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Statement submitted by The Well Being Foundation, 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 order to achieve women's empowerment within the context of sustainable development and eliminate and prevent all forms of violence against women, the Well Being Foundation Africa is placing adolescent girls at the core of our shared mission: what you teach a girl, she will carry with her into womanhood.

The implementation of Goal Three — to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages — of the Sustainable Development Goals can only be possible by paying due attention to reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health indices. Adolescent girls health is an essential component to achieve this: reproductive education is a key means of implementing women's empowerment in line with the new universal agenda for sustainable development. If you teach an adolescent girl that she can choose when to start a family, she will carry this choice with her into womanhood. She will go on to ensure positive future health outcomes such as enabling her to make informed decisions regarding her reproductive health, maternity care and children's health.

In order to realise Goal Five — to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls — of the Sustainable Development Goals, we must ensure adolescent girls rights. The Well Being Foundation Africa rigorously supports empowerment mechanisms that ensure adolescent girls are not denied their right to an education and livelihood of their choosing. In 2014, as part of a strong network, we lead the calls to “Bring Back Our Girls” in the wake of the Boko Haram kidnapping crisis. As an advocate of adolescent girls empowerment, I called for the international community to not only bring back the missing Chibok girls but also help the millions of other adolescent girls who have been marginalised in society: we must provide safer schools, this can not only ensure that young girls are secure during their school years but also provide them with a basis in health education that they need to keep themselves and their families safe, long after graduation and into womanhood. In my home country, Nigeria, we have placed an emphasis on fostering a new generation of female leaders within my home state of Kwara and indeed, across Nigeria. I have witnessed firsthand that if you teach a girl the importance of her rights and access to education, she will carry it with her into womanhood, which is why I founded the All Kwara Women group, which empowers young girls in the community through education, economic empowerment, and community engagement.

The statistics concerning adolescent girls in Nigeria are dire: 1 in 5 Nigerian girls are married by age 15 and very few married girls between the ages 15-19 are in school. A lack of education robs girls of a voice in both their marriage and the wider community and into the adult responsibilities of motherhood. The health ramifications of early marriage amongst girls who are pulled out of education into the adult responsibilities of marriage are very troubling. Girls who give birth before the age of 15 are five times more likely to die during childbirth than women in their 20s, and the children of child brides are 60 per cent more likely to die before their first birthday than the children of mothers who are over 19. If you teach an adolescent girl that it is her right to choose her path in life, she will carry this with her into womanhood. At the Well Being Foundation Africa, we support the Girl Declaration, and are a proud partner of the Girl Effect and Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage initiatives in Nigeria — together we combat the status quo to ensure adolescent girls have access to the future they are entitled to.

Challenging the status quo with regard to education must also be paired with challenging the status quo regarding violence against women. Securing Goal Five of the Sustainable Development Goals can only be realised with the elimination of violence against women and girls: two thirds of Nigerian women are believed to have experienced physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Domestic violence affects one in two Nigerian women, but due to a lack of reporting and legislative structure to effectively prosecute domestic violence, this number may be higher. As a member of the Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women, the Well Being Foundation Africa worked tirelessly to see the actualisation of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Bill in Nigeria. Battling legislative inertia to bring justice to domestic violence victims will require community cooperation and grassroots domestic violence awareness initiatives. If you teach a girl that she has tools to galvanise grassroots awareness on culturally sensitive initiatives, she will take this with her into womanhood.

Women are 50 per cent of our global workforce. Adolescent girls are the next generation of the workforce. Empowering adolescent girls empowers our future economies and communities. The Well Being Foundation Africa advocacy programmes include the empowerment of adolescent girls, as they are crucial to progress on maternal, newborn, and child health, as well as community and economic development. If you teach adolescent girls: that they choose when to start a family, that they have the right to choose their path in life and that violence should never be something they fear; these girls will go into womanhood armed with the tools to transform communities and equipped to build sustainable results.

We commend the United Nations Economic and Social Council, United Nations Women and the Commission on the Status of Women and our civil society colleagues for continuing to endorse our shared mission and strengthen empowerment mechanisms for women across the world.
