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 Commentary

## Migration and Adolescent Health

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It is a great pleasure for me to join you today for your XIth Congress and I am particularly grateful to the wonderful organizers and the Government of India too for this privilege.

### The Unprecedented Now

When we consider that the population of adolescents globally is at its highest level ever; if we factor in where it is that those young people are most concentrated; if we examine how current policy and practice are treating them; if we look to the world that we are bequeathing to them; then the urgency of acting more decisively and more conclusively right now becomes all too clear—acting now to ensure that this enormous reserve of potential is not denied its contribution, but is actively enabled to emerge into the flow of our world challenges as our greatest source of influential and powerful agents for positive change.

And, our need to direct change positively arguably has never been greater. For we stand today in the midst of unprecedented opportunity and almost unfathomable challenge.

By any number of measures, globally a massive dynamic of change is underway: unprecedented in scale, significance, consequence, pace, and urgency, globally. This, friends, is the unprecedented now:

Conflict, contagion, climate instability, the cruel crises of famine, and feud—these dynamics are shaping harsh realities for unprecedented numbers of people and those countries suffering the gravest of these impacts have the youngest of populations.

The city unplanned and the sprawling slum; contaminated water supplies and insecure food chains; rising armed conflict and deepening corruption are eroding peace.

Yet more people are more interconnected than ever before. Forty-eight percent of us now have access to the Internet—20 years ago, less than 1% did. Among the world's youth, 71% is now online. Although the greatest growth is occurring in some of the poorest places, still information poverty is entrenching poverty too of opportunity.

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Gilmore's comments were delivered as a keynote lecture to the International Association for Adolescent Health's XIth World Congress, held in New Delhi, India, October 27th–29th, 2017.

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Consumption is nearing twice the rate at which the planet can replenish and driving destabilizing shifts in climate, while with graver inequality—within and between countries—than at any other time in human history. It has been predicted that at the end of 2017, 1% of the world's population will own more wealth than the other 99% out together.

And in the meantime, a misanthropic roll back against hard won health gains—particularly for women and girls—is underway, with ramped up efforts designed to erode sexual and reproductive health and rights. These efforts are bringing selective, discriminatory, and devastating consequences for women, adolescents, and the new born—exactung unaffordable costs on them, their families and their communities.

Indeed, people's access to quality essential health services and information—without fear, stigma, or discrimination—is under direct threat. Deliberate punitive targeting of health workers and health facilities, particularly, but not only, in conflict settings is on the increase.

Yes, thanks to extraordinary development gains, more people are living longer. We are about to, for the first time in human history, have the number of adults aged 65 and over outnumber the number of children under the age of five.

But 40% of the world's population is under the age of 25. More educated, more politically active, if youth were a nationality, if being adolescent were an ethnicity, then theirs would be a country the size of India itself.

These dynamics of shift and change make for an unprecedented now. A unique moment, which if lost, will bring otherwise preventable suffering, sorrow, and indignity for generations to come—a burden that will be borne not by us directly perhaps, but one that most certainly will bend the backs of our children and our children's children.

### People On The Move

Perhaps the most telling sign that we hover on the brink of opportunity lost, that we are paying high price for man-made disasters and man-made inequality is that now there are also more people on the move than ever before in human history.

The world's unprecedented change-dynamics are also driving people out of their homes and livelihoods at record levels; with more fleeing for relief from the unbearable on often harrowing

journeys in search of the promising. We are witness to the largest numbers of refugees since the heights of refugee movement in WW2.

It is estimated that around 70% of the world's people on the move internally are women and those aged under 18. More than 12% of the world's 15–24-year olds are migrating across borders, with children making up perhaps more than a third of those crossing by sea into Europe and accounting for at least 30% of recorded deaths (UNICEF 2015).

Adolescents on the move? They are asylum seekers fleeing conflict, violence, and persecution. They are young people compelled to move to escape extreme poverty, lack of access to land, food, water, decent work, education, and healthcare. They move, because when separated from their families—who migrated perhaps years before—they persist with the hope they can be reunited. They move to escape the consequences of environmental degradation and climate change. Adolescents leave their homes, travel far, and aim for a new world of possibilities for the same reasons we have always moved, traveled, and explored, since time began.

