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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 The Fred Hollows Foundation, Limited, 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

Blindness and vision impairment affects more than a quarter of the world's population, over 2.2 billion people with more than 1.1 billion living with a condition that could have been prevented or is yet to be addressed. 55% of those living with a vision impairment are women and girls. The Fred Hollows Foundation wants to see a world in which all people have access to high quality, affordable eye health and because we know that women and girls are disproportionately affected by blindness and vision impairment – this access is crucial.

Eye health, by virtue of the scale of the problem, its reach across every corner of the globe and intensity in low- and middle-income countries, its direct gendered inequity and its impact across the social and economic fabric of society, has a catalytic role to play in unlocking opportunity towards achieving an equal world for women and girls.

The impact of poor eye health on children, their education and future livelihoods

Globally, at least 450 million children have an eye health condition that needs treatment, with 90 million children living with some form of vision impairment. 448 million children and adolescents have refractive errors (meaning they need to wear spectacles) and 90 million children and adolescents live with sight loss. The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health reported that children with vision loss in low- and middle-income countries are up to five times less likely to be in formal education. The vast majority of what a child learns is processed through vision and visual aids, making good vision critical to a child's ability to participate in education. Untreated eye health conditions need to be identified early, otherwise children are at a disadvantage and may fall behind in school enrolment, educational performance, and completion. Vision impairment in children can severely impact educational outcomes, contribute to low self-esteem and future socio-economic potential.

Where girls are blind or significantly vision impaired, they are often left out of accessing education and girls generally are often charged with care giving for adults with vision impairment impacting their ability to gain an education.

Women and girls with blindness and vision impairment are often disempowered from conversations and decision-making that affects their health and wellbeing and those of their families.

Women and girls are more likely to develop vision impairment and less likely to get treatment. Women and girls often face significant cultural barriers and gender discrimination, which means they are less likely to receive services or treatment with the same frequency as men.

Women occupy most domestic or unpaid care roles and women with blindness are often locked out of paid employment, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and disadvantage for women with vision-related disability.

Most significantly, up to 9 out of every 10 girls and women don't need to be blind, as the most common eye conditions, cataract, and refractive error, can be easily prevented or treated.

Women make up 70 percent of the global healthcare workforce (both paid and unpaid) yet occupy less than 25 percent of the most influential leadership positions. Women are also under-represented in leadership positions within the eye health sector and this disparity becomes greater at higher levels of leadership. Women play a critical role in the advancement of global health, both in formal roles and informally

within their families and communities, but men continue to hold the majority of leadership positions.

Next Steps

Gender equity in eye health is not just about eye health, it is about women and girls having equality throughout the whole social fabric of society. The adoption of General Assembly resolution [75/310](#) 'Vision for Everyone: accelerating action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals' in 2021 was a pivotal moment elevating gender equity within eye health, amplifying the role eye health can play in the march towards a gender equal world.

It is estimated that 40% of children are blind from eye conditions that could have been prevented or could be managed if the child had access to eye care services. To improve child eye health and reduce disability, comprehensive services are needed at community, primary, secondary, and tertiary level. The Lancet Commission reported spectacles to be one of the most effective health interventions for children, reducing the chance of failing a class by 44%. School-based eye health programmes offer an effective, cost-effective model to deliver eye care to schoolchildren, and are efficient in respect to time and resources.

The digital age provides a great opportunity for greater access to information and the flow on effects for education and literacy, but this opportunity needs to be matched with considerations around stable, sustainable and adequate energy supplies, access to adaptive technology, appropriate training and re-training with technology and an attention to ensuring information is provided in accessible formats. There is a danger with rapidly changing digital technologies and environments (such as live online platforms), that the gap in fact widens for people with vision related disability due to the breadth and speed of developments and lack of regulation and practice standards in digital accessibility.

We call for these actions:

Prevention and treatment: Implement comprehensive eye health and screening services at community, primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels to improve child eye health and reduce vision related disability.

Inclusion: Ensure all digital technologies, platforms and information (including those in the educational space and more broadly) meet accessibility standards and children have access to appropriate compensatory skills training and assistive devices.

This is why we, The Fred Hollows Foundation, acting on behalf of the global eye health sector, seek support from UN Women to help elevate gender equity within eye health and to amplify the role eye health can play in the march towards a gender equal world.