beyond

Statement by UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem International Women's Day

8 March 2021

All over the world, women lead. They lead peace processes, run businesses, establish hospitals and schools. They are presidents of countries and corporate boards. They head international and grassroots organizations, faith-based groups and sports teams, labour and environmental movements, often while caring for their families and communities.

On this International Women's Day, we celebrate all women, and particularly those leading the charge for equality. I encourage women and girls who dream of leadership to take it up. Do not wait. It is your right, and the world needs you now more than ever.

No country has yet attained complete gender parity in leadership. But I believe that we will get there, and that women, collectively, will change our world for the better. Where there is gender equality, societies are more prosperous. Peace is more durable. All of society benefits.

Yet, many obstacles still block women's path to leadership. One of the most fundamental is the lack of bodily autonomy. Many women cannot make basic decisions about their bodies, such as whether to have sexual relations or not, to use contraceptives or not, or even make their own health-care choices.

No woman should be denied these choices. Yet we see, one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, how crises can exacerbate existing barriers that hinder the ability of women to exercise bodily autonomy: sexual and reproductive health services were shuttered or scaled back across the globe, and gender-based violence skyrocketed.

A woman who cannot realize bodily autonomy may face compounding barriers to equality throughout her life, undermining the range of rights and choices required to become a leader. That is why we must ensure women both gain skills and opportunities to lead, and can build on a firm foundation of bodily autonomy.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, women have kept entire societies going, sustaining health systems as the majority of front-line workers, and courageously managing extra responsibilities at home in caring for the ill as well as children out of school. They have kept open shelters for survivors of violence against women, and they have scaled mountains, literally, to distribute contraceptives.

In short, women themselves have offered vivid, unforgettable testaments to the value of their leadership. These should be celebrated and replicated, all the way to a world where every woman is able to govern her body and her life, where women lead as equals, as is their right.