18 January 2024 – Cairo, Egypt – The Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean successfully organized a landmark event as part of the Presidential Initiative on Women’s Health. Held on 18 January 2024 at the Hilton Heliopolis Hotel in Cairo, this roundtable event coincided with the 16th Annual Breast, Gynecological and Immunoncology International Cancer Conference forum and addressed the escalating challenges of breast and cervical cancer in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Organized under the auspices of His Excellency Professor Khaled Abdel Ghaffar, Minister of Health and Population, and led by Professor Hesham Elghazali, Head of the Presidential Initiative of Women’s Health, the event facilitated international collaboration, assessed cost-effectiveness of interventions and promoted cross-learning in alignment with WHO’s mission. It brought together high-level health and political authorities from the Region to discuss and devise strategies for scaling up women's health initiatives, focusing on the return from investing in breast and cervical cancer prevention and management programmes.

[The Presidential Initiative on Women's Health stands as a beacon of hope and progress, enveloping our nation in a comprehensive strategy to enhance early detection and management of women's cancers. Today, as we convene on this momentous occasion, we recognize the significance of international collaboration in achieving this noble objective.

As we stand on the precipice of progress, let us recognize the transformative power of partnerships. The Egyptian Presidential Initiative on Women's Health seeks not only to provide a platform for experience sharing but also to become a catalyst for advancing cancer control strategies globally. By convening world-renowned scientists and policymakers, we are creating a dynamic space for strategic discussions that will resonate far beyond our borders.]

Prof. Khaled Abdul Ghaffar, Minister of Health and Population Egypt

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, breast cancer is the most common and deadliest cancer among women, accounting for around 49 000 deaths per year, according to the latest estimates of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) ; meanwhile, cervical cancer claims around 10 000 women per year in the Region . In addition, there is alarming evidence that the occurrence of women’s cancers is increasing in the Region.

The burden of these cancers in the Region is compounded by a range of factors, including limited resources for the health sector, inadequate health care infrastructure, low levels of societal awareness, and cultural and social barriers. These factors contribute to delays in diagnosis and treatment, leading to poor outcomes and increased mortality rates.

[To effectively combat Women's cancers, we must prioritize strengthening of our health systems, including infrastructure, training healthcare professionals, and ensuring sustainable financing mechanisms.]

Dr. Rana Hajjeh, Director of Programme Management, WHO EMRO

Women's cancers not only have a significant impact on the health and well-being of a most important pillar of the society, thus affecting women's fundamental right to health, but also severely impact the overall economy of every and each country in the Region. Preliminary results of a WHO-led socioeconomic study – an investment case – on women's cancers demonstrate that the cost of inaction, i.e. not addressing this crucial public health issue, will impose a substantial economic burden on the Region, reaching hundreds of billions of US dollars by 2050.

Egypt has taken important steps to respond to and counter this alarming trend. The Presidential Initiative on Women's Health is a nationwide programme embraced by the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population to upgrade the early detection and management of women's cancers. the Initiative also fosters international collaboration and aims to gather world-renowned scientists and policymakers, by providing a platform for experience sharing and for advancing cancer control strategies worldwide.

[In four years, the Egyptian Presidential Initiative on Women's Health achieved remarkable outcomes. Notably, the percentage of women presenting at the late stage of breast cancer decreased significantly from 70% to 20%. Additionally, the duration from the initial presentation to diagnosis was shortened to 49 days, exceeding the WHO's target of 60 days.

Preventing and detecting cancer early are the most economical and valuable methods to save

lives in our battle against cancer. The Presidential Initiative serves as a tangible example of an equitable, evidence-based, cost-effective strategy against breast cancer, involving collaboration with all stakeholders.

The Presidential Initiative serves as a beacon in the control of women's cancers in the entire region, particularly for low- and middle-income countries. Its replicable methodology and concept are commendable. In the future, we aim towards solidifying partnerships that go beyond borders to ensure comprehensive and accessible care for every woman in the Eastern Mediterranean and setting a new standard in women’s health.]

Prof. Hesham Elghazaly, Head of the Presidential Initiative on Women’s Health Egypt

Discussions during the roundtable event spotlighted:

1. Improvement and positioning of success models by highlighting the Egyptian experience and other regional success stories in breast cancer prevention and treatment.
2. Socioeconomic considerations around women’s cancers, focusing on how breast and cervical cancer initiatives synergize with overall socioeconomic development in Egypt and the wider Region, thus offering insights into the broader implications of health interventions.
3. Integration of international and regional efforts, including fostering and strengthening collaboration between various international and regional organizations in cancer control, sharing experiences and strategies for effective integration.

Keynote presentations and panel discussions featured eminent speakers including His Excellency Professor Khaled Abdel Ghaffar, as well as high-level representatives from the WHO, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC).

This roundtable event has proven to be a critical platform for bringing together key international stakeholders in the fight against women's cancers, leveraging the collective knowledge, experience and resources of the Region’s leading health authorities and international organizations.

The anticipated outcomes include enhanced models for breast cancer prevention and treatment, a better understanding of the socioeconomic impacts of these health initiatives, and stronger multisectoral collaboration for women's health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond.

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1. GLOBOCAN 2020. Estimated number of deaths breast, females, all ages.

2. GLOBOCAN 2020. Estimated number of deaths cervix uteri, females, all ages.

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