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Achieve gender equality in this generation

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Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia shares her views on gender equality



Achieving gender equality is everyone's business, including the health sector's. Health authorities across the WHO South-East Asia Region must be a force for change and take the opportunity to lead. On this year's International Women's Day, which marks 25 years since the path-breaking Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we must redouble our efforts and accelerate progress towards gender equality in this generation. This year's theme – I am Generation Equality: Realizing Women's Rights – is of special significance to the health sector for three key reasons.

First, gender inequality is closely linked to health. Gender inequalities systematically determine health risks, access to services and health outcomes. For example, whether a woman can access skilled assistance during childbirth significantly depends on where she lives, her education level and household income, which are themselves mediated by her gender. The Region's relatively high maternal mortality underscores women's continuing disadvantage and the need for health systems to deliver evidence-based solutions.

Second, the call to achieve gender equality highlights the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on gender equality and its relevance for other goals, including the health goal. It recognizes that gender inequality spans generations, starting before birth and continuing into infancy, through childhood, adolescence, adulthood and older ages. It is for this reason that WHO takes a life-cycle approach to building gender-responsive health systems and programmes, which it is supporting all countries to adopt and implement.

Third, realizing women's rights includes their right to health. Respecting, protecting and promoting the right to health requires us to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls. This is aligned with the SDG target on universal health coverage, which is also one of the Region's eight Flagship Priorities. To achieve UHC, all health systems must cater to the full range of women's health needs, not only maternal needs. We must remove all barriers that women and girls face when seeking care, whether social, economic, legal or health system-related. We must also end gender-based violence, a grievous and widespread human rights violation, which limits women's equal participation in education and economic, political and civic life.

Progress on gender equality is especially needed in the WHO South-East Asia Region. The highest any country in the Region ranked on the 2019 UNDP Gender Inequality Index, which ranks 189 countries, is 81st. The lowest is 129th. Though Member

States have made significant advances in recent years, they must accelerate progress: At the present rate of progress, estimates suggest it will take the world almost 100 years to close the gender gap.

On International Women's Day, WHO reiterates its commitment to supporting countries in the Region to identify and implement policies that promote gender equality in the health sector and beyond. Together we must drive faster and more enduring gains for women and girls across our Region, and across the world. A more gender-equal world is possible. This generation must achieve it.