



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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**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 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. As all human beings have human dignity, it is important that all of us, women and men, girls and boys, are able to develop our abilities and gifts to contribute to our families, workplaces, and communities.

Women's roles in society have shifted in recent decades. Women are continuing their education longer and working outside the home in greater numbers than ever before. These dramatic shifts bring with them new challenges as well as opportunities. All human beings are equal in dignity and therefore deserve respect, opportunity, and the freedom to use their abilities and talents. Education, health, and respect for women's unique capacities and gifts are essential to ensure that women are empowered in all aspects of their lives.

Education is one of the best ways to address inequality and empower women and girls economically. 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.

Cultural norms that see women and girls as a burden, educated and fed only to be given to another family through marriage, may also contribute to the difficulties girls face in securing the nutrition, education, and investment in skills needed to flourish. By eliminating school abandonment, girls will be empowered and are likely to increase their earnings over their lifetime. A key to eliminating school abandonment and achieving equal opportunities and gender parity in education is understanding that all human beings have human dignity, and that everyone deserves respect and the chance to reach their potential.

World Youth Alliance has developed a curriculum that can help promote respect, responsible behaviour, and equality between men and women. The Human Dignity Curriculum teaches children about human dignity: that every human being has it, and should therefore be respected. The Human Dignity Curriculum 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. 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.

Health plays an important role in women's economic empowerment. In order to address women's health needs we should prioritize research and healthcare for non-communicable diseases, which are among the leading causes of death for women. Women who have persistent health problems may end up leaving the workforce when they would prefer to work. Men and women experience some

illnesses and medical conditions differently, and reports indicate women often receive less healthcare than men. It is essential that women's health needs are met so that ill health is not a barrier to women's economic participation.

One particular area of non-communicable disease that has been under-researched is reproductive health. The endocrine system is closely linked to women's 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.

When a woman understands her cycle, she gains a window into her overall health. She becomes an informed participant in her own care and is able to make informed choices about her reproductive health goals, achieve the family size she wants, and meet long-term health goals. Knowledge-based healthcare will therefore help to empower women economically.

The world of work has changed significantly in recent decades and will continue to do so. In order for women to be able to participate in the economy in the ways they want to, there must be respect for women as women, and the promotion of balanced lives for both men and women.

Women have contributed economically throughout history. Their contributions have included roles both as educators and caregivers in the home, as participants in family businesses and as employees in a variety of fields. As higher numbers of women have entered the formal economy, women have adapted to systems based on male bodies and expectations. As a result, while women are increasingly represented in the workforce, professional life often does not take womanhood into account.

Only women can become pregnant, so when women's opportunities for professional growth are negatively impacted by gaps in their careers it pits work and family life against each other. These two aspects, both of which are important for women as well as men, should not be in competition. Women's needs and wishes are not met by the assumption that childbearing is a burden which they should avoid or, if they do not, one they must bear alone. This burden can effectively become coercive in the case of poor women. Claims that abortion and contraception are necessary for women's empowerment in fact undermine women's empowerment; by treating pregnancy as a problem rather than a unique capacity of women, we tell women that they must conform to standards of maleness to be able to participate in society, or lose out.

The changes to the world of work should promote balance between work and family lives, recognizing that each benefits from the other and brings fulfilment to both women and men. Just as women's contributions should be valued in every sphere of life, so should every sphere of life, including personal relationships and caregiving, be valued. By valuing both, we can promote equality in both the work and the home. World Youth Alliance encourages civil society as well as Member States to foster this healthy balance as well as promote ways for women to return to

work following career gaps, and to empower men and women through education so that they can make informed choices about their family lives.

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, not only economically, but in all areas of their lives, 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 can foster true justice and authentic development. World Youth Alliance encourages the Commission to empower women economically through policies which are based in human dignity.

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