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### Commission on the Status of Women

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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.

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\* 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 and building solidarity between young people of developing and developed countries.

All human beings are equal in dignity and therefore deserve respect, opportunity, and the freedom to use their abilities and talents. The Sustainable Development Goals stress the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment as well as the importance of including rural communities. Rural women are at the centre of social and economic life in their communities. Rural areas pose unique challenges to development; focusing on women and girls in these areas offers a special opportunity to greatly improve their lives and empower them. Two key areas that can help achieve equality and empowerment of women and girls in rural areas are education and health.

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. Sometimes cultural norms reinforce the idea that girls and women are not worth investing in, as any education or skills training they receive will benefit the family they marry into, rather than the family of their birth.

Other factors, particularly poor infrastructure, also affect education for women and girls. Women and girls in rural areas often have less access to schooling due to distance, fees, and the need for help at home. When girls lack a safe way to get to school, or are needed for help with basic needs that are distant such as clean water, they may stop attending school. It is essential that infrastructure improvements include rural areas, as called for in SDG target 2.a, and that development planning focus on all areas, not just cities and suburbs.

Another way that education can help empower women and girls and achieve gender equality is through education about the human person. All human beings have human dignity, and therefore everyone deserves respect and the chance to reach their potential, including women and girls. Learning about this can build a generation of young women and men who recognize women's intrinsic value and gifts.

World Youth Alliance has developed a curriculum that can help promote respect, responsible behaviour, and equality between men and women. The Human Dignity Curriculum (HDC) teaches children about human dignity: that every human being has it, and should therefore be respected. The program is culturally sensitive and encourages parental involvement. Students who understand human dignity are not only prepared to make responsible personal decisions, but to contribute to their communities and to treat others with respect in their families, peer groups, and communities, including in their personal relationships.

The HDC also has a sexuality education extension. This program teaches age-appropriate, biologically accurate information with a focus on personal development and informed decisions related to students' sexuality based on an understanding of themselves, and with respect for their own human dignity and the dignity of others. This can help girls and boys form healthy, respectful relationships and resist peer pressure.

Women and girls in rural areas also often suffer from poor access to healthcare. A significant health risk 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. Women and girls in rural areas often lack access to key interventions, infrastructure, and support and thus may be at greater risk of maternal death.

Women play a central role in their societies. The loss of women, and girls, in childbirth, can have a profound effect on their families and communities. Every maternal death is both emotionally devastating to loved ones and represents a loss to the community of the woman's creativity, talents, and participation in society. Maternal mortality also has troubling consequences for her family's health and wellbeing. 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, due to loss of income and care, and are also much less likely to receive complete schooling and adequate nutrition, and are more likely to enter the workforce at an earlier age. Maternal death also has an immediate, direct economic impact on families. This can be particularly acute in rural communities.

Reports suggest that adolescent birth rates are higher in rural than urban areas. Early and forced marriage and early sexual debut contribute to these rates. Early pregnancy and childbearing are often impediments to improvements in the educational, economic and social status of women in all parts of the world, particularly in rural areas. Early pregnancy and early motherhood can entail complications during pregnancy and childbirth, increasing risk of maternal death. In developed and developing countries, the trend towards early sexual experience undermines efforts to fight HIV and other STIs.

Therefore, for the development of rural communities, rural women must have access to maternal health care, including prenatal and post-natal health care and emergency obstetric care. The most important step in improving rural women's reproductive health is increasing the number of skilled birth attendants, who are trained in treating obstetric fistula, haemorrhaging, high blood pressure and infection, the primary causes of maternal mortality. The UNFPA states that three-fourths of all maternal deaths could be averted by the presence of skilled birth attendants. Furthermore, better infrastructure, more hospitals and cleaner health care facilities will reduce maternal mortality.

The World Youth Alliance stresses that, given such problems, educating rural women about their reproductive health is essential. Poor reproductive healthcare and knowledge among women and their doctors can have long-term health effects. Hormonal health is closely linked to overall health, yet many women do not know what a healthy cycle looks like or when they need medical assistance. Moreover, many doctors cannot accurately diagnose these conditions or go beyond symptom management to treat the root causes.

Many women experience symptoms on a regular basis but do not understand that they could benefit from treatment. Some of these symptoms can significantly impact women's enjoyment of their lives and ability to achieve their goals. Rural women may have greater difficulty accessing appropriate medical care and therefore special efforts should be made to bridge the gap in both knowledge and resources.

When a woman understands her cycle, she gains a window into her overall health. Knowledge empowers like nothing else can; it makes women informed participants in their healthcare, and it does not run out like other supplies. Knowledge-

based healthcare empowers rural women to make informed choices about their health and family planning. Women who know that they need better healthcare and support are more likely to drive improvements in healthcare infrastructure.

Rural women drive solutions within their own local communities because they both understand the problems of their communities and know the appropriate ways to confront and solve them. Investment in rural women requires investing in maternal and reproductive health care and education, because healthy and educated women contribute to their families, their villages, and ultimately their countries. They transform their communities and ensure human flourishing for all those around them.

Human beings are our greatest resource. As the world of work continues to grow and change it is important to ensure that we include all people in all spheres of life. Women will be empowered and realize gender equality when we recognize the equal dignity of all human beings and foster solidarity between women and men. By promoting policies which value all of women's gifts and unique capacities, we enable them to be drivers of development in their communities. World Youth Alliance encourages the Commission to promote the key interventions grounded in human dignity that will help rural women and girls achieve gender equality and empowerment.

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