



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
10 January 2022

English only

Commission on Population and Development

Fifty-fifth session

25–29 April 2022

**Population and sustainable development, in particular
sustained and inclusive economic growth**

Statement submitted by C-Fam, Inc., a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹

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.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) is a non-profit educational organization that interacts with diplomats and the general public about issues related to human rights. For over twenty years, we have worked to defend human life at all stages and the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society within international institutions.

The theme of the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on Population and Development relates to the third chapter of the Programme of Action adopted in Cairo, Egypt at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. This chapter focuses on the imperative to lift people out of extreme poverty avoiding environmental degradation.

The consensus of the International Conference on Population and Development was pivotal in that it marked a change away from the population-control mindset of the past and envisioned a world in which protecting people's human rights and fundamental freedoms, rather than taking them away, was not only the right thing to do, but also the best way to achieve sustainable development. As people rise out of poverty, they have access to better nutrition and health care, better education, and greater social and financial security. This has been accompanied by a reduction in child and forced marriage, and as more women are receiving more years of education, they are marrying as adults and bearing fewer children across their lifetimes than previous generations. While this may be a natural result of poverty reduction and development, it must not be seen as an end in itself.

Columbia University's professor Matthew Connelly wrote in his book *Fatal Misconception*, "if the idea of planning other people's families is now discredited, this very human tendency is still with us." As global leaders gather to discuss strategies to address climate change and sustainable environmental practices in an increasingly globalized world, there is a temptation to seek a panacea in family planning or "reproductive health" more broadly.

Family planning, which includes but is not limited to contraceptive methods, is often promoted as key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, and the goals of empowering women and girls and achieving gender equality. Much is made of the claim that over 200 million women in developing regions have an "unmet need" for family planning, a figure that is frequently misinterpreted as measuring lack of access to modern methods. In fact, a lot has changed since the ICPD. Before 1990, when women were surveyed regarding their fertility intentions, a quarter of those designated as having an "unmet need" for family planning expressed a lack of knowledge regarding the subject as a reason for non-use. Today, family planning advocates proudly say that knowledge of family planning methods is near-universal. Furthermore, those citing lack of access as a reason for non-use only account for about five per cent of "unmet need."

Despite this, eliminating all "unmet need" remains a United Nations agency's target and increasing use of family planning methods has been cited as one of the top environmental priorities by experts. Such strategies repeat the common error of equating non-use with lack of access, and equating "unmet need" with unsatisfied demand. In fact, most women who described having a "need" cite concerns about the side effects and the risks of contraceptive methods, religious or other opposition to using them, or consider themselves at low risk of becoming pregnant. Pursuing the elimination of all "unmet need" would seem to require an element of coercion, or else risk wasting valuable money and resources to satisfy a demand that is not there.

There is also the danger of policies that are harmful to women and girls being promoted as a way of empowering them. The decriminalization of prostitution, for example, would provide legal cover to those who traffic vulnerable women and children to sell their bodies, as opposed to combating human trafficking and offering safety and legitimate economic opportunities for those who have been victimized.

Sustained and inclusive economic growth cannot be achieved without security and resilience against both manmade and natural disasters. Stable societies require good governance and accountability for those in leadership as well as policies and laws that create the optimal conditions for human flourishing in all sectors of society. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states, “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” It is therefore crucial that the family be carefully considered when enacting laws and policies to increase economic growth. Much of the work that takes place within a family, including care for children and elders, is not accounted for in the formal economy, but is essential not only to ensure the physical wellbeing of all members of a family, but also as a critical social tie between its members.

Human beings do not live best in isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic has created further pandemics of mental health problems, substance abuse, and increased domestic violence. It has also resulted in the departure from the workforce of many people, especially women who are mothers, due to the closure of schools and the need to provide care for children. For many women, this was a setback in terms of income and career advancement. Yet in many wealthy societies, the need for two incomes to maintain a decent lifestyle prevents mothers and fathers from staying home with their young children who would otherwise would do so. As developing regions continue to grow their economies, steps must be taken to ensure that the goal of economic growth does not come at the expense of family life and drive the alienation of individual persons who increasingly live apart from family and have been hard-hit by the effects of the pandemic.

The theme of this year’s session of the Commission on Population and Development is a wide-ranging and important one. There is much that has already been agreed upon by the global community that, if fully achieved, would go a long way toward improving people’s lives around the world. It is therefore critical that the Commission’s work focus on these areas of prior agreement and fulfilling the promises already made, and not become endlessly embroiled in debates over divisive issues as in years past – and risking the absence of an agreed outcome. There is not, nor will there be, consensus over issues like abortion, sexual orientation and gender identity, comprehensive sexuality education, and other similar issues that have stymied negotiations in this and other fora for decades. The way forward is through consensus and recommitment to what has already been decided but requires greater will and effort to achieve.
