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- Thanks for the kind invitation.
- My intention is to highlight some of our working methods, discuss opportunities and challenges related to civil society access and participation, as well as emphasize the important role of civil society at the international level. I will also make some comments of particular relevance to the Commission on the Status of Women, including shining a well-deserved spotlight on a few of our member organizations who are engaged in this important work – whether it be drug-related incarceration, stigma, and reducing harm for women, or other gender-related issues around drugs.
- As mentioned, I am the Chair of the Executive Committee for the New York NGO Committee on Drugs (NYNGOC), which is a global committee that aims to support civil society organizations in engaging with the UN system on international drug policy and practice, as well as facilitates the exchange of information between civil society organizations and UN agencies, member states, and other relevant UN bodies.
- Established in 1984, the NYNGOC operates under the umbrella of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO) and represents more than 100 civil society organizations from across the globe.
- We have a long history of women at the helm of the NYNGOC. I follow in the footsteps of my predecessor Heather Haase who served as Chair for six years and was central to our activities around recent high-level meetings at the UN on drug control. Heather revived the NYNGOC after a period of dormancy and did so with the instrumental help of prior Chair of the NYNGOC, Rosalind Harris, without whose work and support I could not be in this role today.
- In addition, a number of our members are specifically engaged in exploring and illuminating issues faced by women with respect to drug policies, and I would like to highlight a few today.

- The **Washington Office on Latin America** and the **International Drug Policy Consortium**, which each devote a significant amount of resources focusing on human rights of women incarcerated for drug-related offences in both Latin America and other parts of the world.
- The **Women and Harm Reduction International Network**, which works to improve the availability, quality, relevance and accessibility of health, social and legal services for women who use drugs.
- The **National Advocates for Pregnant Women**, works to secure the human and civil rights, health and welfare of all people, focusing on pregnant and parenting women – particularly low-income women, women of color, and drug-using women.
- **Moms Stop the Harm** – which advocates to end substance use related stigma, harms and death on behalf of families and friends of loved ones affected by substance use; **Broken No More**, which provides support and guidance to those who have lost a loved one to substance use; and **Anyone’s Child**, an initiative of **Transform Drug Policy Foundation**, that gives voice to family members whose lives have been acutely affected by current drug laws and are now campaigning to change them.
- Of course, **Dianova**, who have brought this event to you today – deserve our appreciation.
- NYNGOC works to ensure that all have a voice in international policymaking and discussions at the UN around drugs. These organizations and others are an important resource supporting member states and other UN actors who formulate gender-related drug policies at the global and national levels.

### ***Working Methods***

- The UN General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS) held in 2016 ushered in a period of collaboration between the NYNGOC and its sister committee, the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs (VNGOC), with the two committees partnering to form the “Civil Society Task Force” (CSTF). The CSTF was a global task force of NGOs representing global regions and affected populations/global voices. The CSTF was an effective vehicle for increasing the inclusion of civil society voices at preparations leading up to and at the UNGASS, as well as at the Ministerial Segment of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in 2019. The CSTF was specifically named in the CND resolution outlining modalities for the 2019 Ministerial Segment.
- Activities of the CSTF included:
  - Identifying civil society speakers for preparatory events and at the meetings themselves. Diversity and representation were of great importance in these selection processes, as we aimed to ensure a parity in representation of women and across regions. CSTF Guidelines for Selecting Speakers explicitly include gender balance as a criterion to be considered in speaker selection.

