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30th Session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

Monday, May 23, 15:00-18:00

Focus: *Analysis of the state of health and well-being of children/adolescents of African Descent, examining the intersections with gender and other demographic markers. She highlights progress and critical sub-areas needing global policy, planning, capacity-building investment shifts.*

Introduction

Good afternoon,

At UNFPA we are delighted to welcome the members of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent to New York. We reiterate our support to the mandate of the group and renew our commitment to the advancement of the agenda for people of African Descent.

UNFPA is a world-leading sexual and reproductive health agency, championing rights and choices for all! We do this by working to increase access to sexual and reproductive health services, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment and preventing gender-based violence, including harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation..

The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development that guides UNFPA's work to this day, recognizes the intersectional nature of inequalities, in particular gender based and racial discrimination, and this is why the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reflects a determination among Member States to leave no one behind.

To this end, UNFPA is uniquely positioned to play a significant role in supporting the fulfillment of the human rights of people of African descent in particular for youth, women and girls.

Indeed, UNFPA welcomed the International decade for people of African descent, which provides a targeted framework for the United Nations, civil society, academia, the private sector, governments and other entities to intentionally work towards recognition, justice and development for people of African Descent.

To support its efforts for the implementation of the programme of activities of the International Decade for People of African Descent, UNFPA developed a targeted strategy for people of African Descent, working in partnership with other UN agencies, governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, private sector and others.

Most importantly, UNFPA has aimed to lift the cloak of invisibility over the situation of persons of African Descent by pioneering communications, programmes, advocacy and evidence generation activities.

As part of UNFPA's new Operational Plan on Leaving No One Behind, UNFPA has outlined a clear vision to reach the furthest behind as part of our efforts to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights: This vision is that:

Those furthest behind enjoy sexual and reproductive health and rights as UNFPA explicitly prioritizes addressing intersectional, persistent, and extreme disadvantages, discrimination and disempowerment.

In alignment with the vision of our Strategic plan 2022-2025, we are fostering strategic partnerships, including with feminists movements and civil society, to advocate for the recognition, justice and development as well as sexual and reproductive rights of Afro-descendant women, girls and young people.

The 2019 landmark Nairobi Summit to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the ICPD Programme of Action, explicitly acknowledged the importance of advancing the rights of people of African Descent as integral to efforts for achieving the ICPD.

One challenge remains the lack of disaggregated data by race and ethnicity. With the exception of a handful of nations in Latin America that are making progress on statistics. Globally, most countries still do not have a satisfactory basic count of their African descendant population, including disaggregated statistics on development markers such as health.

Latin America holds the largest Afro-descendant population currently at **about 134 million people, which represents around 21% of the total population of the region.** Data and evidence show they constitute some of the poorest and most marginalized groups in the region.

In **Latin America there are approximately 37.6 million young people of African descent.** They are a diverse group in demographic, territorial, social, and cultural terms. Nonetheless, they are one of the groups that faces the greatest challenges associated with poverty, inequality, and exclusion.

They are living in a context of systemic racism- where racism is enclosed within the political, economic, social, and cultural systems and that, as a result, health is incorporated in that reality of racial exclusion.

Furthermore, multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination and exclusion such as gender, age, place of residence layered with the ethno-racial status, interact in such a way that gives rise to health inequalities that need to be addressed in a comprehensive, integrated and holistic way.

Latin America has seen advances in terms of expanding coverage and access to education to its young population.

However, as noted by recent studies, significant challenges remain, to ensure quality education and equal access to the most excluded groups including young people of African Descent.

This is particularly important when we look at the rates of attendance and secondary school completion, an essential step to build the skills necessary for basic employment and to help reduce inequalities and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

According to a study published by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and UNFPA of **11 countries in the Latin American region for which information is available, in 7 of them the school attendance of children of African descent between 12 and 17 years is lower than that of non-Afro descendants.**

Adolescent pregnancy is also a major concern for the young afro-descendant population of Latin America with available data showing that the rate of adolescent pregnancy is higher amongst the Afro-Descendant population across the region.

Indeed the percentage of Afro-descendent adolescents between 15 and 19 years who were mothers exceeds that of non-Afro-descendants. In all the countries where data is available between 14% and 30% of Afro-descendent adolescents have already had at least one child.

Unplanned pregnancies have a negative effect on the lives of Afro descendant girls, including hindering their ability to conclude secondary and tertiary education thus, yet again, perpetuating poverty and inequalities.

Structural and social barriers including poverty, little or no access to comprehensive sexuality education, access to family planning, play a key role in the higher levels of adolescent pregnancy in Afro-descendant communities.

Likewise, rooted in poverty, racism, discrimination, lack of access to quality sexual and reproductive health including culturally sensitive services, Afro-descendant women, including adolescents girls are 3 to 4 times more likely to die of preventable maternal health causes. For example,

- In Ecuador, the maternal mortality rate for Afro-descendant women is triple the overall maternal mortality rate.
- In Brazil, the rate for Afro-descendant women is 36% higher.

