



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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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”**

### **Statement submitted by Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

There have been many significant landmarks in promoting the empowerment of women since the founding of the United Nations. The 2030 Development Agenda presents unique challenges and opportunities to continue the advancement of equality and the empowerment of women through sound national and international policy.

This is not only an imperative dictated by the United Nations' commitment to respecting fundamental human rights, the inherent dignity and worth of the human person, and the equal rights of men and women, as the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights authoritatively asserts. It is necessary for societies to flourish.

As United Nations Member States increasingly recognize, the empowerment of women is necessary for States to achieve social and economic development that is environmentally friendly, and that can be described as truly holistic and inclusive. Legal changes and sound policy development at the national level as well as international assistance and cooperation are essential to achieve this goal.

But legal changes, new policies, and partnerships must cater to the needs of women as they themselves express them in order to truly empower them. An essential element of empowering women must be to listen to women themselves express their needs, desires, hopes, and dreams.

This constitutes a great challenge especially in places where women are unable to make well-informed decisions because of lack of education, which is quite possibly the single biggest factor that can empower women. It is estimated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization that up to 500 million women in the world are illiterate.

These women are the poorest of the poor. Their lack of education compounds the inequalities inherent in the social and economic structures in which they live and interact. Indeed, helping families and States to provide girls with adequate education to empower them, as well as women of all ages, must remain the highest priority in the new agenda for development.

One greatly overlooked challenge is also a top-down version of international cooperation that disregards the needs and desires of women as they themselves perceive them and express them in their concrete living circumstances, their culture, religion and tradition. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals will require not only the specific goals and targets related to the empowerment of women, it will also require that women are empowered to fulfil their potential within diverse societies and communities around the world, not in spite of them.

Often, sophisticated and well-funded international organizations, government aid agencies, and non-governmental organizations purport to represent the needs and desires of women, but in reality are simply projecting alien needs and desires on entire populations of women.

This partnership model, perhaps well intentioned, is defended by referring to the lack of education and consequent lack of informed decision-making ability of poor women. But it cannot ultimately empower women because it does not allow women to reach their full potential. Instead, such programmes project onto women the aspirations and ideals of experts and specialists who comfortably dwell in high castles

of privilege and opulence far removed from the everyday lives of women who live in poverty and misery.

This kind of partnership cannot be sustainable in the long term because it is predicated on subjugating women to a new form of tyranny. It purports to help women achieve their desires, then asserts that because of their poverty and lack of education, they desire the wrong things. It devalues the kinds of work that are not measured in dollars. It frames child care, elder care, and domestic work as more valuable if it involves getting paid to care for someone else's children, parents, or home. Above all, it fails to honour the inherent dignity and worth of the human person, most especially their freedom and autonomy, as well as their right to democratically exercise their sovereignty. Most worryingly it makes women dependent on the help of those who want to colonize their hearts and minds.

In this regard we are very concerned about the prospects for the empowerment of women in the 2030 development agenda.

Because of the specific mission of our organization we are especially concerned that the new sustainable development goals appear to have taken a step back from the Millennium Development Goals' strong commitment to improving maternal health, in favour of a broad approach to reproductive health that is more intent on changing sensitive social norms that are best left to national legislation.

There is much ado in the new agenda about sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, but the phrase "maternal health" which should be a primary focus for population policies in the new development agenda, has been used with parsimony.

This is a symptom of the programmatic focus on fertility reduction from donor countries that ultimately fund United Nations population policies. They lavishly fund contraceptives of all kinds in the developing world, while funding for interventions to make pregnancy and childbirth safe for mothers and their children, has been inadequate.

Much remains to be done to make pregnancy and childbirth safer for all women. Yet, 40 per cent of all United Nations Population Fund resources and funding is spent on family planning and contraception, and even more is invested in contraception through other policies with contraceptive components. Contraception is now even touted as a part of maternal health programmes.

According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation maternal deaths have only fallen 22 per cent since 1990, and not 50 per cent as some have claimed, and 300,000 maternal deaths occur each year, most of them being preventable. We have let pregnant mothers down, all the while sending them the message to avoid pregnancy in the first place.

There are now fewer proposed indicators for maternal health in the Sustainable Development Goals than there were in the Millennium Development Goals. This is a step backwards that will prove costly for mothers and children. By failing to adequately fund maternal health poor women are receiving the message that they are not allowed to have the children they want.

Yet the Guttmacher Institute reports that less than 2 per cent of married women in Africa self-report lack of access to contraception. Most women who do not use contraception do so because of adverse side effects, or other personal reasons. Yet,

family planning groups clamour for more money from governments and their development partners for a supposed “unmet need” for family planning for 220 million women in the world, wrongly equating it with lack of access. Meanwhile mothers are dying because of complications from pregnancy and childbirth.

Spending vast sums of money to meet a purported “need” with no corresponding demand may result in population policies that are at best wasteful and at worst coercive.

Investments in contraceptives are driven by concern over high fertility and the much-touted demographic dividend theory. But this theory fails to account for the unprecedented economic development that accompanied the baby boom in the post-war era. And, that the dividend has been inconsistent or absent in Latin America and the Middle East where fertility has plummeted below replacement.

Countries with below replacement fertility and aging populations are experiencing anaemic economic conditions. Migration and urbanization are the major trends that will shape populations in the next two decades, and these will further reduce fertility. The so-called “demographic transition” is not synonymous with prosperity. Perhaps a different transition is needed.

Investments in reducing fertility promise a quick fix, but do not improve overall health infrastructure. They do not train doctors or skilled health practitioners. They do not educate women about their fertility, treating it as a sickness instead. And they do not improve the conditions in which mothers become pregnant and give birth.

This same kind of desire to find a silver bullet to solve population issues is on display when United Nations agencies and non-governmental actors suggest legalizing abortion as a way to reduce maternal deaths. Abortion always involves the destruction of an innocent human life; many times abortion is a tool of oppression against women because of forced abortion and prenatal sex selection.

Moreover, the complications from abortions, whether legal or not, can only be adequately addressed by investing in time-tested and well known improvements in maternal health: education, skilled birth attendants, emergency obstetric care, antenatal care, including adequate nutrition and hydration.

The time has come to invest in maternal health. Let us make pregnancy and childbirth safe in 2030 era.

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