



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

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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 Zonta International, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Zonta International, with the support of the undersigned organizations, presents to the participants of the 62nd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women the following statement for consideration of the Commission in its deliberations on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls.

Each year, 15 million girls are married before the age of 18. Experts estimate that if there is no reduction in child marriage, the global number of women married as children will reach 1.2 billion by 2050. Rural girls, more affected by the practice of child, early and forced marriage, are twice as likely to marry as girls in urban areas. Child, early and forced marriages both result from and further perpetuate the poverty, inequality and insecurity that rural girls disproportionately experience in their everyday lives.

Poverty, traditional social norms and lack of education are all drivers of child, early and forced marriage in rural communities and are further perpetuated by the continued practice of child marriage. Girls living in rural areas are very isolated and lack the knowledge, resources and social support to understand what other options they may have. Without access to information and education and little or no opportunity to improve their chances of earning a living to pull themselves out of poverty, girls living in poverty-stricken rural areas often opt into early marriages to escape the cycle of poverty, thinking their needs will be met by their new husbands and families. The reality is that may never happen. These girls and their families are simply making the best choices among the very limited options they have.

The consequences of child, early and forced marriage for girls are devastating. It robs girls of their childhoods, education and ability to socialize with peers. Child brides are more likely to become victims of domestic violence and to contract HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases. Forced to become sexually active and pregnant before their bodies have fully matured, child brides are also more likely to suffer devastating injuries like obstetric fistula or die due to complications during childbirth.

Even where laws have established 18 as the legal minimum age of marriage, rural girls face additional obstacles. Without birth certificates, many rural women and girls do not know their exact age. As a result, they assess the legal age of majority as the age a girl reaches puberty, allowing her to be married and become pregnant well before she is 18.

Child, early and forced marriage is a gross violation of human rights, but it is also a sustainable development issue. While Target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals is critical to galvanizing support for actions to reduce child marriage globally, the Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty, health, education, nutrition, food security, economic growth and reduction of inequality will also not be achieved unless significant progress is made on reducing child marriage.

All women and girls, including the most vulnerable rural women and girls, should enjoy equal rights and be able to achieve their full potential. All girls should know their rights and be empowered to decide if, when and who to marry. Zonta International calls on the United Nations and its Member States to find effective short term and long term methods to eliminate child, early and forced marriage and empower all women and girls and ensure that the unique needs of the most vulnerable

rural women and girls are addressed. Strategies to address child, early and force marriage should include:

- Strengthen and enforce the implementation of national laws that set 18 as the minimum age of marriage
  - Where the law allows children to marry before the age of 18, governments must establish new laws to set the minimum age of marriage at 18, and any loopholes related to parental consent or customary laws must be removed. Governments must also train national and local officials to enforce and monitor the implementation and execution of these laws, especially in rural areas where girls may not be aware of the existence of such laws or of their rights under the law.
- Mobilize communities to abandon harmful traditional practices
  - Deep-rooted social and cultural norms and attitudes often pressure girls to marry young. Programs to address child, early and forced marriage must engage community leaders, parents and extended families, the media and young people to change attitudes and behaviors related to child marriage.
- Empower young girls to understand their rights and provide them with access to peer support networks and education and training to prevent early and forced marriage
  - Programs like the United Nations Population Fund’s Action for Adolescent Girls initiative in Niger, funded by Zonta International, provide safe spaces and support networks for girls to receive the training, skills, including financial management, and information they need to feel empowered to say no to early and forced marriages.
- Ensure equal access to quality education at all levels and address the unique needs of young married girls to allow them to return to school and complete their education.
  - Lack of secondary schools in many rural areas means girls often live very far from the nearest school. Girls need to be able to travel safely to and from school, and school facilities must include sex-segregated toilets and washing facilities, complying with SDG targets 4.A and 6.2, so girls do not miss school once they begin menstruating. Married girls need to be allowed and encouraged to return to school and should be supported with catch-up classes and childcare services if needed.
  - In Madagascar, UNICEF’s Let Us Learn program, funded by Zonta International, is helping to ensure that families and communities protect girls from early marriage and keep them in school, while at the same time encouraging adolescent girls who have married and had children to return to school to continue their education.

Eliminating child, early and forced marriage is critical to achieving the sustainable development goals; however, to eliminate this harmful practice, the global community must also address the barriers facing rural women and girls and ensure that equal attention is given to address the drivers of child marriage in rural communities. We must ensure that no woman or girl is left behind.

Zonta International is a global organization pledged to empower women through service and advocacy. The Objects of Zonta International include:

- To improve the legal, political, economic, educational, health, and professional status of women at the global and local level through service and advocacy.
- To promote justice and universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms

During the 2016-2018 Biennium, Zonta International is investing 4 million USD in international projects in cooperation with UN agencies, in addition to more than 1 million USD into its own educational scholarships and awards for women and girls. The focus of Zonta's global and local service and advocacy work is on achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal No. 5, Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Within Goal No. 5 is a specific target to eliminate harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage.

**This statement is supported by:**

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