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Statement submitted by Family Planning NSW, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹

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.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Family Planning NSW is one of Australia's leading providers of sexual and reproductive health services. We also work internationally, supporting our partners in the Pacific to deliver sexual and reproductive health education, information and clinical services. Our mission is to enhance the sexual and reproductive health and rights of our communities by supporting all people to have control over and decide freely on all matters related to their sexual and reproductive health throughout their life.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights encompasses all matters related to puberty, relationships, sexuality, sexual health, fertility and birth. It recognises the right of all people to have control over, and make informed decisions on, matters related to their bodies, sexuality and reproduction, free from coercion, discrimination and violence.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical to ensuring food security, optimal nutrition and sustainable development, and supports the health and wellbeing of populations. By upholding the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all people there are health, environmental, social and economic benefits for all. Family Planning NSW's work contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and to furthering the International Conference on Population and Development.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and embedding the International Conference on Population and Development into on-going practice can only become a reality with strong support for sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly around the areas of contraception, cervical cancer, and comprehensive sexuality education.

Contraception

Access to contraception and contraception education allows women to decide when and if to have children. This access, supported by comprehensive sexuality education, gender equality programs and family planning services, lessens the burden on the food production system by reducing numbers of unintended pregnancies and promotes sustainable development. Further, access to contraception supports women and their communities to achieve optimal levels of sexual and reproductive health.

Too many women do not have access to contraception education and services. In Australia, one in four women have experienced an unintended pregnancy in the past decade. About half of these pregnancies occurred for women not using contraception, and about one third ended in abortion (Taft et al 2019; Medical Journal of Australia).

In the Pacific, the unmet need for family planning is even worse (United Nations 2017).

One strategy for reducing the rate of unintended pregnancies is to increase the uptake of long-acting reversible contraception, including contraceptive implants and intrauterine devices. These contraception methods are more than 99 per cent effective, higher than other common contraceptives such as the oral contraceptive pill and the male condom. Despite this evidence, however, use of long-acting reversible contraception is low globally.

Ensuring that all women have access to sustainable sources of contraception and contraception education is critical to safeguarding food security and sustainable development.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines comprehensive sexuality education as a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. Comprehensive sexuality education is a crucial early intervention strategy for ensuring that sexual and reproductive health and rights are met.

Comprehensive sexuality education is relevant across the lifespan and has a critical impact on sustainable development, the health of populations and gender equality.

Implementation of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education promotes gender equality and better health outcomes, including lower rates of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, commencing at an early age, offers numerous benefits, including helping children to identify and report inappropriate behaviour such as child sexual abuse, and helping children develop healthy attitudes about their bodies and relationships.

As noted in the Secretary General's report developed for this session of the Commission on Population and Development, efforts are required to increase all forms of education, particularly for women and girls. Taking a rights-based approach that focuses on ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, and protecting reproductive rights could bring about fertility decline by giving women greater control over the number and spacing of their children.

Cervical Cancer

While we are on track to eliminating cervical cancer in Australia, this form of cancer remains a leading cause of death for women in many countries around the world, especially in the Pacific. Eradicating cervical cancer is a critical primary healthcare approach that the World Health Organization has identified through their Global Strategy as fundamental to achieving the shared global goals of universal health coverage and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals.

The high mortality rate from cervical cancer globally can be reduced through a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, early diagnosis, effective screening and treatment. Ultimately this will improve the health of populations, reduce existing burdens on health systems and enable women to fully participate in society.

Cervical cancer is a critical component of sexual and reproductive health, and given the global commitment to eradicate it, should form a stronger part of the Commission's work into the future.

Conclusion

It has been well recognised that sexual and reproductive health and rights are a critical enabler of sustainable development, however, it also plays an important role in promoting food security and improved population health outcomes. This is, in part, because of the strong role sexual and reproductive health and rights plays in supporting gender equality by empowering women to make decisions about work, education, relationships, and whether or when to have children.

The autonomy and empowerment of women and girls is essential not only for their own health and wellbeing but also for those of their families and communities and, ultimately, for sustainable development. Sexual and reproductive health is, in turn, fundamental for women and girl's full participation in society.

The social and economic costs and the negative impact of gender inequality are high. Programs that work to achieve sustainable development, population health, good nutrition and food security must address elements of gender equality and promote the empowerment of women and girls.

Australia remains a leader on both contraception and cervical cancer and a strong voice internationally on sexual and reproductive health and rights. However, there is work to do in regard to long acting reversible contraception access and in ensuring consistent provision of comprehensive sexuality education which is a critical enabler to promote respectful relationships and provide girls with the information and confidence to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health.

Further, improvements in sexual and reproductive health and rights are needed in the Pacific where all key sexual and reproductive health and rights indicators are poor for women. Specifically, women in the Pacific have the highest level of unmet need for contraception in the world, declining contraception usage rates, unacceptably high maternal mortality, increasing prevalence of cervical cancer, and growing incidence of sexually transmitted infections.

In conclusion, rights-based approaches that focus on ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, comprehensive sexuality education and gender equality programs that protect sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical enablers to advance the rights of women and girls, reduce adolescent pregnancy and improve access to contraception and family planning. Further, these will reduce these risks to women's and children's health, giving women greater control over the number and spacing of their children, and aiding sustainable development.
