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Special Theme: Indigenous Women

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Chairperson, Members of the Permanent Forum, Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNFPA welcomes the Special Theme selected for this year's Permanent Forum that has been prompted by the recognition of the significant contributions of indigenous women to their communities and also by the need to address the special challenges that they face. We also wish to stress the importance that the theme has for us in UNFPA and how closely related it is to our work and concerns. We hope that by the end of this session we will have clear steps for action to respond to how the rights of indigenous women can be better promoted and protected; how development programmes for indigenous women can be enhanced at the national and international levels; what types of actions are needed in legislation, institutions, policies and budgets; and how the Permanent Forum, other United Nations bodies and mechanisms, the United Nations system and other intergovernmental organizations, indigenous peoples' organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and others can strengthen their contributions to the improvement of the lives of indigenous women.

In its Mission Statement, UNFPA stresses the universality and indivisibility of human rights, focusing on the reproductive and sexual health and rights of women and men and on the promotion of gender equality, equity and empowerment of women. In line with the Programme of Action (PoA) of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), special attention is given to a rights-based approach to population and development with focus on meeting the rights of the individual.

Within the context of population and sustainable development, UNFPA has underscored that legal systems must protect and enforce women's rights, and that all forms of discrimination and violence against women must be eliminated. For more than 30 years, UNFPA has been in the forefront of bringing gender issues to wider attention, promoting legal and policy reforms and gender-sensitive data collection, and supporting projects that empower women economically. The Fund aims to improve the status of women at every stage of their lives.

The approved “Key Actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development”, a result of the five-year review of the ICPD in 1999, reaffirms that Governments should promote and respect the rights of indigenous people with particular regards to their cultures, resources, belief systems, land rights and languages, and should ensure that the human rights of women and girls are respected and promoted through development, implementation and effective enforcement of gender-sensitive policies and programmes.

Within the scope of its mandate, UNFPA has been supporting initiatives and programmes targeting the rights and specific needs of indigenous peoples, in particular indigenous women, to ensure that their rights are fully respected and realized.

Eradicating poverty, achieving universal primary education, empowering women, reducing maternal and child mortality, combating HIV/AIDS, ensuring environmental sustainability and establishing a strong partnership for development are common goals shared by the Millennium

Development Declaration and the Programme of Action (POA) of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in 1994 in Cairo. To make these goals a reality depends largely on their ownership by local communities and on efforts to sustain an “enabling environment”, where local resources are tapped and mobilized to achieve these goals. The POA calls on Governments to address, in consultation with indigenous peoples and in collaboration with relevant NGOs and intergovernmental organizations, the rights and specific needs of indigenous populations, in particular, indigenous women’s right to reproductive health.

UNFPA’s efforts have been directed to incorporate the perspectives, needs and rights of indigenous women into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the population, development and environment programmes that affect them; to ensure that they receive reproductive health services, which are socially, culturally and ecologically appropriate; and to address social and economic factors that act to their disadvantage.

To address these challenges, UNFPA has been examining its programming approaches, with the view of refining its knowledge and tools to develop more inclusive culture sensitive programming and mobilizing communities to become active partners in development.

A central concern of UNFPA’s programmes focusing on indigenous peoples has been the incorporation of a gender perspective in order to respond to the very different needs of indigenous women and men and to address issues such as violence against women. Action is especially needed in two areas: first, to establish the broad human rights which enable sexual and reproductive

health and rights, and create the conditions for their exercise; and second, to put in place information and services that meet the full range of requirements for sexual and reproductive health.

The real struggle is for everyone to enjoy freedom from fear and freedom from want. It is the quest for human dignity. Indigenous women and girls in many countries need increased support to live lives of dignity, where their human rights are respected and their human needs are met.

Greater attention has to be paid to broader human rights issues, especially to those that promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. Laws and procedures must be reformed, and existing rights protections better enforced. Both government and civil institutions must become more accountable for protecting rights. Education about human rights should be undertaken, and alliances developed among institutions concerned with rights. Internationally, human rights goals must be given greater priority in technical assistance programmes.

