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**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

As the world's largest girl-led movement, 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 United Nations Member States to demonstrate strong will and commitment to address the injustices and rights violations of girls and young women, to invest in mechanisms that respect girls' agency and bodily integrity, make space for their genuine political participation and bridge the gap in state reporting requirements from infancy to adolescence. This statement is written in consultation with girls and young women from our global Movement.

In the 26 years following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, millions of girls have grown into women. Many girls are raised in cultures and communities that would have preferred sons over daughters. They navigate childhood and adolescence in classrooms and on streets that are not safe for them. Women face sexism and misogyny at unprecedented levels, and often, when challenged they receive further ramification. As young women enter 2021 they face a crisis; the crisis of a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to surface and exacerbated many existing inequalities and injustices women and girls face in everyday life. It is vital that we ensure girls are not left behind in the face of this pandemic.

Women and Girls participation in decision-making

Women and girls participation in decision making is hindered through a number of key barriers, notably, a lack of opportunity, enshrined societal gender 'norms' and a lack of agency as a result of patriarchy. Girls and women face an unequal burden of care, they spend three times more hours than men in unpaid care and domestic work, limiting their access to education and decent work. Despite this responsibility of care, women and girls have fewer decision-making powers within a household.

70 per cent of the global health workforce at the frontline of providing care during the COVID-19 pandemic are women, while on the frontline they continue to bear domestic care-giving responsibilities. For many women the pandemic has resulted in a loss of their livelihoods. As economics continue to shrink and employers struggle to retain staff, efforts to close the gender gap in many workplaces will be deprioritised. Women now face further roadblocks in reaching positions of leadership and accessing opportunities for professional development.

The involvement of young women in decision making processes locally, nationally, regionally and globally is often an afterthought. Girls are not consulted in social, civic or political life, including within the spaces they occupy where the State has both a mandate and an influence. 1.3 million girls are currently out of school. This number has increased as a result of the pandemic with millions unlikely to return as a result of child marriage, early pregnancy, caregiving responsibilities, forced labour and reduced income of families resulting in deprioritisation of educating the girl child. For those in school, pervasive gender norms often prescribe responsibilities, opportunities or praise to students based on their gender, leaving girls behind.

Access to non-formal education in school and outside of school has now become even more critical with so few spaces dedicated to responding to girls' needs and making them aware of their rights. Non-formal educational settings, youth groups and girl-only safe spaces rarely benefit from government funding and often rely on voluntary contributions.

In pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 5, Target 1, which calls for an end to all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and 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:

To collect gender-segregated data to analyse the impacts of COVID-19, and to develop short-term and long-term gender responsive approaches

Ensure girls and women's equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision making

Ensure access and opportunities for young women to be consulted and appointed in decision making positions

Appoint women to leadership positions to ensure gender parity in all spheres of decision making

Invest in formal and non-formal education to ensure 12 years of free, safe, quality education

Eliminate cultural barriers and harmful practices that prevent girls and young women from gaining an education

Elimination of violence (shadow pandemic)

COVID-19 has seen the emergence of a 'shadow pandemic' – one against girls and women in their own homes, their workplaces and in spaces of education. Gender-based violence in itself can be seen as a socially-constructed virus and no country is immune. It has a serious and life-altering impact on the physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health of women and girls everywhere. Laws to protect women and girls must be implemented. Where inadequate they must be amended.

Measures being put in place by governments to address the current outbreak are making it harder, and in some cases impossible, for girls to access protection from violence at home and leaving them confined with their abusers. In a recent U-Report Global poll, 75 per cent of respondents believe that sexual violence against women was increasing in their communities and in the world.

Girls experience oppression for being both children and females. Early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, street harassment and unpaid domestic work are normalised elements of childhood for too many girls worldwide and require intervention before a girl enters adolescence. The physical, emotional and mental impact that such rights violations have on girls are lifelong.

Prevention starts with listening to girls at every decision-making level.

Recommendations

While the Sustainable Development Goals in Goal 5.2 and 5.6 refer to adolescent girls' experiences there is a failure to acknowledge that girls experience violence before the age of 15. Goal 16 seeks to measure rates of violence against children within the broader context of peaceful and inclusive societies but lacks a gender lens that recognises the unique vulnerabilities of girls.

We therefore call on governments to:

Implement laws and amend inadequate/out-dated laws that harm women and girls rights

Increase investment in, and provision of, services in communities to support girls and women experiencing gender based violence and raise awareness of these services

Roll-out multi-media campaigns that tackle harmful norms and stereotypes, inform girls and women of their rights and perpetrators of the consequences of their actions

Ensure that policies and measures against violence and harassment at schools and work are put in place and implemented during and after the COVID-19 crisis

Governments should provide support to low-income families, in particular single-parent families and female headed households

Health and well-being of girls and women

The health and social impacts of COVID-19 have been devastating, and have detrimental consequences for the empowerment of women and girls.

Mental and physical health

Malnutrition in young women and girls is likely to be amplified by this pandemic, which will have long-lasting effects on healthcare, economies and food systems. Young women are often the last to eat in their families, and eat the smallest portions, even less in times of crisis, due to cultural practices and gender norms.

We have also seen the emergence of harmful social messaging with a direct correlation to lockdown and isolation measures. Popular terms such as gaining “The Quarantine 15 [pounds]” and “the COVID-19 [pounds]” are viral terms steeped in sizeism, which perpetuate stress and anxiety about the shift in eating habits.

During the lockdown, official advice from Malaysia’s Women’s Ministry directed women to make sure they wore makeup at home, and avoid loose and casual clothes in order to maintain a “happy” home. This highlights the pervasiveness of this issue.

Isolation and social distancing has resulted in lifestyle changes and research shows that loneliness often leads to disordered eating and emotional distress.

Menstrual hygiene

Periods do not stop for pandemics. Our Global U-Report poll with young women told us that 1 in 4 girls are finding it harder to manage their menstruation during COVID-19 with 50 per cent struggling to get menstrual hygiene products. Lockdowns intensify the impact of household level taboos and families under financial constraints are less likely to spend money on items that are necessities for girls, such as menstrual hygiene products. Furthermore, menstruating girls and women face inadequate access to toilets and water, and those needing to use communal facilities may be at greater risk for contracting COVID-19.

Recommendations

Urgent action is taken to address the on-going global crisis in menstrual health and hygiene

Invest in menstrual health across all youth focused initiatives

Disaggregate national data on SGD targets and recognise intersection in issues that disproportionately affect girls and women e.g. nutrition, gender-based violence and body autonomy

Regulate media and social media, to ensure it promotes positive online and digital practices, and actively enforce clearer signposting to support young people on their mental health.