



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
11 January 2023

English only

Commission on Population and Development

Fifty-sixth session

10–14 April 2023

Population, education and sustainable development

Statement submitted by ACT Alliance – Action by Churches Together, 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

Introduction

As faith and rights-based actors, we stand in solidarity and affirm our commitment to the Programme of the International Conference on Population and Development and the outcome of its reviews. Working in over 120 countries, we are engaged in all pillars of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. We urge its full implementation and call for a joint resolution at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on Population and Development.

We echo the calls from Generation Equality Forum that catalytic action is required, which includes increased investment and strong multi-stakeholder partnerships. In times of rising fundamentalisms (religious, political and economic), and a shrinking of democratic spaces, human rights defenders are risking their lives to affirm and uphold our interconnected rights: including economic, freedom of religion and belief, sexual and reproductive rights.

Faith actors are important agents of change. They can be advocates, duty-bearers, service providers, and legislators. Faith actors have a normative and real-life influence on the uptake, acceptability, and accessibility of preventive measures, education and services within sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Ensuring Access to Education

Access to life-giving education and information is imperative to empower people, especially adolescent youth and young women, to make free and informed decisions. Young people, including children and adolescents, are not a homogeneous group, and have diverse experiences and educational needs. Unjust laws, affordability and social norms all contribute to hampering access to life-giving education. A lack of digital infrastructure, access to technology and training, in particular in rural areas, further exacerbates intersectional inequalities.

Girls are particularly harmed by the lack of access to that abundance of knowledge because they are particularly vulnerable to experiencing major or life-altering setbacks, such as unintended pregnancies. Forced early marriages continue to violate the right to education, health and opportunities. Without access to formal education, girls are often trapped in a cycle of poverty. Ensuring quality education outside the classroom is also critical, to contribute to inform and shape social environments, which affirm the rights of women and girls in all their diversity.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

It's crucial to establish age-appropriate, interactive, and context-specific / culturally sensitive comprehensive sexuality education. We affirm the definition provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization that comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.

Age-appropriate and context-specific comprehensive sexuality education and access to information are imperative to empower people and especially adolescent youth to make free and informed decisions regarding reproductive choices and on all

aspects of their sexuality including the choice of partner, voluntary choice in marriage, consensual sexual relations, the decision on whether or not or when to have children. Comprehensive education on gender and sexuality can contribute to dismantling the stigma that serves as a significant contributor to harmful practises, including violence and discrimination based on age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and gender identity. Comprehensive sexuality education is a key prevention strategy, including against sexual and gender-based violence. Access to comprehensive sexuality education must also be secured during humanitarian interventions.

A range of actors from governments, parents and guardians, civil society, health and education system, multilateral and religious institutions have key roles to play. Education and health care systems in various parts of the world are sustained by faith communities, whereby engaging with them is paramount for access and acceptability. The capacity of young people to make decisions about their own life based on reflection, knowledge, and religious principles is supported and celebrated by many religious traditions.

Faith in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Everyone should have the ability to decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. There have been increased gaps between sexual and reproductive health and rights policy frameworks and the constrained socio-economic lived realities where these frameworks are implemented. Civil society is central to demanding accountability efforts for the implementation of policies and improved service delivery on the comprehensive access to sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services.

Faith based actors are an integral part of civil society and are often a major health provider. For example, an average of 40 per cent of health services in Sub-Saharan Africa are provided by faith-based organisations. We recognise that Member States have the primary responsibility to fulfil universal social protection including universal health coverage, but nonetheless all providers must be included in strategies. Faith actors can also be a barrier to gender justice, but religious and cultural practices are not stagnant, nor operate in isolation.

Eighty-four per cent of the world's population identify with a faith and faith actors are often trusted voices within communities. Faith and family planning interact in complex ways at personal, community, civil society, and governmental levels. The social determinants of health, norms and systems pertaining to faith, are crucial elements of any comprehensive health strategy and understanding how faith actors' impact both negatively and positively. If universal health coverage and family planning is to be achieved, engaging with faith actors is crucial.

Many faith actors face barriers, such as organisational, technical capacity, socio-cultural, and religious barriers, all crucial for delivering family planning services without discrimination and with quality. While family planning can be an issue of extreme contention among faith groups, many have been engaged in a series of efforts, including re-interpreting their religious traditions to make healthcare provisions that protect and advance gender equality; combatting religious misconceptions around contraception; lifting the taboo around discussing these issues; and providing reproductive care to communities in remote areas. Studies have convincingly demonstrated a connection between faith leaders' approval of contraceptives and men intending to use them.

Investments in multi-stakeholder partnerships, including between faith and secular actors, are critical for achieving transformative family planning. Knowledge

and awareness raising, trust-building, dialogues, social and behavioural change communication, advocacy, and developing safe(r) spaces, are important areas for collaboration.

Resourcing Reproductive Justice

We support the High-Level Commission on the International Conference on Population and Development 25 Follow Up calls for sexual and reproductive justice, made in their 2022 report. The sexual and reproductive justice framework, originally coined in 1994 by black feminists, recognises the need to address overlapping structural barriers to progress the Nairobi Commitments at community, country, regional and global levels. This requires an intersectional paradigm shift, which puts those most marginalised in the centre.

A sexual and reproductive justice framework shifts focus from the individual, towards an interdependent way of seeing the world, where our choices and possibilities are not isolated from the wider structures of our lives. Power manifests through the multiple oppressions of race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, age and migration status. Yet, the realisation of sexual and reproductive justice is contingent on finance, domestic and international. Persistent underfunding of services means that more than 4 billion people globally will lack access to at least one key sexual and reproductive health service during their lives.

We call upon Member States to resource sexual and reproductive justice frameworks, which includes funding grassroot-led feminist / faith-based movements, who are critical stakeholders in addressing the power dynamics and barriers that currently exist in achieving justice.

Recommendations to Member States:

- Fully implement the Programme of the International Conference on Population and Development and its subsequent reviews. Develop national implementation plans, which include achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Fulfil previous commitments to the Programme of Action and subsequent declarations, to promote sexual and reproductive justice and affirm targeted action to eliminate structural barriers, discriminatory laws and social norms.
- Increase investment to close resource gaps to fully implement these agendas, including investing in universal social protection floors and in the Minimum Initial Service Package in crisis settings.
- Ensure no regression or exception on the Programme and urge other States to do likewise. This encompasses non-regression on previously agreed language, including reference to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.
- Stand up for the integrity of the United Nations and the importance of multilateralism, rejecting extreme polarisation and fragmentation and embracing cooperation.
- In the spirit of cooperation, invest in partnership, in line with Goal 17 of the 2030 Agenda, with faith-actors as essential service providers.