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General Debate 3 (a): Actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development at the global, regional and national levels

3 (b): Special theme of the fiftieth session² of the Commission based on the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the key actions for its further implementation

Statement submitted by Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council³

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.

¹ E/CN.9/2017/1.

² Changing population age structures and sustainable development.

³ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Sexual and reproductive health and rights in the context of changing population age structures and sustainable development

1. Preamble

We, the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, work together so that all may have life in abundance with justice and peace. Upholding and defending women's rights is essential for ensuring basic rights and life in dignity for all, for women and men alike. We recognise that religion and culture contain both resources and obstacles to the full attainment of sexual and reproductive health rights for women. We also acknowledge that there is controversy over the conception of social, religious and cultural dimensions of these rights and subsequent inaction in addressing them has a detrimental impact on social equity and sustainable development. Yet we all agree that it is our basic responsibility as churches and faith-based organisations (FBOs) to defend each person's inherent dignity as part of the divine creation.

2. Changing population age structures and the implications for sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights and sustainable development

In a world that is experiencing historic shifts in its age distribution, towards larger proportions of middle-aged and older persons in some regions, there is an unprecedented youth bulge in in other regions. Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the Middle East are regions with large youth populations, and this trend will continue for many decades. Within global demographic trends, we have seen social, economic and political consequences play out in diverse ways in different regions due to changing fertility and mortality rates. This presents unique challenges for the achievement of universal sexual and reproductive and health rights, basic rights that should be secured for all, and especially for women and girls, who are most directly affected.

As overall fertility is slowly declining, we continue to see high population growth and high rates of fertility in many countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. These same countries are struggling to resource sustainable health systems, which compounds the challenge of providing universal health care and access to sexual and reproductive health care and support. Provision of family planning services is still not meeting the global demand. In these changing population structures, sexual and reproductive health rights cannot be ignored. They are a pre-requisite to ensuring the health, well-being and full empowerment of women and girls as well as men and boys, which is the foundation for the full engagement of communities in the sustainable development agenda.

If all women and girls had access to modern contraception, unwanted pregnancies would be reduced by 70 per cent, dangerous abortions would be reduced by 74 per cent and maternal mortality would be reduced by 25 per cent. Access to family planning, modern contraception, age, and culturally appropriate sexual education and an end to early, forced and child marriage would contribute positively to giving girls and women increased knowledge and control over their

own body, access to and attainment of education, participation in the work place and improved livelihoods as part of the free will inherent in their dignity.

The world is experiencing a crisis in funding and support for international family planning programmes. The Global Financing Facility (GFF), launched by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim, at the Third International Financing for Development Conference in July 2015, aims to accelerate global efforts to end preventable maternal and child deaths and improve the health and quality of life of women, children, and adolescents by 2030. This new funding partnership should be mobilized to ensure emerging funding gaps for family planning and other sexual and reproductive health services are filled.

Filling the funding gap is essential but not sufficient. There is also urgent need to mobilize political and moral support for family planning, age-of-consent minimums, and access to sexual and reproductive health care and context-appropriate sexual education. This is essential for reaching the ambitious goal of Agenda 2030 to “Leave No One Behind”, and specifically necessary for meeting SDG Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being for All) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality).

3. The strategic position of faith communities to transform SRHR agendas

The strength of the churches and FBOs cannot be overemphasized. We have strong, well-connected and self-sustaining networks that reach to the deepest grassroots where beneficiaries of sexual and reproductive health rights are found. In most developing countries we are an integral part of the health infrastructure, through the Church Health Associations, and we comprise up to forty percent of health care providers through which women and girls access (or are barred from accessing) sexual and reproductive health care.

The Church leadership has high potential to influence positive change of behaviour to support SRHR. As FBOs, we have been investing in the capacity-building and training of our religious leaders through exposure to Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Human Rights Universal Peer Reviews, Sustainable Development Goals as well as other human rights instruments from a gender justice perspective. Through our programmes on HIV/AIDS, we have created safe spaces to call church leaders to fight stigma and defend sexual and reproductive health rights and prevent communities from HIV infections as well as the mitigation of its impact on those who are living with HIV/AIDS. This has included awareness raising and training in transformative masculinities for the defence of women’s rights. Through the “16 Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women and Girls” campaign (25 November-10 December), we have been sharing resources to raise awareness and mobilise for action for gender justice and the defence of women’s and girls’ rights. Our constituencies have been mobilised to join the campaign for a world without rape and violence as part of the defence of women’s rights. In the same spirit as we have engaged to defend human rights, fight HIV/AIDs and end gender based violence through many initiatives including the campaign for a world without rape and violence. It is now time that we double the efforts to mobilize to defend sexual and reproductive health and rights.

4. Our commitments and recommendations for the fiftieth session of the Commission on Population and Development

Therefore, we affirm the search for those resources from religious traditions, including feminist theologies, which affirm gender equality and the full humanity of those with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, as well as people with diverse reproductive health needs. We recognise the role of religion and culture in challenging such rights. We therefore commit to constantly challenging those ideas, beliefs and practices that do not promote abundant life for all, including those with vulnerabilities connected to their sexual and reproductive health. We will work for an interpretation of sacred texts and doctrine that takes seriously the narratives of those whose sexual reproductive health rights have been violated.

We commit and call on people of faith everywhere to declare “Not in our Name:”

- Shall a mother die while giving birth.
- Shall any girl, boy, woman or man be abused, violated or killed.
- Shall any girl child be deprived of her education, be married, harmed or abused.
- Shall anyone be denied access to basic health care.
- Shall any child or adolescent be denied knowledge of and care for her/his body.
- Shall sacred texts and religion be used to silence those who have been violated.
- Shall any person be denied their human rights.

To accomplish this strategic partnerships and progressive actions between the United Nations system, Member States, faith-based actors and broader civil society are needed. The World Council of Churches and Norwegian Church Aid calls on the Commission, Member States, civil society and the private sector to act now to:

- Recognize the important role of faith in transforming doctrines, beliefs and practices that undermine the advancement of sexual and reproductive health rights for all by engaging in innovative, strategic and mutually respectful partnerships for action.
- Call upon governments to guarantee that sexual and reproductive health is recognized as a basic right for all, which means ensuring gender justice.
- Ensure that every pregnancy is wanted and every birth is safe, and support the provision of family planning and modern contraception for all.
- Prevent FGM, early and forced marriage and improve national legal frameworks and enforce child marriage laws where they already exist.
- Ensure people everywhere have the knowledge needed to care for their body, and provide age-and culture- appropriate sexuality education. Special attention must be given to the health, education and participation of youth and adolescents.

- Improve access to context-specific sexual and reproductive health care services, such as mobile clinics, helplines, and including treatment and care for people with HIV/AIDS.

Ensure that new funding mechanisms — such as the Global Financing Facility — are mobilized to meet emerging funding gaps in family planning programs, which are essential to supporting the rights and health of women everywhere. There is an urgent need to fill the UDS 850 million funding gap of UNFPA, which is the largest provider of donated contraceptives worldwide.

We hold these matters to be necessary and relevant for a true transformation of our societies, and central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
