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Annual discussion on the integration of a gender perspective throughout the work of the Human Rights Council and that of its mechanisms

Friends and colleagues,

25 years ago, the governments of the world came together to make commitments to advance gender equality and women's rights. I was one of the lucky women to be there. It was a very special moment for me on my own journey as an activist for women's rights and social justice. That struggle continues and we've learnt much along the way. We've learnt the importance of intersectionality-that gender intersects with other axes of inequality.

And that it is at the intersections of those different axes of inequality, race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, health status, like HIV status, disability, where people suffer the most and where we must pay attention. That awareness was not that strong 25 years ago.

Let me share some very specific actions lessons from HIV response that inform our understanding of how to take our struggles forward:

First, that laws, policies and programmes that are intended to advance women's rights and gender equality should address women in all their diversity. Women are not just women. They are young or old, there are women who are sex workers, there are transgender women, some women who use drugs. There are women living in different conditions and who identify differently. There are black women like myself and there are women of other nationalities, all these must be taken into account. Trans women and women who use drugs, sex workers face substantial barriers in accessing prevention, treatment and care services. They do not enjoy their full human rights, their full right to health like other women in their countries, largely because of stigma, discrimination and criminalization. We need to remove laws that criminalise sex work, that criminalise personal drug use or criminalise gender identity. We need to create supportive laws on legal recognition of gender and on workplace protection for sex workers.

UNAIDS is a Joint Programme cosponsored by 11 UN agencies and in Pakistan we worked together with UNDP to mobilise the transgender population at different consultations and ensure their strong involvement. The result was the passing of the Transgender Persons Bill. This is transformational for transgender people who, in the past, either had to live with identification papers which did not accurately reflect who they were or had to live without any papers at all and miss out on essential services and rights in their own country. The change in the law enables

transgender people to apply for example for a driver's license, for a passport. A right they are now able to have. This is a good practice which we were involved in fighting for, that we need to replicate, and I am proud to share it.

Secondly, fight for gender equality, struggle at this stage must include and connect with other struggles and connect with other forms of oppression and discrimination. We've worked a lot on law reform and women's rights. In the last 25 years, I've seen and worked with others in women's movements to move laws, to tackle violence against women and gender-based violence, equal citizenship laws. Now we must look at laws which criminalise aspects of women's rights such a sex work, gender identity, drug use. We have the evidence that when you remove such laws and create an enabling environment for LGBTI people, you advance their right to health. They can come forward to claim their right to health and receive services. We have a lot of data to show that this is perhaps the biggest barrier in order to end the AIDS epidemic among key populations.

The third point I want to make is about adopting an intersectional lens to data and evidence. Now is the time to be more innovative about how we gather the data we need and pull it together to analyse and put evidence on the table of what works. We need a better understanding of the intersecting causes of vulnerability and risk to HIV to better address this at national levels. It is different in every country. We need to be smarter in generating data and analysing.

Lastly, the imperative of protecting and fulfilling the rights of adolescent girls and young women. This is critical and urgent. In Sub-Saharan Africa adolescent girls and young women represent a quarter of all new HIV infections. We are failing them. 4500 new infections every week among adolescent girls and young women. We are looking at the COVID-19 crisis but this is also a crisis particularly for young women and girls in Africa. We are co-leading a new initiative with UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA and UN Women called "Education plus" in this area and I am happy to invite you to be a part of it and I look forward to telling you more about it another time.

Friends, this is a make or break moment for "building back better". The fate of our young generation, the risk of rolling back years of hard-fought gains in women's rights is real because of COVID. What is needed is bold political leadership to get us back on track, with human rights and gender equality, and communities at the front in all their rich diversity. We can do it.

Thank you for this opportunity.

