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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”**

Statement submitted by Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Twenty years ago at the Fourth World Conference on Women, world leaders committed to collectively uphold the rights and empowerment of women and girls. Since then, the resulting Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has stimulated unprecedented political energy and social mobilization around the world, with governments, civil society and others using it to take steps to end inequality, discrimination and violence against women and girls. While recognizing the substantial progress made since the adoption of the Platform for Action, it must be stated that such progress has not been universal and that there is still far to go in realizing the full promise of the Beijing agenda.

In particular, we would like to draw the Commission's attention to the unfulfilled sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls, particularly as they relate to the following critical areas of concern outlined in the Platform for Action: unacceptable inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services; continued violence against women; lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women; and persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

Human rights violations stemming from women and girls' unmet sexual and reproductive health and rights are unacceptably common worldwide. For one, access to a range of voluntary, safe, and affordable contraceptive options continues to remain out of reach for roughly 222 million women in developing countries. Even if the global need for safe and voluntary contraception were met, no existing method of contraception is 100 per cent effective, entailing that there would still be a need for safe, accessible and legal abortion services. Yet unsafe abortion continues to be one of the leading causes of maternal mortality and morbidity, where an estimated 47,000 women needlessly die each year, accounting for approximately 13 per cent of maternal deaths worldwide, and an additional 5 million women are annually hospitalized because of abortion-related complications. Furthermore, the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls in particular are ignored in many developing countries. Approximately 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 the leading causes of death among girls in this age range. When trying to access sexual and reproductive health services, young women and girls are all too often turned away, humiliated, or ostracized; subjected to emotional or physical abuse; or denied their right to health and bodily autonomy as a result of parental consent limitations. This frequent inability of young women and girls to access sexual and reproductive health services is often exacerbated by an absence of gender-sensitive and rights-based comprehensive sexuality education, further limiting their self-determination and ability to exercise meaningful and informed decision-making power in their lives. As a result of power and structural inequalities, women and girls who are particularly at risk of multiple and intersecting forms of inequality, disempowerment and discrimination include young and/or unmarried women and girls; women living with HIV; female sex workers; women of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities; women living with disabilities; indigenous women; rural women; and migrant women, among others.

Many of these ongoing issues stem from the lack of a real commitment to uphold and follow through on a comprehensive approach to women's health, rights

and well-being, of which their sexual and reproductive health and rights are an integral part. The Millennium Development Goals perpetuated a limited approach to women's health by focusing almost exclusively on maternal health. In doing so, the Millennium Development Goals effectively diverted focus from existing, more ambitious and rights based commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment, and ignored the laudable commitments governments made five years earlier at the Fourth World Conference on Women.

As outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action, realizing the right to the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health for women, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights, is a linchpin for women's empowerment and the development of a sustainable and just world. With 2015 marking not only the 20th anniversary of the Platform for Action, but also the end of the period for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, we now have the opportunity to mobilize all actors for accelerated and effective implementation of the Platform for Action, and to incorporate into the Post-2015 Development Agenda an approach to women's health that is comprehensive, holistic, and addresses all women's needs and rights over the course of their lives. Such an approach must of course draw on, emphasize, and reinforce the existing commitments within international and regional human rights treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Belem do Pará Convention and Maputo Protocol, among others.

When states fail to recognize full sexual and reproductive rights, they not only compromise women's health and well-being, they both tolerate and endorse institutional and structural violence towards women and girls, abusing their human rights and perpetuating their marginalization and social exclusion. Through the Beijing Platform for Action, governments affirmed that "the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women is essential for the empowerment of women" (para. 9), which is in turn integral for the building of a sustainable, just and developed society. Moreover, governments explicitly recognized that the "human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence" (para. 96). As such, any Post-2015 Development Agenda will fail to be transformative and be limited and uneven in its achievements, if women and girls' sexual and reproductive rights are not meaningfully included as an integral component for equitable and sustainable development.

We thus call upon governments to take this opportunity of the 59th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, to not only reaffirm the crucial commitments set out in the Beijing Platform for Action, but also strengthen and advance them, particularly as they relate to women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights, and particularly in terms of their incorporation into the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

Recommendations

- Reaffirm sexual and reproductive health and rights as human rights, integral to gender equality, women's empowerment and sustainable development; and particularly reaffirm the sexual right of all women and girls to have control

over their own bodies and sexuality, free from coercion, discrimination and violence.

- Eradicate all forms of violence and discrimination, including institutional violence, towards women based on age, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, occupation, class, ethnicity, religion, disability, migrant or HIV status, among other grounds.
- Ensure the incorporation of the Beijing Platform for Action and outcome documents of the Beijing+20 review conferences into the Post-2015 Development Agenda.
- Thoroughly integrate human rights, with the understanding that any meaningful efforts towards sustainable development must posit people as the drivers of development rather than passive receivers of aid priorities and programming.
- Include under the proposed post-2015 Sustainable Development Goal on health: an indicator on unsafe abortion under the maternal mortality target; an indicator under the target on sexual and reproductive healthcare services, on the universal provision of and access to a full range of high-quality, voluntary, and user-friendly contraceptive methods, including emergency contraception; as well as an indicator on young people's access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, education and services.
- Include under the proposed post-2015 Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality: an indicator on the right to access safe abortion services under the target for sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, recommending that governments review and repeal laws that criminalize voluntary abortion, and remove all legal and implementation barriers to ensuring access to safe, comprehensive, free, sensitive and high-quality procedures for pregnancy termination.
- Include specific indicators focused on women and young people throughout the proposed Sustainable Development Goals, so as to ensure that the human rights and empowerment of women, girls and young people are incorporated as a cross-cutting priority of the post-2015 development framework and its monitoring.
- Prioritize the systematic and coordinated collection, analysis, and use of data disaggregated by sex, age, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, location, income and other variables, to effectively monitor progress and ensure accountability.