



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
23 November 2019

English only

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fourth session

9–20 March 2020

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

In the 25 years following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, millions of girls have grown up to become women. For many, they are raised in cultures and communities that would have preferred sons over daughters. They navigate adolescence and young adulthood in classrooms and on streets that are not safe for them. As these young women enter the world of work, they face sexism and misogyny at unprecedented levels that they have to circumnavigate with caution to avoid further ramifications when they decide to challenge them.

The rights of the girl child have been enshrined in international agreements and within the frameworks of the global development agenda for longer than it has taken a generation of millions of girls to grow up into young women. The inclusion of the girl child as one of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action's 12 areas of critical concern demonstrates the essential need to address gender equality and women's rights, from infancy across the lifecycle. Visible progress has been recorded in some areas, such as access to primary education, access to maternal health, and increased engagement of girls and young women with science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. Unfortunately, the rise of right-wing governments around the world has led to attacks on women's rights, and 25 years later, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action still remains the most progressive blueprint for advancing women's and girls' rights.

The objectives of freedom from violence and gender-based discrimination outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action present a roadmap to overturn the inferior status held by women in societies across the globe. The consequences of inaction for the girl child are multi-layered, as girls experience oppression for being both children and female. The position of the girl child within social hierarchies, therefore, renders her voice and agency largely invisible. As a result, girls are not consulted in social, civic, or political life, including within the spaces they occupy where the state has both mandate and influence, such as schools. Within schools, pervasive gender norms often prescribe responsibilities, opportunities, or praise to students based on their gender, leaving girls behind. In addition, the challenges for girls to physically attend school, due to domestic or care duties, violence on the route to school or on public transport, or a dismissal in the value of educating girls and internalization of social norms and gender stereotypes, adversely affects girls' participation in education.

As the world's largest movement for every and any girl, with 10 million girl guides and girl scouts in 150 countries, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girls Scouts actively engages girls in leadership opportunities through its non-formal educational methodology, global programmes, and advocacy campaigns. We call on Member States to demonstrate strong will and commitment to address the injustices and rights violations of girls and young women everywhere, to invest in mechanisms that respect girls' agency and bodily integrity, to make space for their genuine political participation, as well as to bridge the gap in state reporting requirements, from infancy to adolescence. This statement is based on consultation with girls and young women from our global movement.

Eliminate gender-based violence

Across the world, violence against women and girls remains one of the most flagrant and most tolerated human rights violations. Violence affects all groups of women in every community and every country, but girls are uniquely vulnerable. Today, the number of countries that have legislation against different forms of gender-based violence is unprecedented. Yet, even though elimination of gender-based

violence features high on national and international agendas, 78 per cent of respondents to our poll, using the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) U-Report platform, believed that sexual violence was on the increase in their community.

In the years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals, the current Sustainable Development Goals have addressed in part the experiences of girls and young women, specifically through Sustainable Development Goal 5: gender equality. Targets of goal 5, specifically 5.2 and 5.6, that identify adolescent girls' experiences, do not acknowledge that violence emerges before the age of 15. While key indicators of Sustainable Development Goal 16: peace, justice and strong institutions, seek to measure rates of violence against children within the broader context of peaceful and inclusive societies, a gender lens is needed. This analysis is essential in recognizing the nature and experience of childhood violence. Early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, street harassment, and unpaid domestic work are normalized elements of childhood for too many girls worldwide and require intervention much earlier than a girl's teenage years. The physical, emotional, and mental impact that these rights violations have on girls is often lifelong. Crucial opportunities to prevent and protect girls from such traumas will continue to be overlooked unless the globally pervasive culture of patriarchy and oppression of women is not addressed at every level. This starts with girls.

Recommendations:

- Adopt, strengthen, and enforce laws and policies on gender-based violence, and end impunity for acts of violence and harassment.
- Challenge harmful social norms, by working with faith leaders and communities, and organizing public awareness and education campaigns that address inequality and condemn violence.
- Adopt legislation that criminalizes street harassment, including verbal harassment and unwanted advances.
- Integrate education on gender equality and healthy relationships into school curricula.
- Guarantee robust support mechanisms for survivors, including practical and emotional support, as well as improved access to justice

Invest in girls

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in and recognition of the multiple benefits of investing in programming for adolescent girls. Currently, however, the rhetorical commitment to girls is not matched by actual investment levels.

