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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by IPAS, 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

IPAS is an international organization that works in more than 20 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America to increase women's and girls' ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights, especially the right to safe abortion.

IPAS welcomes the discussion on the priority theme of the 2022 session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Addressing the impact of climate change and environmental degradation to sexual and reproductive health and rights is critical to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and to accelerate progress in fulfilling the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals.

A growing body of evidence links climate change to negative reproductive health and rights outcomes for women and girls. In many countries, women and girls are responsible for cultivating small farms, obtaining wood or coal, and gathering water. As climate change alters the landscape, they face many potential threats to their safety, economic livelihoods and to their sexual and reproductive health and well-being. A longer walk to find water or a new food source may increase an adolescent's vulnerability to rape and subsequent unintended pregnancy; a crop failure due to drought may prevent a head of the household from being able to afford contraception or a safe abortion. Impacts like drought and desertification can also lead to mass migration, disrupting all aspects of life for women and girls – particularly the availability of safe abortion and contraceptive services and the social support that facilitate access to accurate information and quality care.

Land degradation, food and water insecurity, and rising sea levels are forcing communities to migrate, impacting women's and girls' health and well-being. Climate-fueled conflict may also expose women and girls to sexual violence and disrupted access to health services. More frequent and extreme weather shocks compromise the health system infrastructure and workforce, creating additional barriers to essential health care. An undermined health system can also lead to new health emergencies, which often redirect political support and resources away from sexual and reproductive health and toward other pressing demands.

Despite critical need, sexual and reproductive health care is underfunded under usual circumstances, and often deprioritized in humanitarian response efforts. Increased rates of sexual violence, disrupted access to contraception, and survival sex due to aggravated poverty can all contribute to unintended pregnancies during a weather emergency. Women and girls may then seek unsafe abortions and delay – or be unable to access – treatment for serious complications.

The fear of being persecuted, prosecuted, and imprisoned limits the ability of women, girls and adolescents to seek the medical attention they need after attempting to terminate a pregnancy or even after a miscarriage. This fear makes it more difficult to exchange accurate and reliable information about the safest methods of induced abortion, including medications such as mifepristone and misoprostol. Thus, criminalization and social stigma around abortion worldwide makes it more complicated for women, girls, and adolescents to obtain safe methods and forces them to resort to obtaining the necessary drugs through less reliable sources.

For abortion and contraceptive care to be available and sustainable, many complex factors must align, including enabling laws and policies, supportive social norms, women's and girls' knowledge and agency, a trained health workforce, and a strong supply chain. The climate crisis jeopardizes this delicate dynamic and puts women and girls at risk.

The Beijing Platform for Action brings attention to how critical women's participation and leadership is to ensure a strategic, holistic, multidisciplinary and intersectoral approach in decision-making and management of the environment at all levels. However, women and girls are still absent, and their needs are not included in key climate change and environmental policy and decision-making spaces.

Therefore, we urge Member States to:

- Establish strategies and mechanisms to increase women's and girl's participation, engagement and decision-making in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of national and global climate mitigation, adaptation and conservation policies and programs. These strategies must ensure the participation of indigenous women and girls, women with disabilities and grassroots movements and organizations.
- Provide universal access to nonjudgmental sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception and safe abortion care. Services must respect the rights to confidentiality, privacy, and informed consent. Ensuring women's and girls' access to sexual and reproductive health services should be considered an important element of holistic strategies to eliminate all obstacles to women's and girls' full and equal participation in sustainable development.
- Strengthen health system capacity and resilience to deliver safe abortion care, including abortion with pills, especially in the communities that are most vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Decentralizing medical abortion services can facilitate access to more women through multiple cadres of primary and community health-care providers. The availability of medical abortion or abortion with pills make abortions safer, particularly in low-resource settings. Unlike surgical procedures, medical abortion does not require health care facilities, special medical equipment, or specially trained healthcare providers.
- Promote and strengthen alternative pathways to sexual and reproductive health, including abortion care using telehealth and self-managed abortion with pills to meet women's needs and ensure that are resilient during climate disruptions and in humanitarian settings.
- Accelerate actions to repeal laws that criminalize women and girls who seek abortion. In most countries, legalizing abortion is a precursor to planning for and delivering high-quality safe abortion services. Women's and girls' access to safe abortion is as relevant to gender equality as women's equal access to education, employment, adequate food and housing. It puts women's and girls' lives, health, and human rights at the core of human development.
- Increase efforts to prevent and provide care to those affected by sexual and gender violence, including access to emergency contraception and safe abortion, during climate-related disasters and conflict. Young women and survivors of violence are also more likely to need second trimester abortion services. Public health services must have trained providers that are willing to provide second trimester abortion.
- Implement holistic educational programs for children and youth that are evidence-based, gender-transformative and human rights-based to help increase their awareness on the impact of climate change and to ensure that they have access to comprehensive sexuality information, education, and services. Reaching youth, particularly girls and young women through education is key to ensure that their active participation in their communities and to meet the global goals focused on health and gender equality.