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Statement submitted by Casa Generalizia della Societa’ del Sacro Cuore, Congregations of St. Joseph, Loretto Community (Sisters of Loretto), and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, non-governmental organizations 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

We welcome the opportunity to address the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. In particular, we wish to highlight girls' empowerment through links to sustainable development and achieving the SDGs.

In order for women to fully and effectively participate in decision-making in public life, they must feel safe in their private relationships and residences. Therefore, we start with the importance of the elimination of violence against girls and women.

UN Women's research shows that one in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence – mostly by an intimate partner. Globally, almost 1 in 5 women have experienced violence at the hands of a man they know. In addition, emerging data shows an increase in calls to domestic violence helplines in many countries since the outbreak of COVID-19, and oftentimes survivors have limited information and awareness about available services and limited access to support services.

In some countries, resources and efforts have been diverted from a violence against women response to immediate COVID-19 relief, while sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women continue to occur on streets, in public spaces and online – without repercussions for the perpetrators.

Violence against women and girls is a human rights violation. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, gender-based violence and exploitation rise as resources dwindle, land becomes increasingly uninhabitable, and climate change intensifies. Women and girls in rural communities are typically the ones gathering food, water, and household energy resources, as well as undertaking the unpaid labor of cooking, cleaning, growing food and caring for children and elders. The effects of climate change are making it harder to manage household responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, gathering resources, and caring for children, especially in remote rural communities. This only exacerbates a situation where already, women and girls do 3 times as much of the unpaid care work than men, and each year over 12 million girls are married before age 18.

We affirm that we must achieve the aims of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. However, progress cannot be made if the global gender pay gap remains stuck at 16 per cent.

We welcome the actions of UN Women's recently formed multi-partner movement for bold action, Generation Equality, as well as civil society efforts for both equality and equity. The full development of girls and women depends upon urgent action, the fullest commitment and collaboration of member states and civil society partners.

Various girls' groups in our organizations and through various gatherings related to the International Day of the Girl, report that they experience:

- Reduced access to education, noting that remote learning not accessible to all
- Reduced access to sanitary pads, which also interrupts education
- Reduced food assistance, which is exacerbated by the climate crisis and COVID-19 pandemic
- Increased discrimination and other vulnerabilities, including alarming rates of family violence and sexual assault

- Increased risk for marriage and teenage pregnancy
- Reduced financial security and increased economic inequality
- Reduced access to information and justice re: current policies and reporting corrupt practices
- Increased home and family care by girls, interrupting their education
- Isolation due to COVID-19: restricted social contacts and support from extended families
- Increases in family stress, loneliness, anxiety, depression

The impact of COVID-19 has caused further erosion of previous gains for girls and women. The pandemic has revealed that women and girls continue to carry the burden of inequality in all spheres of life. This is a grave injustice and infringement of their human rights.

We applaud the efforts of the UN to include the voices of youth. However, it is important to note that girls are increasingly at-risk, not only due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, but by the unwillingness of adults to prioritize girls' right to equality and commit to addressing all the ways girls continue to be left behind.

Oppressive cultural norms, attitudes, and practices take a toll on girls and contribute to the stress they experience on a daily basis and decreasing mental health. Girls have said that inequality begins at home, as parents cling to traditional gender roles and expectations, and fail to grasp girls' reality and the issues confronting them in current times. Girls are often unable to discuss taboo topics at home when in fact they are in desperate need of support and education in navigating adolescence in particular. Even in families that show empathy and understanding of girls' experience, the ability to be a mentor or role model may not be present as parents struggle with the legacy of their own upbringing. Families need help in learning to provide a supportive and empowering climate for their daughters to flourish. Girls say parents need to be more willing to be open, to listen, to understand their issues, to be willing to change their mindset. "We cannot delay the conversation any longer...We are risking millions of girls being abused because parents are dismissive or unwilling to discuss what is happening to them."

Girls continue to be given second-class status in homes, schools, communities and workspaces due to cultural attitudes that limit their access and participation in activities and opportunities that enable the advancement of boys but leave girls behind. These attitudes are often additionally reinforced by religion, which does not always support what girls believe about gender equality, and thus serves to silence them. Likewise, global media portrays girls and women in stereotyped and objectified ways and does not represent or support the true diversity of girls and the free expression of their identity. This is particularly true for differently-abled girls, girls of color, girls on the move and girls living on the margins. Girls need safe spaces to speak, to be heard and supported, to articulate and realize their deepest identity and potential, to express their ideas and beliefs.

Women and girls are absent from decision-making and negotiations at all levels. According to #NationsUnited, we have a situation where, globally, 75 per cent of parliamentarians are men, 73 per cent of managerial decision-makers are men, 67 per cent climate negotiators are men, and 87 per cent of people at the peace table are men. It is recognized that when peace settlements include women, negotiations and outcomes are more durable.

We call upon governments to:

End gender-based violence perpetrated against Girls and Women as outlined in the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women

- Collaborate with civil society, including religious leaders, and faith-based groups such as ours, to help change the harmful and restrictive cultural norms and practices that diminish the ability for women and girls to develop and reach their full potential. (Many of these organizations are already addressing gender-based violence with curriculum and women and girls' empowerment initiatives.
- Provide Girls and Women with Equal and Equitable Access to quality education, vocational training and work opportunities, including in STEM fields.
- Commit to ensuring girls' completion of secondary school, which increases girls' survival rates, potential income, and decreases the likelihood of child marriage.
- Provide Education for families, boys, communities and social institutions regarding gender equality and equity, promoting why they are important for sustainable development.
- Promote culturally appropriate education in sexual health, and access to appropriate services and resources.
- Open spaces in Governments and International institutions for the participation of women and girls in decision-making and negotiations at all levels, with institutionalized mechanisms to guarantee their representation in all sectors.
- Provide appropriate educational actions to dismantle patriarchal and cultural attitudes, norms, practices and policies that harm girls and women and prevent their equality and equitable treatment in all areas of society.
- In conclusion, women and girls seek to claim the power to build their own capacity, to represent themselves, and to be part of decision-making and problem solving, demanding and creating responsive solutions to the issues of inequality that limit their full potential. They are ready, capable and are already demonstrating the ability to be capable and compassionate leaders. We applaud those governments and institutions that are committed to making leadership equally accessible to all and urge all governments to welcome the wisdom of half of our world's population.
