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to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights, 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

“Women’s empowerment and its link to sustainable development”

The Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights, representing over one thousand organisations and individuals worldwide working towards the realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all, thank the Commission of the Status of Women for the timely focus on women’s empowerment and sustainable development.

The Millennium Development Goals made some progress in its target to reduce poverty, as well as the decline of maternal mortality globally, however, improvements on these issues around the world are uneven. It has been noted that the Millennium Development Goals failed in ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health services for all people, leaving behind the vast majority of women and girls. The lack of recognition of sexual and reproductive health and rights as human rights and as an integral aspect of gender equality, women’s empowerment and sustainable development resulted in human rights violations that disempower women and girls worldwide.

Human rights violations stemming from women and girls’ unmet sexual and reproductive health and rights are unacceptably common worldwide. For one, access to a range of voluntary, safe, and affordable contraceptive options continues to remain out of reach for roughly 222 million women in developing countries. Even if the global need for safe and voluntary contraception were met, no existing method of contraception is 100 per cent effective, entailing that there would still be a need for safe, accessible and legal abortion services.

Yet unsafe abortion continues to be one of the leading causes of maternal mortality and morbidity, where an estimated 47,000 women needlessly die each year, accounting for approximately 13 per cent of maternal deaths worldwide, and an additional 5 million women are annually hospitalized because of abortion-related complications. Furthermore, the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls in particular are ignored in many developing countries. Approximately 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 years and 2 million girls under the age of 15 give birth every year, and complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading causes of death among girls in this age range. When trying to access sexual and reproductive health services, moreover, young women and girls are all too often turned away, humiliated, or ostracized; subjected to emotional or physical abuse; or denied their right to health and bodily autonomy as a result of parental consent limitations. This frequent inability of young women and girls to access sexual and reproductive health services is often exacerbated by an absence of gender-sensitive and rights-based comprehensive sexuality education, further limiting their self-determination and ability to exercise meaningful and informed decision-making power in their lives.

As a result of power and structural inequalities, women and girls who are particularly at risk of multiple and intersecting forms of inequality, disempowerment and discrimination include young and/or unmarried women and girls; women living with HIV; female sex workers; women of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities; women living with disabilities; indigenous women; rural women; and migrant women, among others. While these examples

may seem extreme, they happen all too frequently, and share a common root cause: namely, the denial of women's right to sexual and reproductive health, and the denial of women and girls' right to exercise autonomous decision-making over their bodies and their lives. The denial of these rights results in violence against women and in some cases results in cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment paramount to torture, as recognized by Human Rights Bodies. States are accountable for these human rights violations when they ignore their obligations under international human rights law to respect, protect, and fulfil women's right to sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination and violence.

The Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights welcomes the new Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 for adopting bold vision across social, environmental and economic areas that will address the huge development challenges left by the Millennium Development Goals. Agenda 2030 Goal 5 outline commitments to ensure that every girl and woman can live free from discrimination and have access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. It is our hope that, when implemented, Agenda 2030 will save millions of lives of women and girls and bring meaningful and transformative development for all. We believe sexual and reproductive health and rights must be central to the goals and targets and go beyond a very narrow understanding of sexual and reproductive health and rights as merely "maternal healthcare" or "reproductive health". Drawing on the existing progressive international instruments like the Maputo Plan of Action for the Africa region, the International Conference on Population and Development review regional outcome documents such as the Geneva United Nations Economic Commission for Europe meeting Chair summary, and Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development and the Bali Global Youth Forum Declaration. The Agenda 2030 should approach sexual and reproductive health and rights, through comprehensive sexuality education and ensure that governments consider reviewing the laws that criminalize abortion. Sexual and reproductive health and rights should include abortion rights, pleasure, young people, access to contraceptives, sexual orientation and gender identity; particularly for the most vulnerable groups such as women, young people, sex workers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. In the implementation of the Agenda 2030, human rights must be explicitly referenced, with the understanding that sustainable development posit people as subjects of rights and drivers of development rather than passive receivers of aid priorities and programming.

We cannot talk of sustainable development and women's empowerment without respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the human rights of women and girls in all their dimensions, including the right to sexual and reproductive health, and acknowledging the actual needs of all women and girls in all their diversities.

In the light of the member states' commitment and accountability towards the implementation of the Agenda 2030, Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights calls the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women on the following:

- Reaffirm sexual and reproductive health and rights as human rights, integral to gender equality, women's empowerment and sustainable development; and particularly reaffirm the sexual right of all women and girls to have control over their own bodies and sexuality, free from coercion, discrimination and violence.

- Reaffirm that sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights are essential in achieving women's empowerment and universally relevant sustainable development agenda across its social, economic, and environmental dimensions.
 - Address human rights violations and uphold their commitments, by ensuring a comprehensive and rights-based approach to women's health, and accounting for the full spectrum of women and girls' sexual and reproductive health issues, needs, and rights.
 - Eradicate all forms of violence and discrimination, including institutional violence towards women based on age, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, occupation, class, ethnicity, religion, disability, migrant or HIV status, among other grounds.
 - Thoroughly integrate human rights into the Agenda 2030, with the understanding that any meaningful efforts towards sustainable development must posit women in all their diversities as subjects of rights and drivers of development rather than passive receivers of aid priorities and programming.
 - Take all necessary measures to ensure that national laws and policies are consistent with international human rights agreements, and do not perpetuate any form of violence against women.
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