Beyond the school setting, there are few spaces dedicated to improving girls' awareness of their needs, rights, and potential, which are outlined as essential in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action girl child area of critical concern L.3. Informal educational setting, youth groups, and girl-only safe spaces rarely benefit from government funding and often rely on voluntary contributions. Where they do exist, these spaces are overrepresented by women. The de-prioritization and feminization of care work can reinforce negative gender stereotypes around women's purpose and potential, and the lack of professional or political women role models has been cited by girls as a significant hindrance in their self-belief. As shared by a girl guide, "formally, we need to teach our children that they can do and be whoever and whatever they want. Informally, we need to show them this."

Recommendations:

- Ensure adequate financial commitments are made to programmes that address girls' needs, either through domestic resources and/or official development assistance. International development agencies must similarly commit more substantial levels of resources to specialized programmes aimed at girls and young women.
- Commit to implementing gender-responsive budgeting to ensure that investments in all sectors deliver real benefits for girls and women.

Tackle lack of body confidence and self-esteem

In today's ever globalizing and more interconnected world, the role of traditional and social media is significant in shaping narratives and carving out space for young people to seize and tell their own stories. Positive improvements have been made in national media attention surrounding women athletes or team sports achievements. However, a lack of media regulation means influential personalities with limitless reach are able to market products that may be harmful to girls.

Growing data demonstrate an increasing rise in body dissatisfaction among girls and young women and the danger it poses for their advancement in life. For girls and young women, fragile body perception and low body confidence create formidable barriers to their health, wellbeing, and pursuit of equity. Low self-esteem is causing the majority of women (85 per cent) and girls (79 per cent) worldwide to opt out of important life activities. This impacts young women and girls' lifestyle choices, diet, professional and physical activity patterns, and crucially their professional and academic attainment. Furthermore, due to low self-esteem and body confidence, seven in 10 girls will not be assertive in their opinions or stick to their decisions, impacting young women's decision-making.

Despite the worrying impacts of this issue on women and young girls, there has been very little done by governments. Therefore, in pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 5 target 1, which calls for an end to all forms of discrimination against women and girls and Sustainable Development Goal 5 target 5, which calls for women's effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making, we urge governments to:

Recommendations:

- Recognize body confidence, body image pressure, and self-esteem are key challenges of the modern world and integral to the advancement of women and young girls.
- Fund and carry out research to establish a national baseline understanding of the nature and implications of low body confidence in girls and young women.
- Support and fund informal education programmes that address issues body confidence and self-esteem, particularly girl-only spaces.
- Ensure good nutrition throughout the life cycle.

Gender inequality can be a cause as well as an effect of malnutrition. Currently, girls are more likely to suffer from nutritional deficiencies than boys for reasons including reproductive biology, low social status, poverty, and lack of education. Sociocultural traditions and disparities in household work patterns can also increase girls' chances of being malnourished.

Improving nutrition early on in life improves girls' and young women's abilities to fulfil their full potential and break free from a cycle of malnutrition.

Except for the first two years of a child's life, adolescence is a time when a girl experiences the most rapid rate of physical growth, gaining up to 50 per cent of her physical weight and 20 per cent of her physical height. While women and girls are disproportionately affected by malnutrition, they are also the critical actors to finding lasting solutions. However, there is little disaggregated data about the progress being made on improving the nutritional outcomes of adolescent girls.

Recommendations:

- Address harmful norms and perceptions that regard girls as inferior to boys and prioritize boys' access to food.
 - Protect girls from early marriage and pregnancy, which have further negative consequences on their access to food, among other resources.
 - Invest in increasing understanding of healthy nutrition for girls at all levels.
 - Recognize girls and young women as a distinct demographic group with unique nutritional needs. Invest in age and gender-disaggregated data.
 - Increase women's and girls' involvement in decision-making at all levels, in both public and private domains.
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