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## Commission on the Status of Women

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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 Orchid Project Limited, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Orchid Project is submitting this statement on behalf of the Girl Generation - Support to the Africa-led Movement to End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) Programme.

### Background

Women and girls living in rural areas face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Globally, the overarching issues facing rural women and girls is the exclusion created by the scarcity of amenities and services such as access to education, income-generating activities, affordable housing, and healthcare services. The cumulative effect makes opportunities unreachable or unaffordable, driving them and their families into a cycle of poverty.

In Africa, women make up more than 50 percent of the population and 80 percent of them reside in rural settings; and are at a higher risk of undergoing Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting than their urban counterparts. For example, in Senegal variations in Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting prevalence among Mandingue women depending on where they live are 56 percent in urban versus 79 percent in rural areas. 28 Too Many national reports on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting prevalence indicate that with a small exception, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting prevalence is higher in the rural communities.

This context is such that they are forced to drop out of school, denying them the opportunity to acquire gainful employment and make informed decisions on factors that contribute to an increase in the risk of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, child marriage, and maternal mortality for current and future generations.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting is internationally recognised as a gross violation of human rights and a form of violence against women and girls. Over 200 million women worldwide have undergone the practice. The magnitude of the problem requires intensified, urgent international action.

The 62nd Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions recognized that, despite gains in providing access to education, rural girls are still more likely than rural boys, and girls and boys in urban settings, to remain excluded from education due to gender-specific barriers to their right to education such as the feminization of poverty, child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting, and all forms of gender-based violence, including sexual violence and harassment.

Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) places the obligation on States to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas, allowing them to participate and benefit from health care, education, social security, and development planning equally with men. Yet, women and girls in rural areas are still left behind.

### The Nexus Between Gender Equality And Innovation, Technological Change, And Education In The Digital Age

The intersectionality of the Commission on the Status of Women 2023 priority and review theme highlights the inextricable link between gender equality and access to the advancements in innovation, technological change, and education in the digital age.

The digital divide includes the technological divide which highlights the gaps in infrastructure; the content divide where web-based education and information is considered irrelevant to the needs of people and communities and the exclusion of

local, grassroots, indigenous voices and views; and the gender divide, where women and girls enjoy less access to information technology than men and boys, across the Global North and Global South, rural and urban settings.

In ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, there's been a consistent building of a critical mass towards the harnessing of technology that disseminate information, track, and aid in the reporting of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting cases. Africa is scaling up the use of digital applications, reporting toolkits, online campaigns and e-learning tools as part of digital engagement which could potentially mitigate the risks of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting. For example, in Nigeria the U-Report, a free open-source mobile messaging programme, gives the youth a voice on issues they care about and facilitates youth mobilisation campaigns through #endcuttinggirls to support social media advocacy to end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting. During its first phase, the Girl Generation programme launched the "I will END FGM" campaign across youth networks inviting young people to share videos on how they would end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting.

Despite these advancements, the capacity for women and girls in rural settings to exploit the potential of innovation and ICT as empowerment tools to end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting remains constrained due to unavailability of technical infrastructure, connection costs, and computer literacy. They are unlikely to own communication gadgets, such as radios, mobile phones and computers that aid in the dissemination of information and reporting of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting cases.

Women and girls are conspicuously missing and underrepresented in the digital space, particularly in rural settings where access, cost, and other socio-cultural factors limit their ability to engage with new technologies. With few exceptions, little effort has been made to respond to the needs and priorities of people living in rural communities; and as a result, rural women are even less likely than their urban counterparts to engage with ICT solutions designed with them in mind.

Digital technologies are a powerful catalyst for the political, economic, cultural, and social empowerment of women and girls and the promotion of gender equality.

Ahead Of The 67th Session Of The Commission On The Status Of Women, We Are Calling On Member States To;

1. Invest in innovation and digital technology infrastructure to promote gender equality and support efforts to end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting.
  - a. Allocate resources to better understand the relationship between digital technologies and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting; and create a body of evidence that will inform effective interventions that stimulate innovation for local, national, and sub-regional programming to end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting at a greater scale especially for women and girls in rural settings.
  - b. Increase financial investments in innovative technology to aid rural communities in adapting to climate change resilient agricultural practices that empower women and girls living in rural settings to break the cycle of poverty and reduce the risk of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting for girls from poorer families.
  - c. Invest in digital connectivity in rural areas and ensure a reduction in the cost of access for digital products and gadgets such as airtime, internet bundles, mobile phones and offering connectivity spaces with free WIFI that will increase access to Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting related information.

2. Narrow the gender gap in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics to include women and girls
  - a. Facilitate the inclusion, sponsorship, and reduction of barriers to education for girls from rural settings in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics through initiatives that will aid in the agency, confidence, and decision-making of women and girls to address Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in rural settings.
3. Promote ICT literacy and education for gender equality.
  - a. Create an enabling environment for the formulation, review, and adoption of holistic approaches and policies that ensure that girls are ICT literate.
  - b. Formulate policies that include the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting as an explicit goal in the ICT education sector policies and plans, with appropriate strategies and accountability frameworks.
4. Use technology in data collection, analysis, coordination, and dissemination systems.
  - a. Collect gender disaggregated data on the use of ICT education in Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting policy and decision-making, and develop targets, indicators and benchmarks to track the progress of the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting.
  - b. Prioritize the use of technology for the collection, processing and dissemination of data on real time platforms to inform Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting prevention, mitigation, and response interventions.
  - c. Improve national and subnational data collection on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, using standardized methods that allow for the comparability of data across countries, regions, and innovative methods, such as the use of technology and community-led data collection.
5. Scale up funding for ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting
  - a. Increase investment for programmes aimed at eliminating Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting through resource mobilisation from all sources, including domestic resource allocation and development funding.
  - b. Remodel traditional funding practices that lead to a shift in resourcing for women and girls in rural areas and effectively supporting grassroots and community-led programmes.
6. Ensure access to essential services
  - a. Increase access to essential services for women and girls in rural areas, including Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting survivors to quality, affordable and accessible sexual and reproductive health-care facilities, and support systems, including for mental health.
  - b. Promote the right and access to education for girls living in rural communities by providing free, quality and compulsory primary and secondary education as a strategy to mitigate the risk of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting.
7. Scale up grassroots Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting sensitization and awareness
  - a. Invest in supporting rural communities to abandon Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting by empowering women and girls, supporting community dialogues with parents and religious leaders, and large-scale

awareness raising campaigns to address negative gender and social norms that condone Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting.

- b. Prioritise girl-centred programming aimed at ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting by ensuring that the perspectives of women and girls in rural settings are included in the design, implementation, evaluation of policies and activities that affect their livelihoods.
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