But the most precarious movement—along the most irregular routes—is rarely "voluntary." Women, men, boys, and girls—their lives at risk—take long and brutal journeys across inhospitable deserts—across the high seas—because they feel they have little other choice. It is the policies of Governments and practices too of parties to conflict, corruption, and crisis—the absence of regular migration pathways, the militarization of borders and the criminalization of irregular migration—that are pushing more and more people to undertake these perilous journeys.

And each and every stage of that migration experience is shaped by a person's age, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, health, and disability shape.

For adolescents too, it is characterized by multiple threats—of xenophobia, of discrimination, physical harm, psychological trauma, and sexual and economic exploitation and, when at the world's borders, immigration raids, and detention.

Although threat accompanies them wherever they go, opportunities do not. Risks to their health and well-being travel relentlessly with them; relief, services, and support it seems do not. While distance from the cause of their flight lengthens, the distance to their point of arrival in a place of dignity and acceptance more often does too.

In transit, migrant adolescents are at risk of violence, including kidnapping, abduction and extortion, trafficking, sexual exploitation, economic exploitation, child labor, begging, or the involvement in criminal and illegal activities. Particularly when traveling in an irregular manner, children are at risk of violence at the hands of both State and non-State actors and of witnessing violence against their parents or others.

Reporting to the UNGA, an independent expert—known as a special rapporteur on the right to life and extra-judicial killings—advised the world's governments that so perilous are these migratory routes that they amount to a human rights and humanitarian crisis: "Characterized by mass casualties globally, a regime of impunity for perpetrators and high tolerance for its fatalities."

"These deaths of refugees and migrants often remain undocumented: how many have been executed, shot, have drowned? We do not know. How many have lost their lives to starvation or dehydration? How many have been tortured, denied life-saving treatment, or have died from despair? We simply do not know." That was her chilling message to the UNGA.

Migrant boys and girls who survive their journeys arrive profoundly traumatized by their experience.

With migration governance centered more on the protection of borders than on the protection of people, many current migration policies and practices not only fail to respond to this trauma, they serve to exacerbate it.

Immigration detention is widespread—meaning that instead of being protected, migrant boys and girls are often deprived first of their liberty. The migrant young people my colleagues have met in migration centers around Europe kept asking why it is that they are treated as criminals. They described how distressing it is to be kept in closed and narrow spaces; spoke of how they are left feeling desperate, anxious, depressed, and sick physically. Of how they dream of access to fresh air, to blue skies.

As stated by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture "The deprivation of liberty of children within the context of administrative immigration enforcement is never in the best interests of the child, exceeds the requirement of necessity, becomes grossly disproportionate and may constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of migrant children." Child and family immigration detention should be prohibited by law and its abolishment ensured in policy and practice.

Having experienced severe trauma and emotional distress migrant boys and girls have often urgent mental health needs, that due to inadequate screenings and insufficient access to skilled staff, are not identified or addressed. This is particularly the case for those who have been subjected to sexual and gender-based violence.

Experts, including child protection officers, should be present at borders to complete human rights-based screenings and referrals. Migrant adolescents should have access to specific care and psychological support, comprehensive rights-based sexual and reproductive health information, and services and specialized care for survivors of sexual violence and abuse. Psychosocial support for migrants who have lost family members and for migrant women who have suffered miscarriages or other adverse pregnancy outcomes during their journey must be guaranteed.

Yet on arrival many are denied access to essential services—of education, housing, and health. They are excluded from recreation, participation, protection, and social security. Even where their rights to services are protected by laws and policies, they face administrative and other obstacles impeding their access to just treatment including: inflexible demands for identity documents or social security numbers; harmful and inaccurate age-determination procedures; financial and linguistic barriers; and the risk that using even essential services will reveal their status and result in detention or deportation.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has made clear that migrants' enjoyment of the right to health without discrimination "should not depend on the legal status of the persons concerned."

In particular, migrant boys and girls and their families should be able to access health services without fear of being detected, detained and deported. For this reason, it is essential to advocate for firewalls, to separate immigration enforcement activities from public health service provision and make sure that they are respected.

Healthcare institutions should be prohibited from reporting data on the legal status of their patients to immigration authorities. Healthcare providers should be clearly informed that they are not required to do so and migrants should receive specific assurances that they will not be reported to immigration authorities if they

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