

**Oral statement to the 45<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Population Development by Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre on behalf of our allies in Global Interfaith and Secular Alliance working for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (GISA).**

Honorable Mr. Chair

On behalf of the Global Interfaith and Secular Alliance working for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (GISA) and our allies and partners in support of it, I want to thank you and the CPD Bureau for giving us the opportunity to speak at this session and make our voices heard on the issue of religious extremism and its impact on young women's SRHR. We also take this opportunity to acknowledge the bureau of the Commission for focusing this 45<sup>th</sup> session on one of the key population cohorts in the world today: adolescents and youth. The world is home to the largest generation of young people in history – more than 1.8<sup>1</sup> billion people between 10 and 24 years of age.

Now is the most opportune time to create spaces and forums to hear young women's concerns, to understand the struggles of these times and this generation, to include young women's voices in decision-making especially in programmes and policies that address the sexual and reproductive health needs of female adolescents and young women, as well as ensure their rights over their bodies which are guaranteed in international documents and which governments have committed to.

In the past few years we have seen new emerging issues affecting the world's younger population. However, the greatest amongst these is that of 'religious extremists,' who support extreme limitations on women and young people's autonomy over their bodies and their lives. These extremists are bent on imposing an archaic understanding of traditions, cultures and religions when it comes to sexual and reproductive health, perpetuating a cycle of human rights abuses. Because of the fear of backlash, the visible impact of religious extremism on young women is hardly ever debated in a constructive manner.

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<sup>1</sup> UNFPA. 2011. *7 Billion Actions – Young People Forging the Future*.  
[www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/.../7B\\_fact\\_sheets\\_en.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/.../7B_fact_sheets_en.pdf)

The policing of sexuality and sexual norms for young girls and women is characteristic of religious extremists of all faiths. Respecting and believing in the diversity of human beings and their religious beliefs, we take this opportunity to highlight one of the most pressing population development issues of young people especially that of adolescent girls and young women: the subjugation of sexuality and rights by religious extremists.

Honorable Mr. Chair,

*The extremist values promoted by these movements result in negative consequences for young women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.* Out of the 1.8 billion young people in the world today, half are adolescent girls and young women. Most of them are subject to traditions sanctioned by religious extremists such as early and child marriages, and female genital cutting. Apart from the mutilation some suffer, this makes them vulnerable to early pregnancies, unintended pregnancies and frequent pregnancies along with the accompanying mortality and morbidities such as obstetric fistula, STIs including HIV/AIDs and unsafe abortions etc. For example, about 2.5 million adolescents have unsafe abortions each year, often with complications more serious than those experienced by older women.<sup>2</sup> It is proven that legal restrictions on abortion do not lower the number of abortions<sup>3</sup>.

*Such extremist values deny young girls and women their basic human rights including their reproductive rights as recognized in the ICPD PoA and compromise international consensus.* Even in countries where early and forced marriages are rare, there are attempts to restrict adolescents' and young women's access to contraceptive services, including access to emergency contraception and safe abortion even in the circumstances of rape, and to comprehensive sex and sexuality education. This ultimately

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<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. 2011. Adolescent pregnancy. Geneva, WHO; [http://www.who.int/making\\_pregnancy\\_safer/topics/adolescent\\_pregnancy/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/making_pregnancy_safer/topics/adolescent_pregnancy/en/index.html)

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization. 2011. Unsafe abortion: global and regional estimates of the incidence of unsafe abortion and associated mortality in 2008. 6th edition. Page 16. Geneva, WHO; [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501118\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501118_eng.pdf)

results in unwanted births among adolescent girls and young women and puts them at a greater risk of mortality and morbidities.

Moreover, young people around the globe face greater dangers at the hand of extremist groups when they challenge the patriarchal and heterosexual norms of gender and sexual orientation. Some of these extremists even advocate and sanction the murder of service providers and human rights defenders for the LGBTIQ community. Unfortunately, SRHR advocates are working under this duress across the globe.

Privacy, bodily autonomy, equality and non-discrimination are some of the most fundamental rights closely connected to ensuring women's sexual and reproductive health and have been time and again recognized internationally.

Honorable Mr. Chair,

We have only one request of this Commission, that at all times you uphold the sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights of adolescents and young women, and that you protect and promote universal human freedoms, as mandated by many different international, consensus documents such as the Cairo Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action and international conventions such as the CRC, CEDAW and the ICESR. Our organisations work with networks of women's organisations and we witness and experience first-hand the impact of religious extremism in the lives of women in our countries.

Thank you.

***GISA Allies:***

Action Canada for Population and Development (ACPD)

AIDOS - The Italian Association for Women in Development.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW)

ASTRA Network Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Health

Catholics for Choice  
Catholics for Reproductive Health – the Philippines  
David Pollock – the United Kingdom  
European Humanist Federation – Belgium  
Spanish Federation of Family Planning – Spain  
Family Planning Association of Portugal  
Irish Family Planning Association – Ireland  
Indonesian’s Women’s Association for Justice – Legal Aid Foundation (APIK)  
Likhaan Centre for Women’s Health – The Philippines  
PROMSEX, Centro de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Sexuales y  
Reproductivos – Peru  
Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance of Malaysia (RRAAM)  
RFSU – Sweden  
Sex og Politikk - The Norwegian Association for Sexual and Reproductive  
Health and Rights  
Sexuality Studies Association – Thailand  
Shirkat Gah Women’s Resource Centre – Pakistan  
Southeast Asian Consortium on Gender, Sexuality and Health - Thailand  
Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan (YKP) - Indonesia  
The Rev. Vincent Lachina - U.S.A.

**The statement is also supported by:**

CHETNA – India  
World YWCA  
ASTRA Youth Network