Another great concern is the fact that Afro-descendants in the region, including adolescent girls, are more likely to be victims of violence such as gender-based violence including sexual violence, trafficking and other forms of violence, intimidation, and torture that in many instances end in femicide.

The intersection of gender and racial discrimination becomes stark when looking at the gap between young Afro-descendent women and non-Afro descendent men. Studies show that while the two groups have a similar level of education, unemployment among young Afro-descendent women is approximately double that of young non-Afro-descendent men.

These inequalities have far reaching implications for the cycle of life. An adolescent Afro-descendant who cannot enjoy her sexual and reproductive rights is one who cannot stay healthy, complete her education, find decent work outside her home and chart her economic future. And this will also affect the next generation.

Impact of COVID

The profound inequities in health faced by these communities have been further exposed and exacerbated by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic in both its direct and indirect effects.

The reality has shown us that all across the world there are striking inequalities in both access to quality health care and health outcomes for different populations and communities.

Discrimination, unequal access to health care, social protections, medical supplies, other structural, social and economic barriers throughout the pandemic, made it difficult for

Afro-descendant people to gain access to, COVID-19 tests, hospitalization, treatment, epidemiologic follow-up and/or isolation at home.

Other vulnerabilities, including household overcrowding, reduced access to safe water and basic sanitation, informal employment particular for women and girls that forced them to leave their homes, use public transportation or made it impossible for them to adhere to safety measures further undermined their ability to appropriately protect themselves from the COVID-19 virus, hence increasing its impact in their communities.

Children and adolescents of African descent also suffered and continue to deal with the impacts of the pandemic. As schools moved to online classes a light was shed on the technology gap faced by Afro-descendant households. Due to poverty, limited access to computers, laptops, or other suitable electronic devices, lack or limited access to internet connection, children in poor households including those of African descent struggled to regularly attend classes, and were confronted with food and housing insecurities.

Additionally, evidence showed disruption of menstrual hygiene management in areas with limited access to water, sanitation and hygiene products for adolescent girls and young women of African descent.

Lastly, while disaggregated data is not available, key issues affecting all young girls, include child marriage. Indeed, COVID-19 will also disrupt efforts to end child marriage, potentially resulting in an additional 13 million **child marriages** taking place across the globe between 2020 and 2030 that could otherwise have been avoided.

UNFPA's Interventions

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, UNFPA has developed programmes, generated data and evidence and advocated for reducing inequalities and promoting the rights and choices for all. For example, in Latin America, UNFPA's targeted responses for people of African Descent including young people include:

- Ensuring access to quality sexual and reproductive health services and efforts to prevent gender based violence, in particular among marginalized communities.
- Generating evidence-based knowledge and data disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity and other relevant markers.

- Advocating for reducing inequalities faced by people of African descent, including the promotion of institutions, laws, policies, and action plans to combat racial and gender discrimination and the advancement of equality,
- Cooperating through global, regional and national partners, including reproductive justice movements, to ensure inclusive, equitable and sustainable development for people of African descent in particular women, girls and youth.
- Providing tools to government counterparts and strategic implementing partners to ensure the continuity of prenatal and postnatal care, safe births, access to contraceptives, gender-based violence prevention and response services, as well as the protection of frontline health personnel, including midwives targeted to communities of people of African descent.
- Supporting human rights based national, regional and international accountability systems to raise violations of sexual and reproductive rights and ensure redress, particularly with those groups most left behind. Our engagement with the Working Group on Persons of African Descent is a testimony of this close relationship.

Recommendations

At UNFPA, from our work around the globe, we see afro-descendant women and girls denied their fundamental rights to sexual and reproductive health and well-being; we see their exclusion from all levels of decision-making; and we see the toll this takes generation after generation.

There is an urgent need for governments to invest in disaggregated data to allow for a better understanding of the complexity and magnitude of the challenges and inform the design of targeted transformational and inclusive policies.

We must continue to advocate for the dismantling of discriminatory laws, particularly those that restrict women and girls of African descent's bodily autonomy, encourage harmful practices and limit their full access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Ensure health centers and hospitals, in particular maternal health facilities located in communities where Afro-descendants live, or in nearby areas, provide quality health services with appropriate culturally sensitive trained staff.

We need to ensure meaningful dialogues and participation in decision making spaces for women, girls and young people of African descent, including in the planning and implementation of COVID-19 responses.

It is important to integrate a gender, ethnicity and race analysis into the COVID-19 responses to ensure measures taken include specific actions to meet the needs of the Afro-descendant population particularly those of young people.

Conclusion:

In 1966, Dr Martin Luther King Jr said: “of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane”. These words never rang truer, than in the past two years.

It is then not a surprise that COVID-19 has both highlighted and deepened the divide in a world that is already afflicted by severe racial, social and economic disparities.

However at the global level we have also seen great momentum in advancing recognition, justice and development including with the establishment of the Permanent Forum for People of African Descent a mechanism that will play a critical role in this agenda.

We look forward to continuing to partner and collaborate with the working group of experts on people of African descent and galvanize support to ensure children and young people can march towards a better and more equitable future.

Thank you!