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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women
and to the special session of the General Assembly 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.



Statement

Sexual and reproductive rights: gaps and challenges 20 years after adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

The International Women's Health Coalition welcomes the attention paid by the Commission on the Status of Women to the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and appreciates the opportunity to participate in ongoing efforts to review progress on its implementation and to reflect on challenges still standing in the way of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Over the past 20 years, we have made enormous strides towards ensuring the protection of the rights of women and girls. However, the international community continues to fall short of fully guaranteeing their sexual and reproductive health and rights. This issue must be a priority for the Commission on the Status of Women, as well as for ongoing discussions about the development agenda.

Sexual rights

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognized that gender equality would not be possible unless States guaranteed women's human rights, including the 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. There is a growing international consensus that sexual rights must be explicitly acknowledged as part of the human rights framework.

Sexual rights include the right of individuals to achieve the highest attainable standard of sexual health; to have control over and decide freely on matters related to their sexuality and reproduction; and to obtain all necessary services, education and information to enable them to do so, without fear of violence, coercion or discrimination, including on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The terms "sexual and reproductive health and rights" and "sexual rights" have been agreed upon by Governments in multiple regions of the world. They also appear in the outcome documents of the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014 for Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia and the Pacific.

Yet the area of sexual rights it is one in which little progress has been made. Many of the human rights violations that women and girls face on a daily basis result from attempts by others to control women's and girls' bodies and sexuality, including child, early and forced marriage, rape and other forms of sexual violence and limitations on their mobility, dress, education, employment and participation in public life. Women's inability to control their sexuality limits their capacity to negotiate sexual relationships, increases their risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, contributes to unwanted pregnancy and has other consequences for their sexual and reproductive health. Guaranteeing the sexual rights of women and girls is fundamental for their empowerment.

Access to safe and legal abortion

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action urges all Governments to prevent and address the health consequences of unsafe abortion and ensure that, in

circumstances in which abortion is not against the law, abortion is safe. It further states that in all cases, women should have access to quality services for the management of complications arising from abortion. Member States also agreed to consider reviewing laws containing punitive measures against women who have undergone illegal abortions.

Unsafe abortion remains, however, a major cause of maternal mortality and morbidity 20 years after the adoption of the Platform for Action. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 21.6 million women worldwide experience an unsafe abortion each year, including 18.5 million in developing countries. According to WHO, 47,000 women die each year from complications resulting from unsafe abortion, accounting for close to 13 per cent of all maternal deaths.

Further, the evidence is now clear that when abortion is criminalized or restricted, it does not decrease the number of abortions. It merely increases the likelihood that those abortions will be unsafe.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action listed the girl child as one of 12 priority areas 20 years ago. However, adolescent girls remain largely neglected. The Millennium Development Goals do not substantively address their rights and needs, and adolescent girls remain largely absent from discussions around the post-2015 development agenda.

Adolescents and young people comprise a quarter of the global population: 1.8 billion people with complex needs and challenges. Over 15 million girls between 15 and 19 years of age give birth each year; young people between 15 and 24 years of age account for approximately 41 per cent of new HIV infections worldwide; and as many as 3.2 million adolescent girls between 15 and 19 years of age undergo unsafe abortions each year in developing countries.

Child, early and forced marriage is a fundamental violation of the human rights of girls, yet the practice remains prevalent around the world. According to the United Nations, 37,000 girls under 18 years of age are married each day. One in three girls in the developing world is married before the age of 18 years. If present trends continue, more than 140 million girls will be married before the age of 18 years in the next decade. Child marriage effectively ends a girl's childhood, curtails her education, minimizes her economic opportunities, increases her risk of experiencing domestic violence and puts her at risk for early, frequent and high-risk pregnancies. Not only are girls under the age of 15 years five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s, but the children of child brides are 60 per cent more likely to die in the first year of life than those born to older mothers.

While there has been growing attention to education and employment for young people, it is critical that their other needs, including their sexual and reproductive health needs, are not neglected. There is clear evidence that comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services not only have critical health benefits (the delay or avoidance of unwanted sexual encounters, the prevention of unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion and protection against sexually transmitted infections, including HIV) but also vital cultural and social impacts, including transforming gender norms, empowering girls to understand and assert their rights and increasing the ability of

girls to stay in school. Comprehensive sexuality education, coupled with youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, allows young people to make responsible decisions about their health and sexuality.

Key recommendations for the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women

(a) Promote and protect the sexual and reproductive rights of all people, including the right of women, men and young people to have control over and make decisions freely and responsibly about all matters related to their sexuality, free from coercion, discrimination and violence;

(b) Eliminate punitive laws, including those that criminalize sex work, same-sex sexual conduct, abortion, personal conduct during pregnancy, HIV exposure and transmission, consensual adult sexual conduct outside of marriage, adolescent sexuality and the provision of sexual and reproductive health services and information;

(c) End discrimination and violence carried out on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity;

(d) Guarantee the right of women to safe, legal abortion services; reform laws that criminalize abortion and that punish women for having had abortions; liberalize restrictive abortion laws; and train and equip health-care providers to ensure that abortions are safe;

(e) Guarantee the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls by ensuring universal access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and information, as well as comprehensive sexuality education, that address harmful gender norms and violence against women and provide skills-building for healthy living, relationships and social participation on the basis of gender equality and respect for human rights;

(f) End child, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and other harmful practices.
