Statement at WHO SEARO RC

Thank you, Chair. Honorable Ministers, Heads of Delegations, Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director and Members of the WHO Secretariat. Thank you, Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh for the invitation extended to Women in Global Health to attend this Regional Committee meeting.

I am Dr. Shubha Nagesh a medical doctor from Women in Global Health India and would like to raise 3 points:

This regional committee meeting is timely, as the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body meets with Member States to finalize the Zero Draft of the Pandemic Instrument in the coming months. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown a harsh light on the pressing need to create strong health systems at the national, regional and global level. A crucial element of these systems are health workers, 70% of whom are women and 90% on the frontline.

Therefore, first, we commend the INB on proposing gender equal representation in health emergencies governance. In addition, we ask that all related expert, advisory, and decision-making bodies have equal representation including those bodies within Member States. Excluding women weakens pandemic preparedness, response and recovery since decisions are not informed by women’s expertise.

Second, we also commend the INB on recognizing the importance of a skilled health workforce, and ask for language additions to ensure that health workers receive fair and equal pay. During the pandemic, millions of community health workers, midwives and nurses were left underpaid or unpaid for months as healthcare spending was reallocated to the COVID-19 response.

In addition, health workers must be protected from violence. The WHO reported a marked increase in attacks against health workers related to fear and stigma, as women were given tasks related to enforcing lockdown measures.

Thirdly, we ask Member states to add language requesting health workers have safe working conditions. Many facilities and services lacked adequate infection control tools or adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Many health workers are now burnt out and the resulting ‘great resignation’ of health workers is exacerbating the 15 million health worker shortage, especially in South and South East Asia where health worker migration to high-income countries is likely to increase.

We ask each of the Member States to include specific language in the Operative part of the Instrument for the three points raised.

Thank you, Chair.