- Conducting consultations with civil society, such as through online surveys and civil society hearings held in New York and Vienna.
  - Publishing reports presenting the findings of consultations by the CSTF.
- The CSTF successfully delivered this range of actions in both 2016 and 2019. It remains a useful example of cross-committee collaboration in an effort to support inclusive civil society participation at high-level UN meetings.
- In 2016, the global survey – which showed great global inclusivity and was well regarded by member states and UN agencies – highlighted the impact of drug policies on women as a priority area of civil society for the UNGASS, as did the input from consultations with civil society. I will not detail the types of impacts, but they include those covered in today’s presentations. If this is of particular interest to you, I would direct you towards a great resource from civil society that compiles publications on the impacts of drug policy on women, namely the virtual library on the Women and Harm Reduction International Network’s website (<https://whrin.site/all-publications/>).
- The UNGASS outcome document reflected this priority by including a chapter on cross-cutting issues: drugs and human rights, youth, children, women and communities, which was a huge achievement advocated for by civil society. The outcome document includes directives to mainstream a gender perspective, to ensure the involvement of women in all stages of developing, implementing, and monitoring drug policies and programmes, as well as to develop and disseminate gender-sensitive measures particularly with regard to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
- Since then, the inclusion of gender in discussions at the CND has become more common, as reflected in two CND resolutions (61/4 and 62/6) with a focus on women, increased references to gender perspectives in CND resolutions on other topics, and in the 2019 Ministerial Declaration.
- This growing emphasis on mainstreaming a gender perspective in international drug policymaking enables civil society to collaborate with UN agencies further on these issues, as well as to encourage progress domestically by pointing to these advances in their engagement and advocacy with governments at the national level.

### ***Opportunities and Challenges***

- COVID-19 has had several important implications for us, both positive and negative. Digitization serves as an opportunity to broaden and strengthen meaningful civil society participation. The removal of barriers to physical participation should serve as an opportunity for intergovernmental organizations to ensure that civil society access remains at least as strong as (and ideally stronger than) it was prior to the pandemic, and is leveraged to allow the inclusion of new voices.
- At the NYNGOC, we saw an opportunity to update our own working methods given changes to UN working methods due to COVID-19 and the reliance on virtual platforms for convenings, meetings, and negotiations. For the first time, the Executive Committee sought

candidates for NYNGOC leadership – particularly the Chair and/or Vice-Chair – for the 2020 Elections who were not based in New York. This reflects our efforts to address the issue that the NGO committee system focused on drugs is generally always ultimately governed from the global north due to the physical location of the UN ‘hubs.’ Although the NYNGOC membership has always been international, a more global governance model will allow leadership to be shared with our partners located outside UN ‘hubs’ including myself from Canada and our Vice-Chair from Costa Rica.

- Yet there have been risks as well. The reformatting of spaces has also meant the need to protect existing access. We know spaces have been limited, such as allowing pre-recorded statements by civil society only or restricting attendees due to platform limitations. Such examples of restricting civil society engagement are supported by some member states and may set a dangerous precedent for after the pandemic.
- With respect to civil society access and participation at the Commission on the Status of Women, these parallel events as part of the NGO Forum occur on a separate and dedicated platform that has been coordinated by a civil society committee like ours, namely, the NGO CSW New York. Hosting parallel events outside the formal framework significantly limits the involvement of member states, as well as UN agencies, and thereby consists largely of civil society talking among themselves. Yet this division also existed when the NGO Forum was held in-person, with many NGO representatives from around the world coming to New York to attend the NGO Forum but not having access to the UN building.
- Another issue pertaining to the NGO Forum – and certainly to other areas of civil society participation at the UN – is the inability for parallel events to be considered or to influence the main outcome, namely the agreed conclusions, given the language of this document is already agreed.
- A final issue related to civil society access and participation at the Commission on the Status of Women is the lack of transparency around the selection of civil society speakers for the general discussion or interventions from the floor during an interactive dialogue. While NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC have opportunities to address the Commission on the Status of Women, there is no information about who selects the speakers and based on what criteria.
- Turning to the upcoming 64<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs beginning on April 12, modalities concerning civil society access and participation are still to be seen. The recent VNGOC Position Statement contains urgent recommendations to protect civil society participation at the 64<sup>th</sup> session of the CND, which the NYNGOC fully supports.
- Like the VNGOC statement, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen significant civil society collaboration in support of protecting civil society access and participation at the UN, including across sectors. Examples include activities of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO), the UN-Mute Civil Society statement, the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability (FOGGS), among others.

- It is imperative to continue these good practices of consultation and collaboration in civil society organizing, with the overarching goal of ensuring the continued and strengthened inclusion of diverse voices from civil society in UN proceedings. The UN as a whole has a collective responsibility to respect, protect, and promote the freedom to engage with the UN as an exercise of fundamental freedoms and human rights for all. Civil society organizations represent a diverse range of expertise, perspectives, and lived experiences. Protecting and enhancing civil society access and participation at the UN is therefore critical to the success of international policymaking.