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### Commission on Population and Development

#### Fiftieth session

3-7 April 2017

Item 3 of the provisional agenda<sup>1</sup>

**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 session<sup>2</sup> 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 International Women's Health Coalition, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council<sup>3</sup>**

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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<sup>1</sup> E/CN.9/2017/1.

<sup>2</sup> Changing population age structures and sustainable development.

<sup>3</sup> The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

The theme of the fiftieth session of the Commission on Population and Development, “Changing population age structures and sustainable development,” gives the international community an opportunity to focus on how to tailor policies and programmes to best meet the needs of their populations. Some countries will require significant investments in the education, health and livelihoods of large youth populations; others will need to adapt health and social protection systems to address the needs of rapidly growing older populations. In all cases, policies and programmes must be grounded in human rights and aim to eliminate discrimination and achieve gender equality. They must make a specific effort to address the needs of populations that have often been left behind, such as young adolescent girls, women over the age of 49, and marginalized groups.

### **Put human rights and gender equality first**

Governments must put human rights at the centre of population policies. They must respect individuals’ sexual and reproductive rights, including their rights to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on all matters related to their sexuality and reproduction, including their sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to the highest attainable standards of sexual and reproductive health and to sexual and reproductive health services and information. They must also work to eliminate all forms of discrimination in laws, policy and practice and reduce inequalities, including by taking additional steps to reach the most marginalized and excluded groups at all ages with public goods, services, and social protection. When human rights are at the centre of population policies, they create the grounds needed to ensure that all people can live healthy, productive lives and realize their potential and contribute to societies that are more stable, resilient and better able to adapt to change.

Gender equality must also be a central consideration of all population policies. Discrimination against girls, which manifests in their inability to complete an education, harmful practices, a lack of autonomy over their lives, violence and other human rights violations, can result in a lifetime of deprivation. This has profound consequences for women as they age. In almost all countries, women make up a greater proportion of the elderly, are more likely to live in poverty and experience poor health and disability and have less access to pensions or other forms of social protection. In all contexts, women shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid work within households, and in particular, care work for children and older family members. As a result, for countries at every stage of the demographic transition, increased investment in gender-sensitive policies and programmes is necessary.

### **Meet the needs of young people and older generations**

Investing in young people must be a priority for all countries, but for countries with large youth populations, additional planning, gender-transformative policies, and investments are needed to ensure that all adolescents and young people are educated, healthy, have opportunities for decent work, and can realize their human rights. To best meet young people’s needs, it is imperative to ensure that they are actively involved in decision-making about policies and programmes that impact

their lives. Particular attention must be paid to addressing the needs of young people who are poor, marginalized or socially excluded and developing policies that respond to their diversity.

In many cases, governments with rapidly ageing populations have struggled to adapt policies and programmes to meet the needs of older persons. Often, this requires transforming health-care systems to address non-communicable diseases and ensure that older persons are not just living longer lives, but healthier ones. It also requires policies that support older people to remain active and productive members of society, as well as social protection programmes and services to prevent poverty, support access to nutrition, and provide care.

A life-course approach to development and health can help reduce challenges that come with changing age structures of populations. For instance, cervical cancer is often caused by human papillomavirus, a sexually transmitted infection that can be prevented by a vaccination in adolescence. Malnutrition in childhood can be linked to poor mental development and skeletal disorders in older ages. Investing in the health and nutrition of children and adolescents and promoting exercise and healthy habits, can help set the stage for healthier populations at all ages and reduce burdens on health systems.

### **Achieve a data revolution**

In order to plan appropriately for both current and future generations, governments must understand the populations within their countries and beyond. Data is essential.

Strengthening the capacity of national statistics offices to collect and analyse population data that is ready for the task is critical. At a minimum, countries should have the capacity to disaggregate data by age, sex, and other relevant factors such as geographic location, disability or migration status. Data should also be collected on populations outside of traditional demographic age ranges, particularly younger adolescents and older people. This is particularly critical in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR): 1 in 9 girls in the developing world are married before the age of 15 and many girls become pregnant soon after marriage, yet adolescent fertility rates are almost always calculated for girls 15-19.

But governments must go beyond traditional data sources, such as censuses and Demographic and Health Surveys, because they often make already marginalized people even more invisible, such as adolescent girls under 15 and women over 49. They must also consider quantitative and qualitative data that comes from civil society partners, who work most closely with those who are hardest to reach and who understand what policies and programmes are most likely to serve their needs.

### **Recommendations**

To meet the needs of adolescents and young people, governments must provide:

- Free, safe, quality education for all through at least the secondary level, with an emphasis on knowledge and life-skills. Education should include:

- o Comprehensive sexuality education, which addresses gender norms and the importance of gender equality and human rights, power dynamics in relationships, sexuality, and sexual and reproductive health, to both in and out of school youth;
  - o Information on the importance of nutrition, exercise and other aspects of healthy living;
- Tertiary education, vocational training and support to achieve full and productive employment for all young people.
- Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services provided by qualified health professionals in non-judgmental settings, with full respect for rights to privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. Barriers to access, such as user fees, stigma, and third party consent requirements, should be eliminated.
- Mental health care, including suicide prevention, for all young people free from stigma; and
- Laws, policies and programmes to promote gender equality and respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of adolescent girls and young women, including to prevent, respond to, and eliminate harmful practices, including child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

To meet the needs of ageing populations, governments must:

- Provide Universal Health Coverage, including financial risk protection, for all people of all ages, including older people. This includes sexual health services to people beyond reproductive age;
- Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all people, including older persons and providing older workers with access to education or vocational training, reskilling or other means to maintain their employability; and
- Promote age-friendly environments that enable continued social and economic participation of older adults.

In all countries, regardless of the age structures of their populations, governments must:

- Ensure that all population and development policies and programmes place human rights at the centre and do not use coercive methods to achieve population and development goals.
- Respect, protect and fulfil sexual and reproductive rights of all people, including and especially adolescent girls, women of reproductive age, and older women by ensuring universal access to quality sexual and reproductive health-care services, the repeal of discriminatory and punitive laws, the elimination of barriers to access, and the elimination of harmful practices. Meeting the needs of older women will require a specific focus on sexual health and rights, rather than reproductive rights.
- Eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls.

- Reduce and redistribute women's unpaid care work, including through paid family leave for all genders, including parental leave and leave for elder care, and free or state-provided infant, child and elder care.
  - Ensure universal social protection, including basic income security for, secure shelter, and adequate and nutritious food.
  - Ensure universality in all policies and programmes with emphasis on those individuals who are hardest to reach and/or are most marginalized, including young people and girls, older people, people with disabilities, and individuals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
  - Invest in collecting quantitative and qualitative data that is disaggregated by age and sex, and other relevant factors, that captures populations under the age of 15 and over the age of 49.
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