



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-ninth session

9-20 March 2015

**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”**

### **Statement submitted by Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

The Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, Kuala Lumpur, welcomes the theme of the 59th Commission on the Status of Women on the Beijing Declaration and Programme for Action which highlights equality for women and men as a pre-requisite to social justice, upholds human rights of women and girls as inalienable, integral, indivisible and universal, underlines the removal of all obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making, and emphasizes the need for working together with women and men across different contexts, cultures and situations. We believe that sexual and reproductive health and rights for all is an important pre-requisite to attaining a just and equitable world.

Equality of women, can be achieved not only through focusing on the common concerns of women worldwide but also through recognizing and respecting diversity among women. Poor women, women from rural areas, women in conflict situations, women in regions prone to climate change, women belonging to religious minorities, women with disabilities, migrant women, and women of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities face a host of challenges that must be recognised and addressed. Also, women in dangerous working conditions, with unequal pay, unprotected home-based production, under-remunerated and undervalued jobs also face additional risks.

Two decades from the 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, the world is far from achieving substantive equality and human rights for all. Development which does not take into consideration the gendered inequities and marginalization of almost half the world's population of women and girls is inadequate and unjust. Feminization of poverty makes it increasingly difficult for women and girls to access resources including economic resources, credit mechanisms as well as access to food security and sovereignty. In such situations of dire poverty and neglect, women's access to sexual and reproductive health resources becomes further thwarted.

Women's unequal access to education also makes it additionally difficult for them to access information on sexual and reproductive health services. Lack of gender-sensitive and comprehensive sexuality education curricula in general and more specifically for uneducated and out-of-school women and girls aggravates misconceptions around sexual and reproductive health and rights issues.

Women bear the additional burden of childbirth and pregnancy, maternal mortality and morbidity continues to be one of the leading causes of death in the Asia-Pacific region. The main causes of maternal mortality include excessive haemorrhaging, hypertension, and abortion-related injuries, and inadequate abortion policies, unavailability of safe, legal and unconditional abortion services, inadequate and unaffordable access to healthcare, lack of access to contraceptive information and services, unavailability of skilled birth attendance, inadequate antenatal care coverage, emergency obstetric care services, and violence during pregnancy. The causes get further accentuated through the lack of private sector regulation thus widening the gap between poor people and health facilities, increasing trends in privatization of healthcare coupled with higher rates of out-of-pocket expenditures

thus posing as a barrier to achieving universal access to health in general and women's sexual and reproductive health in particular.

Child, early and forced marriages remain detrimental to the rights of a child to bodily integrity and the right to decide if, when and who to marry; denying the right to education leads to early and unwanted pregnancies for girls. Girls and young women who are married early have less access to reproductive health services and fewer decision-making choices as they will invariably be married to older partners, and have limited capacity to make healthy reproductive choices due to gender power imbalances. Interlinked with early and forced marriages, is an increased risk of violence and Sexually Transmitted Infection transmission.

Women and girls worldwide are also becoming increasingly vulnerable to sexual violence, abuse and discrimination whether in the public or the private spheres. Increasing incidence of violence throughout the Asia-Pacific region is a growing cause for concern and calls for better laws and policies on rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment, effective implementation of these laws and policies, and good conviction rates. Diverse sexual orientation and gender identities including lesbian women and transgender women, and sex workers are additionally vulnerable to sexual abuse. Further, out of every twenty people living with HIV in Asia, seven are women; and nine out of ten women living with HIV had contracted it from their husbands or long-term partners. Laws and policies must therefore take into consideration the added vulnerabilities of sexual and gender minorities and women living with HIV to integrate better their concerns.

Religious fundamentalism all over the world opposes any space for change resulting in direct and indirect controls over gender and sexuality, curbing women's rights and especially over women from marginalized communities, including gender and sexual minorities. Because women are often considered the custodians of family norms and honour, their bodies and sexualities become important sites of religious control. Religious fundamentalisms affect unmarried and single women from accessing sexual and reproductive health services and interventions, prohibits people living with HIV from accessing treatment and services, opposes the use of contraception for married and unmarried people alike thus equating use of contraception with abortions, restricts and criminalises abortion thus forcing women to avail unsafe abortions thereby endangering their lives and health. We need to ensure policy-making venues are free from the influence of religious fundamentalists.

Asian-Pacific Resources and our partners therefore:

Call for equitable distribution of all resources including sexual and reproductive health resources.

Demand that governments of all countries especially with poor health indicators should increase their budget allocation for health and include sexual and reproductive health and rights as one of the major components.

Call on governments to include gender-sensitive comprehensive sexuality education for all.

Demand for the provision of adequate and affordable access to the healthcare system, along with the availability of and access to skilled attendance and antenatal care coverage especially to vulnerable populations.

Call for effective abortion laws and policies and good quality and safe abortion services.

Call for countries to move away from, 'out of pocket' expenditure' towards a greater share of government expenditure of health through tax revenue and through social insurance.

Believe that governments must not disengage from its regulatory role and must strive for balance between economic growth and equity and ensure the meaningful participation of civil society and other stakeholders in the public health system.

Call for sound laws and policies for the prevention of sexual abuse and assault on all populations including for sexual and gender minorities, effective implementation of such laws and policies, and higher conviction rates.

Call on all governments to remove legal and policy barriers based in political, religious and cultural conservatism and make available universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

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