



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
8 December 2020

Original: English

---

### Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fifth session

15–26 March 2021

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 Marie Stopes International, 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.

---

\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Marie Stopes International is a global organisation and one of the world's largest providers and advocates for sexual and reproductive health and rights, providing client-centred contraception, safe abortion, and post-abortion care services in 37 countries. Globally, the services that we provided in 2019 resulted in an estimated:

- 14 million unintended pregnancies prevented
- 6.5 million unsafe abortions averted
- 34,600 maternal deaths averted

By the end of 2019, there were 32 million people using contraception provided by Marie Stopes International.

### **Sexual and reproductive health and rights and the elimination of violence against women**

Sexual and gender-based violence is a serious and under reported public health issue. It inflicts great harm on women, girls, men and boys. Global estimates show that 1 in 3 or 35 per cent of women worldwide report experiencing some form of physical or sexual violence (WHO, 2017).

We know that during a crisis, the risk of sexual and gender-based violence and the need for sexual and reproductive healthcare increases. This happened during the Ebola crisis in West Africa and is happening now during the COVID-19 pandemic (John N et al., 2020). Marie Stopes International's United Kingdom programme for example, has seen a 33 per cent increase in domestic violence reports to our safeguarding team (MSUK, 2020). Our recent Ipsos MORI survey found that 1 in 10 women surveyed in India reported needing domestic abuse services during the pandemic and a fifth of respondents seeking an abortion service reported not being able to attend a face to face appointment for fear of leaving their home due to domestic abuse.

Despite the increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence during crises, efforts to prevent and respond to this continue to be underfunded and under prioritised. Governments and donors must ensure that preparedness and response plans include essential services to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence and that these are adequately funded. Health providers have a key role to play, as they are often the first or only person that a survivor may disclose to. As per World Health Organization guidelines, they should receive training on the risks and health consequences of sexual and gender-based violence and be supported to provide stigma-free first line support and medical treatment for women, girls, and other individuals. Appropriate referrals and stigma-free access to comprehensive care (including emergency contraception and safe abortion services) must be available to survivors of violence.

Violence against women and girls is a barrier to achieving gender equality. If we are to achieve the commitments made in the Beijing Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals and achieve gender equality, it is crucial that both sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response activities are prioritised and funded, especially in crisis situations.

### **Sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's empowerment and sustainable development**

Improving access to rights based sexual and reproductive health services contributes to women's empowerment. Supporting women to take control of their reproductive rights and choices can address negative gender norms, combat discrimination against women and girls, and contribute to improved agency and

empowerment – this is particularly true for women who have traditionally faced barriers in accessing health services such as young women, or women living with HIV. It can also support women, their families and their communities to strengthen resilience to the increasing shocks and stressors that they will face as a result of climate change and to achieve sustainable development.

With over 40 years' experience delivering life-changing healthcare, we know how transformative access to sexual and reproductive health and rights can be for women and girls. If every woman and girl who wants to avoid a pregnancy had access to contraception, we could prevent an additional 76 million unintended pregnancies, 26 million unsafe abortions and 70,000 maternal deaths each year (Sully EA et al, 2020). High-quality reproductive healthcare is undeniably linked to good health and wellbeing for women and girls across the planet.

But access to sexual and reproductive health and rights goes beyond improving women and girls' health. It is linked to quality education as girls are able to stay in school longer and supports women's economic empowerment (IPPF, 2015). When women have control over when they have children and how many to have, they are better able to support their families, improving their families' health and well-being and helping them break out of the cycle of poverty. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has confirmed that improving basic public health measures, securing essential health care, increasing capacity for disaster preparedness and response, and alleviating poverty are the most effective measures to reduce vulnerability in the short term (Smith KR et al., 2014).

The role that sexual and reproductive health and rights can play in improving gender equality and creating opportunities for women and girls to pursue their ambitions can also lead to increased participation and decision-making power for women and girls. When women and girls are involved in disaster risk reduction planning and implementation, these programmes are more effective (UNDP, 2016). Women's meaningful participation in developing community and national-level strategies for sustainable development, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation will make these strategies more effective and gender equitable.

Marie Stopes International believes that the impact of sexual and reproductive health and rights on health, well-being, education, poverty and gender inequality can strengthen communities' resilience to climate change and other shocks – allowing them to continue to progress in truly sustainable development.

### **Recommendations**

Governments, humanitarian agencies, and donors must ensure that humanitarian preparedness and response plans prioritise essential services to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, including stigma-free comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care, and that these plans are fully funded.

States must remove policy barriers to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care for all, in particular, they must take steps to ensure commodity security for sexual and reproductive health supplies and remove barriers to safe abortion services.

Sexual and reproductive health services must be integrated into national-planning and programmes aimed at resilience-strengthening, disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and sustainable development, and focus on increasing meaningful participation of women and girls.

Development assistance, humanitarian aid, and climate financing must prioritise and fund sexual and reproductive health and rights information, services and commodities to ensure all women can benefit from and participate in resilience-strengthening and sustainable development activities.