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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> Special consultative status.

<sup>2</sup> General consultative status.

<sup>3</sup> Roster.

<sup>4</sup> The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

### **Background**

Since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), governments have reached a consensus that gender equality, human rights and empowerment of women and girls are global priorities. The ICPD Programme of Action highlights several critical areas including universal access to family planning and sexual and reproductive health services, reproductive rights and equal access to education for girls, among others. Member States also committed to remove all barriers from sexual and reproductive health education and have pledged to encourage comprehensive education that includes discussions of family planning, safe and healthy sex, healthy relationships, and personal development in the Beijing Platform for Action.

Education is a fundamental human right. The right to available, accessible, acceptable and quality education is a central obligation of States under the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other multiple international legal instruments. The right to education has a transformative potential to support the empowerment of all women, adolescents and girls, in all their diversity, to claim their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, as well as in political, economic, social and cultural life, and to fully, equally, effectively and meaningfully participate in the decision-making processes that shape society.

Access to quality education at all levels including relevant life skills development and re-education/training throughout the life course is both fundamental and a human right to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Access to education, or lack thereof, is not gender neutral; often girls and adolescents have additional gendered barriers that prevent them participating in schooling and other educational opportunities. Quality education equips girls, adolescents and women with skills and knowledge to make autonomous decisions that help them to delay the age of marriage, prevent unintended pregnancies and access healthcare; and to understand and advocate for 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 and is a pathway to employment.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened existing learning gaps and negatively impacted the education systems backtracking countries in their efforts to achieve the SDGs, especially SDGs 3, 4, and 5. The number of girls worldwide who left school because of COVID is staggering and according to UNESCO, 11 million girls and young women are still at risk to never return to school. This threatens not only decades of progress towards achieving equitable quality education, but increased girls' risk for unintended pregnancy, child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU), and sexual and gender-based violence. For many girls, school is not just the opportunity for a better future it is a lifeline.

### **Comprehensive sexuality education and the full realization of the right to education**

Comprehensive sexuality education is central to the full realization of the right to education. Lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education in formal and non-formal settings can also mean girls and young people are unaware of their rights and lack basic information on their bodies and development which can affect their capacity to protect themselves from violence and coercion, access essential and lifesaving services when needed and make informed decisions about their lives.

### ***CSE and SRHR***

Complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death globally for girls aged 15-19. Adolescent childbearing may interrupt school attendance and impair young women's long-term social and economic mobility and, indirectly, their empowerment. Adolescent pregnancy is also recognised as both a driver and a consequence of CEFMU. Furthermore, girls and young women often do not have access to the contraceptives and information they want and need; in sub-Saharan Africa and South Central and Southeast Asia, more than 60 percent of adolescents who wish to avoid pregnancy do not have access to modern contraception. Inequality, discriminatory social norms and attitudes towards girls and young women underlie and drive these issues. In this regard, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a vital strategy by which to shift negative norms and attitudes, and empower young people to make conscious, healthy and respectful choices about relationships and sexuality. However, comprehensive programmes are not available in most countries. Sexual and reproductive health 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 CEFMU, female genital mutilation (FGM), unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortions, and may prevent their return to school.

As children and adolescents grow and develop, they need education that prepares them for their future, matches their development and circumstances that go beyond pure biology. CSE fosters positive social outcomes and goes beyond biological information to include values creation around human rights and gender equality, nonviolence and non-discrimination as well as skills to build healthy relationships. UNESCO's international technical guidance defines CSE as "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."

### ***Evidence of Effectiveness of CSE***

Highlights of some the key findings based on various studies and research elaborated have found out that CSE does not increase sexual activity nor sexual risk-taking behavior or sexual transmissible infection (STI) or HIV infection rates but rather has positive effects, including as a cost effective and crucial strategy in HIV prevention, and in increasing young people's knowledge and improving their attitudes related to SRHR and behaviors. Nearly all sexuality education programmes that have been studied result in increased knowledge about different aspects of sexuality and the risk of pregnancy. In addition, the educational system of every country includes some type of curriculum or programme that educates young people on sexual and reproductive health and their rights.

