



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
16 January 2023

English only

Commission on Population and Development

Fifty-sixth session

10–14 April 2023

Population, education and sustainable development

Statement submitted by Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, 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 1994 International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action clearly states that Reproductive health implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that their capacity to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this last condition are the rights of men and women to be informed and have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of contraception of their choice. Clause 7.45 of the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action calls for states to recognize the rights of parents and caregivers of adolescents to provide information on sexual and reproductive health rights in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child. Countries should ensure negative attitudes from health care workers do not restrict access to SRHR services and information to adolescents. Clause 7.46 urges states to protect and promote the rights of adolescents to reproductive health education and reduce teenage pregnancies. International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action notes that adolescents are vulnerable due to lack of access to sexual and reproductive health information in their countries and provides that “full attention should be given to promotion of mutually respectful and equitable gender relations particularly to meeting the educational and service needs of adolescents to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way their sexuality”.

Twenty-eight years ago in Cairo, the International Conference on Population and Development affirmed that every person has the right to access reproductive health information and services. In 2019, all roads gathered to the Nairobi Summit to finish the unfinished International Conference on Population and Development business. The summit convened 172 States who re-committed to accelerating this promise to support the pushback on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights in achieving sustainable development goals by 2030. Governments and stakeholders committed to attaining the three zeros:

- Zero maternal mortality
- Zero unmet need for contraceptives
- Zero gender-based violence

including eliminating harmful practices like child and forced marriages, and female genital mutilation. They spotlighted urgent issues such as greater domestic and international financing, bringing young people to participate in all decision-making that affects them, developing quality and disaggregated data, and ensuring that sexual and reproductive health information and services reach people in crisis.

It is difficult to attain the three zeros without addressing the lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education. According to the *World Youth Report 2020*, the global population of youths aged 15 to 24 years has increased globally to 1.2 billion. The majority of them live in indigenous communities and rural areas, arid and semi arid areas, and they are affected by displacement. Many of them living with disabilities and with HIV/AIDS, and those who belong to LGBTIQ groups do not have access to comprehensive sexuality education.

Forty-four million abortions occur worldwide each year, nearly half of which are unsafe. Deaths due to unsafe abortions continue to be a major public health concern in many countries. A pregnant person dies every eight minutes somewhere in a low- and middle-income country due to complications arising from an unsafe abortion. All these deaths partially attributed to the lack of accurate, evidence based, scientifically and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in the communities. In most school settings the majority of teachers are not adequately

trained to deliver comprehensive sexuality education, others have their own self biases. Also, comprehensive sexuality education is mostly taught from a reproduction and religious angle during biology and religious education lessons. Comprehensive sexuality education is not a standalone examinable subject; therefore, it is rarely taught and, when it is taught, it is from an abstinence approach, of no sex until marriage with a weak focus on gender, human rights and pleasure. Adolescents are not aware of their national abortion rights as per their countries' constitutions. Restrictive abortion laws requiring third party consent hinder young people from accessing comprehensive abortion and post abortion care. Similarly, a lack of comprehensive sexuality education impacts the uptake of HIV testing amongst young people who continue to be disproportionately impacted by the global AIDS epidemic.

Since the International Conference on Population and Development 1994, countries not permitting abortion on any ground have declined from 8 per cent to 3 per cent in 2011 and countries where abortion is permitted on request increased from 22 per cent to 30 per cent. In the three years since the Nairobi Summit, various governments have advanced their abortion laws, permitting abortion under some parameters mostly where the health or the life of the mother is in danger, where there are severe foetal abnormalities, or on socio-economic grounds among others with somewhat clear standards and guidelines for safe abortion. However, the rates of unsafe abortion are still high due to lack of information and awareness at the grassroots level. Limited or no access to comprehensive sexuality education amongst adolescents and young people deprive them from accessing safe abortion and exposes them to unintended pregnancies or to unsafe abortion and its devastating consequences of death and disability. Access to accurate, scientific and evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education is a fundamental solution to attaining the three international conference on population and development zeros. When young people are informed about their rights and services are made available to them, then their lives and that of their generation succeeds.

The International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action reaffirmed that “the aim of family-planning programmes must be to enable couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information and means to do so and to ensure informed choices and make available a full range of safe and effective methods.” Yet, research shows that despite the desire of women and adolescents to avoid or delay pregnancy, roughly 215 million of them in low- and middle-income countries rely on traditional methods only, which have a high failure rate, or do not use any contraceptive method at all, mainly due to lack of adequate education and information.

Access to affordable, available, acceptable, youth-friendly and good quality contraceptive services ought to be accompanied by education and information from the early childhood stage cascading to adolescence and adulthood to ensure young people are able to effectively participate in the society and gender equality is achieved. International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action clause 7.45 and 7.46 respectively reiterates that countries should remove legal and social barriers to reproductive health care information to adolescents taking into account their right to privacy, informed consent respecting cultural values to reduce the prevalence of teenage pregnancy.

According to data from the World Health Organization in 2018, one in three women, that is around 736 million women aged 15 years and above, have experienced physical and sexual intimate partner violence globally. Due to lack of access to information and adequate education, survivors of gender-based violence often might not access justice and do not know the legal steps to take.

To achieve the Nairobi Summit commitments and the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, comprehensive sexuality education should be prioritized with a positive approach centering joy and pleasure as the epitome of bodily autonomy. There is no enabling environment to comprehensive sexuality education without meaningfully engaging young people in designing the contents of comprehensive sexuality education curriculum. Young people know and understand our realities best. Thus, we ought to be involved in co-creation, co-design and decision-making processes in all matters affecting us. Financing youth led organizations, peer sex educators to deliver comprehensive sexuality education to both in and out of school is a critical step in attaining the International Conference on Population and Development targets and the Sustainable Development Goals. Supporting young people and adolescents to develop youth-friendly accountability tools to hold their governments accountable for the efforts made towards implementing comprehensive sexuality education as stipulated in the International Conference on Population and Development commitments is critical to achieving the three zeros. However, we cannot do this alone, we recognise the importance of engaging community gatekeepers including parents, religious leaders, adult stakeholders, teachers, and healthcare professionals in the design and implementation of comprehensive sexuality education.

Comprehensive sexuality education ought to acknowledge sexual activities as normal behaviours and ensure sensitization of safer sex practices, access to HIV prevention and counselling, training on effective communication skills and assertiveness, access to contraceptives, safe abortion and post abortion care from an intersectional human rights perspective. As Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights we made commitments on the Action Coalition on Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights.

As youth commitment makers we aim to achieve the following:

- Strengthen laws and policies on comprehensive sexuality education through including young persons with disabilities in comprehensive sexuality education challenging ableist structures who perceive them to be asexual thus leaving them out in such conversations.
- Creating an enabling environment for comprehensive sexuality education which ensures meaningful youth engagement and allows young people to co-lead, co-design, and co-own the decision-making spaces on comprehensive sexuality education programming.
- Ensure comprehensive sexuality education targets both in and out of school young people of all ages; funding the work of peer sex educators to continue producing content that is free from stigma and that approaches comprehensive sexuality education from a perspective that centres on bodily autonomy, pleasure, and a positive approach towards sex.
- Challenging interconnected systems of oppression; heteropatriarchy, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, racism, sexism among others which prevent intersectional groups of young people and adolescents from accessing youth friendly sexual and reproductive health services.