Thank you Madame President,

UNFPA welcomes the report on the COVID 19 response by the Director-General WHO outlining the challenges faced by women and girls as well as by health and social protection systems, which UNFPA is helping to address in over 150 countries.

The pandemic has resulted in the irreparable loss of hundreds of thousands of lives across the globe and has put health systems in developed and developing countries under enormous stress. While priority still is and should continue to concentrate on saving lives, UNFPA’s latest data provides a stark picture of the broader impact COVID-19 Pandemic is having on the rights, health and wellbeing of women and girls.

UNFPA projects the pandemic could result in millions of more cases of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and unintended pregnancies. We have already seen setbacks in efforts aimed at preventing child marriage and female genital mutilation, as girls are no longer in school and therefore more vulnerable to be married off or mutilated, against their will.

Essential Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services have been limited as a result of containment measures and movement restrictions. Moreover, fears of contracting the virus in health centres are preventing women from seeking those services. Loss of income has limited access to services, medicines, and contraceptives. Furthermore, many healthcare providers working on SRH, for instance midwives, have been redeployed to support the treatment and care for COVID19 patients or have not been prioritized in the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) required for them to operate safely.

Mindful that women represent 70% of the global health workforce, often performing tasks that place them at an increased risk to get infected and suffer burnout, UNFPA has been at the frontline of supporting health workers, including the delivery of PPE. Moreover, we have been actively advocating with governments to ensure SRH services are an integral part of the governments’ response plans. Some concrete measures have included the strengthening of health systems’ capacity to deliver safe and quality services for pregnant and lactating mothers; the remote delivery of services and information through telemedicine, mobile clinics, social media and text messaging; and help to maintain global supply chains for contraceptives and PPE.

UNFPA is ensuring the continuity of life-saving services for women and girls survivors of GBV. This includes the updating of GBV referral pathways to reflect changes in available services; and targeted investments in supporting the capacity of shelters, hotlines as well as online and off-line safe spaces and virtual chat groups.
Unless the rights, health and wellbeing of women and girls are kept at the centre of the COVID-19 response, there is a real risk that essential programmes and services will be seriously deprioritized or neglected. Human rights and gender-responsive COVID-19 response plans that include the voices, concerns and lived experiences of women and girls will be essential in overcoming the challenges posed by the global pandemic and its socio-economic consequences.

I thank you.