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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 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

The Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR), representing over one thousand organizations and individuals worldwide working towards the realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and justice, welcomes the focus of the Commission of the Status of Women on "Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective."

Poverty is the insidious root cause of grave sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues of women, girls, and their communities and violations to their human rights, particularly their SRHR. Women and girls who live in poverty are exponentially more vulnerable to inaccessibility of SRH services, unsafe abortions, maternal deaths and morbidities, and shorter life spans over-all; not only are they merely vulnerable, but poverty in itself fuels these circumstances. Poverty perpetuates this vicious cycle that denies women and their future generations access to education, sustainable livelihoods, secure homes, and peace – the very cornerstones required to escape poverty.

Poverty alleviation strategies that are not mindful of human rights and are gender-blind are not only inept and unsustainable, but it will also result in grave human rights violations. Therefore, in its imperative to reduce poverty and attain empowerment for all, governments must integrate rights-based SRH programs as part of its gendered approach.

In our relentless pursuit of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, we cannot underestimate the critical role played by well-funded and robust SRHR institutions. These institutions serve as the sturdy foundation for comprehensive, rights-based SRH programs, ensuring that women and girls have unfettered access to the comprehensive services essential to their good health and well-being. These institutions serve as access points to reproductive health care and bastions of knowledge and awareness, enabling individuals to make informed choices about their bodies and lives.

To address the compounding challenges of poverty, it is essential that these institutions receive the support and resources they require to function effectively. This includes adequate financing for maternal care, safe abortion and post-abortion care, family planning, and contraceptive services, among others. Additionally, these institutions need to be free from discriminatory practices and obstacles, allowing every woman and girl, especially for the poor, to access the care they deserve. Strengthening SRHR institutions is not just a matter of health; it is a fundamental step toward breaking the cycle of poverty and advancing the rights and well-being of women and girls.

Yet, we cannot ignore the distressing reality that, far too often, when countries implement budget cuts and austerity measures, women's health services bear the brunt of the impact. Globally, countries are stalling progress to realizing SRHR for all, as they enact large budget cuts for social services and reproductive health. In 2020, Texas anti-rights groups pushed for fund slashes for women's health needs in the guise of prioritizing COVID-19 response, yet in the shadows they were mobilizing resources to power anti-abortion campaigns. Just in 2023, the Philippines General Appropriations Bill allocated zero budget for Family Planning, Reproductive health and Social Protection for Adolescent Mothers and their Children, and drastically reduced the annual budgets of health and young people-focused sectors. Notably, even SRHR development aid giants like the United Kingdom, United States, and Germany are poised to reduce their foreign aid allocations for SRHR, as shown in a new report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, marking the first decline in a decade of consecutive growth.

While it may be tempting to rationalize these resource allocations as mere shifts in priorities, the stark truth is that marginalized women and girls face the consequences, posing threats on their lives, health, and futures. Community health facilities will be forced to restrict supplies or even close, thus, people needing care have no choice but to seek services in farther facilities, at exorbitant costs, or at a delay. The 2022 UNESCO report on the global status of CSE demonstrates that the lack of specified budget for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programs will be further weaken its already grim implementation. People seeking abortion care will be forced to seek unsafe methods or endure abortion complications without post-abortion care. It will bring further challenges in the unmet need for family planning and contraceptive services, early pregnancies, and preventable maternal deaths and morbidities, among others. Distribution injustices are not just reprioritization, they stand as forms of gender-based discrimination and a flagrant violation of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

We emphasize that gender equality and empowerment for all can only be achieved if women and girls are provided with the opportunities for full and equal participation in development. These opportunities are intrinsically linked to rights-based SRH programs, the removal of burdensome and anti-choice institutions, and the uncompromising pursuit of development justice. At the core of the mission to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls lies the universal and complete realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In this sense, and in the light of Member States' human rights commitments, WGNRR calls upon governments and take this opportunity at the Sixty-Eighth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women to forward the following calls and demands:

We urge the CSW resolution to recognize sexual and reproductive health and rights as a critical component of social protection services, poverty alleviation and reduction programs, and all development frameworks.

States must ensure the meaningful participation and genuine inclusion of women and girls in all their diversity in decision making spaces, particularly on SRHR programs, policies, and other institutions.

We call on governments and global funding bodies to mobilize the resources toward ensuring access to and availability of sexual and reproductive health care and services, among these are contraception, safe abortion and post-abortion care, and maternal care. Open funding to non-government organizations working in sexual and reproductive health and rights advocacy and service provision.

Roll-out comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) now. Ensure that CSE curricula is embedded with principles on consent, bodily autonomy, and human rights. Ensure that CSE is accessible and available in various education facilities and in various modalities.

Promote the integration of gender, human rights, and reproductive justice frameworks in all SRHR programs, policies, and other institutions.

Place particular focus on the needs of marginalized communities, people of color, trans and gender-diverse people, rural and remote communities, and indigenous women and girls through addressing the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that prevent them from realizing their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Address structural barriers, embedded in social norms, laws, and policies that prevent individuals from realizing their sexual and reproductive health and rights and exacerbate crises as they compound over poverty.