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Statement submitted by Advocates for Youth, Equality Now, Mercy Corps, Pathfinder International, Population Council, Public Health Institute and Winrock International Institute for Agricultural Development, non-governmental organizations 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 Coalition for Adolescent Girls welcomes the focus in 2015 of the Commission on the Status of Women on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, including the current challenges that affect its implementation. We represent a broad coalition of service, research and advocacy organizations committed to supporting, investing in and improving the lives of adolescent girls around the world.

The almost 20 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration have not brought sufficient progress with regard to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Girls and young women continue systematically to be denied basic human rights, including access to health services, education and economic assets, and are subjected to violence and abuse. In particular, adolescent girls are physically and socially positioned in a way that puts them at high risk of early, child and forced marriage, early and unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, and trafficking and other forms of violence.

The current international development framework does not recognize the unique needs or strengths of adolescent girls. The Millennium Development Goals, while a laudable attempt to grapple with the most critical issues of our time, have failed to address fundamental elements of gender inequality. They do not go far enough in targeting the structural underpinnings of the oppression of girls, namely the perpetuation of unequal power relations between men and women and discriminatory laws, social norms and behaviours that disproportionately affect girls. Given that the Millennium Development Goals have set the pace for international development efforts since their inception, this harmful oversight has bled into the development policies and activities of countless international, national and local organizations, as well as Governments and donors.

Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5, aimed at reducing child and maternal deaths and improving maternal health, neglect the sexual and reproductive health needs of young women and adolescent girls. Therefore, we have seen uneven progress in achieving Goals 4 and 5 for the most vulnerable young women.

The Beijing Platform for Action, in line with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, recognizes the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls as essential for them to lead productive and fulfilling lives. Unfortunately, early, child and forced marriage continues to put girls at great risk of harmful early pregnancy and the denial of educational opportunities, as well as poor health outcomes. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, more than 30 per cent of young women between 15 and 19 years of age are married, while in Nepal, 40 per cent of girls are married by the age of 15. Early pregnancy and childbirth have severe consequences for adolescent girls, including complications during labour, obstetric fistula, needless injuries and death. Furthermore, there are approximately 380,000 new HIV infections globally every year among adolescent girls and young women aged 10 to 24 years, and maternal mortality remains a leading cause of death among girls aged 15 to 19.

Lastly, gender-based violence remains a reality worldwide, as do rape and other forms of sexual abuse. Violence and discrimination against young women and girls violate their human rights and jeopardize their lives, bodies, psychological

integrity, freedom and health. Young women and girls have a right to be healthy and to live free from violence and coercion.

As the international community debates the post-2015 development agenda, it is imperative that adolescent girls and young women and their rights be prioritized. The next set of development goals must contain a stand-alone goal on gender equality that specifically makes reference to adolescent girls and emphasizes their importance to international and human development and progress. Furthermore, language, targets and indicators specific to adolescent girls must be integrated across all goals. We believe that the issues, needs and rights of adolescent girls are inextricably linked to all humanitarian issues, including access to education, safe drinking water, the prevention and reduction of violence and conflict and the eradication of extreme poverty. Their needs and well-being should, therefore, be highlighted across all sectors of international development.

Improving the lives of adolescent girls in a substantive and sustainable way requires not only passion, but also accountability, resources and political will. Organizational and government structures must reflect a true appreciation of the importance of gender equality and the multisectoral approaches needed for meaningful change. In order to transform harmful cultural and social gender norms, we must implement an integrated approach to the empowerment of girls, including effective economic empowerment and school-based interventions. We need reliable resources to ensure that organizations can implement targeted, evidence-based programmes that have measurable results and can be scaled up. In addition, empowering adolescent girls requires the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Cairo Programme of Action.

Adolescent girls must be given the tools and the space to voice their opinions and concerns, as well as the agency to implement solutions as key actors, rather than bystanders, in their own empowerment and development. We must ensure that young women and girls, in and out of school, married, unmarried, disabled, rural, marginalized or displaced, are actively and meaningfully involved at every level of decision-making, including in the planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes and policies that affect their lives. To be meaningfully engaged, Governments must promote and provide capacity-building opportunities, including financial and technical support, to enable young women and girls to inform programmes and policies. Boys, men, community leaders, parents, guardians and other gatekeepers must also be engaged as gender equality advocates in the elimination of discrimination against women and girls. This will ensure that change occurs at all levels, from the grass roots to global institutions. Finally, whether it be in data collection, programme design or monitoring and evaluation practices, adolescent girls face unique challenges and deserve a unique focus.

The plight of adolescent girls is eclipsed only by their resilience, courage and ability to craft solutions to the critical issues affecting their lives. Research suggests that although adolescent girls often lack legal standing, social support, access to education and basic human rights, they have the power to change communities, dismantle harmful social norms and improve the well-being of their families. Reducing the discrimination that adolescent girls face and providing them with educational, economic and social opportunities will not only improve their lives, but also improve our chances of achieving real and sustainable development.