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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 Helpline Foundation for the Needy, Abuja, 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

Giving voice to the girl child and building self reliant women in achieving gender equality

At the United Nations high-level meeting marking the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Secretary-General, António Guterres, called on Member States to accelerate progress toward achieving the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action. Gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls are inextricably linked to achieving sustainable development for all. We acknowledge the recognition by global leaders that the commitments made 25 years ago in Beijing have not been matched by action, investments and accountability; however, more needs to be done in advancing the empowerment of women and girls especially in rural communities.

Helpline foundation for the Needy is a woman led organization set to empower girls, who are the women of tomorrow, through accessing free basic education for girls and financial empowerment of widows and vulnerable women in Nigeria. The Major Focus Areas are:

- Promoting the Girl child right to minimize gender inequality in the northern Nigeria, Women Economic Empowerment
- The ‘Girl child Realize your Potential’ which is an annual girl’s summit, aims at empowering girls of secondary schools education through scholarships and giving them a platform to represent the voiceless girls through the Voice of the Girls parliament.
- The non revolving loan Scheme for widows and vulnerable women to be self employed and financially stable.
- The African women Conference co-hosting with African empowerment initiative aimed at creating awareness and influencing policies on gender imbalance and ending violence against women.

In Helpline Foundation for the Needy, Abuja, the girl child is the woman of tomorrow; we strongly believe that educating the girl child is a grassroots measure for empowering the women of tomorrow. However, the society continues to restrict girl education through cultural and religious norms. The pandemic has elevated the poverty level of women, resulting to an increase in the level of unwanted teenage pregnancies, child marriage, physical and emotional women abuse, girls trafficking, child molestation and modern slavery. During the pandemic, academic activities was almost grounded, children couldn’t go to school; Except for the few who could access the internet for virtual studies.

Giving voice to the Girl child

Girls suffer more than boys in terms of missing out on education. In the north-east of Nigeria only 41 per cent of eligible girls receive a primary education, 47 per cent in the north-west of which 41 per cent may not proceed to secondary education because of early marriage, traditions or poverty. The Universal Basic Education Act 2004, provides that primary education is free and compulsory and offered to children aged 6-14. The formal and compulsory component is 9 years of schooling divided into primary education (6 years) and junior secondary education (3 years). Addressing these challenges and many other issues affecting the Girl child have over been our mission as a foundation from inception.

We started with an annual capacity building Girls Summit, which resulted in the establishment of the Voice Of the Girls Parliament. The girls’ parliament was

established during the annual girls' summit in 2012, the girls from ages 9-18 come from diverse backgrounds to represent various segment of the society. In their sessions, they share ideas and come to an agreed recommendation on a particular topic affecting the girls. The report is disseminated through the media and sent to the relevant government agencies. The Voice of the girls' parliament (VOGP) enables the girls to get a realistic view and knowledge of life in the political realm, building confidence in the girls, and to enable them speak out and fight against forms of violence against the girl child in their various schools and the society as well. Membership is free as we hope to have more girls in the parliament in the nearest future. They are guided by facilitators from the foundation to ensure smooth coordination of their seating while the girls take full charge of their debates and resolutions based on democratic principles. Their resolutions are forwarded to the legislators and appropriate policy makers' desk.

The Women Non-Interest Loan Scheme

Despite the many interventions against harmful cultural norms meted out on women who have lost their husbands, widows continue to face challenges of losing their rights to controlling their husbands properties left behind, being subjected to harmful traumatic rituals. Helpline foundation has been advocating for an end to this practices while ensuring that these widows and vulnerable women are self reliant.

The financial stability of a woman is another form of empowerment that boost her self confidence to be able to make decisions for herself and children. Women groups have widows and women with disabilities among them

The non-interest revolving loan Scheme was established since 2010 and has been sustained to disburse cash loans to vulnerable women to start a small scale business of their choice while we offer basic business training for them. Clusters of this vulnerable women meet within their various neighborhoods to voice out challenges facing them and way forward, while helpline facilitators ensures that their plights and needs are taken care of. These clusters of Helpline Foundation Women are currently well represented at council levels within the FCT.

Recommendations

We urge the inclusion of youths especially girls in decision making processes of the government at grass root level. This is a special appeal to the ministry of women and youth affairs of Nigeria.

The provision of implementable digital sector for the young girls to freely and easily access the internet for academic purposes in addition to the free education program by the universal basic education board

We urge the UN and Member states to invest in ensuring that all girl child acquires basic formal education including science and technology education and access to internet

Implementing all Social protection policies of the governments to give women access to the labour markets, address economic risks faced by working women and ensuring that poor families and households meet their basic needs.

We urge the Member States, UN agencies and civil societies to join hands in promoting full and equal representation of women in leadership and decision making processes including ending gender discrimination in local and national laws, policies and customs.