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Statement submitted by Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Rutgers, and Stichting CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, non-governmental organizations 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

Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Rutgers, Stichting CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality – all organisations with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, welcome the theme of the fifty-sixth session of the United Nations Commission on Population and Development “Population, Education and Sustainable Development”.

Adolescents and young people have the right to information about sexual and reproductive health. This was already included in the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (para 7.41) and built upon ever since, including in the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (SDG 3.7 and SDG 4.7). The right to information about sexual and reproductive health is also supported by international human rights standards, such as the right to live free from violence and discrimination, the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health, the right to receive and impart information and the right to quality inclusive education. The Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have interpreted that the right to education includes the right to comprehensive sexuality education.

Why is comprehensive sexuality education so important?

Comprehensive sexuality education, in and out of school settings, is key to developing the skills, knowledge, autonomy, confidence and ability to make informed decisions about a person’s sexual and reproductive life, so they can enjoy fulfilling and healthy relationships and protect themselves and their partners against ill health, violence and unwanted pregnancy.

As children move through childhood and then adolescence, parents and/or other caregivers teach them how to do everyday things, e.g. how to cross the road safely, how to use a stove without burning themselves or how to buy something from the local grocery store and come back home with the right change. They do this because these everyday things are important parts of their lives. Sexuality and reproduction are also important parts of their lives. As children and adolescents grow and develop, they need education that prepares them for their future and matches their sex, gender, development and circumstances. They have a right to sexuality education because it positively impacts their lives. It increases their agency and helps them challenge harmful gender norms that drive sexual and gender-based violence; child, early and forced marriage or unions; and female genital mutilation/cutting.

This means that regardless of the country they live in, young people have the right to access information about relationships, intimacy, and identity. Although it takes a lifetime to learn about these topics and to shape one's attitudes, beliefs, and values, it is essential to teach children and adolescents early on because it will shape their self-esteem, trust in others, relationships, and communications for the rest of their lives. However, studies from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America show that most children and adolescents are not getting the information and education they need.

Many children and adolescents are poorly informed about the changes that take place in their body and minds at puberty, and are unprepared to deal with them. In many cases, girls learn about menstruation on the day their periods begin. Many are shocked and scared when they see their menstrual blood for the first time. Boys often wake up confused and alarmed after their first nocturnal emission of semen. Many adolescents do not have the right knowledge, so when sexual activity begins – generally during adolescence – they are unprepared to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. They are unable to assess

risks and to make sure that sex is safe, pleasurable and consensual. They are also unprepared to refuse unwanted approaches from peers or from adults who use physical or emotional pressure to coerce them to have sex. They can also feel confused and excluded if diverse experiences, identities and practices are not talked about in sexuality education. Finally, they do not know where and how to seek help from a trusted adult, or from health and social services when problems occur. These experiences can be aggravated within crisis settings.

Ready for the future of sexuality education?

Research shows that young people need and want information about gender and sexual diversity, communicating about boundaries and desires, dating, intimacy, sexual pleasure, love, online communication and sex in the media. However, despite many countries having a national policy or curriculum in place that supports the provision of some form of sexuality education, this does not necessarily result in the effective implementation of sexuality education or young people's access to comprehensive information. This is particularly the case for very young adolescents (VYAs) aged 10–14 years old, and young people who are out of school. When comprehensive sexuality education policies and curricula are implemented, there is often a predominant focus on sexual and reproductive health information (usually biology and reproduction). There is little emphasis on skills development, such as building healthy relationships and expressing consent. These are central components of a rights-based approach to comprehensive sexuality education, which is context specific and culturally relevant and ensures young people's ability to make informed and empowered decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Besides the comprehensive nature of sexuality education, a safe school environment is needed when young people navigate and learn about relationships, intimacy, and identity. This requires a teacher who understands their own sexuality and gender and what effect those have on classroom dynamics. They also need to be able to navigate which questions can be answered publicly. Teachers have to take young people seriously and encourage them to form their own judgments. Schools need a policy on dealing with bullying and sexually transgressive behaviour. Besides the school and teachers, parents are also instrumental in confronting these kinds of behaviours. Schools have to acknowledge that the delivery of sexuality education needs special attention and training and requires a whole-school approach.

We need to accelerate our efforts to ensure this generation of children and young people have access to the skills, knowledge, autonomy, confidence and ability to make informed decisions about a person's sexual and reproductive life. The sustainable development goals as well as the ICPD Programme of Action cannot be reached without implementing rights-based comprehensive sexuality education.

Recommendations

- Commit to strong **political leadership** and clearly mandated CSE in policy and legal frameworks
- Assign a **budget** dedicated to CSE programmes in national / sub-national budgets, and for co-financing by donors, in both in- and out-of-school settings in line with the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE)
- **Increase coverage** of gender-responsive CSE for all children, adolescents and young people, both in and out of school and in times of crisis, as well as increase the comprehensiveness of curricula itself

- Invest in **teacher training** and support, including the development and dissemination of teaching materials and job-aids to provide CSE that is non-discriminatory, inclusive and accessible, non-judgemental, scientifically accurate, rights-based, gender-transformative and effective
 - **Support** governments, parents and other stakeholders to better understand the long-term benefits of CSE, and to involve other sectors, especially youth-led organisations, in providing CSE
 - **Monitor progress** and demonstrate how to overcome challenges, in line with national, regional and international commitments
 - Fully **involve all young people** in discussions about curricula content, delivery channels (i.e. classroom, youth club, online, media), and how to meet their needs. Listen actively and seek out the perspectives of young people.
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