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## Commission on Population and Development

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

### **Statement submitted by International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council<sup>1</sup>**

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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<sup>1</sup> The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) cut across the three central dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental. Ensuring universal access to SRHR should be an essential part of the response to the global challenges we face. SRHR has profound implications for human development and economic growth. At individual, household and macro levels, access to SRHR enables all people, particularly women and girls, to participate in social life, to access education and to participate in an effective and sustainable way to the economy.

### 1. Education, SRHR and impact on future economic opportunities

Education is widely recognised as a powerful tool to empower women and girls within the family and society and is considered a key pathway to employment. Educated women are more likely to marry later, use family planning and access healthcare, and to understand their rights and have the self-confidence to act on them. Each additional year of schooling for girls improves their employment prospects, increases future earnings by about 10 per cent and reduces infant mortality by up to 10 per cent. Post-primary education has stronger positive effects on empowerment than primary education; girls with only primary education are twice as likely to marry before the age of 18 as those with secondary or higher education. Adolescent childbearing may interrupt school attendance and impair young women's long-term social and economic mobility and, indirectly, their empowerment. Girls and young women often do not have access to the contraceptives they want and need. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Central and Southeast Asia, more than 60 per cent of adolescents who wish to avoid pregnancy do not have access to modern contraception. In this regard, comprehensive sexuality education is a promising strategy to shift norms and attitudes, and empower young people to negotiate safe, consensual and enjoyable sex; however, comprehensive programmes are not available in most countries. SRH policies should be combined with educational policies to address quality and equity, including social pressures such as stigma and peer pressure, as these impact keenly on young mothers and girls who may be subjected to child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), female genital mutilation (FGM), become pregnant and have abortions, and may prevent their return to school.

**Recommendation: Governments should ensure that domestic laws protect, respect and fulfil sexual and reproductive health and rights and meet international obligations under human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. At the national level, governments must ensure implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programmes, as well as enforce legislation that addresses and eliminates sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This should also include laws that address multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, and that promote a girl's right to education.**

### 2. The lion's share of unpaid care work is undertaken by women and girls

Women face added vulnerabilities depending on where they work in the economy which can lead to a gendered gap in productivity and earnings. Although the percentage of women working in formal employment worldwide has increased over the past half century, women around the globe are still more likely to work in the informal economy. Gender inequality is the underlying reason for this imbalance, and has severe effects for marginalised groups, including young, disabled, immigrant, and transgender women and girls. A major cause and consequence of this inequality is the fact that, in all cultures and economies, women continue to do the bulk of unpaid care work such as childcare, elder care, caring for ill family members, cooking and

cleaning. Without access to essential SRH services such as contraceptives, women cannot choose if, when and how many children to have. This can increase their care burden and exacerbate already existing inequalities in women's share of caregiving, as well as the time, health and economic consequences that result from unplanned and/or frequent pregnancies, unsafe abortions, pregnancy complications, and increased rates of maternal and infant mortality. Recognition and redistribution of care work remains extremely important to ambitions of inclusive economic growth, women's economic empowerment, and to the health and well-being of women and their families.

### 3. Access to decent work and economic opportunities

In recent years attention has been given to gender equality as 'smart economics'. By empowering women economically, societies and the economy benefit too. In line with this thinking, growing policy attention is given to the extent to which fertility decline can be considered an influence on women's labour force participation or employment. However, in terms of enabling inclusive economic growth, the extent to which women's increased entry into the labour force may be empowering, inclusive or even, arguably, improve their well-being, depends on the context, the reasons for women's economic participation, the existence of regulatory frameworks to support it, and the conditions of the work.

Given the bulk of care work, it is unsurprising that recent studies find that women's empowerment in formal employment is tied to the presence – or lack – of regulatory frameworks i.e. the laws and policies that work to either encourage or discourage women from participating in the formal economy. The most common policies are parental leave, childcare and access to contraceptives and other policies that are often described as 'family friendly' or 'equal opportunity' and that ease the burden of care work for women. The lack of these policies, and the lack of policies that seek to distribute care work evenly – both between women and men and between the state and households – are cited as reasons why women in many regions remain in the informal or agricultural sectors, and are more vulnerable to poverty, ill health and precariousness. Regulations that address gender inequality are essential for women's participation in the formal economy. Findings show that young women in Egypt indicated a fear of and experienced sexual harassment and a higher gender pay gap in the private sector, where employers are not subject to 'anti-discrimination' legislation. Similar concerns drove women into the informal sector in Ghana, where the lack of regulations means that private employers are responsible for paying for maternity leave and childcare without government assistance. However, it is important to note that due to several factors in many economies, women's share of the informal sector is unlikely to experience major shifts in the near future, regardless of availability of support for care work. Given the benefits of childcare and other support programmes, support for care work remains extremely important to women's economic empowerment, to their health and well-being and their families.

