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Statement submitted by Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, 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

The Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, representing over a thousand organizations and individuals working worldwide to realize the full sexual and reproductive health and rights of all people, welcomes the upcoming focus of the 54th session of the Commission on Population and Development on population, food security, nutrition, and sustainable development, especially in light of our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, we would like to draw the Commission's attention to the issue of limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights experienced by rural women worldwide, impacting their health, mobility, quality of life, and bodily autonomy. As one of the populations most affected by food security risks as well as the cornerstone of entire countries' agricultural programs, we believe that there is an imperative to ensure that rural women are given the support and care they deserve and need in order to recover from the effects of the pandemic.

Many will raise issues related to women farmers' disadvantages in the field of agriculture that make them more vulnerable in the context of this pandemic. Gender differences in land rights and less access to markets, technologies, savings, and credit than male counterparts will make it difficult for women to weather loss of income or remittances resulting from COVID-19. Hence, there is a need to ensure interventions and inputs so women farmers can keep their livelihoods and food security is boosted on the whole. But we believe support for women's livelihood represents only one aspect of much-needed gendered responses to COVID-19, and a one-dimensional response such as this will fail to address women's multiple roles in the household and the community.

Past experiences of health and economic crises show that rural women are disproportionately affected in a number of ways, including but not limited to food security and nutrition, time poverty, access to health facilities and services, including sexual and reproductive health services and commodities, and gender-based violence.

In rural Mindanao in the Philippines, women community organizers have shared with us the additional burdens of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives. Since the beginning of the pandemic, these women have been tasked to serve as marshals for checkpoints into their communities. They wake up early in the morning to travel to their stations and return around late afternoon. When they get home, they are met by their young children seeking assistance with weeks' worth of lessons (modules) that they have brought home from school. They identified this as their biggest challenge as they would simply not be able to help their children in the same way their teachers would have before this pandemic.

This same group of women organizers have been unable to go out of their communities to facilitate the provision of reproductive health services to women in other areas within their jurisdiction. This has resulted in a dearth in the provision of sexual and reproductive health information and services since the beginning of the pandemic and possible increase in the number of unintended pregnancies within their communities. They shared apprehensions that there will be many unintended pregnancies which in turn will result in early marriages. For those belonging to nearby indigenous tribe communities, early marriage, which has always been an option, might also increase due to the lockdowns.

Another group, a non-government organization from rural Kenya, shared the same concerns, citing that one of their biggest challenges is the lack of available means of transport to reach their community. They anticipate that many girls would be pregnant after school closures as a result.

Clearly, already limited access to sexual and reproductive health services and commodities has become even more problematic for rural women because of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, sexual and reproductive health services were more accessible in cities than in rural areas throughout the world. For those who are only able to access these commodities through the work of non-government organizations, the situation could not be more drastic. We find this especially disconcerting after learning about reports of maternal health care centres being converted to COVID-19 centres. Rural women who are already dealing with unintended pregnancies will eventually find another hurdle in seeking maternal health care. They will likely deliver at home or along the way to a health facility due to lockdown restrictions, as we have learned has been the experience of many in rural settings.

Another threat to rural women's health and lives is also increased levels of gender-based violence as result of tensions associated with stay-at-home measures, economic closures and food scarcity. Intersecting factors, such as age, socio-economic status, disability and ethnicity, are likely to increase the risk of gender-based violence during the COVID-19 emergency. Emerging data shows decreases in the reporting of instances of gender-based violence, but as past experience can validate, this only indicates significant barriers for women to report, not fewer instances of violence.

When women and girls are able to fully enjoy their sexual and reproductive health and rights, it contributes to the fulfilment of their rights to health, privacy, and information and also positively impacts their families and communities. It is thus imperative to respect, protect, and fulfil the sexual and reproductive rights of women in all their diversities, including rural women, indigenous women, internally displaced persons, migrant women, sex workers, victims of sexual assault and human trafficking, women identifying as LGBT, indigenous women, young women and girls, among others.

Therefore, WGNRR recommends the inclusion of the following in the conclusions of the fifty-fourth session of the Commission on Population and Development:

1. Uphold and accelerate the implementation of all sexual and reproductive health and rights-related commitments under the 2030 Agenda. Expand the provision of all forms of contraception, safe and legal abortion and post-abortion care to rural communities. Ensure these services are accessible, affordable, confidential, and high-quality for all women regardless of nationality, ethnicity, age, religion or economic status, among other identity markers. Take into account the different realities and barriers rural women, including indigenous women, face in accessing sexual and reproductive health and rights.
2. Ensure prevention, response, protection and accountability mechanisms to address gender-based violence that is survivor-centered. Raise awareness on existing and potential risks for rural women, including indigenous women, taking into account their realities, and capacitate local partners and instruments to address such risks. Involve men in the promotion of anti-gender-based violence measures. Recognize access to livelihood support as mitigation of risk for gender-based violence and ensure participation of the community in the design of mitigation strategies and livelihood rehabilitation programs.
3. Recognize rural women as cornerstones of food security and active agents in sustainable development, entitled to their full human rights, including access to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Provide adequate care infrastructure in rural communities and expand social protections for rural women. Provide access to productive resources, technologies, financial assets and markets, and eliminate barriers to land ownership.

4. Above all, prioritize women's universal human rights, especially their sexual and reproductive health and rights, as vital towards strengthening our production systems, boosting food security and ensuring sustainable and equitable development for all. Ultimately, past neglect towards rural development must be structurally addressed through just national and global socio-economic policies that enhance sustainable development, and see rural communities as human beings entitled to full rights, ranging from land ownership to bodily autonomy, and not merely workers along local and global supply chains.
