

Statement submitted by International Relations Students' Association of McGill University

It is said that youth face yesterday's lessons, today's realities, and tomorrow's hope. Despite the fact that youth will inherit the repercussions of today's global policy agenda, our perspectives are often undermined in spaces of international diplomacy and decision-making. Due to persistent issues of social and economic marginalization across all continental regions, these issues do not impact youth uniformly. As we develop a sustainable approach to the COVID-19 pandemic and various inequalities it has exacerbated, it has never been more critical to integrate our perspectives in an intersectional policy framework.

As we reflect on the twenty-six years since the Program of Action and Cairo Declaration resulting from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, we face considerable disparities in the universal access to sexual and reproductive health care and rampant food insecurity. As such, the International Relations Students' Association of McGill University joins the African Network of Youth Leaders for Peace and Sustainable Development in calling upon international organizations to meaningfully include youth in addressing issues of climate change, conflict, food insecurity and in providing a foundation for comprehensive and culturally responsive sexual and reproductive healthcare and education.

The Pan African Network African Network of Young Leaders for Peace and Sustainable Development's mandate is to build a continent where conflicts are banned, disaster risks are reduced, and conditions for sustainable development flourish. We strive to build a continent where, at all times, people have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. We have been implementing several programs across Africa, including the integrated program against desertification, land degradation, drought, and an ecosystem safeguard that focuses on integrated sustainable water and waste management, agroforestry, and soil conservation and restoration. Our gender, sexual reproduction health and nutrition programme aims to improve women and girls' health and child rights and increase the number of girls and women using modern contraception, assisted by qualified health personnel during childbirth, and children receiving nutritional advice.

The International Relations Students' Association of McGill is an entirely student-led, youth-centred, non-profit organization. Our mandate is to work with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to expand the meaningful participation of youth in policymaking. Across our seven portfolios, including the Youth Advisory Delegation, McGill International Review, Flux: International Relations Review, Junior Peacemakers, the McGill Model United Nations Assembly, and the Secondary Schools United Nations Symposium, we empower youth to be active citizens in their local and international communities. Through leadership and participation in undergraduate academic journals, model United Nations, and peace education for young children, we strive to promote youth-representation in decision-making spaces. To this end, we join the Pan African Network of Young Leaders for Peace and Sustainable Development in highlighting three critical areas of limited progress for marginalized youth and provide corresponding calls to action.

Comprehensive and culturally responsive sexual and reproductive health education

There are large disparities in how sexual health education and care are both provided and communicated. Across various political or economic contexts, globally, strains on access to adequate sexual health education and health care facilities visible. Though states may have the required resources to administer sexual health education and care, there are still issues with the standardization of such programs and universal access. Therefore, we call upon local and provincial governments to implement comprehensive sexuality education that is medically-accurate, evidence-based, age-appropriate, and culturally-responsive. We also urge them to provide access to adequate health care facilities for all demographics, including visible minorities.

In practicing comprehensive sexuality education, it is necessary to expand the scope of education beyond reproductive development, the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, and contraceptive use. To this end, we urge governments to emphasize consent education, 2SLGBTI+ education, the practice of healthy relationships, communication, recognizing and preventing sexual violence, and decision-making. Additionally, with regards to health care administration, we call on governments to require health care workers to undergo racial and ethnic bias training and include 2SLGBTI+ care in medical curriculums.

Comprehensive and culturally responsive sexual and reproductive health education must be universally accessible. Comprehensive sexual education is therefore essential to improving education outcomes, preventing dating violence and bullying, developing healthier relationships amongst youth, as well as reducing rates of unplanned pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual health disparities among 2SLGBTI+ youth.

Comprehensive youth-centered approach to HIV/AIDS in youth

Globally, HIV/AIDS remains a prevalent issue amongst youth. A significant amount of all new HIV infections globally occur among youth, and adolescents between 10 and 19 are the only age group within which AIDS-related deaths are increasing. Although youth are disproportionately impacted, they continue to lack access to adequate sexual and reproductive healthcare.

Barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health rights, specifically HIV services, are rooted mainly in harmful societal and cultural norms. These include harmful gender norms, discriminatory laws, age-based stigma, lack of contraceptive provision, socio-economic status, geographical inaccessibility, confidentiality issues and service provider views. These barriers are most substantial for youth that belong to marginalized groups, primarily women and girls, and LGBTQ2IA+ youth. In many countries, official agendas actively prevent youth from accessing adequate sexual healthcare through harmful laws and health policies that lead to discrimination and denial of service from healthcare providers.

We call on governments to amend current laws, policies and programs and adopt comprehensive policy approaches that acknowledge the intersectionality of youth and improve access to youth-friendly, stigma-free, affordable, and confidential sexual health services. Young people must be involved in every step of this policy development process to ensure that policies effectively address their needs. These policies must also include culturally-responsive education to decrease societal stigma and encourage youth to seek out healthcare.

With the effects of climate change increasing at an alarming rate, we are deeply concerned by the disproportionate implications on marginalized youth, especially

regarding food security, nutrition, and sustainable development. Additionally, we are disappointed by the current lack of comprehensive and culturally-responsive sexual and reproductive health care and education. This deficiency contributes to a lack of accessible and adequate services for all youth.

Ultimately, we call for urgent collaborations among governments, corporations, and non-governmental organizations to strengthen the implementation of strategies aimed at ecosystem restoration, improving food security, and providing culturally responsive sexual and reproductive health care and education for youth. In developing these strategies, we call for an intersectional approach and the meaningful participation of youth, particularly youth disproportionately affected by these issues. Therefore, we emphasize the inclusion of all youth in developing global health and education policies, including Indigenous youth, youth with disabilities, young refugees and internally displaced persons, and youth in areas affected by conflict.