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Agenda item 4: General debate on national experience in population matters: adolescents and youth

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Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is important for the individual well-being, for public health and for achieving gender equality. Luckily, in Norway, these facts are accepted. And the involvement of young people in these efforts are particularly valued. Norwegian adolescents and youth are organized and represented in political organs. I here represent the Council of child and youth organizations, on behalf of the Norwegian delegation. I want to extend my gratitude for this opportunity, and remind you all of the important resources available to us this week, in the young delegates and observers present. Make sure to listen to their experiences and opinions.

It is especially important that young people get the means to make healthy and informed choices about our sexuality, based on our own needs and limits. For all these reasons, comprehensive sexuality education, access to cheap contraceptives, free and confidential sexual health services are an integral part of the Norwegian health care and education system. Civil society organizations are also important as source of information and platforms where young people can engage and interact. For example, the queer youth movement is creating an important safe space for lesbian, homosexual, bisexual and trans youth. Through such channels much information about sexual health and rights are shared.

Simultaneously however, Norwegian adolescents and youth express their concerns about the high rates of sexually transmitted infections and the fact that many are still exposed to discrimination due to their sexual identity. HIV infection rates in Norway are relatively low, also among

adolescents and youth. The vulnerability for HIV/AIDS among young people is recognized, but still many young people have insufficient knowledge of HIV and how it is transmitted.

There is room for improvement of the quality of comprehensive sexuality education in school, and it should be made sure that young people get equal access to information, sexual health services and counseling across the country. More focus should be given to identity and personal integrity, as essential supplement to the otherwise technical information given about sexual acts and contraception. Crucially, in order to prevent stigma and abuse; young people need spaces for open dialogue, they should be empowered in relation to their own body and learn to respect people's differences. Teachers' education must include comprehensive sexuality education, so that teachers get competence before they teach about sexuality.

Women's sexual and reproductive health have been given priority in Norway so that women can decide freely over their own bodies and obtain the highest standard of physical and mental health. This is especially important for young women, who in many ways are in a vulnerable position. Recent numbers show that Norway has low birth rates and relatively low abortion rates among adolescents and youth. The rates have been reduced since abortion was legalized in 1979. Among adolescents the abortion rates have never been lower than now. Female birth control is given free of charge for girls under the age of 20, and young people access abortion services for free, without parental consent.

Adolescents and youth is a time for change. It is a time for excitement, joy, new experiences and new demands. It is also a time of insecurity, rupture and challenges. I certainly hope we manage to continue bearing in mind this celebration of youth as well as the challenges, but most importantly the needs young people identify for themselves must be at the center of our attention.

Thank you for your attention!