Statement to the 75th Regional Committee for South-East Asia
Provisional Agenda Item 8.6: Achieving UHC, SDGs and health security through stronger and more comprehensive PHC

Honourable Delegates,

Community Health Workers (CHWs) form the backbone of the public healthcare systems in the region. They play a critical role in improving health related SDG targets. The WHO has detailed the role of CHWs in integrated community case management including in early detection of Covid-19 outbreaks, identification of vulnerable population.

However, this progress has aberrantly depended on the exploitation of women’s unpaid labour, as CHWs are not regarded as health workers but as volunteers. Despite recognizing them as “warriors against Covid-19”, governments have still failed to recognise CHWs work as work. Our affiliates representing CHWs documented a range of threats and violations that the workers experienced during the pandemic with enduring long working hours, psychological distress, fatigue, occupational burnout, discrimination, and physical and psychological harassment.

Here we would like to bring to your attention the ILO General Survey Committee for Nursing Convention (C-149), that recognises the work of CHWs and, considers that they are undoubtedly covered by the fundamental rights and principles at work. But due to the voluntary nature of work they may not always be afforded the protections envisaged under Conventions Nos 149 or 189.

We are concerned that while the agenda document acknowledges the central role played by CHWs in strengthening PHC however, there is not much attention given to their conditions of work and right to be recognised as health workers. We welcome WHO’s Global Health Leaders Award for India’s ASHA workers but what they need are living wages and decent work. We would like to state that to build stronger and more comprehensive primary health care, the pillars of the PHC-the CHWs, need to be guaranteed their labour rights.

Please note that whilst CHWs are central to Universal health coverage for a robust PHC, they are rarely consulted in the development of plans. It is imperative that representatives of CHW, through their unions, are included in all Covid committees as well as broader health policy development. Further, we strongly encourage governments to recognize that many of the major challenges we are experiencing during the pandemic are the result of decades of under-funding of public health systems and adherence to neoliberal policies. If governments had committed to a well-funded, universal public health system for all, CHWs would be properly recognized and paid. Instead, our public health systems rely on the exploitation of women’s unpaid labour while large corporations make enormous profits from people’s ill-health.

If we are to “build back better”, we must ensure CHWs are recognized and valued as workers in a fully funded universal public health system. We urge WHO to choose CHWs as a relevant theme under this item and submit an annual report focusing on them.

Annex

Public Services International is a Global Union Federation of more than 700 trade unions representing 30 million workers in 154 countries. We bring their voices to the UN, ILO, WHO and other regional and global organisations. We defend trade union and workers’ rights and fight for universal access to quality public services.
REQUEST SHEET

THE SEVENTY–FIFTH SESSION OF WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Participants are requested to submit statements relevant to the agenda item(s) of concern.

Declaration by IGO/NSA

WHO Secretariat,

I wish to submit a statement for the Agenda Item: 8.6
Title- Achieving UHC, SDGs and health security through stronger and more comprehensive PHC

Mode of Statement: ☑Written

Name the person submitting the Statement: Ananya Basu
Name of the IGO/NSA (Agency): Public Services International
Designation: Health Equity Coordinator PSI Asia Pacific
Email ID: ananya.basu@world-psi.org
Mobile Number: +91 9926381475

NOTES:

* Invited Representatives may submit one oral statement for the entire RC Session. Any additional statements will be considered “written statements”.

*Representatives are requested to submit statements relevant to the agenda item(s) of concern. Please complete an individual ‘Request Sheet’ for each statement. The ‘Request Sheet’ duly completed along with the statement is to be e-mailed at sepir@who.int, addressed to:

Mr Pablo Barrera
Technical Officer, Partnerships and Resource Mobilization
World Health Organization
Regional Office for South-East Asia
New Delhi, India