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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by International Women’s Health Coalition, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

The Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, and the International Women's Health Coalition welcome the focus of the Commission on the Status of Women on challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls.

As we move into the future global development framework, it is absolutely critical that we reflect and learn from the Millennium Development Goals in order to address the gaps in sexual and reproductive rights for young women and adolescent girls.

Gender and age inequalities in Millennium Development Goals achievements

While the Millennium Development Goals have resulted in impressive progress in some areas, the Goals that are furthest from being achieved are those focused on women and girls — Goal 3 (promote gender equality and empower women and Goal 5 (improve maternal health). It should be noted that:

- Compared to men, women are still more likely to live in poverty. In the poorest 20 per cent of households, girls have the lowest chance of receiving an education.
- Opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives continue to be unequal for women. As of 31 January 2013, the average share of women members in parliaments in the world was just slightly over 20 per cent.
- The gender gap in employment remains, as indicated by a 24.8 percentage point difference between men and women in the employment-to-population ratio in 2012.
- Out of 123 million youths (aged 15 to 24) who lack basic reading and writing skills, 61 per cent of them are young women.
- In 2011, approximately 820,000 women and men aged 15 to 24 were newly infected with HIV in low- and middle-income countries, and more than 60 per cent of them were women.
- About 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 years and 2 million girls under the age of 15 give birth every year, and complications from pregnancy and childbirth, are in fact, the leading causes of death among girls in this age range.
- Globally, about a third of girls are married before age 18, with prevalence rates of 30 per cent or higher in 41 low- and middle-income countries.
- Roughly 25 per cent of the world's population still lives in countries with highly restrictive abortion laws — mostly in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the regions where the majority of deaths owing to unsafe abortion occur. Approximately 8.5 million women experience complications from unsafe abortion annually, 3 million do not receive necessary care, and almost 50,000 die.

The reasons for this lack of progress include:

- (a) Persistent gender inequalities, gender-based violence, and stigma and discrimination against young women, adolescent girls and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities;
- (b) Inadequate investment in programmes to ensure universal access to comprehensive, quality sexual and reproductive health services, especially for adolescents;
- (c) Inadequate investment in programmes to promote gender equality and the human rights of women, girls and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities;
- (d) Failure to address legal, economic, social and spatial inequalities and resulting barriers in access to education, information and services;
- (e) Failure to ensure universal access of all adolescents and young people to comprehensive sexuality education.

As a result, women and girls in many countries have been prevented from fully realizing their human rights, including their sexual and reproductive rights, undermining progress on Goals 3, 5 and 6. It is essential that these challenges be addressed between now and 2015 to ensure further progress in achieving the existing Millennium Development Goals, so that this momentum can be carried forward into the post-2015 framework.

Comprehensive sexuality education is an essential strategy for accelerating progress on Goals 3, 5 and 6

Comprehensive sexuality education is a particularly important strategy for achieving gender equality, improving maternal health and combating HIV because it empowers and equips young people with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to make decisions about, and enjoy, their sexuality and their health. The High-level Task Force for the International Conference on Population and Development defines comprehensive sexuality education as: age-appropriate education about human rights, human sexuality, gender equality, relationships and sexual and reproductive health and rights through the provision of scientifically-accurate, non-judgmental information.

The evidence is clear that comprehensive sexuality education programmes, when linked to comprehensive, youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, can support adolescents and young people to delay or avoid unwanted sexual encounters; prevent unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortions; protect themselves from sexually transmissible infections, including HIV; and transform gender norms. These programmes can also empower them to understand and assert their rights, increasing girls' ability to avoid early and forced marriage and stay in school. Comprehensive sexuality education is also a vital tool in promoting gender equality and reducing stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

When young people do not have access to the sexual and reproductive health information and education they need, the results can be devastating consequences for their health and lives. For example, despite the fact that more than a third of new HIV transmissions are among young people aged 15 to 24, knowledge about

preventing HIV transmission among them is still very far away from the global target.

We urge governments to promote comprehensive sexuality education to ensure further progress on the Millennium Development Goals and in the upcoming post-2015 development agenda.

Key recommendations for the agreed conclusions of the fifty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women

- Incorporate the Bali Global Youth Forum Declaration and regional and global outcomes of the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014 review process into the post-2015 development agenda.
- Build the post-2015 development agenda around a human rights-based framework that prioritizes gender equality, social justice, economic justice and environmental justice.
- Meaningfully engage women's and youth organizations at all levels of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the post-2015 development agenda.
- Focus on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against young women, adolescent girls, women living with HIV/AIDS, women living with disabilities, people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and other marginalized communities.
- Specifically address gender equality and women's empowerment with targets to guarantee women's and girls' rights to control all aspects of their sexuality and their reproductive rights; eliminate early and forced marriage; end gender-based violence; guarantee women's economic rights, including their rights to own and control land, property and other productive assets; and promote women's leadership at all levels.
- Address gender equality and women's rights throughout the framework, including by ensuring women's and girls' equal access to employment, living wages and social protection; education; quality health care including universal access to sexual and reproductive health services: gynaecological care, all forms of safe and effective contraception, safe abortion and post-abortion care, maternity care, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, breast and reproductive cancers, and infertility; as well as services to screen for and address violence; and addressing the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change and women's roles in sustainable development.
- Include specific indicators that are focused on women and young people.
- Address the intersectional nature of gender inequalities by recognizing the ways in which multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination can compound marginalization and discrimination.