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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 Plan International, Inc., 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

Over the past five years, progress for gender equality and girls' rights has been uneven. Global discussions, including at the Commission on the Status of Women, have increasingly acknowledged the rights and experiences of girls. The evolving perception of girls as agents of change and individual rights-holders has spurred initiatives that highlight their leadership potential and ability to drive social and political change. This shift is evident in the increased meaningful participation of girls in policy-making forums, such as the recent Summit of the Future, although access remains challenging, particularly for those under 18. While legal protections for girls have improved – especially regarding education, child, early and forced marriages and unions, and female genital mutilation – implementation and accountability often fall short.

Efforts to address the rights and needs of adolescent girls, particularly those aged 10 to 14, remain inadequate. As we approach the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we must face the stark reality that gender equality remains far from being achieved, particularly for girls. Many of the rights in the Beijing Declaration are still out of reach for many girls and young women, who face distinct, intersecting forms of discrimination throughout their lives, often through violence and harmful practices.

Many girls are pulled from school to take on domestic or agricultural work, undermining their right to education and limiting their potential. Harmful gender norms, that value girls and women for their fertility and stereotypical roles as wives and mothers, further limit girls' prospects of accessing and completing their education. Those who remain in school, their challenges take the form of inadequate learning conditions, gender-biased materials, and environments that are insensitive to their needs. The combination of being young and female, along with restricted access to quality education, places girls at a significant disadvantage, with lifelong consequences for their opportunities and well-being.

The celebration of Beijing +30 further takes place against a backdrop of multiple global crises- climate change, poverty, conflicts, and public health emergencies - all of which have been found to disproportionately affect girls, adolescent girls and young women. As new emergencies arise and existing ones worsen, girls, adolescents and young women bear the heaviest burden. The climate crisis severely limits their economic and educational opportunities, impacts their health, including sexual and reproductive health and increases the risk of maternal mortality and morbidity due to complications from unintended pregnancies. It also heightens the risks of gender-based violence and child, early and forced marriage and unions.

Adolescent girls are often made to take on adult responsibilities without the necessary skills or support networks. Gender differences also significantly influence how conflict is experienced. Dansha, a 17-year-old from Ethiopia, highlights that, "The impact of the war is harsher on young females, and we have experienced so many challenges during those moments." As conflicts escalate in various regions, multilateral systems struggle to respond effectively.

In this context, hard-won advances in girls' and women's rights face mounting pressure. With only five years remaining until the conclusion of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, no country is on track to achieve gender equality. Globally, girls remain marginalized, their rights neglected, and their potential undervalued. They are often grouped with "women" or "children", which overlooks their distinct needs and realities. While some progress has been made in challenging this oversight, gender-neutral and age-neutral approaches continue to dominate policymaking

discussions, failing to adequately address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that girls face.

Over the past decade, there has been significant pushback against key human rights advancements, particularly in gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights and LGBTQIA+ rights as patriarchal values resurge in both international forums and domestic politics. This backlash threatens to reverse progress on gender equality and girls' rights, places girls' and women's bodily autonomy, health and lives at risk. It is accompanied by growing resistance to addressing diversity comprehensively in the development and implementation of international policy and human rights law. This rollback is further exacerbated by decreasing financial support for gender equality and children's rights, undermining efforts to sustain the momentum for change.

In the Girls' Pact for the Future, a youth-led manifesto outlining adolescent girls' and young people's vision for a gender equal future in the context of the Summit for the Future, young people issue a stern warning: "If you, leaders of the world, do not take immediate, appropriate and significant actions, you will condemn another generation of girls to a future marked by inequality, violence, and exclusion. Progress towards gender equality will regress, widening inequality."

Considering these challenges, Plan International urges Members States to adopt a renewed and targeted focus on girls' rights at the upcoming 69th session of the Commission of the Status of Women, which will celebrate Beijing +30. The following overarching actions are essential:

- Ensure girls' voices are at the centre of decision-making: Girls (under 18) must have safe, meaningful, and institutionalized opportunities to participate in global forums, including the Commission on the Status of Women and reviews of the Beijing Declaration. Their perspectives must inform the policies that shape their futures, and their leadership must be supported.
- Defend and expand progress: In the face of growing pushback, it is critical to defend the gains made on girls' rights and push for further advancements. Regressive norms and policies must be challenged, and the focus must remain on facilitating the empowerment of girls, adolescents and young women and ensuring the realisation of their rights.
- Increase funding and data collection: Greater investments are needed to support girls' education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, health, economic empowerment and safety, among others. Without adequate funding, commitments to gender equality will remain unfulfilled promises. Enhanced disaggregated data collection is crucial to identify and address the specific challenges faced by girls.
- Implement targeted and intersectional approaches: Policies must specifically address the lived realities amid multiples and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by girls. A one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice: instead, tailored strategies must consider factors such as age, gender, disability, and the impact of crises.

