



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Sixty-first session

13-24 March 2017

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and 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 IPAS, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Ipas welcomes the priority theme “Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work” and review theme “Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls” of the sixty-first session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Ensuring women’s and girls’ human rights and empowerment is key to achieving gender equality, growing economies, strengthening families, and fighting poverty. In order to ensure a sustainable future for us all, we must address the obstacles that prevent this half of the world’s population from full participation in the growth and development of their communities.

Education is key to opening up opportunities for personal growth and economic development. It is imperative that women and girls can pursue education without limit, which means having agency to determine the best timing of their childbearing. As an international non-governmental organization working to improve women’s human right to access safe and legal high-quality abortion care and comprehensive reproductive health services, Ipas believes that one of the most fundamental determinants of a girl’s or woman’s opportunities in life is whether or not she truly has the ability to decide when and whether to have a child and has access to effective contraception and safe and legal abortion to allow her to manage that decision.

In today’s world, however, more than half of 15-19 year olds do not have access to or the legal or customary right to use modern contraceptive methods, about 3 million of them undergo unsafe abortions, and of the estimated 16 million young women giving birth each year, approximately 4 million of the pregnancies are unintended. Many of the 16 million young mothers are never able to finish their education, as adolescent pregnancy often results in an abrupt end to schooling — often because of government policy — and the 3 million young women undergoing unsafe abortions are also at risk of death or severe, debilitating injuries. Additionally, according to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), “Children of mothers with little education are less likely to be educated,” so the cycle of disenfranchisement often continues to the next generation. Thus, access to modern contraception and safe and legal abortion are both basic needs and fundamental human rights that enable young women to have better access to education, better opportunity for economic empowerment, and expanded life choices.

The fulfilment of sexual and reproductive health and rights, including safe abortion, is key to improved health and wellness, the ability to pursue an education, economic empowerment, and expanded life choices — all integral to achieving the broad integrated Sustainable Development Goals, especially goals 1 “End poverty in all its forms everywhere,” 3 “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages,” 5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,” 8 “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all,” and 10 “Reduce inequality within and among countries.” In order to know how we can best achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we must also learn from the challenges and achievements of meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

The specific targets of Millennium Development Goal 5 — “improve maternal health” — 5.A “Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio” and 5.B “Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health” were not fully achieved by 2015, though progress was made. When reviewing the challenges of meeting the goal 5 targets, the Commission on the Status of Women noted that progress for this goal was “particularly slow and uneven, especially for the poorest and rural sectors of the population, within and across countries.” The Commission also expressed concern about significant gaps in funding and the magnitude of the unmet need for all sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including safe and effective contraception, services for complications of unsafe abortion, and safe abortion where such services are permitted by law.

The Commission has noted the importance of providing modern contraception and safe and legal abortion services in order to reduce maternal mortality, yet, as a result of limited access to safe and legal abortion in so many parts of the world, an estimated 47,000 women die every year from unsafe abortion globally, making up about 13% of all maternal mortalities. Additionally, according to Guttmacher, 25 million women worldwide want to avoid a pregnancy but are not using an effective contraceptive method, indicating a huge unmet need. Reducing unsafe abortion through provision of safe abortion and contraception is the most straightforward way to have a positive impact on maternal mortality; yet, comprehensive abortion care continues to be undervalued, politicized, and negotiated away. If comprehensive abortion care had been prioritized as an evidence-based approach to addressing the problem of maternal mortality from unsafe abortion, we might have seen larger reductions in maternal mortality and closer achievement of Millennium Development Goal 5.

The Agreed Conclusions of the fifty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women were clear that “[women’s] human rights include the right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free from coercion, discrimination and violence.” This position was also put forward at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and in many other human rights agreements, comments and concluding observations since then. We have been making these pronouncements for many years and yet abortion remains completely illegal or is only permitted to save the life of the woman in over 40 countries, in clear violation of women’s human rights. In some countries, abortion is completely criminalized and women are arrested and jailed for having abortions or miscarriages. In order to accomplish the work of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and now, the Sustainable Development Goals, women and girls must have complete and total access to effective contraception and safe and legal abortion.

### **Conclusions**

The advancement of women’s and girls’ human rights, their personal and economic empowerment, and the achievement of international development goals and agreements can only be accomplished if women’s and girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is ensured. Ipas urges the member States to do the

following in order to effectively address the priority and review themes of the sixty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women:

- Protect and fulfil women's and girls' human right to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, including safe abortion care, information, and education.
  - Repeal laws that criminalize abortion and remove barriers on women's and girls' access to safe abortion services.
  - Release all women and girls and health-care professionals who are incarcerated as a result of punitive abortion laws.
  - Guarantee that comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services are attentive to the needs of women and girls who are most vulnerable through non-judgmental and rights-based services that protect patients' privacy and confidentiality.
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