

To: Nordic Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Ministers for International Development Cooperation

A Nordic development agenda for gender equality and SRHR post Covid-19

Over the past years, the Nordic countries have been crucial actors in defending and promoting human rights, global health and gender equality, with a strong voice on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), health systems strengthening and non-discrimination. Overall, the Nordics have advanced a strong common agenda when it comes to the reliance on multilateral systems and a human rights-based approach to development.

With this letter we - SRHR organisations in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, members of IPPF - would like to celebrate and encourage a closer Nordic cooperation on the global stage and to suggest a deepened cooperation around the above-mentioned areas of common interest; a human rights-based approach to development, realizing SRHR and gender equality and strengthening of the global health system. In the context of Covid-19 and its repercussions, a strong Nordic voice on these issues is more important than ever.

The systemic discrimination, gaps and inequalities that we are now witnessing in the context of the pandemic are not *created* by it. The Covid-19 crisis exposes states' long overdue international human rights obligations and pending commitments under the 2030 Agenda. Covid-19 has deepened the inequalities and made them more visible. This includes increased levels of sexual and gender-based violence, additional barriers to accessing safe abortion, modern contraceptives and comprehensive sexuality education.

It is our belief that there is no need to come up with revolutionary new solutions redressing these rights violations and inequalities. It is not the ideas, solutions and recommendations that have been lacking. What has been missing is the political will and the financial means to implement the suggested solutions. Had human rights been fulfilled and sustainable development been achieved, we would have been collectively more resilient to an external shock, such as Covid-19.

We believe that the following 5 points should be at the heart of a joint Nordic development agenda for **a sustainable and equal post Covid-19 world, where all people can have their right to health, including their SRHR, fulfilled:**

1: Insisting on a human rights-based approach to development, including emphasising gender equality and SRHR as prerequisites for a sustainable development. The Nordic countries should continue insisting on putting human rights at the centre of all development initiatives. Nordic governments have a unique and irreplaceable role when it comes to making sure that SRHR are protected and promoted for everyone, including those that live in the most vulnerable situations and are left behind. This should be a core part of the agenda setting and discussions on how we build back a better and greener world - post Covid-19. In order to depoliticize the SRHR and gender equality agendas within key multilateral spaces, we also encourage the Nordic Governments to continue to defend and advance SRHR, to continue to contribute to cross-regional coalition building, dialogue and new alliances for gender equality and SRHR at all levels. This should include support for initiatives that boost and show the support of the silent majority and 'moveable middle' for SRHR, as well as supporting the meaningful and active participation of civil society actors', as they play a key role in increasing pressure towards their governments to advance SRHR.

2: Strengthening and reforming existing multilateral health mechanisms, fora and tools to guarantee donor coordination, harmonisation, accountability and adaptive, people centred responses. There is no need for a new global health mechanism post Covid-19, but there is a need

to leave behind what is currently not working, and to learn from and build on what is working. Any future global health architecture should include a multi-sector and system-based approach and broaden the governance space for community and civil society engagement. The Nordic countries have the multilateral weight and legitimacy to insist on these aspects.

3. Strengthening support for implementation of the 2030 Agenda, specifically target 3.8 on universal health coverage (UHC) and delivering on the commitments in the UHC Political Declaration 2019, including investments in SRHR and reaching those who are most left behind first. In a recent UN policy brief¹ it is concluded that “*When the coronavirus has been tamed, the international community will need to redouble its efforts to guarantee the right to health and the achievement of SDG 3, including the targets of UHC*”. For the post Covid-19 world to become an equal, just and sustainable one, SRHR have to be embedded into the UHC agenda. SRHR information and services must remain a central component of essential health services². This should include safe abortion services.

4. Supporting the promotion of an enabling environment for civil society organisations’ existence and meaningful participation in building back a better world. During the pandemic, further restrictions have been imposed on civil society as a number of governments have taken advantage of the crisis to restrict civic freedoms, reduce civic space and criminalize criticism. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated that civil society organisations have a distinct ability and capacity to deliver innovative solutions, including on SRH, that reach the people in the most vulnerable situations. Civil society organisations are key drivers of societal change and any COVID-19 recovery platforms should include civil society representatives and be gender balanced.

5. Highlighting and investing in changing harmful social gender norms, as underlying root causes of poverty. Crises can lead to economic and social changes and the spread of new ideas that, in turn, can change harmful social norms. The post Covid-19 context could be an opportunity to change deeply rooted norms around sexuality, femininity and masculinity that currently lead to exclusion, discrimination, violence and human rights violations. Such norms are severely restricting people’s access to sexual and reproductive health, including to safe abortion and modern contraceptives.

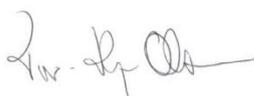
Sincerely



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¹ COVID-19 and Human Right: We are all in this together APRIL 2020

² As committed to in SDG 3 of the 2030 Agenda and the UHC political declaration 2019