While the girl child is identified as one of the critical 12 areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, the 11 other areas are equally relevant for girls. Across these areas and based on The Girls' Pact for the Future, and echoed by the 8 Transformative Actions for Adolescent Girls and Young People, identified by youth from the Pact for the Future, Plan International recommends the following actions to:

**Poverty**

- Alleviate poverty among girls and young women in implementing gender-responsive macroeconomic strategies, including tax regulation and sectoral policies. Ensure active participation of youth-led organizations and female worker associations in budgetary decisions and policy investments to prioritize their interests.

**Education**

- Ensure equal access to gender-transformative education, in removing barriers for girls, including policies addressing gender-based violence, support for pregnant and married adolescents, and access to safe, free transportation and night schools.
- Increase education funding, in allocating 15–20 per cent of public expenditure to education for better access and quality.
- Promote gender-transformative education, in integrating curricula that challenge stereotypes, promote gender equality, and include comprehensive sexuality education and diversity.

**Health**

- Implement comprehensive sexuality education in schools and in out-of-school settings that is inclusive, age- and gender-responsive, rights-based scientifically accurate, non-discriminatory and accessible.
- Ensure access to inclusive, age- and gender-responsive sexual and reproductive health services, free from stigma, discrimination, violence or coercion, eliminating barriers to access and ensuring confidentiality.
- Challenge harmful gender norms to support bodily autonomy and address toxic masculinities.
- Remove barriers to menstrual health by providing access to affordable, eco-friendly menstrual products and addressing stigma.
- Prioritize sexual and reproductive health rights as a life-saving intervention during crises and implement the Minimum Initial Service Package, transitioning to comprehensive services as soon as possible.

**Violence against women and girls**

- Strengthen and enforce laws criminalizing all forms of violence against girls and women, including domestic, sexual, and online violence, and harmful practices.
- Provide accessible, survivor-centred services such as shelters, legal aid, healthcare, and job training, while ensuring long-term, sustainable support systems.
- Raise awareness through the launch of campaigns to challenge harmful gender norms, and enhance data collection and reporting to better combat gender-based violence.
- Implementing laws that prohibit child, early and forced marriage and unions, address harmful gender norms, ensure access to comprehensive sexuality education, and support at-risk and married girls. Engage community leaders to denounce child marriage and facilitate the education of pregnant adolescents and young mothers without stigma.

**Women in armed conflict**

- Protect children, including girls in conflict, by ending grave violations against children, including recruitment and sexual violence.
- Uphold international humanitarian law to ensure safe and unhindered humanitarian assistance and provide safe education.
- Prioritize the participation of youth in peace talks and call for immediate ceasefires.

**Women and the economy**

- Facilitate youth and young women's organizations' participation in labour decision-making and advocate for informal workers' rights. Promote gender equality by investing in decent work for young women and implementing social security policies that address the gender wage gap, offer flexible working conditions, and ensure parental leave.
- Strengthen the agency and autonomy of children and young people, particularly girls and young women, by fostering their self-confidence and leadership skills to drive meaningful community change.

**Women in power and decision-making**

- Meaningfully consult and involve girls in decision-making, through inclusive methods like town halls, focus groups, and advisory boards to shape public policy.
- Empower girls as political leaders, in investing in leadership programs to build girls' capacity for political activism and civic engagement.
- Increase funding for girl-led initiatives, by providing accessible, multi-year grants for girl-led organizations and implement affirmative action, such as quotas, to ensure women's representation in leadership and peace negotiations.

**Women's human rights**

- Fully ratify and implement treaties protecting girls' rights, withdrawing any reservations that hinder their rights. Strengthen the integration of girls' rights within human rights norms and avoid politicizing their issues by supporting both gender-neutral and girl-specific language.

**Women and the environment**

- Ensure girls and young women participate in climate policy planning, implementation, and monitoring, and represent them in decision-making bodies.
- Implement gender-responsive climate and environment policies that address the unique needs of girls and women, protect their rights, and focus on equitable climate financing for low- and middle-income countries.
- Promote green skills and empowerment, in providing girls and women access to green jobs, entrepreneurship opportunities, and resources for climate-resilient livelihoods, supporting women-led initiatives in sustainable agriculture and eco-tourism.

### **The girl child**

- Mainstream girls' rights in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and take targeted action against critical issues affecting girls, such as early, child and forced marriage and unions, female genital mutilation, and discrimination in education and health.

The Beijing Declaration and Plan for Action envisioned a world where gender equality is a reality for all, including for girls, adolescent girls and young women. As we mark its 30th anniversary amidst global crises, States must reaffirm their commitment to this vision. Girls are not merely vulnerable; they are powerful agents of change. Investing in their rights and futures, while working to end conflicts, is essential for creating a more just and equitable world with sustainable peace. As Rania, an 18-year-old from the Middle East and North Africa region, powerfully stated, "I'm very optimistic about our future generation and as much as cruel reality we live in. I'm really like hoping for the best. And actually, I believe that our generation is going to take the big steps toward a better future for all of us."

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