



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
7 December 2017

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-second session

12–23 March 2018

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 Grail, 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

The realization of gender equality and full empowerment of all women and girls everywhere is crucial to achieving sustainable development. The constant inequalities and exclusions women and girls face, such as access to education and fair wages, cut across all income and location divides. Rural women and girls, however, are subjected to inequalities and hardships at a higher rate than other geographical areas. The Grail, an international women's organization, with roots in Christian faith, present in more than 17 countries on all six continents, is committed to the empowerment of women and girls, environmental sustainability, and the transformation of the world into a global community of peace and justice. The Grail calls for international and local action to tackle the global issue of rural women and girls' inequalities and exclusion.

We acknowledge the lack of access to education as one of the biggest challenges rural girls face. The reduced number of educational institutes in rural areas limits the opportunities for girls to access higher education and be qualified for better jobs. Moreover, the long distances girls have to walk to and from school constitute a huge barrier for girls' completion of basic education levels. One of our Grail chapters in Brazil shares about the impact of this issue, "In Brazil, the vast majority of rural girls have to travel great distances to access the school and, even when they finish high school, rarely they can attend university. Lack of opportunities to have a job has often the consequence of early marriage or, for those who do not marry, the exodus to the big cities where they will work in services with precariousness as domestic servants, often being subject to sexual exploitation, sexual harassment and prostitution, especially in the poorest regions of the country."

In Mozambique, "Lack of employment increases the chances of human trafficking in rural areas as many girls and young women are trafficked to urban areas believing they will have better opportunities there while they will actually work as maids (with unacceptable salaries or no payment at all in some cases) and prostitutes."

Other challenges like access to hygiene and sanitation continue to hinder girls from attending school as well, especially when they start menstruation. Sexual education is still a taboo in many rural areas which leads to girls not having adequate knowledge about their sexuality and family planning. This results in early or unwanted pregnancies which force most girls out of school and excludes them from the social life of a girl within their community.

Education is a basic human right and all girls must have access to it. Girls' academic performance will drastically improve if schools are located within the villages or have boarding establishments. During the life skills and life orientation classes, girls must be educated about their sexuality and be provided with a school guidance counsellor. Departments of Health and Wellness of all governments must budget for the distribution of free sanitary pads to girls in school every month, carried out through a consultation with a family planning professional.

Girls should be provided with skills development trainings which advance their knowledge and access to opportunities such as computer literacy and business management. These skills can be advanced through girls' clubs in schools and communities. Other forms of community capacity building for girls can include educational entertainment like drama, sports, art and cultural expressions.

We acknowledge that poverty often forces girls to work. The constraints in accessing education by girls in rural areas prevents them from breaking the cycle of poverty and expose them to a systematic violation of their basic human rights. While girls and women constitute a significant part of the workforce in rural areas, much of this work continues to be unrecognized and unpaid. The Grail in Mexico shares about

the experience of working with young low-paid workers and the impact on the community, "... when they reach the age of 15 or 16 girls want to find a way to leave their community because of the hardship of working in the fields that pays almost nothing, sometimes just corn & chickpeas for their families". This is emphasized by the lack of land ownership by women and the pay gap between men and women.

The uneven distribution of domestic and care work based on traditional gender norms disadvantages girls and limits their academic performance as they are expected to spend more time completing housekeeping tasks as a way of preparing for womanhood.

The lack of power in decision-making processes within households and the community in general, continues to hinder girls' meaningful participation, and contribution to the development of their communities.

The future of the women of tomorrow depends on the girls of today. Community leaders should engage girls in the decisions that concern the community well-being and work together to solve issues, to create a better social environment for everyone. Policies that disadvantage women must be replaced by more inclusive and fair legislative practices that equally promote both men and women's economic empowerment in rural areas.

Lack of information exposes girls to trafficking, as they typically believe the false promises of a better life elsewhere. Mentorship and role modelling are pivotal for the development of girls. Mentorship programs should be put in place that assist rural girls in creating a vision of personal and professional goals for the future and supporting them in developing their rural communities.

Harmful cultural practices still play a huge role in oppressing girls in rural areas. Practices like female genital mutilation, virginity testing, child marriage and others violate the rights of the girls leaving them vulnerable to gender based violence, sexually transmitted diseases and mental illnesses and disturbance. We recommend community engagements and discussions that include men and boys, women and girls, community leaders and traditional leaders. These discussions will bring about a paradigm shift in attitude and behaviour towards girls and women.

Girls in rural areas continue to fall behind when it comes to engagement in Information and Communication Technologies. Most of rural areas still face many difficulties related to electricity and internet provision. With these barriers, girls have limited, if any access to computers and internet. The gap between girls and boys with access to internet is very high as many families in rural areas continue to believe that Information and Communication Technologies is a field for boys. We recommend that there should be libraries built close to schools with computer laboratories and free internet connections and wi-fi. Library and computer centres should have training available for rural girls to learn about cyberspace and how to search for online books, extra classes and work opportunities. More programs that aim to engage girls in Information and Communication Technology as well as in other Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics fields must be developed in rural areas.

The impacts of climate change have led to drastic changes in the environmental conditions in some parts of the world. Girls in rural areas are facing droughts and floods that prevent them from going to school and create new implications for their daily survival. Tasks such as fetching water and collecting firewood have become more challenging to complete. National strategies should be enforced to states that address and combat the issues and effects of climate change on girls. Climate change insurances for countries should be encouraged and made accessible for governments. Rural areas always need to be a priority when hit by a natural disaster. Rescue missions should equally distribute essential items to girls' homes including clean

water, natural resources for heat and cooking fuel, and medical supplies to minimize the impact on one of the most vulnerable segments of the population.

The Agenda 2030 pledges to leave no one behind in the road to sustainability. We cannot allow rural girls to continue to be marginalized, excluded and left behind. Full inclusion of rural girls is required in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. By eliminating the factors that contribute to the lack of access to education, we will be creating a ripple effect of rural girls' excellence. Now is the time to unleash the potential of rural girls and make them agents of change for their lives and communities.
