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SPECIAL PROCEDURES
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Expert Workshop on the role of the family and family-oriented approaches, policies and programmes in the promotion and protection of human rights and in sustainable development

Session 1: Achieving the full enjoyment of human rights by family members, including achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls

Thank you to the organizers for managing to convene this important workshop despite and in spite of the financial challenges and for inviting me.

There are many reasons why I say that: The title and focus of the workshop are a reassertion of the fact – often dismissed or forgotten – that international law recognizes the family as the natural and fundamental group within society and recognizes that it is entitled to the protection of the State and society.

On one hand, healthy families can play an important role in preventing and responding to violence coming from any source- whether within or outside a family. Exposure to sexual and gender-based violence has only multiplied through digital technologies; the use of artificial intelligence, and the proliferation of global crises.

On the other hand, however, they can also be spaces where violations of the rights of its members, including women and girls can take place, because of unequal power dynamics within the family, unrecognized or unpaid care work; gender stereotypes and because of harmful social norms. After all, we know that in the case of femicide, and violence against women and children, it is perpetrated by persons they know, which are often from their families. These are, however, exceptions or deviations from the positive role that families generally play.

For the protective beneficial potential of the family to be enhanced, it is important that the family receives the comprehensive protection and support that it is entitled to in accordance with several international treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in addition to the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action as well as the outcomes of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.

States must therefore address obstacles that stand in the face of the full potential of the family such as poverty, conflict, structural inequalities, discrimination, and harmful social norms.

I have seen many good examples around the globe in this regard that include:

1. Empowerment through family education on human rights, integrating empathy, respect, and equality. Parenting workshops have also proven to be useful;

2. Provide family counseling to address gender inequality in the home and work with families to challenge patriarchal norms that may otherwise encourage harmful practices such as domestic violence, marital rape, or forced early marriages. Leading by example as positive male role models in the family has been found to be impactful.;
3. Strengthening legal literacy within the family and amongst individual family members so they know where to go if they face abuse or violence. Hotlines and free or low cost legal aid are indispensable. These can be provided through community centers or mobile units;
4. Create opportunities and incentives for economic empowerment for women so that they can make their own autonomous decisions regarding family planning;
5. Related to the above, provide counseling and services on all aspects of reproductive health, including family planning, maternal health and sexual rights;
6. Remove obstacles for family reunification for families in the countries where they have obtained asylum or protection;
7. Reverse a concerning trend that I have observed in some corners of the world, that attempt to undermine the role and standing of parents or legal guardians, reducing them from nurturers and educators to a mere authority. Too many initiatives have gone terribly wrong when trying to address the psychological and bodily distress of adolescents or the online or offline abuse of children when parents have been excluded from the solutions and their views have been sidelined. A related trend is attempts to "dechild" children by pretending they can make informed decisions and consent to all processes that affect their lives *on par* with adults, contrary to the principles of international law.

Even as we strive for the maintenance of family units and work through the family to ensure every member of that family can thrive, we must recognize that this may not be always possible and that there can be a tension between maintaining the family unit and ensuring the safety and security of its members.

I have come across this tension often through my work as I meet women and children who experience gender-based violence, sexual violence, coercive control but who are forced to remain with their abuser. The situation is particularly grim in the context of child custody cases, where the contact of the child with the father is often prioritized at all costs. This is why, it is not advisable to place all policies relating to violence against women and violence against

children predominantly under the overarching umbrella of ministries dealing with the promotion of the family. Effective mechanisms for protection and assistance of women and children that may be at risk must be available to encourage reporting; and to prevent further violence and the loss of lives. These must include protection orders, shelters, victim-centered trauma counseling and legal aid.

To conclude, to harness the potential of families as human rights enablers, we must work with them as a whole and the individuals that form the family in parallel. Fortunately, much good practice already exists that needs to be documented, shared, and digested. This workshop—I believe—aims to do just that, which is very welcome.