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SI Secretary General Luis Ayala address to the Council of the Socialist International Women Reinventing our future after Covid-19

1. Where we are today

The coronavirus pandemic has profoundly changed the way we live and the world we live in. For more than a year, people around the world have lived with the threat of infection by this deadly virus and endured the consequences of the measures taken by governments in order to slow the threat. The full, catastrophic impact of the pandemic in terms of the cost in human lives is impossible to fully quantify, but the global death toll is now tragically over 3 million, a sobering milestone.

Although the impact of Covid-19 has been felt on all segments of society, it is undeniable that it has had a particularly damaging impact on social groups in the most vulnerable situations, including those in poverty, those suffering from ill health and disability, elderly people, and indigenous peoples, among others.

The impact on women has been significant. Women have faced disproportionate exposure to the virus in the workplace due to making up the majority of workers in many front-line and consumer-facing jobs, carers, health workers, teachers and other sectors where they are over-represented, and are hit hard by the pandemic.

Governments have a responsibility to their citizens to act in good faith based on scientific advice, to be transparent and accountable about their decisions and their consequences. The unprecedented restrictions on liberties across the world have been necessary in order to save lives, but we must remain vigilant to the danger of suppression of dissent and authoritarian behaviour by governments under the guise of actions taken to restrict the spread of Covid-19.

2. Our short term future - the vaccine

The common vision of the member parties of the Socialist International for the future is the elimination of the virus and the protection of citizens of all countries. For this to be achieved, access to vaccinations is absolutely fundamental.

The situation today gives both cause for optimism and concern. The rapid development, approval and manufacture of the vaccine owes a great deal to publicly funded research grants and close international collaboration, and is a shining example of what can be achieved when countries and companies work together and cooperate across borders. On the other hand, when it comes to the distribution of the vaccine, the spirit of international cooperation has been less evident, as shown by the vastly unequal access to vaccines that currently exists.

The scramble by the richest countries to secure access to the vaccine for their citizens has led to a situation in which some countries have enough doses on order to vaccinate their populations multiple times, while others lack even enough doses to offer protection to healthcare professionals and the most vulnerable. Vaccine equity is essential and we should offer our full support to COVAX as well as the organisations working alongside the WHO for greater access to vaccines in all countries. Speaking on this, I wish to recall the proposal of our vice-president, leader of the PDT of Brazil, Carlos Lupi, to promote ending vaccine patents and intellectual property rights, which was also recently proposed by a group of former heads of state and government.

As we have previously stated, no country can protect itself from Covid-19 forever by simply vaccinating its own population and ignoring the needs of the rest of the world. If the virus can continue to spread and potentially mutate in parts of the world without access to vaccines, it will continue to pose a risk to the entire world, and continue to inflict huge financial costs upon the global economy.

If we look today at South America - Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Perú, and even Uruguay which we thought had the situation under control, are all suffering terribly. South America has 8% of the world's population, but accounts for 35% of all deaths in the world as at last week. In all those countries there is a very limited supply of vaccines.

In Asia, India, as we all know, is suffering a catastrophe. We have been in touch with our member party, the Indian National Congress, expressing our solidarity and adding our voice to their call for free vaccinations for all. No doubt the moment of reckoning will come and Modi's government will have to respond. In Myanmar, where we have been in contact with our friends from the NLD, the healthcare system is near collapse because of the coup, and healthcare workers – many of which are women - are among those targeted by the military. In the

Philippines, where we also have a member party, there are fears of a similar catastrophe as we see in India.

We must also be aware of the potential for discrimination against those who have so far been excluded from vaccination through no fault of their own. No one should be discriminated against or denied their rights because they have not had the opportunity to be vaccinated or are unable to do so. Measures will continue to be necessary to prevent the spread of the virus for the foreseeable future, but great care must be taken to ensure that basic rights are not denied on the basis of access to vaccines.

3. Medium/long term - more solidarity in the world as a whole

It is as yet unclear if the Covid-19 virus can ever be fully eliminated, but the rapid development and deployment of vaccines gives hope that it can at least be controlled. Once this is achieved, it is vital to learn the lessons of the pandemic and the way in which the world responded to a global healthcare emergency on a scale not seen in a century.

One thing that is clear to see is that no one is safe from the pandemic until everyone is safe. We see this with the vaccine, as all countries need to be equally protected in order for the global spread of this awful disease to be curtailed. But this phrase could just as easily be applied and adapted to many other challenges that face global society today and have for many years been at the heart of the agenda of the Socialist International and Socialist International Women. Climate change will not be addressed in individual countries but across the entire planet. Conflicts and insecurity are not limited to single countries in regions. We should see violations of human rights and women's rights anywhere in the world as an attack on our common humanity.

The pandemic has also shown the inescapable reality of the inequalities that shape daily life for so many of the inhabitants of our planet. The economic inequalities preventing access to healthcare or a social safety net have been exposed by the suffering of those who have died due to lack of resources to treat Covid-19 patients, or who have fallen into poverty due to the economic consequences of lockdowns and other restrictions, and will continue to be a pressing issue even as the world emerges on the other side of the pandemic. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and vulnerable populations is a reflection of the challenges we continue to face in ensuring equality in all areas.

Nationalism in relation to access to finite healthcare resources, discrimination on the basis of perceived risk of transmission and xenophobia related to the origins of the virus are an indication of the urgent challenges we face as a global social democratic movement to promote better understanding between peoples and a world where animosity and ill-will are replaced with solidarity and collaboration.

It is up to us to offer a different vision for our common future. Our social democratic vision is one that is founded on the principles of fairness, cooperation, equality and solidarity. We need to keep these values at the forefront of not only the actions we take as individuals, as parties and in government or opposition in relation to the struggle to defeat the coronavirus, but in our approach to all the major challenges that face the world today.

In the SI we need to use every opportunity to highlight that securing rights and equality for women is to the benefit of everyone, not just women. We know this to be true and it is our platform.

Gender disparity has undoubtedly increased during the pandemic. We need to redress that regression, end the inequality that is institutionalised in our economies and societies, and together continue to build a more equal future.
