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peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by International Planned Parenthood Federation, 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

Violence against Women in Public Life and Politics

Twenty-five years ago, the international community adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action addressing 12 critical areas, from education and health to violence against women, women in power and their representation in decision-making processes. However, real progress falls short of the expectations created in 1995. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Agenda, in particular target 5.5, “Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” brought new prospects and commitment to work in this area and bring the necessary change.

25 years after Beijing and 5 years after the 2030 Agenda, women’s and girls’ full and effective participation and decision-making processes in public life remains woefully distant from the gender balance towards which these agendas aspire. Currently women make up just 6.6 per cent heads of state, 6.2 per cent heads of government, and 20.5 per cent speakers of parliament globally. This stark underrepresentation of women in politics and public life in the institutions across all States is caused and exacerbated by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, harmful stereotypes and gender-based violence.

Violence against women and girls is a structural issue embedded in social systems and institutions, which are based on and reinforce gender inequality and harmful, patriarchal gender stereotypes and gendered social norms, resulting in a pandemic which affects the physical, psychological, sexual, and economic life of women and girls. What is even more disturbing is that the ethics, values, morals, and culture of society promote, perpetuate, normalize and accept impunity for a range of forms of violence against women across their life cycle. It is inconceivable that in this day and age, one in three women still experience some form of violence in their lifetime. Violence against women in public life and decision-making spaces consists of any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately.

Such violence specifically targets women and girls because of their gender in order to discourage them as a whole from being politically active and exercising their human rights; to influence, restrict or prevent the political participation of individual women and women as a group; and to preserve traditional gender roles and stereotypes and maintain structural and gender-based inequalities. This has long-term repercussions: violence targeting women who hold public office and political decision-making positions has a chilling impact on the political ambition of young women, with intergenerational consequences for the full realization of their political rights.

Violence often takes gender-based forms, such as misogynistic and sexist verbal attacks, threats, sexual harassment, and acts of sexual or gender-based violence, including femicide, much of it increasingly online. A 2015 report by U.N. Women and the U.N. Broadband Commission estimates that 73 per cent of women have endured cyber violence, and that women are 27 times more likely as men to be harassed online. The sheer volume of online violence against women and girls has severe social and economic implications: threats of rape, death, and stalking take an extreme toll on women’s and girls’ mental health, take-up time and financial resources including legal fees, online protection services, and missed wages, and can have a profoundly chilling effect on free speech and advocacy.

In every region of the world, there are emblematic cases attesting to the endemic and lasting spread of gender-based violence targeting human rights defenders and activists. Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head in 2012 in Pakistan by the Taliban for speaking up for girls' right to education. Jo Cox, a Member of parliament in the United Kingdom, was assassinated in 2016, the same year Berta Cáceres, an indigenous, environmental human rights defender from Honduras, was murdered. Marielle Franco, an Afro-Brazilian, feminist human rights defender and openly gay politician, was murdered in 2018. Just recently, in October 2020, a group of rightwing militia members were arrested for plotting to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, Governor of the state of Michigan in the US. Even at the Commission on the Status of Women in 2018, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Kenya and facilitator of Agreed Conclusions was the victim of bullying, harassments and threats from Citizen Go.

Despite the increased violence they face, the transformative power of women's leadership, when women are meaningfully engaged in decision-making at highest levels, has a powerful, positive impact. An emblematic example of this are the successes of Finland, Germany, New Zealand, and Taiwan, all with female leaders, who took early action on COVID-19 and saw fewer national deaths than their neighbors. These examples or any others highlight the need to break down barriers (including violence) that inhibit women's exercise of leadership.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Exacerbates Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to deepen economic and social inequities, coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence against women and girls is increasing exponentially. This "horrifying global surge in domestic violence" prompted António Guterres, United Nations Secretary General, to make an appeal to for "peace at home – and in homes – around the world," urging governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women and girls a key part of their national response plans to COVID-19.

UN-Women has called online and information communication technology (ICT)-facilitated violence against women and girls a "shadow pandemic" during the COVID-19 pandemic. As more women and girls turn to digital platforms during the pandemic for connection, entertainment, and information, these technologies have also become a weapon against them, including physical threats, sexual harassment, sex trolling, sextortion, online pornography, zoom-bombing among others.