This year, we are commemorating the tenth anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). We have to assess what we have been doing for the past 10 years, since the Programme of Action was adopted in Cairo in 1994. We know that much progress has taken place, especially in terms of laws and legislation. But we also know that many tragedies and many daily violations of women's human rights are still taking place. We therefore need to reach the goals already set by the ICPD and the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, in other words, in the next 10 years. We need to continue supporting the empowerment of women to challenge not

only what violates their rights, but also to create an enabling environment to promote change in the basic norms and institutions of society. We need to move from talking about entitlements to addressing the requirements of the process of realizing these rights. And we need to look at the gap between awareness and action, and bridge that gap.

Reproductive health and rights are essential parts of any consideration of empowerment of women, including the empowerment of indigenous women. While it is now well established that women's right to health, including reproductive and sexual health, is central to gender equality and women's empowerment, many challenges still remain.

Among the challenges are ensuring that indigenous women's right to reproductive and sexual health is fully respected and realized. Reports indicate that the standard of health including reproductive health and related information available to indigenous people is often inferior to those of the general population. Adequate healthcare is often not delivered to indigenous peoples due to a lack of information and health-care services that are not culturally and language appropriate.

UNFPA's activities in support of Indigenous Women

UNFPA has been supporting initiatives and programmes to address the special needs of indigenous peoples, and in particular indigenous women, through developing quality, culturally-sensitive reproductive health information, and services that respond to the needs of indigenous peoples and with their full participation.

A focus on incorporating the gender perspective is at the core of UNFPA reproductive health programme. These initiatives strive to build local capacity and ensure that the services and service providers are gender and age responsive and respectful of clients from all social and cultural backgrounds. To mention just a few concrete examples, in Ecuador, UNFPA has supported an innovative project that combines traditional indigenous practices with modern medicine. In Bolivia and Peru, indigenous women were empowered through a methodology which provides bilingual literacy enabling women to read and write simultaneously learning about sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender quality, with a view to improving their well being, health and income earning potentials. The success of the methodology has fostered interest in replication in several other countries and documentary of this approach won an international film festival award.

Geography, language and cultural barriers all limit indigenous people's access to health services. At public health facilities service providers sometimes fail to respond to indigenous women's complaints. Language differences may limit indigenous clients' understanding of the medical examination process. Indigenous groups have criticized the use in their communities of provider-directed contraceptive methods and the lack of informed consent. In Ecuador, with UNFPA's support, the Indigenous Federation of Imbabura provides indigenous communities with integrated health services, including vaccination, family planning, emergency referrals and nutrition education, provided by indigenous physicians and traditional healers. Close attention is paid to service quality and follow-up.

In April of this year in Lima, Peru, UNFPA supported, along with other partners, the Fourth Continental Meeting of Indigenous Women of the Americas. UNFPA has been collaborating with the indigenous women's movement in the region since the inception of the first continental meeting in Quito, Ecuador. Through key alliances within the movement, UNFPA has been able to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality and equity and population and development issues as priority areas for common action.

The way forward

Before closing my remarks, I would like to make a few suggestions for your consideration to address the challenges in reproductive health and rights faced by indigenous women:

- It is imperative that we place a gender perspective at the centre of all policies and programmes affecting women's health, in particular indigenous women, and involve them in the planning, implementation and monitoring of such policies and programmes, and in the provision of health services. And this also implies that the role and responsibilities of men is squarely addressed.**
- There is an urgent need to continue to expand efforts for comprehensive and accessible health services and programmes, including reproductive health, for indigenous communities, in particular women. These programmes must be carefully developed so that they truly respond to the needs and reflect the rights of indigenous peoples, with particular**

considerations to their cultures and languages and based on socio-cultural studies.

- It may be particularly helpful to create permanent regional, national and local working groups and networks that include government officials, NGOs, women's groups and indigenous peoples to ensure that reproductive rights are explicitly covered in policies and laws.
- There is also need for more reliable information. Particularly helpful to have an inventory and include indigenous social organizations, their capacity to participate and decide on solutions to their pressing needs. In this respect, due consideration must be given to making data available from censuses and surveys which is recognized by indigenous populations.
- Governments, in collaboration with research institutions and NGOs, as well as with the assistance of the international community, must strengthen national information systems to produce reliable statistics. All information should be disaggregated by population subgroups, including indigenous peoples and by age and sex. Such information is crucial for translating policy into strategies that address age and gender concerns and for developing appropriate indicators for monitoring progress. This is particularly important for monitoring progress towards goals adopted internationally, at conferences of 1990s and the Millennium Summit.

I wish you a successful and productive forum.

Thank you.