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60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women:

Governments Block Progress but Uphold Commitments to Mainstream Gender Equality and Women's Rights across the Sustainable Development Goals

The 60th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) closed with governments reaffirming commitments in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome documents of its review conferences and pledging to mainstream gender equality and women's rights in the implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, many governments failed to use this opportunity to advance their commitments around women's human rights and gender equality with a significant number of states opposing the inclusion of language on important rights to which they had previously agreed.

The agreed conclusions, adopted by consensus at the CSW's final meeting, reaffirm that gender equality and the empowerment and human rights of women and girls are critical factors to achieve progress towards the 2030 Agenda. They also urge UN Member States to integrate gender equality and women's rights in all programmes and policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development, including across all Sustainable Development Goals and targets.

Amnesty International welcomes the acknowledgement that the empowerment and human rights of women and girls cannot be fully realized and gender equality cannot be achieved unless the root causes of gender inequality are tackled, including unequal power relations, social norms and practices and stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination against women and girls. This includes also the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that many women and girls experience throughout their lives as well as gender-based violence and harmful practices, acknowledged in the agreed conclusions. The Commission also urges States to address the specific challenges in the enjoyment of rights by marginalized groups of women and girls, including migrant and refugee, rural and Indigenous women, and women and girls with disabilities.

However, the document fails to recognize the specific discrimination and violence faced by lesbian, bisexual, trans and intersex women and it was disappointing to

see that the Holy See and some other States oppose efforts to acknowledge and seek to address violence experienced by individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. States must ensure the rights of all women to live free from violence and discrimination on all grounds – including on the basis of an individual's real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.

The agreed conclusions contain a welcome call on governments to make “universally accessible and available quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health-care services, commodities, information and education”, including, among others, modern contraceptives, maternal health care such as skilled birth attendance and emergency obstetric care, prevention and treatment of reproductive tract infections, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and reproductive cancers.

However, the conditions attached to the provision of some of these services are of concern, such as the provision of safe abortion services only when national law permits abortion. As in previous years, the inclusion of vital aspects of sexual and reproductive rights met resistance and opposition from some government delegations and interest groups. It is disappointing to see governments placing restrictions on long-established human rights such as the right of every person to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality. The document also failed to include a reference to the provision of comprehensive sexuality education as a key policy intervention to empower young women, adolescents and girls to make free and informed decisions about their sexuality and lives, and enable them to fully and equally participate in development.

Such restrictions and omission are inconsistent with the international human rights standards and obligations of States. States have an obligation to ensure that individuals can enjoy their sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to the highest attainable standard of health and the right to non-discrimination. References to culture, religion, tradition and national context and legal framework cannot be used to justify discrimination and other human rights violations.

Families can play a role in development, including in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals for women and girls. The agreed conclusions urge States to direct their family policies at achieving gender equality and women's empowerment and at enhancing the full participation of women in society. However, the document refers to "the family" failing to recognize that many diverse forms of families exist worldwide. It also fails to acknowledge and address the fact that for many women and girls, human rights abuses occur within their family.

Amnesty International welcomes the recognition by UN Member States that

women must have access to full, equal and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life. Women and girls are agents of change and development and governments must enable meaningful participation for women, including those women from the most marginalized groups.

Amnesty International welcomes the recognition of the important role played by civil society organizations in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – particularly the role of women and community based organizations, feminist groups, youth led organizations and trade unions. While the Agreed Conclusions recognise the specific role of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) as part of civil society working to raise the interests, needs and visions of women and girls in spaces including Agenda 2030, it is disappointing that the same Agreed Conclusions do not explicitly recognise WHRDs in the call for a safe and enabling environment.

WHRDs are legitimate and vital actors for the implementation of Agenda 2030, especially in the areas of gender equality, ending poverty, protecting the environment, reducing inequalities and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. Governments must create a safe and enabling environment for WHRDs to carry out their work free from harassment, intimidation and violence from state and non-state actors.

Amnesty International welcomes the Commission's recognition of the importance of collection of high quality, reliable and timely data disaggregated by sex, age, income and other characteristics as relevant. Collection, analysis and dissemination of gender disaggregated data is essential in order to monitor progress for women and girls with regards to the implementation of the SDGs.

Regrettably, the agreed conclusions fail to make a strong call on States to commit to the establishment of strong monitoring and independent accountability mechanisms as an integral part of the implementation of Agenda 2030 and in alignment with their existing human obligations under international human rights law.

States must establish effective accountability mechanisms at national level and involve civil society and other stakeholders, including WHRDs, in the monitoring and review of the Agenda 2030 implementation. Women and girls, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, should be enabled and supported to participate in assessing whether implementation, including budget allocations, is meeting their needs and priorities. Reviews should also take into account the recommendations by human rights monitoring bodies, in particular with regard to human rights of women and girls. States must also ensure adequate regulation, safeguards and mandatory reporting for private sector organizations involved in the

financing and implementation of the Agenda 2030. States must ensure that private sector operations do not undermine the human rights of women and girls. In the case of private management of public services that are essential for human rights enjoyment, the State – as the ultimate human rights bearer - is always responsible for ensuring that those services are delivered in a manner compatible with the State's human rights obligations.

In conclusion, Amnesty International urges governments to ensure that the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2030 commitment to 'leave no one behind' is not simply rhetorical but instead translates into concrete actions and measures to contribute to the full realisation of the human rights of all women and girls that will allow them to live their lives with equality and dignity. Governments must deliver on their commitments and should use the Commission on the Status of Women as an opportunity to reflect and advance women's rights and gender equality and must demonstrate the political will to move beyond the status quo in order to achieve more just societies for all women and girls.

Background

The UN Commission on the Status of Women meets annually in New York. Comprised of 45 Member States the CSW is the principal global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and advancement of women with the aim of promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social, and educational fields. Its mandate is to ensure the full implementation of existing international agreements on women's human rights and gender equality.

The CSW 60th session focused on the theme 'Women's empowerment and the link to sustainable development' between 14 and 24 March 2016. The Agreed Conclusions of CSW 60 follows the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 and offered an opportunity for governments to commit to practical measures that empower women and girls and to ensure that development efforts address the structural inequalities and discrimination that disproportionately affect women and girls.