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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 Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), 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

We welcome the priority theme of the 66th Session of the Commission of Status of Women on innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age with a specific focus on access to comprehensive sexuality education and safe abortion for young women and girls in Asia and the Pacific region.

The Asia and Pacific region is home to 60% of the world's young people aged between 15 to 24 years. Despite the region having the advantage of a demographic dividend due to the large number of young people residing in this part of the world, young people in this region continue to face obstacles in their access to education. The COVID-19 pandemic has further affected the transition between secondary to tertiary education to employment which has been one of the key obstacles facing young people of the region. The declining trend of accessibility to quality education is worrisome and has been exacerbated by the increasingly widening digital divide. This correlates directly to rising unemployment levels among young people in the region. Young girls were mandated to engage in household responsibilities placing them at risk of academic failure. Internet connectivity is still not available in the most remote areas of the region and therefore online learning isn't easy to access. Families lying below the poverty line find it to be an ordeal to purchase expensive gadgets and thus consider it to be economically not viable and in the interest of the family to have their children drop out from schools. Consequently, there has been a spike in drop-out rates.

In most Asian countries, the topic of sexual and reproductive health and rights is still considered a taboo, and the cultural context prevents young people and youth from being educated on this topic via reliable sources. The lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education for young people is highly concerning as evidence proves that access to accurate, age appropriate information on their sexual and reproductive health and rights is important to ensure young people's physical, social, emotional health and well-being and development. Despite that existing international agreements including the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action, Beijing Platform for Action and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) strongly recommend for Member States to guarantee the right to comprehensive sexuality education, access to comprehensive sexuality education remains a challenge for many young people including young women and girls in Asia and the Pacific region. While digitalisation makes comprehensive sexuality education more accessible, it is not necessarily true for most young women and girls especially those from rural areas and lower socio-economic backgrounds who do not have access to the internet and digital technologies as well as those with low digital literacy levels.

Lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education and contraceptives have a direct impact on teenage pregnancies. The recorded teenage pregnancy rate remains high in the region especially in many countries of South and South-West Asia. Young women face unique vulnerabilities when accessing healthcare and safe abortion services even in contexts where abortion is legal because of their age and gender. In countries where abortion services are legal and available, there is also a lack of awareness of the legal status of abortion which reflects lack of comprehensive sexuality education.

There should be recognition and respect of young people's bodily autonomy and choice that include their right to comprehensive sexuality education and comprehensive and youth friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights services. We need a rights-based approach to the provision to sexual and reproductive health and rights services including abortion services and care for young women that recognises the principle of evolving capacities and their ability to make autonomous

decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. Protection should not be interpreted as denial of services or information but, rather, it should be referred to as the provision of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights services and policies that create a supportive stigma free environment.

Young people must have access to the full spectrum of information and reproductive healthcare services that include contraception, comprehensive sex education, maternity care, post abortion care and safe abortion. This includes ensuring access to medical abortion is rights-based; ensuring pregnant persons have access to adequate services in an informed manner without stigma and discrimination.

We therefore urge Member States to:

- Improve digital learning opportunities especially for people who have less access. Internet access, technological devices and other needs of students and teachers need to be fulfilled to ensure that nobody is left behind. Educators need to be trained on how to educate digitally.
- Promote and expand on innovative and technological advances made in both digital and sexual and reproductive health and rights services to make it accessible for all. For example, strengthening access to medical abortion with pills and telemedicine have a huge potential in strengthening access and confidentiality for young person's seeking safe abortion. The revised guidelines published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2022, also include recommendations for use where appropriate of telemedicine, which helped support access to abortion and family planning services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Abortion with pills is a safe option of ending an unwanted pregnancy when women using them have accurate information and access to reliable sources.
- There is need for increased accountability and strengthening of public health systems providing comprehensive abortion care and comprehensive sexuality education to enable access to medical abortion for young people. Ensuring availability of medical abortion pills along with complete and accurate information can reduce the burden on women, who may have a number of socio-economic barriers and constraints to accessing facility-based abortions, such as transportation and medical costs.
- Access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights services and information as per international human rights standards is important and should take into account the needs of the emerging contexts of crises. The International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action enabled a shift from a focus on "adolescents' needs" to rights, paving the way for normative development by international human rights mechanisms recognising adolescents' rights to agency, reproductive self-determination, and bodily autonomy. The Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, among others, affirmed the importance of adolescents' sexual and reproductive rights, urging States to take a host of specific measures to ensure the full exercise of these rights. Commitment to SDGs cannot be fulfilled without fulfilling the commitment to International Conference on Population and Development.
- Ensure full and comprehensive integration of comprehensive sexuality education in the school curriculum and increase capacities of teachers to deliver comprehensive sexuality education in line with the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education and ensure meaningful and inclusive engagement of young people for integration of their inputs in national and local

level policy and programmes related to comprehensive sexuality education and provision of youth friendly services.

- Comprehensive sexuality education should be incorporated into school curricula, be funded and should address comprehensive topics in a more open, free manner specially to prevent sexually transmitted illnesses or early pregnancy.

Additionally, the Member States must

- Increase investments and efforts to remove barriers to education for young women and girls in all their diversities including their access to comprehensive sexuality education both in and out of school settings.
- Implement policies that ensure young women and girls who dropped out of school due to the pandemic are enrolled back in the education system and have access to comprehensive sexuality education.
- Develop more collaborative work in educational settings on global and cross-regional levels: connecting schools across regions and sharing facilities and knowledge will improve the quality of education.
- Develop and support two-dimensional quality assessment; the internal reviews or self-assessments by schools and the external reviews through mechanisms such as school inspections.
- Ensure rights-based approach to the provision of abortion services for young women that recognises the principle of evolving capacities and their ability to make autonomous decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

States must recognise women and young people's agency and right to make decision about their sexual and reproductive health and reflect them in policies and programmes. We need to reinforce young women's right to consent, and bodily autonomy and build a supportive environment empowering young women and girls to make autonomous and informed decisions about their reproductive health. Gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights are central to development and achievement of the SDGs, Beijing Platform for Action and International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action.
