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entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by International Women’s Health Coalition, 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

Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in political, economic, and public life is essential to achieving gender equality, which in turn cannot be achieved without ending the widespread discrimination, violence, and economic and structural barriers that women and girls face. In 2020, the world celebrated twenty-five years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, with its commitments to transform laws, policies and norms related to women's and girls' human rights, bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive health, peace, media, the environment, power, economy, education and much more. In 2020, the world also celebrated five years of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its goal on gender equality and with women's rights woven throughout the seventeen goals. The celebrations were tempered by the grave consequences of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which are setting back the already uneven progress on gender equality.

Public participation by women and girls is most visible in terms of formal, elected office, yet it also encompasses participation in formal organizations and events as well as in informal movements, meetings and actions. Levels of public participation and decision-making among women and girls are both a reflection of and a driver of gender equality.

The interplay of sexual and reproductive health and rights, universal health coverage, women's movements and COVID-19 are fundamental to further progress in public participation and gender equality. Governments must take urgent action to promote, protect and fulfil women's and girls' human rights in all aspects of their lives across the life course, engaging and learning from women's movements, in particular in the ongoing chaos of the global pandemic. They must take action that supports transformation, access and rights, and gives voice to people and communities.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Fulfilment of sexual and reproductive rights and access to sexual and reproductive health services is a pre-requisite to full and effective participation and decision-making in public life. It affords all women, girls and gender non-conforming people the ability to choose if and when they marry, have sexual relationships, have children; as well as opportunities to attend school, participate in the economy and community, live free from sexual and gender-based violence and access wide-ranging support services.

Yet, many women, girls and gender non-conforming people live in countries or communities without that guarantee, effectively denying them agency and autonomy over their bodies and their lives. Women and girls, especially those experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of violence, discrimination, stigmatization, exclusion and inequalities, are subjected to sterilization without consent and are denied access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception and abortion, as a result of restrictive laws and policies, or as a result of discriminatory norms and practices.

The impacts on adolescent girls are compounded by lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education that is evidence-based and addresses power dynamics within relationships, which impedes their ability to make informed decisions about their sexuality and relationships. Adolescent girls face violations of their rights in terms of harmful practices such as child, early and force marriage and female genital mutilation. The health consequences include sexually transmitted infections, unsafe abortion, higher maternal mortality and obstetric fistula.

Fulfilling sexual and reproductive health and rights encompasses preventing and reducing sexual and gender-based violence before it is perpetrated, in public and private, political and non-political spaces. It includes a focus on women human rights defenders who are standing up to patriarchal culture to address unequal power relations.

Failure to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights and bodily autonomy severely limits opportunities for effective participation in public life and decision-making for women and girls.

COVID-19

COVID-19 threatens serious setbacks to gender equality, including to public participation and decision-making and to addressing gender-based violence. COVID-19 has exposed ineffective social, health and economic systems, as well as fractures in global cooperation, with devastating consequences for all women and girls, especially the most marginalized people and communities. COVID-19 has demonstrated the limitations of our systems to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly in the face of government declarations of abortion as “nonessential” and increased incidences of sexual and gender-based violence and child, early and forced marriages.

COVID-19 also highlights the urgent need to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid domestic and care work, and promote equitable distribution of responsibilities in the household. The gender division of care is stark; worldwide, seventy-five percent is provided by women. With school closures as a result of COVID-19, girls home from school are taking on increased domestic and care burdens, caring for other children, the elderly, the ill or taking on broader household responsibilities. Evidence shows girls who leave school are unlikely to return to finish their educations, and therefore will have less access to decision-making spheres over the course of their lives.

Universal Health Coverage and Self-Care

Access to health care is crucial for productive, inclusive and just societies and active public participation and decision-making. Implementing gender-responsive universal health coverage (UHC) that includes financial risk protection, universal access to quality services and universal access to medicines and vaccines as part of public health systems, is fundamental, and it requires investment in available, accessible, acceptable and quality public health services.

Recognizing the impacts of the global pandemic on access to services, though lock-downs and reduced mobility, as well as the existing inequities in access and discrimination faced by adolescent girls, migrants, minorities, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) people, there is an immense opportunity to improve self-care options. Policymakers can develop initiatives that give women and girls more power over their immediate needs and improve access to critical services in the long term. These interventions support sexual and reproductive health and rights: oral contraceptives over the counter; self-managed abortion; and alternative maternal care (telemedicine, midwives, birthing centers).

Self-care can address issues of waiting times, privacy violations, stress, over-medicalization and can support improved health awareness and management, improving overall health and strengthening health systems. It can free up time that supports access to public participation for women and girls.

Feminist and Women's Movements

Feminist and women's organizations and movements exemplify and support increased women and girls' participation in public life. Evidence shows that strong, autonomous women's organizations and movements are the key to government accountability and action on women's rights. Multiple studies have confirmed that women's movements drive lasting policy change. These policies and legislation on women's rights are creating more space for public participation, but the progress is uneven as civic space is closing in many places where conservative and authoritarian governments are in power. Globally, women's and feminist groups are chronically underfunded to do this transformative work. Additionally, violence against women in public life, from politicians to human rights defenders, remains a serious problem.

To address the challenges above and support effective and meaningful public participation and decision-making for all women and girls, the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) calls on governments to:

Ensure online and offline safety and support services, including hotlines, counseling, housing and legal and financial assistance that address multiple and intersecting forms of violence and discrimination are available to all, and that they remain uninterrupted during pandemics or other emergencies.

Eliminate laws, policies and practices that punish, stigmatize or criminalize bodies, sexuality and pleasure for women, girls, non-binary, gender non-conforming and trans people.

Ensure that Universal Health Coverage includes sexual and reproductive health care services – including access to modern contraceptives, safe abortion, maternal health care, fertility management, among others – as a core component of comprehensive essential health care services.

All of these should be classified as essential services during emergencies and should be available as ongoing self-care where possible.

Redistribute care work, including by: inclusively designing social protection systems and ensuring universal access for unemployed or underemployed, including women of all ages, migrants and persons with disabilities; incorporating labor policies including parental leave, sick leave, child care, old age pensions; providing public services such as child and elder care; and implementing a universal basic income.

Invest in women's organizations and movements, protect civic space and their right to organize, as well as shifting funding and investments from military expenditures and extractive industries to the care economy, social protection and direct support to people.

Strengthen mechanisms to ensure access to justice for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, women human rights defenders and survivors of other human rights abuses.
