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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 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 and the upholding of human rights. We have over 200,000 members in more than 130 countries. Our goal is to help establish solidarity between young people from all over the world who are able to articulate, defend, and live the dignity of the person in their lives and influence the communities and world in which they live.

The goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are far from being realized, particularly in the area of safeguarding maternal health consistent with the dignity of every woman.

In order to make a drastic and significant movement in furtherance of these goals, there must first be an unequivocal recognition that all human beings possess intrinsic dignity, which is the only stable and lasting foundation for human rights. It is the intrinsic worth of the human person that provides the basis on which to create and establish policies and laws that create conditions under which human beings can flourish. Without this foundation, human rights are at best illusory and are articulated and enforced on the basis of the arbitrary whims and caprices of those in power. Thus, for there to be effective progress in the realm of human rights, equality, and development, the efforts must be focused on placing utmost concern for upholding human dignity.

World Youth Alliance recognizes that the task of achieving authentic gender equality and true empowerment of women as protagonists of sustainable development must have at its core a fundamental respect for and observance of the intrinsic dignity of the human person. It must be based on a correct understanding of the nature of the human person, including one's capacity for human flourishing which is, ultimately, what sustainable development must help secure. This struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment as central to the agenda of sustainable development necessarily entails freedom from violence perpetrated against women, full access to health care, shelter, education, and full participation in all efforts geared toward sustainable development.

World Youth Alliance proposes that the emphasis must instead be placed on helping safeguard better maternal health, access to education, and participation in acts of public life.

The improvement of maternal health must still be at the forefront of the endeavor for sustainable development and must be comprehensive enough to include prenatal, postnatal, and emergency obstetric care for women. It is too often the case that women, particularly in the developing world, have greater access to services to prevent and terminate their pregnancies than to protect their health during pregnancy and delivery. This is especially troubling in light of pharmaceutical trials for medication abortion being performed on women in Africa, who experience significant healthcare gaps and are less able to hold the companies accountable for harm they experience as a result. In reality, controversial policies, such as abortion, do not address the root causes of maternal mortality, and consequently do not promote maternal health. Such a state of affairs is profoundly disrespectful to human dignity and must be proscribed. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action must maintain the original, hard-fought consensus, which respects the national policy space and sovereignty of each country on these controversial issues.

Evidence-based solutions must be undertaken in order to advance maternal health. World Youth Alliance proposes solutions such as improved prenatal care, including information on pregnancy and delivery and how to access skilled birth

attendants; providing skilled birth attendants, who are trained to recognize problems early, prevent the transmission of infections, encourage rest and rehydration, and manage the placenta to reduce blood loss, among other qualifications; adequately equipping birthing facilities, which have at the very minimum the essential medications needed to treat major complications; and better healthcare delivery system infrastructure, including education and transportation.

Increased access to education is critical to empower women and bring about greater recognition of their equality. States must invest in women's education in order to bring about women's empowerment, as well as reduced family poverty, increased health, and reduced child mortality.

In this regard, World Youth Alliance can contribute through a curriculum that promotes respect, responsible behavior, and equality between women and men. Our human dignity curriculum teaches children about human dignity - that every human being is endowed with it, and is thus deserving of all respect, care, and attention. The programme is culturally sensitive and encourages parental involvement. Students who understand human dignity are prepared to make responsible personal decisions and to contribute to their communities and to treat others with respect in their families, peer groups, and communities, including in their personal relationships.

The human dignity curriculum also has a sexuality-education extension which teaches age-appropriate, biologically accurate information. It focuses 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, thus decreasing social risk-taking. It promotes gender equality among men and women, for both are born free and equal in dignity.

With regard to women's access to participation in all acts of public life, it must be noted that in many countries of the world, women are denied civil rights and opportunities for fulfilment of their talents and aspirations. This is incompatible with respect for their equal dignity, and with lasting development, which will be achieved only where women and men live and work together in mutual respect and solidarity. Education in human dignity can promote respect for the equal value of women and their ability to contribute to development and society on an equal basis with men.

Humanity is its own greatest resource, but only when it involves all its members. Every person – woman or man – deserves a voice. Each woman has unique qualities and gifts that can only be fully appreciated, fostered, and utilized where human dignity is respected. By recognizing women's innate dignity as human persons, we can empower women who will then transform their communities. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action can only achieve its objectives by grounding its actions in understanding that human dignity is the basis for all true equality.