CSE informs youth about their rights and gives them the tools and information to protect themselves from HIV and other STIs through safer sex practices, such as negotiating condom use, and to identify when their rights are being violated, such as cases of sexual abuse or denial of services. CSE can break the silence on sexual violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and inspire young people to seek help. Furthermore, evidence is growing on the potential of CSE to contribute to outcomes including: preventing and reducing gender-based and intimate partner violence and discrimination. In this regard, CSE is a promising and critical strategy by which to shift norms and attitudes, and empower young people.

### ***Out of School CSE***

Out of school CSE provides an opportunity to reach adolescents and young people who are not in school and where CSE is not in the school curriculum or who prefer asking and receiving quality information anonymously. CSE provided out of school enables the contents to be tailored to the specific needs of young people who are out of school and complements information provided to young people especially where it is not ‘comprehensive’. In the provision of online CSE, attention should be paid to the gender digital divide and its impact on girls’ education. Girls are more likely to be denied access to computers and the internet. Access to digital technology as well as digital literacy is required for girls to access sexual and reproductive health information and education, including out of school CSE. Besides the fact that digital technology offers numerous opportunities for learning and development, modern technologies also entail potential risks, including the risk of online/digital violence.

### ***Education during crises***

During conflicts, girls’ educational access, attendance and learning outcomes risk being undone. Girls experience disproportionate impacts from climate change and conflicts as it amplifies the barriers they already face in accessing education. In countries affected by conflict, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of primary school and 90 per cent more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts living in non-affected countries. Girls with disabilities living in humanitarian and conflict settings are far more likely to be excluded from education service than her non-disabled counterparts. Acts of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is also aggravated in countries affected by conflict and when education systems are affected by conflict and crisis. Girls tend to experience higher rates of pre-existing gender discrimination in and out of school as well as child marriages and early pregnancies rises compared to non-crisis times. Additionally, lack of access to menstrual supplies; lack of access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure often lead to girls missing weeks of school and falling behind and never catching up.

It is also necessary to reassess the importance and long-lasting impact of access or lack of access to education that has been disrupted by natural disasters and the events such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Early in the pandemic many students transitioned from in-person schooling to remote learning arrangements or to no access to school or education at all. Many education settings relied on technology and digitalization and many educators, parents and students had to become familiar with online learning. In many contexts, patterns of learning changed dramatically, as those in charge struggled to maintain access for children and youth to continue to make educational progress. Often, women and girls did not have the same digital access as men & boys, especially in families where access to technology and related hardware is limited. This led to barriers to learning, prohibiting many girls and women from having the opportunity to progress in all levels of education. COVID-19 amplified the widening digital gap between urban and rural communities.

### **Recommendations**

Governments should:

- Protect, respect and fulfill sexual and reproductive health and rights and meet international obligations under international human rights law. At the national level, governments must ensure implementation of CSE programmes, as well as enforce legislation that addresses and eliminates sexual and gender-based violence including 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. In addition, access to adolescent and youth friendly SRH information and services including contraception and safe abortion for adolescents and young people in need is crucial for continuing education and gender equality.

- Recognize the provision of CSE as integral to improving the health, safety and rights of adolescents and youth, as well as realizing gender equality and sustainable development by implementing the commitments made in the area of education, and include CSE in SDG 4.7 policies, programs, implementation, budgeting and reporting.
  - Ensure the provision of universal access to education with mandated inclusion of CSE for all children, adolescents and young people, both in and out of school. Governments should also ensure CSE is delivered in the context of Out-of-school to reach out to children who are not in formal school settings.
  - Put gender equality at the heart of education sector plans, budgets and policies, identifying and addressing gender disparities and their underlying factors from the early years and beyond, in order to transform harmful gender norms, stereotypes and practices that are often perpetuated in and through education.
  - Commit to the Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education through the UNESCO ReWirEd campaign.
  - Increase investments for women, youth and girls so they may have access to all forms of quality education and life course learning and also, create specific targeted digital programmes to enable women, youth and girls to regain entry into education and training.
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