National meeting highlights priorities for government to protect transgender rights and health

*Dialogue between government and community acknowledges urgent attention needed to protect India’s estimated one million transgender and hijra citizens*

**Friday, 2 September 2016; New Delhi:** Transgender and hijra community leaders from across the country met today with politicians and policy makers at the 4th National Hijra Habba. Organised by India HIV/AIDS Alliance’s Wajood programme, the Hijra Habba is a forum for outreach and dialogue between government stakeholders and the transgender and hijra community.

With the theme “Equity, Empowerment and Access” guiding the proceedings, this year’s meeting takes place following the recent approval of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016 by the Union Cabinet, under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Ministers of State Shri Faggan Singh Kulaste and Smt Anupriya Patel in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare expressed concern at the state of transgenders and hijras in the country and described steps to ensure their wellbeing. They commended the recent Bill as a means towards greater inclusiveness.

Simran Shaikh, a leading hijra activist, said, “I thank the Government for the Transgender Bill, which will protect rights, reduce violence and discrimination, and provide for our welfare. However, the present Bill includes a definition for transgenders that is vague and needs to be revised to avoid confusion and ensure the legislation is properly implemented. I urge the Government to look carefully at the Supreme Court’s 2014 NALSA judgement and take its guidance with regard to the definition.”

India HIV/AIDS Alliance’s Chief Executive James Robertson commented, “Hijra Habbas are a platform for transgender and hijra communities to engage with Government and other stakeholders to increase understanding and build the political will required to act. By increasing awareness of how the current Bill might improve lives, this meeting will help consolidate support and motivate the Government to act to secure inclusion and equality for the estimated one million transgender and hijra Indians.”

Medical practitioner and two-time Member of Parliament, Dr Kirit Solanki, remarked, “It is unfortunate that even after 70 years of independence, transgender rights are still being denied and discrimination against transgenders continues. The Transgender Bill that has been passed under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, shows that the present Government has political will to change the situation. I agree there are challenges in the present Bill, and I request you all to give us your inputs so that we can work on them. We assure that your rights will be protected through this Bill and justice shall not be denied.”

UN representatives and officials from the National AIDS Control Organization were also part of the day’s events. Leaders of India’s transgender movement, including Laxmi Narayan Tripathi among many others, brought their experience and insights to the deliberations. Celebrities such as Diandra Soares and Sushant Divgikar of Bigg Boss 8 fame displayed their solidarity with the cause, and lawyers and activists from various organisations provided their expertise to increase understanding of the Bill and how it may improve transgender wellbeing in India.

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**About India HIV/AIDS Alliance**

Founded in 1999, India HIV/AIDS Alliance is a non-governmental organisation operating in partnership with civil society, government and communities to support sustained responses to HIV in India that protect rights and improve health. Complementing the Indian national programme, we build capacity, provide technical support and advocate to strengthen the delivery of effective, innovative, community-based HIV programmes to vulnerable populations affected by the epidemic.
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