Pre-Covid, many women and girls already lacked access to the most basic free essential services for their safety, protection and recovery, such as emergency helplines, police and justice sector response, sexual and reproductive health care (SRH), safe accommodation, shelter and psycho-social counselling – and where these services existed, they have been typically underfunded, understaffed, uncoordinated or not of sufficient quality. During the current pandemic, reports from all regions of the world show a significant rise in the number women calling helplines and reporting abuse, but the women and girls experiencing this violence face significant additional barriers to necessary services as a result of the pandemic. Access to critical sexual and reproductive health services, including for women who have experienced violence, have become more limited, as have services like crisis centres, helplines, shelters, and safe accommodation, often operated by civil society and women's organizations on the frontline of community response, due to social distancing, worker safety measures, travel restrictions, and lock-down measures.

Despite major challenges, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) Member Associations have worked diligently to ensure access to essential sexual and reproductive health, rights and services during this time. According to IPPF surveys conducted in March and May 2020, 27 IPPF Member Associations (MA) are currently

part of a Government-led national taskforce to co-ordinate the COVID-19 response. As part of these Government taskforces, particularly across Africa, IPPF MAs are playing a critical role to support the existing health systems in responding to the crisis through contributions to the overall public health response and ensuring prioritization of sexual and reproductive health within national responses. Member Associations are providing COVID-19 testing in Colombia and Cameroon, case management of COVID-19 patients in Comoros and Namibia, and support for medical workers treating COVID-19 patients in Kyrgyzstan and Mozambique, as well as contributing to multi-sectoral coordination in Tuvalu, Tonga and Vanuatu. In Afghanistan, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Nepal, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Pakistan, IPPF MAs support national taskforces to the development and delivery of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights service delivery guidelines, and ensuring access to and provision of services to vulnerable populations in Macedonia and Maldives.

IPPF Member Associations are responding to increased cases of gender-based violence, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo where the MA is part of the national mechanism led by OCHA on preventing and responding to GBV through the Protection and Health Clusters, and in Namibia, where the MA is part of the UNFPA Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) as implementing partner responding to GBV. While many MAs have been able to reopen closed service points during this time, challenges to secure Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplies, fear and restrictions on travel continue to pose challenges in delivery of SRH services. Upstream disruptions in the SRH supply chain, especially for contraceptives in March and April 2020, compounded by COVID19 transmission dynamics is beginning to impact on ground availability, with 22 MAs across Africa and Europe now reporting an SRH commodity shortage.

Recommendations

In order to ensure women's and girls' full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, IPPF calls on governments to:

Ensure women and girls, and their communities are equally and meaningfully engaged in all political and decision-making processes, including in health emergencies, conflict and post conflict situations, and measures to eliminate gender-based discrimination and violence in all public and political spaces, both online and offline.

Respect, protect and fulfill their human rights obligations to gender equality and to a life free of violence for all, including women, girls and adolescents engaged in political activity and decision-making spaces. This includes issuing comprehensive laws to address SGBV in both political spaces and informal sectors, including the involvement of education, media, social services, health justice and finance. In addition to laws, government are responsible for ending impunity of perpetrators of SGBV, as well as to create adequate sectoral regulation and protocols, agile and effective intersectoral coordination mechanism and to designate an adequate budget to implement those policies.

Prioritize reaching the most vulnerable populations, implementing multi-sectoral policies for SGBV prevention, mitigation and response at all levels of government, to facilitate access to services to those living in remote locations, to ensure human rights protection and respect with no discrimination (i.e. adolescent girls, sex workers, undocumented migrants, gender-non conforming, indigenous, disabled people, among others).

Strengthen adolescent girls' and young women's capacity to engage in public and spaces and ensure that those most impacted by SGBV are meaningfully included in the decision-making process of all policies, programmes and activities to advance the right to a world free of SGBV.

Enhance efforts to prevent SGBV, in particular with young people through Comprehensive Sexuality Education. Young people, including adolescents, have the right to have access to the information and education they need to have healthy, equal, free and happy lives.

Increase funding for SGBV prevention, mitigation and response, and adapt funding mechanisms to different contexts and circumstances. Agile, rapid mechanisms are needed to advocate to resist conservative backlashes to hard-won rights and to push for critical progress. Multi-level and multi-year support is needed for effective interventions on SGBV.

Strengthen the implementation by governments, CSOs and community-based groups of the Joint program of Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence.

Ensure support, access and connection with the broad range of civil society actors and social movements – both in humanitarian and in stable contexts – that lead the public demand for ending SGBV. Build strong partnerships with women-led organizations, local coalitions that fight against SGBV, and independent human rights commissions that seek accountability and enforcement of human rights redress mechanisms at national level.
