



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-second session

12–23 March 2018

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 Advocates for Youth, 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

Advocates for Youth welcomes the theme of the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which focuses on the empowerment of rural women and girls and the challenges and opportunities that they face in achieving gender equality.

The Commission's emphasis on gender equality and empowerment of rural women and its review theme are of interest to Advocates for Youth. We call on governments to ensure that young women and adolescent girls in rural settings, including those who are in and out of school, married, unmarried, disabled, marginalized, displaced, and of all sexual orientations and gender identities, can engage meaningfully in policies and programs that impact their daily lives, attend and stay in school, and access comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health and rights services, free from stigma, discrimination, and violence.

Today, there are approximately 1.2 billion young people ages 15-24 in the world and according to UNFPA, more than 600 million adolescent girls, most of who are living in low and middle-income countries. Although young women and adolescent girls comprise a large part of the population, not enough is being done, especially in rural areas, to advance their empowerment and gender equality worldwide. They face considerable challenges in rural settings, including: poverty; geographic and social isolation; harmful traditional practices, including forced marriage and female genital cutting; gender-based violence; risk of unplanned pregnancies and HIV; and stigma and discrimination, including due to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Comprehensive sexuality education is critical to achieving gender equality and women and adolescent girls' empowerment. Evidence shows that sexuality education can delay the onset of sexual activity, reduce the number of sexual partners, and increase condom use. Yet, young people still face considerable barriers to accessing comprehensive sexuality education, particularly adolescent girls and young women in rural areas. Barriers include long distances that they must travel to attend school, an educational program, or a health clinic; household duties that are prioritized over their attendance; lack of menstrual hygiene management supplies or bathroom facilities; and cost, among others.

Addressing health disparities, such as with regard to HIV, is also critical to ensuring gender equality and advancing women and adolescent girls' empowerment. Yet, according to the U.S. President Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, adolescent girls and young women account for 71 percent of new HIV infections among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than 1,000 new infections occurring each day. In many settings, forced marriage can also result in an increased risk of HIV infection. A study in the Republic of Kenya and the Republic of Zambia found that married adolescent girls had rates of HIV that were 50 percent higher than those girls who were unmarried and sexually active. Further, these elevated rates of infection were associated with more frequent intercourse, virtually no condom use because of power dynamics and lack of condom negotiation, and older partners who were more likely to be living with HIV.

Ensuring access to quality and confidential sexual and reproductive health services is also a key to ensuring gender equality and advancing rural women and adolescent girls' empowerment. Whether it is to access an HPV vaccine, HIV treatment and care, contraception, abortion, pre-and post-natal care or obstetric care,

among other services, young women and adolescent girls must be healthy to thrive. Yet, globally, complications from pregnancy and child birth are still the second leading cause of death among girls ages 15-19. In many rural areas, services can be especially difficult to access for adolescent girls and young women due to distance, cost, restrictive social norms, lack of confidentiality, and lack of information about rights and where you can access services.

Elimination of stigma, discrimination, and all forms of violence against young women and adolescent girls is vital to advancing gender equality and women and adolescent girls' empowerment. Violence against women and girls, including those identifying as lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender, and/or intersex, violates their human rights, jeopardizing their freedom, bodily integrity, dignity, education, ability to earn an income, and sexual and reproductive health. Yet, according to the latest Violence Against Children Survey, more than one in four girls' first sexual intercourse was coerced and sexual violence results in high unintended pregnancy rates. Further, emerging data shows that girls experience sexual violence throughout childhood and adolescence.

To achieve gender equality and empowerment, adolescent girls and young women living in rural settings must have access to comprehensive sexuality education; confidential sexual and reproductive health and rights services; and be able to live free from discrimination and violence.

Therefore, we call on governments to:

- Ensure the meaningful participation of young women and adolescent girls in programs and policies that impact their lives by engaging them systematically and partnering with local youth-led and/or girl and women-led organizations.
- Support in- and out-of-school sexual and reproductive health and rights programming for adolescent girls and young women.
- Provide rights-based comprehensive sexuality education that is grounded in gender equality and empowerment.
- Ensure access to the full range of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, including pre- and post-natal care, emergency obstetric care, contraception, safe abortion, and post-abortion care, such that these services are confidential, affordable, and respectful of young people's rights.
- Condemn violence and bigotry committed against adolescent girls and young women, including lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender, and/or intersex girls and young women in the global south, and around the world.
- Provide specific funding for youth organizations and young human rights defenders working to advance women and adolescent girls' rights and gender equality in rural settings, including groups working with lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender and/or intersex adolescent girls and young women.

In conclusion, we urgently call on governments to take these actions in order to make gender equality and empowerment of rural young women and adolescent girls a reality by 2030.