



**UN High Level Political Forum (UNHLP)  
session on SDG 5 – gender equality and its interlinkages  
with other SDGs.**

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**Keynote speech by HRH Princess Dina Mired  
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Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

It is a pleasure to join you here today for this critical focus on gender equality, and the interdependence of SDG 5 and the other Sustainable Development Goals.

Two months before the Pandemic, I was invited by Her Highness Sheikha Intisar from Kuwait; a great friend of mine who is sponsoring amazing work to combat violence against women in our region, to attend a healing and empowering session for women in the Jabal Natheef community for women suffering from physical and mental abuse from their husbands. Of course, one reads about violence against women, and one can imagine how awful that must be, but you when you actually meet women who are victims of domestic violence and listen to their lived experiences, you realize that whatever your imagination can conjure about the issue, it is nothing compared to the actual daily horrors faced by these women. These women who live each day as if it is their last and each day survived unfolds yet another grueling day to just simply survive. It was actually a miracle that they were allowed to attend those weekly sessions in the first place, where they can share their stories with other sisters, who until that session felt they were alone. That session was supposed to be the

graduation of the many months of the program but was extended after the urgent pleas of this group to extend it.

So, when the pandemic hit, and all countries locked us all in. The first thing I thought about was these women whom I met in the flesh. It was an act of supreme courage for each one of them to actually attend these weekly sessions. I could not help wondering and worrying as to what happened to them when the pandemic not only shut the door but this time with lock and key with their abusers! I shuddered to think if they survived to tell their tale.

Perhaps, some might say that these women represented the extreme of what the pandemic inflicted on women. I would say that everything is so interconnected. These women found themselves in this situation, because they were a product of poverty, discrimination, lack of access to education or decent work, and increased exposure to the drivers of chronic diseases including unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, tobacco use and the harmful use of alcohol. In fact, these women told us that they even married off their daughters early to protect them from their respective husbands, only to find out their respective new husbands continued the abuse. These women represented and summarized everything that is wrong with the lack of gender equity in that one hour. And they also represented the

reversals caused by the pandemic, that have wiped out any gains, however small, that were positive for achieving gender equity. In this case these women lost their one hour a week to literally simply breathe like the rest of us.

And yes, we have seen reversals across the board globally directly affecting all SDG's triggered by COVID-19 and compounded by other global crises. From rising rates of extreme poverty, to falling rates of education, access to decent work, and the rise of unpaid care work and of course domestic violence. These setbacks have made the goal of achieving the 2030 Agenda all the more elusive.

For each of these reversals, women shoulder perhaps the greatest burden. For example:

- They are disproportionately affected by poverty, and, due to existing gender inequalities, they tend to hold less secure jobs with less job security, lower social protections and lower pay. Before the pandemic, women accounted for less than 40 percent of total employment, yet they suffered 45 percent of global employment losses in 2020. The women I met would have had no job at all through restricted movement and utter fear.

- Women are less likely to receive an education, with dire consequences for their futures. While the pandemic has interrupted schooling for tens of millions, girls are less likely to return to the classroom. According to Malala Fund estimates, 20 million girls in developing countries may never return to school after the pandemic.
- They face the rising burden of unpaid care work. And, during lockdowns, women face greater threats of domestic violence. The pandemic aggravated alcohol abuse and escalated stress levels, which triggered a rise in domestic partner violence globally.

COVID not only highlighted the linkages between inequality and poverty but also the effects of gender inequity on NCD's. This hit close to home for me, given my lifelong commitment to the prevention of noncommunicable diseases.

Prior to Covid-19, the situation was grim already. Nearly three out of four deaths worldwide—or 41 million annually—are attributed to largely preventable NCDs, including heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. More than 80% of these premature deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries. And the global burden continues to climb. It is estimated to reach 52 million deaths by 2030, while the SDG 3 target aims for a one-third reduction in premature mortality from noncommunicable diseases.

Covid 19 has exposed further the vulnerability of all people living with noncommunicable diseases... those so-called “underlying conditions”. In fact, Covid 19 and NCD’s were billed as “the perfect storm”.

I would say that perhaps women fared an extra burden. For one, women, who make up 70% of the health workforce, suffered the double burden of being most exposed to the risk of death from corona and either having to experience long absences from their families to care for other corona patients or having to do double the work, performing extreme shifts in hospitals and having to also care and educate their children. And if we are to talk about gender equity here, facts speak for themselves, it is unacceptable that while health systems are delivered by 70% of women globally, less than 25% hold leadership or senior positions.

And when we talk of the impact of covid-19 on prevention of NCD’s, such as on changes in food and alcohol consumption patterns, decreased levels of physical activity and increased stress have exacerbated risk factors associated with NCDs, leaving more people vulnerable to experiencing more severe COVID-19 outcomes.

Yet if we reimagine our approach to public health, we can make progress and ease the strain on our already overburdened health care systems.

The fact is, NCD prevention does not begin at the clinic or the hospital.

- It begins with all laws and policies that are not only gender sensitive, but also sensitive to all “vulnerable-groups”...and it is not difficult...work with local NGO’s who know about the barriers and the opportunities. And make sure to add the necessary funding to make this happen...that is if we are to be serious about it.
- It begins with laws that restrict access to harmful products, especially for children.
- It begins with fiscal policies that tax tobacco, alcohol and ultra-processed foods, which, together, are responsible for more than 20 million premature deaths every year.
- It begins with education that builds public demand for clean air policies—particularly for women, who bear the brunt of household air pollution caused by biomass fuels used for cooking.
- It begins with marketing and labeling requirements that warn consumers of the harms associated with tobacco, junk food, or sugary beverages.

COVID-19 pandemic requested that we all wear *masks* and yet, ironically, it *unmasked* all inadequacies of our health care systems particularly for vulnerable groups including women.

To reduce the insidious hold of NCDs, we need to tackle the risk factors that fuel NCDs. That is why we need to not only shift the information

environment to help people make better choices to lead healthier lives, but to also shift the discriminatory access faced by these vulnerable groups including women, to implement those very choices. Simply put; **We need to help make the healthy choice the easy choice for all.**

Toward that end, I look forward to today's panelists and lightening speakers, and learning about the innovations they've developed to promote gender equality and build a better world. We cannot achieve one without the other.

Thank You