**Recommendation: Governments must include SRHR in regulatory frameworks that support women's access to decent work and implement policies that shift and redistribute the burden of unpaid care work from women. Such frameworks should be expanded across the formal and informal economy.**

### 4. Effects of Covid-19 on inclusive economic growth

The COVID-19 pandemic is a multifaceted crisis that has undone much of the development progress made in the previous decade. Most of the economic impacts of COVID-19 are a side effect of the measures taken to control the spread of the disease, rather than a direct effect of the disease itself. While advanced economies are recovering, many of the world's poorest countries are left behind. Much remains to

be done to reverse the pandemic's massive human and economic costs, including equitable access to vaccines. The pandemic continues to have a devastating impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, including women, school-age children, and informal and unskilled workers, while exacerbating inequalities, both within and between countries. The pandemic led 97 million more people to poverty in 2020. This marks an unprecedented rise in global poverty. In most low- and middle-income countries, informal employment is widespread and is a critical source of livelihood for a large proportion of the population. Because of the volatility of their jobs, a lack of labour rights, and the inability to rely on social safety nets, informal workers are particularly vulnerable during the crisis. Deep-seated inequalities were exposed and worsened by the pandemic, impeding progress in multiple areas, including gender equality. In fact, women and marginalised racial and ethnic groups are bearing the brunt of this crisis. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to economic hardship, as they are globally overrepresented in low-paid precarious professions hit hardest by the pandemic. They bear a greater burden of unpaid care work which limits their economic participation. Women also make up roughly 70 per cent of the global health and social care workforce – essential but often poorly paid jobs that put them at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19.

**Recommendation: The Covid-19 pandemic provides yet another reason to prioritise inclusive and sustainable development. Member States have the unique opportunity to prioritise green, resilient, and inclusive growth. Member States should implement gender-responsive policies and budgeting, to help mitigate the short-term impacts, while also addressing long-term structural drivers of gender inequality.**

## **5. SRHR, population, environment and climate**

Member States are obligated to ensure social protection for all. SRH services must be an integral part of short- and long-term government planning processes. Such policies will help ensure that public service provision, such as education and health care, is adequate, and will also ensure efficient government stewardship and regulation of housing, job markets, agriculture, natural resources and public goods.

Member States are also obliged to ensure a safe clean, healthy and sustainable environment, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity when taking action to address climate change, as articulated in the Paris Agreement. SRHR is critical for advancing gender equality, health, and well-being, overcoming marginalisation and thus for strengthening individuals' and communities' resilience and capacity to adapt to environmental ills including the climate crisis.

Member States must be attentive to the potential misuse of the SRHR agenda especially contraceptives – as solutions to the environmental and climate crises. Different stakeholders point to these as important interventions for climate change mitigation and environmental sustainability. The argument is that contraception will reduce fertility, which will lower population growth, which in turn will lead to decreased levels of greenhouse gas emissions and lessen pressure on the environment. The predominant focus of such narratives is on women and girls in lower income countries, where rates of fertility are comparatively high. Policies and practices driven by a desire to stem population growth have led to countless human rights violations, and the ICPD marked an important shift away from population-focused objectives to a SRHR agenda, grounded in individual human rights. Neither local environmental distress nor the global climate crisis must serve as justification for harmful and coercive population control narratives, policies, and practices.

**Recommendations**

- **Governments must integrate SRHR in policies, plans and programs aimed at ensuring climate adaptation and resilience – such as National Adaptation Plans – to address the effects of climate change, and in the construction of climate resilient health systems, as well by allocating the necessary funding to implement holistic and integrated resilience efforts that span the climate, health, and gender equality sectors.**
  - **Governments must ensure that access to contraception is not considered a climate change mitigation strategy or a solution to environmental ills, as it violates women's and girls' rights and instrumentalises their bodies, and, particularly for the climate crisis, it places emphasis and responsibility for tackling crises on already marginalised population groups – particularly women and girls in the global south – who are also most severely affected by their impact.**
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