**Statement of Ms. Karina Nersesyan (UNFPA)**

Unfortunately, no country in the world is free of the scourges of racism, and racial discrimination. In the contemporary, sophisticated world, the forms and expressions of discrimination have also become sophisticated, but with the same results. It is our shared responsibility, shared obligation to set the vision and to ‘walk the talk’ to inspire people all over the world to make greater efforts to achieve more just societies, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls focusing on those most vulnerable populations such as women and girls of African Decent. And, I also want to bring that point home, to the Arab Region where activists in the region agree that while people are prone to condemn racism in western countries, they tend to be ignorant of the phenomenon in their own world region. An immediate example of such is the migratory and refugee flows from the African continent to the other recipient Arab States, work on policies and GBV services is not always available nor accessible to people of African descent as they can suffer multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on their status to access services, or simply because the issues they face may be overlooked.

“Where you will sit when you are old shows where you stood in youth.” says Yoruba proverb

I hope that our discussions today, sharing our respective visions and the discussions that ensue will inform concrete directions and strengthen our efforts to counteract different forms of intolerance. Where does UNFPA stand in its vision? For us, it is advancing equity for People of African Descent by 2030, prioritize the needs of people left furthest behind – particularly those most vulnerable women and girls - through inclusion, combating systemic racism, discrimination and ensuring bodily autonomy and access to quality sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Race is a complicated issue all over the world. And for the Arab world, it is the Region's multiple socio-political, cultural, tribal, and national layers that make up the notions of identity and belonging that add unique dimensions to the conversation. The history of the Arabian Peninsula is inextricably linked to the African continent and African history. Migration from Africa to the Arabian Peninsula—forced or otherwise—has happened for centuries. I would very much like to highlight the often overlooked impact of migration, including on the narrative of how the Arab region is perceived in Europe and globally. Often these feeds into the discriminatory practice that negatively impact opportunities. What opportunities, you may want to ask?

1. The upcoming census exercises in a number of Arab States countries is a unique opportunity for such an inclusion. However, a number of countries continues to be reluctant to collect or disseminate ethnic-oriented statistics, further impacting the major challenge of the invisibility and lack of evidence about the discrimination that people of African descent face in accessing the development opportunities. In 4, potentially 5, national censuses coming up, Djibouti is the only country that includes not only religion and citizenship but also ethnicity and refugee status in the questionnaire. It is important because the inability to collect such disaggregated data becomes a major impediment to being able to identify the gaps and design appropriate programs.

In Somalia, lack of reliable, disaggregated statistical data on ethnic communities makes it difficult to plan and monitor economic and social rights for minority groups/clans, including most vulnerable women and girls. It is particularly concerning when we speak about the Somali Bantus, an African minority ethnic group, who reside mostly along the river areas. Clannism/tribalism/ethnicity are at the heart of several conflicts, thus, many governments and development partners steer away from collecting this data during surveys (e.g Censuses, DHS, Labour force surveys).

Speaking of data collection, let me also bring in a migration perspective, using migration - from and - to Tunisia as a somewhat representational example from within the Arab region

Migration from Tunisia whereby Tunisians and Migrants residing in Tunisia, take the sea to European Coasts. The passing through migration and exodus of Tunisian and the neighboring countries’ skilled professionals is caused by a worsening economic situation at home, poor career options, the social repercussions of unemployment or underemployment with no opportunities for access to development and economic and social rights. Between 2004 and 2014, the number of individuals apprehended off the Tunisian coast trying to reach Europe almost quadrupled. Notably, the number of non-Tunisian nationals residing in Tunisia rose by 66% as increasingly, Tunisia is becoming a more popular destination and transit country for migrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa.

There has been a shift in the profile of migrants who chose to embark on a dangerous path to seek "better future" elsewhere: families, and also increased numbers of women, minors and migrants. Irregular departures by sea are no longer the chosen solution by unemployed youth from poor backgrounds, but it becomes a family, community and social segment project (term utilized by migration experts to describe the trends).

Migration to Tunisia is mainly from Sub Saharan African countries, from Libya and Syria where lack of comprehensive strategies/legal framework on migrations in Tunisia creates different status of vulnerabilities and lack of integration/accountability in social policies (overlooked component of social programs VS heavily monitored component in security-related programs). Irregular status leads to exposure, particularly impactful on women and girls, who face indecent working conditions, absence of social protection, violence, exploitation up to human trafficking (50% of victims of human trafficking in Tunisia are women from cote d'ivoire.)

Such situations also increase FGM prevalence in refugee communities, particularly those coming from the African continent that are received in Arab States. Yet, prevention strategies and delivery of adequate services to respond to FGM, other cases of GBV, is rarely a priority. In its approaches UNFPA Arab States explicitly looks for potential policy blindspots as otherwise the issue is not a concern for the host community or services are provided via a piecemeal approach. While UNFPA ASRO had its study on FGM in humanitarian settings which includes strengthening FGM programming for refugee communities, UNFPA Jordan CO also made a study to bring this issue (the existence of pockets of FGM in Jordan within Somali and Sudanese refugee communities) to the attention of policy-makers in Jordan.

