



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-eighth session

10-21 March 2014

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives**

### **Statement submitted by Public Health Institute, 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](#).



## Statement

Public Health Institute welcomes the theme of the fifty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, “Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls”.

This theme is particularly relevant for the organization’s programme called “Let Girls Lead”, which empowers girls and their allies to lead social change through advocacy, education, economic empowerment, storytelling and strategic partnerships. The programme has improved the health, education and livelihoods of more than 2 million girls around the world by empowering girls, local leaders and organizations to advocate for girl-centred laws, policies and funding. Public Health Institute is a non-profit organization with almost five decades of experience in improving the health, nutrition, well-being and quality of life of people around the world. Its programmes and initiatives primarily focus on Millennium Development Goals 2, 3 and 5. In order to achieve universal primary education, gender equality, improved maternal health and universal access to reproductive health, Let Girls Lead and Public Health Institute’s 80 other programmes work to ensure that Governments and United Nations agencies continue to prioritize the health and rights of women and girls and systematically integrate a gender perspective into national legislation and policies as well as international agreements.

### **Women, girls and the future of development**

The Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women emphasizes that women share common concerns that can be addressed only by working together and in partnership with men towards the common goal of gender equality around the world. This philosophy also applies directly to the Millennium Development Goals over the last 14 years and to the new post-2015 international development agenda. As 2015 approaches, there are still significant challenges that lie ahead to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. In order to make progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, Let Girls Lead and Public Health Institute recommend that Member States take the following actions to promote gender equality, achieve universal primary education and beyond and reduce maternal mortality:

- (a) Enact laws that protect girls and young women from violence and bullying, including sexual violence, in schools;
- (b) Support advocacy to ensure the implementation of laws and policies and their responsiveness to the needs of girls and young women;
- (c) Facilitate access to education, healthcare and job skills training for young girls living in rural and remote areas;
- (d) Build the capacity of girls and young women to participate meaningfully in the democratic process and provide substantive input on decisions that affect their lives;
- (e) Raise the legal age of marriage to 18 and ensure grass-roots enforcement of the legal age limit;
- (f) Provide universal access to sexual and reproductive health services to women and adolescent girls;

- (g) Ensure that women's and girls' sexual and reproductive rights are respected, protected and fulfilled;
- (h) Develop and implement women and girl-centred economic empowerment strategies.

### **Beyond primary education**

The world's more than 600 million adolescent girls face enormous challenges. More than a quarter live in extreme poverty and at least half are unable to attend school. While there has been progress in school enrolment, according the 2013 Millennium Development Goals progress report, there are still 123 million young people aged 15 to 24 who lack basic reading and writing skills, 61 per cent of whom are young women. Primary education and competency in basic literacy skills are essential to achieving gender equality. Nations should pass laws and policies to protect girls and promote their education in order to improve the adherence rates of girls and young women in primary and secondary education. Furthermore, civil society and community advocacy must be supported to ensure the implementation of these laws and policies, and their responsiveness to the needs of girls and young women.

One illustrative example of a landmark law enacted to protect children is the passage and implementation of the national Children's Law in Liberia. Let Girls Lead partnered with Liberian leaders and girl advocates to promote and protect the rights of Liberian girls, ensuring that girls can complete schools, have access to medical care and be protected from harmful traditional practices such as child marriage. The new Children's Law stipulates that the Ministry of Education must encourage children's enrolment and re-enrolment into school, take special measures to ensure equal access to education and ensure that teacher training curricula include instructions regarding teaching child rights.

Education is a significant factor in determining the quality of life that women can provide for themselves and their families. The Millennium Development Goals were successful in putting universal primary education on the international development agenda but more can be done. Member States should support girls and young women to continue their education past primary school and to pursue secondary and tertiary education in order to achieve true gender equality. The World Health Organization (WHO) specifically emphasizes that higher education among women leads to a lower fertility rate, which is also correlated to a lower poverty rate. Girls with higher levels of schooling are also less likely to marry as children. Most experts anticipate that a greater worldwide population of highly educated women will lead to further overall global development, as well as healthier individual children and families.

### **Sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and adolescent girls**

As laid out in the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women, women and adolescent girls have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The Millennium Development Goals did include maternal health as a priority in 2000 but did not originally include the fourth goal of the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action, to provide access to reproductive and sexual health services including family planning. The narrow focus of the Millennium Development Goals

on maternal health did not provide space to focus on the needs of women and adolescent girls, but instead focused all global efforts on the health of the child. The addition of target 5b to the Millennium Development Goals only in 2005 gave the global community five years fewer to integrate and address the target than for the other targets.

According to WHO, about 16 million adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 give birth every year, most in low- and middle-income countries. Childbearing at such an early age poses severe health risks to girls, who are twice as likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as those over age 20. Furthermore, girls under the age of 15 are five times more likely to die during childbirth. The international development community and individual Member States must take further steps to address the needs of women and adolescent girls regarding their sexual and reproductive health in order for gender equality to be achieved.

Raising the legal age of marriage in every country to at least 18 is one effective way to curtail adolescent pregnancy, childbearing and maternal mortality. In addition, grass-roots advocacy with traditional authorities, chiefs and local government has sharply reduced and even eliminated the practice of early and forced marriage. Currently, one third of the world's girls are married before the age of 18, and one in nine is married before the age of 15. Early and forced marriage and early pregnancy have devastating emotional and physical impacts on adolescent girls and their families. Babies born to adolescent mothers are more likely to be premature, have a low birth weight, be more at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS and have a 75 per cent higher infant mortality rate than babies born to older mothers. Every Member State could significantly lower maternal mortality, improve the health of individual adolescent girls and families and reduce in-country challenges to gender equality simply by raising the legal age of marriage to 18.

### **Women and girl-centred economic empowerment**

In order to achieve gender equality, women must be equal partners both socially and economically. One quarter of all households worldwide are headed by women, and female-maintained households are often among the poorest because of wage discrimination. A particular challenge to achieving gender equality is that women are often unable to find or pursue work outside of their home due to their domestic and child-rearing duties and are often not able to make economic decisions regarding their home and family. Women's and girls' economic empowerment is essential to achieving global gender equality.

Let Girls Lead's research demonstrates that adolescent girls often lack social support, and that community social norms can create barriers to their economic advancement. Economic empowerment can be a critical lever for change in adolescent girls' lives, helping them to gain financial independence, establish good saving habits and improve their future prospects for participation in the labour force. It can also provide girls with mobility and confidence, strengthen their social networks and improve their health. Recent research has found that, particularly in Latin America, there are few programmes working to improve adolescent girls' financial literacy, job skills or economic security. An increased focus on the economic and personal security of adolescent girls and young women is an important step towards achieving gender equity.