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National Voluntary Presentations

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Madam Chair,

Let me start by thanking you for this opportunity to give a national voluntary presentation on this important occasion of the CPDs 50th anniversary. As a representative from a civil society organisation, we welcome this initiative and particularly the role given to non-governmental delegates in these presentations.

In Norway, civil society has a history of playing a central role in fostering critical debate and knowledge production, through participation, engagement and learning for our members, citizens and leaders alike. That is vital for ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all.

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Indeed many of our country's political leaders, including our two female prime ministers, Ms. Gro Harlem Brundtland and Ms. Erna Solberg, started their careers in civil society, before joining politics. Ms. Brundtland was an activist in the organisation where I work.

This year's special theme: 'Changing population age structures and sustainable development' concerns all UN member states in different ways and to a varying degree. Norway is also affected by what we could perhaps call the ageing syndrome, which characterises most developed countries.

However, because of a relatively high fertility and immigration, the situation so far is less dramatic in our country than in some other high-income countries. Various policy measures have been implemented to address this challenge, including a major reform of the pension system, and we are currently debating the need for increasing the age of retirement.

Norway has a relatively high fertility rate. However, there has been a decrease from 1.98 in 2009 to 1.71 in 2016. What we see is that young women (under 30 years) have their first baby later than before and that older women (over 30 years) more frequently limit the number of babies to two. Immigrant women's fertility is also decreasing.

Our relatively high fertility rate is a by-product of targeted policies for gender equality, such as parental benefit schemes and full access to good quality day-care centres for children at acceptable price, that make it possible for women, and families, to combine work and children. We are however not sure of the reasons for the decline of our fertility rates in the last years and are working on establishing reasons for this.

As far as migration is concerned, most migrants coming to Norway during the last ten years have come from other Nordic and Central and East European EU countries. The year 2015

marked an exception because of the refugee crisis in the Middle East. Recently, work-related migration has decreased markedly and emigration has increased.

Madam Chair, there has never been more young people in the world than now. This is a great opportunity, which at the same time demands specific attention and targeted policies.

Women's and youth's rights and non-discrimination in economic, social and political life is a fundamental part of ensuring a healthy population and a sustainable development. These have been crucial elements of Norway's policies. Ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and equal opportunities for all, irrespective of age, ethnicity, disability, gender identity and gender expression, sexual orientation, political, or religious belief or any other status, is a fundamental part of this.

There is strong evidence about the role comprehensive sexuality education plays in ensuring equal rights and opportunities. It helps enable people to enjoy a healthy sexual life, make informed decisions about their relationships, to delay their sexual debut, to avoid unwanted pregnancies and to prevent sexually transmitted infections.

It contributes to people being knowledgeable and confident in expressing their own identity and protecting their bodily integrity. In combination with access to youth friendly health services and modern contraceptives, these are important conditions for realising the promise of leaving no one behind.

Comprehensive sexuality education is part of the curriculum throughout primary and secondary school in Norway. There is a close collaboration between civil society actors and the government in developing curriculum and resources that support the educators' role in this important task.

The education needs to be norm critical, to raise awareness of the privileges, power imbalances and exclusion that exist. Comprehensive sexuality education not only teaches about the biological aspects of sexuality but also about emotions, respect and integrity and other issues as part of relationships that contributes to creating a safe and inclusive learning environment, and is used as an approach to anti-bullying work.

This education addresses the differences in sexual orientations and gender identities that exists, including among the pupils and students. However, we still see challenges among youth and children. Therefore, in Norway's new sexual health strategy, the role of comprehensive sexuality education is further strengthened and it is anticipated developing programmes for inclusions of programmes in kindergartens in the near future.

This is also an example of how expertise and knowledge constitutes a resource within different parts of society. To realise human rights for all require joint efforts of governments, civil society, academia and people of all ages, the young as well as the elders in society. This principle is well grounded within the Norwegian governance structures, and as a civil society actor myself, an open and constructive dialogue and collaboration with authorities and other stakeholders has been of great benefit to the people that we serve.

Madam Chair, 50 years ago this year, in 1967, the contraceptive-pill was introduced in Norway. At the same time, the women's rights movement was growing and became more active, both within civil society and the political parties, and more women joined the work force. Looking at the birth rates, we see a plunge in the mid 1970's, followed by a slow increase. This shows us how access to contraceptives contribute to the realisation of women's rights as well as influence the demographics.

The best way to prevent unwanted pregnancies is by ensuring easy access to modern and effective contraceptives, and access to information for young people. Youth friendly-services, an extension of contraceptive services to include midwives, nurses and easy access to contraceptives for youth between 16-20 years mostly free of charge, have further increased access and uptake in Norway.

Currently there is a debate on whether young people under 16 already engaging in sexual activities should get easy access to contraceptives. Health providers, civil society organisations and youth political parties are calling for changes in the minimum age of provision of free contraceptive services.

Access to safe and legal abortion is on demand and became available in Norway in 1978. This policy is well grounded among the political decision-makers and the public. With these policies, the abortion rate reached an all-time low in 2016, with the highest decline seen among the young women under 25 years of age.

Madam Chair, to conclude, Norway's experience is that the importance of women's and youth's rights, of sexual and reproductive rights and equal opportunities that have been at the core of political priorities have led to important developments in Norway. Norway has made great strides in the economic and other areas as a result of this approach.

However, we still have challenges and we need to work harder and better to achieve the full realisation of human rights for all and a future where no one is left behind, both in Norway and internationally. Therefore, these efforts will continue to be part of our efforts in implementing the CPD Programme of Action, and in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Thank you for your attention.

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