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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”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

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 of 25 July 1996.

* E/CN.6/2007/1.



Statement

Gender-Based Violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights

1. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) welcomes the theme of the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women – “the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”. Every girl and young woman irrespective of their race, religion, marital status, language, ethnicity, culture, disability or socioeconomic class or because they are indigenous people, migrants, including women migrant workers, displaced women or refugees has the right to equality, and to be free from all forms of discrimination including in their sexual and reproductive health and well being.
2. IPPF notes with increased concern the lack of global focus on the direct linkages between the inability of women and girls to negotiate and make decisions regarding their sexual lives, and their increased vulnerability to gender-based violence resulting in sexual and reproductive ill-health, unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortion, stigma and discrimination, etc.

“The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences” FWCW Platform for Action, 1995.

3. IPPF is the strongest voice safeguarding sexual and reproductive health and rights for people everywhere. We believe that the right to sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing is an essential component for the overall social and economic development of nations. This is particularly important when one considers that sexual and reproductive ill-health accounts for nearly one-fifth of the total global burden of disease.ⁱ IPPF’s work has demonstrated how lives can be transformed if girls, boys and women are empowered to act on their reproductive freedoms – a transformation for themselves, their families, their communities and the world.
4. It is over ten years since the landmark international conferences in Cairo and Beijing took place which affirmed universal access to sexual and reproductive health. The Beijing Platform for Action also recognizes the important role of sexuality and women’s capacity to control and make decisions as critical to their well being.
5. Both the Beijing agenda and the vision and commitments enshrined in the International Conference on Population and Development as well as both the Beijing and the Cairo Plus Five UN reviews emphasize that women must be at the very heart of international development. Both are committed to a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to addressing the critical issues facing women today. Both political platforms and agendas are mutually reinforcing in terms of the means, methods and outcomes of empowering women and ensuring that girls and women everywhere have the right to decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

6. While there have been some advances in many parts of the world towards improving access to reproductive health technologies and services, there has been much less progress and too little attention focused on realizing the rights of women and girls to make key decisions regarding their sexual lives. The World Health Organization has identified unsafe sex as the second most important risk factor leading to disability or death in the poorest countries of the world. Indeed gender violence which is reported by between one-in-two and one-in-six women is a root cause of many sexual and reproductive health problemsⁱⁱ including: increased vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections, HIV and AIDS, unplanned pregnancy, abortion and reproductive cancers.
7. HIV and AIDS is globally recognized as an exceptional pandemic, however the role of gender based violence in increasing the vulnerability of girls and young women to HIV and AIDS is not sufficiently recognized. Today there are nearly 40 million people living with HIV: while women form nearly 50 per cent of this figure, over 60 per cent of all new infections are among young women aged 15-24 years. In some countries young women are six times more likely to be infected than males. This clearly reflects a catastrophic failure by the international community to address gender inequalities including violence that places young girls and women at greater risk of HIV infection.
8. Gender-based violence is one of the greatest forms of discrimination against women and is a major public health concern in its own right. The Report of the Secretary General on “In-depth study on all forms of violence against women” notes four forms of violence that also adversely affect girls and young women. They include violence against women within the family, such as partner violence, harmful traditional practices (i.e. female genital mutilation, child marriage and prenatal sex selection) violence against women in the wider community, particularly sexual violence, sexual harassment and trafficking. Other related forms of violence include those perpetrated or condoned by the state, and violence against women in armed conflict.ⁱⁱⁱ The World Health Organization study on violence against women notes the alarming rates of forced sex in many countries and draws attention to the difficulty women face in protecting themselves against HIV infection.^{iv}
9. This UN gathering is a unique political opportunity for the global community to reaffirm the commitments enshrined in the Beijing Platform for Action. It is also an opportunity to address the gap between the rhetoric of the numerous commitments made to eradicate gender based violence by the international community and the reality facing women and girls around the world on a daily basis. It also presents an opportunity for Member State governments to reaffirm the right of women and girls to exercise their fundamental right to sexual and reproductive health and rights without fear or coercion.
10. As was noted by the Commission on the Status of Women Report on the forty-fifth session (6-16 March and 9-11 May 2001), “many women face additional barriers to the enjoyment of their human rights because of such factors as their race, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability or socioeconomic class or because they are indigenous people, migrants, including women migrant workers, displaced women or refugees. Also the outcome documents of the special

session of the General Assembly indicate that in situations of armed conflict and foreign occupation, human rights of women have been extensively violated”.

11. The elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, including those such as rape, trafficking and harmful traditional practices requires urgent action from governments. The duty to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of girls and women places an obligation on all States to ensure the introduction of appropriate legislative, judicial, administrative, budgetary, economic and other related programmes and services to enable them to effectively exercise these rights.

Recommendations

1. We welcome the focus on the need to end discrimination against girls and women by the fifty-first session of the CSW. We urge the international community to both reaffirm and fully recognize the pivotal role played by women in solving the world's most pressing problems. We acknowledge that realizing the rights of girls and women means fulfilling all promises and commitments that have been made over the past decade. And if promises by the international community are to be treated seriously by future generations, then all such promises and commitments need to be kept by the governments of today.
2. IPPF is willing to play its role. To achieve this goal the appropriate political will, resources and environment are required to enable us all to increase efforts to collectively empower girls and women to have the ability and opportunities to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights.
3. If the Beijing goals are to be met – alongside the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Millennium Development Goals - then political and programmatic efforts must be scaled up at all levels. Adequate resources will also need to be found and allocated. In addition, we must work together to devise new approaches to closing the gender gap in areas such as health, education and human rights – including sexual and reproductive rights.
4. With the new target noted by the General Assembly for ‘universal access to reproductive health by 2015’ in the Millennium Development Goals, we urge governments, the United Nations entities and relevant bodies to ensure that the necessary measures are put in place to protect girls and young women from all forms of discrimination and violence and a reduction in the increasingly high number of women, especially young women, who are infected by HIV.
5. IPPF urges that more commitment be made by the international community to protect the wellbeing of girls and women and that global attention be focused on these key linkages. The message from activists around the world is clear: “In the face of brutality and staggering death rates, these linked crises require immediate and dramatic attention - from creating or strengthening policy, to changing attitudes and challenging prejudices”.^v

6. Finally IPPF urges governments to enforce legislation and expand existing legislation to fully protect the rights of all girls and women including their rights to sexual and reproductive health, to be free from all forms of gender-based violence, and for governments to design programmes that are specifically tailored to the needs of girls and women.

ⁱ FACT Sheet 31: How Access to Sexual & Reproductive Health Services is Key to the MDGs, Washington, 2005.

ⁱⁱ Glasier, A et al, 2006 “Sexual and reproductive health: a matter of life and death” in the Lancet: Sexual and Reproductive Health, October 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ UN General Assembly: 2006, In-depth study on all forms of violence against women: Report of the Secretary General: sixty-first session.

^{iv} World Health Organisation, 2005, WHO multi-country study on women’s health and domestic violence against women: summary report of initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women’s responses. Geneva, World.

^v Rothschild, C., Reilly, A. and Nordstrom, A., 2006, “Strengthening resistance: confronting violence against women and HIV/AIDS”, Centre for Women’s Global Leadership.
