



## 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 Human Life International, 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**

Human Life International acknowledges and affirms the importance of upholding the resolutions of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing by promoting the equality and empowerment of women, and supports upholding the inherent dignity and respect of all women at all stages of life. The Commission on the Status of Women has assisted in empowering women on many fronts. Nevertheless, challenges remain that hinder women's rights around the world. Human Life International advocates for a higher standard of women's sexual and reproductive health and access to education.

### **Women's sexual and reproductive health**

Promoting sexual and reproductive health is essential to attaining equality and empowerment for women and girls. However, there are many challenges impacting women's sexual and reproductive health, including sexually transmitted diseases, unsafe methods of family planning, and lack of access to family planning that respects the dignity of women; and lack of access to education.

## **Challenges to women's sexual and reproductive health**

### **Sexually transmitted infections**

Sexually transmitted infections severely affect both affluent and poverty-stricken women. Women have more frequent and more serious health problems from Sexually Transmitted Infections than men. Women in developing countries have especially high rates of infection. These diseases can have serious consequences beyond the immediate impact of the disease itself through mother-to-child transmission of infection, a cycle that will continue to affect future generations.

Unfortunately, women are often misinformed about preventative measures in maintaining their sexual health. Studies have found that although condom use can decrease the chance of transmitting HIV in monogamous relationships, they are less effective in preventing the spread of HIV when used by those who engage in high-risk behaviours such as promiscuity and men having sex with men. They do not offer reliably effective protection against infections that are spread by skin-to-skin contact, such as genital herpes and human papilloma virus, as well as HIV. They can also have failure rates as high as 10 per cent, amplifying the rates of infection with multiple sexual partners. Condoms are an ineffective and impractical long-term solution. Women and men have the right to be informed about these risks and to be empowered to modify and eliminate behaviour that exposes them to risk. Women and girls should be encouraged not to be passive when faced with risky sexual behaviour, but to expect to be honoured and respected by men and boys. Cultural norms that permit men to objectify women should be discouraged.

### **Unsafe methods of family planning**

Hormonal contraceptives, abortifacient drugs, and intrauterine devices are also detrimental to women's sexual and reproductive health. Documented risks of hormonal contraceptives include, but are not limited to, breast cancer, heart attacks, high blood pressure, and embolisms. Abortifacient drugs can cause hemorrhage and infection, and intrauterine devices can cause perforation of the uterus, serious

infections, bleeding, and ectopic pregnancies. These methods are too dangerous to be a reasonable long-term method of family planning.

Unfortunately, women are rarely made aware of the risks associated with these commodities. Educating women should be an essential component of women's reproductive health as it empowers women to be informed and engaged decision-makers. Comprehensive family planning instituted as a key educational component will allow women to make positive overall choices that are beneficial not only to their own health but also to public health. Women who have control over their sexual and reproductive health, fertility, and family planning needs, based on complete reproductive healthcare education, will build stronger, more sustainable societies.

We support women's rights to the highest standards in reproductive healthcare and family planning, including support for low-income pregnant women. If families feel they cannot afford to have children, they are more likely to procure an abortion. When condom use and hormonal contraceptives fail to prevent pregnancy, women often feel pressured to resort to abortion. Abortion, which is itself a grave violation of the right to life for the child in the womb, also seriously harms women physically and psychologically. Documented symptoms of post-abortion syndrome include higher rates of depression and suicide compared to women who continue pregnancies and give birth. Studies have shown that in countries with unjust and coercive family planning programs, the female suicide rate is up to three times higher than the male suicide rate. In societies with a male child preference, preborn girl children are often selectively aborted. In many developing nations, daughters are seen as a burdensome expense, unlike a son who is able to support his parents in their old age. The phenomenon of sex-selective abortions has extremely detrimental effects on a society that affect subsequent generations, including skewed male to female ratios, which can lead to human trafficking. Therefore, women in developing nations are not empowered when they choose abortion, especially if they are acting in desperation and are led to believe that they have no other choice, or are making the decision based on societal pressures. Women are truly empowered and their dignity is upheld when they are informed about and have access to the highest standard of healthcare that enables them to experience a safe pregnancy and delivery, and educates them on the safest and most effective methods to plan their families.

### **Family planning that respects the dignity of women**

Educating and empowering women to understand their bodies' natural fertility cycles allows them to plan their families while maintaining their own health and emotional well-being, and to do so in a way that respects the inherent dignity and worth of women in all phases of life. Women should have access to training in the sympto-thermal method of family planning. This safe and effective method empowers women by educating them to know and understand their bodies and fertility, and to work with their own natural cycles to avoid or to achieve pregnancy, and without recourse to harmful synthetic hormones and contraceptive devices.

**Women's access to education**

Women's access to education directly relates to their empowerment. Women and girls in many societies do not have equal access to primary, secondary, or tertiary levels of education. Thus, women are not empowered to take an active role in development and in improving the socioeconomic status of their communities. Data shows that female education plays a significant positive role in social and economic development, which improves the lives of women as they benefit from these improvements in their societies. Educated women are much more likely to engage in civic participation, as demonstrated by educated women in the developing world who have improved the quality of their lives and the lives of others through their active participation in politics. In addition, focusing on education for women living in developing countries leads to an increased likelihood of breaking the cycle of the feminization of poverty. Data also show that increasing levels of women's education correlates with lower infant and maternal mortality rates. Educated women are in a better position to make the wisest of decisions in regards to their own health and the health of their children, which leads to real empowerment and gender equality.

Poverty and instability in developing nations both cause and are caused by lack of access to education among women. Without education, women are often forced to find employment in low-paying and unskilled labour or marry at young ages. Early pregnancy and childbirth, in the absence of adequate healthcare, often lead to serious complications that threaten the health of both the mother and child. When societies do not value women's education, they are deprived of all the socioeconomic benefits that come from having an educated populace. When half of a nation's population is uneducated and less productive, the nation suffers on many levels, not surprisingly. Therefore, it is imperative that societies actively promote women's education in order to empower women and to promote peaceful stability throughout the world.

Regard for women's empowerment and equality needs to begin at the earliest stages of life. When societies view women as inherently inferior to men, progress in healthcare, education, development, and the promotion of human rights suffer. Therefore, education should acknowledge the dignity of every human being, including the inherent value of motherhood, child rearing, and other responsibilities that have been traditionally handled by women, while respecting women's rights to develop to the fullest extent their own potential as unique individuals with equal status to men.

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