

United Nations Human Rights Council 37th Session
NGO Oral Statement

Joint Statement delivered by Right Here Right Now Pakistan (RHRN) and the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (Arrow).

Dear Mr. President, I, Noor, on behalf of Right Here Right Now Pakistan and Asia Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, thank you for allowing me to make a statement to voice concerns around young people's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Pakistan.

Pakistan underwent its third Universal Periodic Review recently and member states have rightfully highlighted the importance of sexual and reproductive health of girls and the prevalent discrimination against people with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations in their statements and recommendations. Member states also highlighted the need to revise the child marriage act to increase the age limit to 18.

It was encouraging to see that Pakistan's mission was positive. Responding to the recommendations on transgender issues, the mission responded in an encouraging manner and referred to the Transgender Protection Bill which has been tabled in Senate and has very progressive language. They also referred to the health care measures taken up by provincial governments to ensure universality of services.

But despite positive efforts in terms of policy and programme implementation, the attention given to the sexual and reproductive health needs of young people remains significantly insufficient. Even in the provinces where youth policies exist, lack of information services for young people, child marriage and teenage pregnancy are the main issues standing in the way of their sexual and reproductive health.

Adolescent girls experience high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, and many of them are married as children, before the age of 18. It's important to highlight that Pakistan has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. Child, early and forced marriage operates as a means to control girls' sexuality and reproductive capacity, and results in significant risks of unwanted and forced pregnancies. UN treaty monitoring bodies have specifically stated that early pregnancy violates a girl's right to health by putting her at risk of maternal mortality and morbidity and unsafe abortion.¹

Moreover, in Pakistan, where talking about sexuality and sexual health and reproductive rights is considered taboo in society, young people's choices in this matter are restricted and their wellbeing jeopardized. The unequal power relation between men and women is also an important factor which makes it difficult for young girls and women to exercise autonomy when it comes to making informed decisions about their own bodies and negotiating their bodily rights.

¹ CEDAW Committee (2012) *Concluding Observations: Djibouti*, para. 30, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/DJI/CO/1-3 (2011). 254 Human Rights Council, Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, 22nd Sess., para. 51, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/22/31, 2012

Pakistan at this moment has a very unique opportunity. We, the young people, make the largest population in its history (55% of the population are under the age of 25 years). This is a group that our government needs to look at more closely and invest in, to ensure that Pakistan is able to reap demographic dividend. The rights, well-being and health of young people are crucial cornerstones of development. The 'youth bulge' in Pakistan's population has been called the potential 'Demographic Dividend'ⁱ but despite this, young people's SRHR needs remain largely invisible in the policy and programmatic framework of Pakistan. In the absence of a facilitative and enabling policy and service provision framework as well as a conducive social environment, this dividend could turn into a "disaster"ⁱⁱ or become lost.

It is imperative that policies dealing with education, health and social security are holistic, i.e. they cover every possible aspect for the alleviation of the living standards of young people, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights. The government needs to take immediate measures for the inclusion of quality and non-judgmental life skills based education in education, health and youth laws and policies as there is a wide gap that exists between the young and access to information. Government not only needs to undergo these measures but also needs to ensure that comprehensive programmes with adequate budget allocation on provision of LSBE for all young people are in place and are being effectively implemented and monitored.

For the preparation of our CSO report for the 3rd UPR, Right Here Right Now Pakistan conducted a survey through a consultative process with diverse groups of young people across Pakistan, and the two recommendations and asks came out very vividly:

1. There is an urgent need for sexual reproductive health and rights information and awareness campaigns for the young.
2. There is an urgent need to make accessible and affordable, all SRHR services.

We urge the Government of Pakistan to undertake immediate measures to address the critical needs of young people to ensure a healthy, inclusive and informed future of Pakistan. We also call on the treaty monitoring bodies and Special Procedures holders to address these issues in their monitoring interventions.

Thank you.

ⁱ http://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2013_CapturingDemoDivPak.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pakdiscussion.com/forum/showthread.php/45044-Demographic-dividend-or-disaster-Maleeha-Lodhi-23rd-October-2012>