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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 Asociacion HazteOir.org, C-Fam, Inc., Family Research Council, Human Life International, Inc., National Organization for Marriage Education Fund, non-governmental organizations 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

Since its founding, the United Nations has contributed to the advancement of women all over the world, including the remotest and poorest regions. With the adoption of the 2030 Development Agenda, Member States reiterated their commitment to the advancement of women.

Agenda 2030 reflects the political commitments and obligations of states in the Beijing Platform for Action, which explicitly addresses rural women and girls across the 12 critical areas of concern, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which explicitly recognizes the unique situation of rural women in Article 14. Nonetheless, rural women and girls, who represent a quarter of the world's population, remain among the poorest and most marginalized persons.

According to the Secretary General rural women of the world, with very few exceptions, fare worse than rural men and urban women and men for every indicator of the Sustainable Development Goals for which data is available.

Often lacking access to education and infrastructure, rural women and their families have fewer opportunities to escape poverty and are more likely to experience hunger. In all developing regions, rural children are more likely to be underweight than their urban counterparts.

Rural women are twice as likely to be out of school than rural boys, largely due to the obstacles they face when schools are distant from their homes, and the risks they face. Very often, rural schools themselves are not safe environments for women and girls, especially when they lack access to water and separate, safe, sheltered sanitation. This is further compounded when girls are not offered education on hygiene and are not provided the basic necessities to support hygiene. The resulting lack of education of rural women does not affect only them. Once more, their discrimination bears dramatic consequences on their children's lives. Global data show under-five mortality decreases as mothers' education improves.

Rural women also experience lower health outcomes and have less access to healthcare than urban women, and particularly maternal health-care, including in the wealthiest regions. In developing countries, little more than half receive antenatal care at least once during pregnancy and the proportion of rural women dying during pregnancy because of their inability to reach health facilities and lack of access to emergency obstetric care remains scandalous.

These are only some of the most urgent and grave reasons why there is still much the United Nations can and must do for rural women and girls. Unfortunately, some in the international community use the needs of women and girls as a pretext to promote controversial social policies.

In light of the specific mission of our organization we are especially concerned with the step back from the strong commitment to improving maternal health in the 2030 Agenda. Instead of a targeted and strategic focus on maternal health the 2030 Agenda has endorsed a broad approach to sexual and reproductive health that seems to have more to do with changing social norms about family life and sexuality than improving health outcomes for women.

Since the International Conference on Population and Development contraceptive programmes of all kinds are lavishly funded, including in rural areas, while investments to make pregnancy and childbirth safe for mothers and their

children have lagged behind. The Millennium Development Goals tried to change that by focusing on maternal health outcomes and targeted interventions to prevent maternal deaths. Sadly, the 2030 Agenda seems to have dialled back from focusing on maternal health to emphasize fertility reduction once again.

This kind of prioritization sends a message to rural women that their only option is to use contraceptives and even to abort their children rather than risk their lives in pregnancy and childbirth, or more cynically still, to avoid having to provide for another child. This is simply unacceptable.

The international community needs to prioritize investments in maternal health and give another message altogether. Women do not need to die while giving birth. Ironically, more often than not, rural women do not die from giving birth to unwanted children, but children who are very much desired as children are often greatly appreciated in rural communities.

The investments needed to improve maternal health in rural areas are of a different kind than those needed to reduce fertility. Resources must be invested in building new and improving existing medical facilities. More doctors and skilled birth attendants must be trained. Better roads and transportation systems must be built to ensure rural women have access to medical facilities and maternal health-care. Women need to have access to education.

We are still in time to ensure the 2030 Agenda delivers for women in rural areas. But in order to achieve these results we must avoid the pitfall of turning international policy into a tool for social engineering. In 2012, the United Nations were unable to reach a consensus on rural women precisely because the draft agreed conclusion focused on issues that went beyond above international consensus. It does not help that still today so many actors focus on promoting controversial policies.

Some groups promote abortion as a panacea for women and girls. Even inside the United Nations system there are calls for States to repeal laws that protect the life of children in the womb are based on the false premise that women's health necessarily improves where abortion is permitted. Global maternal mortality data does not support this. There is no positive correlation between permissive abortion laws and maternal health. What the data shows is that maternal deaths from all causes, including from abortion, are reduced when maternal health overall improves.

In particular, chemical abortions cannot be promoted as safe solutions for rural women. Because of the risks of serious complications, women who do not have immediate access to emergency care, including medical facilities are especially at risk from any kind of abortion.

At the same time, violations of human rights such as abortion, forced sterilization, forced abortion, sex-selective abortion and coercive and discriminatory family planning policies often go unnoticed. Abortion continues to claim girl victims, and disproportionately so due to sex-selection. In regions of the world where male preference is cultivated, as is often the case in rural areas, girls are aborted before they even have a chance to take their first breath.

Sex-selection increases demand for sex slaves. Women living in rural areas are at a higher risk of becoming victims of human trafficking. Modern-day slavery is a staggering global problem. Some estimate nearly 25 million persons are victims of this crime at any given time and 71% of them are women and girls. New technologies and the internet have given rise to new forms of online trafficking, making it easier

for women and girls to be sold and exploited, as in the case of Backpage.com in the United States.

Trafficking victims and advocates demand that the United Nations cease partnering with groups that don't want to hold traffickers accountable or groups that promote legal prostitution. This is incompatible with the rights and principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. There is no such thing as voluntary prostitution as there is no such thing as voluntary slavery. Whoever speaks of "sex-work," or of "sex-industry," only helps traffickers legalize their criminal profits.

The world's rural areas are easy targets for the abortion industry and human traffickers. These women and girls deserve to be protected. They need Member States to denounce and punish these crimes, and to work together to re-create a world where women's and their children's lives are treasured and their bodies are respected always, everywhere, and by everyone.

The organizing committee of Civil Society for the Family includes the following organizations accredited with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations: Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam), the European Center for Law and Justice, Family Research Council, HazteOir, Human Life International, the Institute for Family Policy, the National Organization for Marriage, Novae Terrae, and Ordo Iuris for Legal Culture.

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