The UNFPA’s PAD initiative, using a human rights based approach addresses the core problems of racism and racial discrimination as social determinants of health. It challenges structural inequalities, limited rights and limited access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, and data inequalities through its principles of

1. visibility to Accelerate actions for achieving statistical visibility
2. inclusion to Support comprehensive policies and programmes on SRHR and GBV that reflects specific needs, knowledge, culture, language, and eliminates all barriers to access quality services
* Inclusion to Deliberately engage with people who have been left behind under the “Nothing about us without us” slogan. They know their own needs, capacities, and obstacles and can steer more inclusive and effective solutions to uphold their rights.

In terms of the latter I would like to also share the most recent example of the Girls' Summit which included girls from 17 countries of the Arab region and cover access to justice and ending GBV, ending FGM, ending Child marriage, livelihoods, health and well-being, climate change and adolescent girls' leadership. The Summit was a great opportunity for our target youth, including people of African descent, to participate and express their views to indeed follow ‘nothing about us without us’ principle.

Yet another opportunity is the ICPD plan of action as one of the guiding frameworks identified by the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent as mentioned in the Operational Guidelines on the inclusion of People of African Descent in the 2030 agenda adopted by the UN Assembly in 2020. Follow up and review arrangements for the 2030 Agenda that are taking shape at global, regional and country levels offer a golden opportunity to assess the challenges in access to development and to economic and social rights for the people of African descent.

2030 Agenda recognizes and endorses the sequencing and synchronization of the reviews of the Major UN conferences and their outcomes, to ensure these processes feed into the follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda at all levels. As part of its efforts to advance the transformative promise of Leaving No One Behind within the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, I am proud to report that in 2020 UNFPA endorsed its strategy on “Supporting the advancement of rights and development of People of African Descent”

The endorsed strategy was followed by the UNFPA People of African Descent (PAD) Initiative, along with its Theory of Change for People of African Descent Initiative. In a nutshell, to address these core issues, the PAD initiative focuses on designing and implementing targeted programmes, communication and advocacy strategies, generating evidence and strengthening partnerships that accelerate the achievement of the PAD Strategy 2025 outputs: increased level of advocacy skills and capacity building of women and girls of AD, enhanced access to high quality SRHR and essential services to respond to gender based violence for people of AD, strengthened partnerships and coordination for the implementation of programme of activities of the International Decade for People of AD, increased visibility and evidence-based knowledge and data generation for the challenges faced people of AD, including intersectional factors such as racism and discrimination.

The PAD Initiative is  the UNFPA instrument for implementing the UN International Decade for People of African Descent  (2015-2024) and  it is aligned with  the 2030 Agenda, the ICPD PoA, the Durban declaration and Programme of Action, the Montevideo Consensus.

With that UNFPA also developed what we call a Roadmap for the People of African Descent Initiative. This document illustrates the planned priority activities taking into account the last three years of the International Decade for people of African descent (2022-2024). The roadmap also incorporates the milestones of the ICPD @2024 and Montevideo Consensus@ 10 intergovernmental processes.

Having what I would call multi-tiered approach of PAD Strategy, Initiative, Theory of Change and the Road Map, created a framework in which UNFPA partnered with OHCHR, UNDGC and Playing for Change to organize the signature Drum Dialogue events. These events sought to sensitize the global community on the inextricable linkages between securing rights for equal access and visibility of the Afro-descendants and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, as well as to promote the rich diversity of Afro-descendants’ cultural heritage and contributions to global development.

Another good example is Morocco, where UNFPA CO in close coordination with its partners, is supporting social integration of African descent migrants in particular through their access to SRH and GBV prevention and care services. In 2022, UNFPA supported the organization of The Migration Conference in Rabat, which is the largest annual scholarly gathering around migration issues worldwide, including several experts' panels around social, economical and cultural rights of African descent migrants. UNFPA has also supported the High Commissioner of Planning in the development of the first migration survey in Morocco, which is mainly focused on the situation of African descent migrants. In addition, in collaboration with the National Institute of Public Health, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, UNFPA conducted in 2021 a research study on socio-economic and cultural barriers for African descent migrants to access health services and prevent sexual violence. Simultaneously, UNFPA also supports an association of several NGOs working on the improvement of the participation and social inclusion of African descent migrants, including their access to SRH information, education and services.

Through various mechanisms, including multi-regional dialogues, advocacy and South-South cooperation, the PAD initiative will continue to support efforts for Africa and the diaspora to learn about and cooperate with one another, in particular engaging and providing an exchange of experiences and opportunities for young people. This cooperation helps to break down long-standing inequalities that violate the rights of women, girls and young people. It is also a paramount effort to advance the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, the ICPD, the agenda for people of African descent and ensure we leave no one behind in Africa and the diaspora.

The discrimination faced by people of African descent is now receiving greater attention and as a result, Afro-descendant groups have increasingly made their voices heard in the policy process. We have the duty of permanent vigilance, prevention by ‘recognition’, ‘justice’, and ‘development’ to take effective measures to advance inclusion policies, promote better access to development andto economic and social rights all while reinforcing its effective implementation and by dynamic interaction between governments, non-governmental organizations and other protagonists of just and discrimination free civil society.

I would like to close by an excerpt from a statement by the UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem that said “injustice and inequality is not a fate, not set in stone.” And I thank you.