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Statement submitted by World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

World Youth Alliance is a global coalition of young people dedicated to the promotion and protection of human dignity. Because we believe that every human being has equal dignity, we believe that authentic development must respect the dignity of all members of the human family.

The lack of equality between men and women led to the creation of a stand-alone goal in the Sustainable Development Goals in Goal 5 for gender equality. However, women, like men, are a vital part of all goals. It is essential to recognize that women's equality must be founded on respect for their dignity, and ensure that women's contributions are recognized, fostered, and valued.

One of the best ways to address inequality, and to end poverty, is in Goal 4: Education for all. Education for girls should be a primary focus of the sustainable development agenda. Promoting female education provides one of the best ways of combating systems and practices that limit women and girls' ability to participate fully in society.

Poverty, undernourishment and unemployment are the main factors that prevent girls from finishing primary and secondary school. Lack of stability in some countries may force girls and women to either work or marry early. Cultural norms that see women and girls as a burden, educated and fed only to be given to another family through marriage, may also contribute to the difficulties girls face in securing the nutrition, education, and investment in skills needed to flourish. By eliminating school abandonment, girls will be empowered.

Education also relates to several targets under Goal 5. For example, girls who are educated can participate more fully in leadership locally and nationally (target 5.5). They are better able to advocate for themselves in order to end discrimination (5.1). Education to understand the intrinsic value of both women and men and to promote equal sharing of responsibilities should be encouraged. This education should focus on the inherent value of caregiving and other responsibilities (5.4), typically undertaken by women and girls, that promote human flourishing, interconnectedness, and form the basis for building strong families at the heart of society.

Domestic violence, trafficking in persons, and cultural practices such as forced marriage (targets 5.2 and 5.3) treat women and girls as not fully realized human persons with dignity. When we recognize the dignity of other human beings, we recognize also our obligations to treat them with respect and love.

To fully address violence against women, we must also protect women from female foeticide. In some cultures, family and cultural preferences for boys lead to sex-selective abortions of girls. Estimates indicate that over 100 million girls are now missing from Asia alone, and these numbers are rising in other parts of the world. Such widespread violence against girls must be addressed at a global level in order to make sure that girls are welcomed in every family and treated with the respect that the gift of their lives, talents and joy deserves.

The World Youth Alliance is concerned that some of the targets may facilitate this problem. The language of "reproductive rights" is often used to promote abortion, which enables female foeticide. Additionally, the answer to women's inequality is not to use violence against the weak to conform the female body to

male standards. Abortion violates the dignity of women and their children at the most basic level. Member States must implement policies that respect the human dignity to build a just society where women are truly empowered.

It is important that development efforts under Goal 3 focus on the main health risks to women. Non-communicable diseases are among leading causes of early death for women, and so must be addressed. Reports indicate that women often receive less of the care they need than men. There are important differences in men and women's experiences of illness, including experiencing different symptoms for the same conditions. Sustainable development cannot achieve its goal for equality if women's health needs are unmet.

A particularly under-researched area of women's health is related to reproductive health. A woman's endocrine system is interwoven with her overall health. Her hormonal cycles create a delicate balance that is an important part of her overall health. Imbalances can indicate medical problems, including severe ones. The treatment for most gynaecological issues for women is hormonal birth control. However, this only masks symptoms, rather than addresses underlying problems, and while their conditions may worsen undetected.

Many women do not know what a healthy cycle looks like, or the effects on their health of various contraceptives and procedures. Women cannot exercise the informed choice required in family planning if they do not have this information. Further, the focus of unmet needs for family planning ignores the reasons why many women do not want to use contraceptives, including health concerns, side effects, and personal, religious or ethical beliefs. Women deserve health care that treats the causes of their illnesses.

By understanding her cycle and how to observe and understand her own biomarkers, a woman is able to achieve optimum health and plan her family. She can become an active participant in her health care and can work with her care provider to achieve long-term health outcomes.

One of the most significant health risks women in developing countries face is death due to complications from childbirth. According to the World Health Organization, the vast majority of these deaths are preventable. Mothers, as caretakers, educators and providers, are often at the centre of their communities. A mother dying in childbirth increases the baby's rate of morbidity and mortality. Motherless children are at much greater risk of death than those with living parents, owing to loss of income and care. Motherless children are also much less likely to receive complete schooling and adequate nutrition. When a mother dies, children tend to enter the workforce at a young age, leading to health and social problems. Maternal death also has an immediate, direct economic impact on families.

Target 3.1 aims to reduce the global maternal mortality rate to 70 deaths per 100,000 live births. According to the United Nations Population Fund, the 2013 global Maternal Mortality Rate was 210, with the highest rates in the least developed countries. Great strides were made in reducing maternal mortality rates as part of the Millennium Development Goals. There are success stories, from reports of zero maternal deaths in rural villages in Tanzania to Chile's achievement of one of the lowest maternal mortality ratio in Latin America, thanks to a combination of economic growth, compulsory education laws, free maternal and child health care, and improvements in sanitation and nutrition.

The direct interventions needed to help every woman and baby safely through pregnancy and childbirth are clear, and attainable for developing countries:

- At least four prenatal care visits, as recommended by the World Health Organization
- Access to skilled birth attendants who, with back-up emergency obstetric care, can reduce the maternal mortality rate by 75 per cent, according to the United Nations Population Fund, because they are trained to monitor pregnancy and childbirth, recognise and manage problems, and refer to higher levels when necessary
- Minimally equipped birthing facilities that contain the essential medicines and equipment to treat and deal with the major complications of pregnancy
- Health-care delivery system infrastructure, including education, which empowers women to make appropriate health decisions, and transportation, which enables women to reach birthing facilities in time

As the global health community increases its focus on promoting contraception and legal abortion as “necessary” measures in combating maternal mortality, the emphasis on these four achievable and effective interventions has declined. Funding and policy efforts have prioritised contraception and abortion, which fail to address the needs of pregnant women to have safe and healthy pregnancies and deliveries. A medical care system that cannot provide the four simple interventions listed above will be unable to provide appropriate medical counselling or safe surgery of any kind.

Sustainable development can only live up to its name if it includes everyone. People are the world’s greatest resource, and when systems and practices exclude women, we exclude half our problem-solvers. Every person, woman or man, deserves a voice and to be respected. Each woman has unique qualities and gifts that can only be fully appreciated, fostered and utilized where human dignity is respected. By recognising women’s innate dignity as human persons, we can empower women and bring about authentic development. We encourage the Commission on the Status of Women to implement policies grounded in human dignity.
