

# UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

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2024 NORAD CONFERENCE: RIGHTS AND RESISTANCE



WE HAVE DEMONSTRATED HOW PATRIARCHAL, RACIST, AND HOMOPHOBIC LAWS, POLICIES, PRACTICES AND BELIEFS UNDERMINE HEALTH AND HURT EVERYONE. WE HAVE SHOWN HOW ACCEPTANCE, INCLUSION AND RESPECT FOR ALL PEOPLE IS WHAT POWERS PROGRESS. TO PROTECT THE WELLBEING OF EVERYONE, THE HEALTH OF EVERYONE, WE HAVE TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF EVERYONE.

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## **To defeat the backlash on rights, let women and girls lead!**

Excellencies, distinguished panellists, and all of you here. Thank you Norad for this important conference. I congratulate you particularly on the conference title, Rights and Resistance.

Almost 40 years ago, I was a young student just graduated and starting on a PhD program in science. I abandoned it and went to join a resistance to autocratic rule and the violation of human rights in my country, Uganda. I've never looked back. I am a woman of the resistance, because rights are claimed and claiming rights is a struggle.

Our progress on women's rights and on human rights is in peril. It's not just the commitments that were made in the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. It is everything we have won since 1945 that is under threat.

But we are not here to mourn, we are here to organize.

## **We can win a world where everyone's rights are respected.**

To do so, there are three things we need to do.

First, we need to deepen our understanding of this pushback on human rights and democracy.

Secondly, we need to bring our efforts together. We need to connect the dots. We need to link the struggles. We need to think long-term and be bold.

Third, we need to back—and by backing I mean resourcing—the people most impacted by this attack on rights. Foremost amongst the people under attack are women and girls from the poorest, most marginalised communities.

We are in a world where protracted conflicts are increasing, taking place in over 40 countries. In many of these countries, women's bodies are a battlefield.





The five richest men in the world, billionaires, have doubled their fortunes since 2020. At the same time five billion people have become poorer. A few at the top running off with the wealth. And billions sinking. Globally, men own US\$105 trillion more wealth than women.

The majority of the world's poorest countries are being forced by the debt crisis to cut public spending. We are seeing education and health being squeezed out of budgets, particularly impacting women and girls from poor communities.

The world is way off track to meet the gender targets that were set in the Sustainable Development Goals. UN Women tells us that the reason is, and I quote, "deeply rooted biases against women, manifesting in unequal access to sexual and reproductive health, unequal political representation, economic disparities and a lack of legal protection."

Across the world, 122 million girls are out of school. Many girls are not able to know what they need to protect themselves because they not allowed to have vital information: lifesaving comprehensive sexuality education.

In Iran, a new law will punish business owners who serve women not wearing a hijab, and activists who challenge this obligation to wear a hijab, can be imprisoned for up to 10 years.

In my country Uganda, LGBT people can face the death penalty, and in several other countries similar laws are being proposed. Some parliamentarians are in overdrive to punish people for who they are and who they love. In Russia, the Supreme Court has banned what they call "the international LGBT social movement."

The majority of us, 87% of the world's people, live in countries which CIVICUS ranks as closed or repressed. 63 countries have no provisions in place to allow the registration, operation and funding of nongovernmental organizations or community service organizations.

## **The pushback is on. It is global. It is long-term. It is well-funded. It is well-organized.**

In the name of parental rights, girls are denied even a test for HIV. In many countries where I work, a girl may not go for a test because there are parental laws that will not allow her to go to get that lifesaving information. In the name of family values, people are criminalized simply for being who they are, how they were born. Harmful laws and policies are being advanced, vigilante violence is rising, hate is being normalized.

And at this time when international solidarity is most needed, we are seeing some wealthy countries retreating from international commitments to development and human rights.

**There is a warning light flashing red.  
But we can beat this. Because we have done  
so before. But to do so we have to get to  
the roots of this challenge.**

We have to challenge extreme inequality, which is rooted in patriarchy and in an extreme form of capitalism that is exploitative, extractive, violent and oppressive, to people and planet. In particular to women and girls.

We have to challenge a global economic order that privileges wealthy men and exploits the unpaid labour of women. This is just one aspect of a rigged economic model. We must challenge militarism and strong man politics. We must challenge the lie that women's rights undermine culture and tradition.

We must put human rights at the centre of all our development efforts. We in the AIDS movement have been centring human rights and women's rights in the health space. We have refused to accept the myth that you can deliver health services and succeed without putting women's rights, girls' rights, human rights at the centre. We have demonstrated how patriarchal, racist, and homophobic laws, policies, practices and beliefs undermine health and hurt everyone. We have shown how acceptance, inclusion and respect for all people is what powers progress. To protect the wellbeing of everyone, the health of everyone, we have to protect the rights of everyone.

**In all of this, global solidarity is key.**

We can't do it alone. No country will achieve it alone. When the world came together, we saw progress on rights. The twentieth century was a century of winning rights for girls and women. We won the right to vote. We opened the doors of parliaments. Of corporate board rooms. We closed the gap between boys and girls in basic education. All this was achieved through global solidarity.

It is through global solidarity that we have made progress on AIDS. 20 years ago, we had more than 2.5 million new infections every year. In 20 years, we have brought that down by half. HIV was a death sentence. Today it is not. We have put almost 30 million people on treatment. But we still have 9.2 million people to bring on treatment. Why aren't most of these people on treatment? Because their rights are denied. Gay men are 11 times more vulnerable to HIV than other people. They are fleeing the law in many countries. Many are hiding from stigma and discrimination. Rights are key. With rights, everyone, all of those 9.2 million people, can come on treatment.

## **We have to put power in the hands of those whose rights are denied.**

Progress will come when we put power in the hands and money in the hands of those whose lives are most impacted by the denial of rights. Women and girls from the poorest, most marginalized communities are the most important leaders in this struggle. We must support and resource them. We must allow them to lead. Do you know that today 1% of all the money going to gender equality, only 1% is reaching the hands of women's and girls' organizations? We must put the money in the hands of feminist organizations, of girls' rights organizations, to fight for their lives. To push and win the human rights of everybody.

So we need a sustained investment in independent, autonomous feminist movements, in the Global South especially. We must bring the movements together. Sexual and reproductive rights are the frontline. So is political voice and the right to be part of political solutions. LGBTQ rights must be fought for by everybody fighting for human rights. They must not stand alone. Those who fight against racism are a core part of the broader movement for human rights. The climate movement is a core part of the human rights movement. Connecting these struggles is key.

If you look at what young people are doing to challenge inequalities, to challenge climate breakdown, to challenge violence and militarism, they are the teachers today. They are organizing differently, they are speaking differently. Why are we not empowering them? We must change how we do development. They risk with their bodies, they risk with their lives. Let's risk with our money. Let's risk with our resources of knowledge. Our risk is smaller than the risk on the frontlines.

Those are the three things we need to do.

Firstly, to deeply understand this pushback on rights and democracy.

Secondly, to link struggles

And thirdly, to resource the leaders on the frontlines.

Thank you.

