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Statement submitted by Plan International, Inc., 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

Learn, Lead, Decide and Thrive: Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural girls

Background

Women and girls, men and boys experience life differently as a result of deep-rooted gender divisions of roles and responsibilities, entrenched gender norms, and gender-related power dynamics. Women and girls as a group often have little political, economic or social power while girls, by virtue of both their gender and age, are particularly at risk and remain one of the most marginalized and excluded populations in the world — a status that is exacerbated in rural areas. Despite the distinct needs of girls resulting from the intersection of gender and age-related vulnerabilities, girls tend to be lumped together with efforts geared towards children or adult women, leaving their experiences out of the discussion altogether.

In rural areas, girls, and particularly adolescent girls are highly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence; sexual violence and rape; the worst forms of child labour; and child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM), among other forms of discrimination and abuse. Our research tells us that adolescent motherhood is closely linked to inequality and that girls in rural areas are twice as likely to be married by 18, in comparison to those in urban areas. Child, early, and forced marriage and unions, early pregnancy and motherhood, and unpaid care and domestic responsibilities remain persistent obstacles to girls' and women's access to 12 years of quality education and labour market participation which effectively reduces women's life-long learning capacity.

Girls also face exacerbated obstacles to accessing safe, quality education due to their basic needs not being met. Examples include: a lack of schools, child marriage, fear and insecurity, the lack of female teachers, unpaid domestic labour and unpaid domestic care work. In addition to this, rural girls are usually susceptible to teen pregnancies and face extreme difficulties in accessing urgently needed healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health, due to remote access or non-existence of these service rendering institutions in rural areas.

Lastly, food insecurity and nutritional deficiencies also have age and gender-related impacts that must be addressed in the context of rural girls. When food is scarce, girls often eat less and eat last. They also face risks of exploitation and abuse in accessing food and water which is often manifested through access to menstrual hygiene. In addition, adolescent girls are also particularly vulnerable to malnutrition, especially once they begin menstruation.

Plan International welcomes the priority theme of the 62nd Commission on the Status of Women, Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls. However, it can be recalled that in 2012 the Commission failed to reach a consensus and adopt the agreed conclusions on the CSW56 priority theme, the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges signifying the lack of global commitment on the issue. In this regard, we urge this Commission to recognize the General Recommendation (GR) of the CEDAW Committee on 'Rights of Rural Women' which has outlined the various challenges faced by rural women and girls to the realization of their rights, as well as measures to be taken by States to remove these barriers while reviewing progress, providing policy guidance and ensuring the

empowerment of rural women and girls in its deliberations as well as adoption of agreed conclusions.

We reiterate that the 62nd session of the CSW offers a unique opportunity for Member States to re-evaluate their past positions on the theme and to re-examine the empowerment of rural girls and their role in poverty and hunger eradication. In this regard, it is critical that the Commission recognizes and urges Member States to acknowledge and promote the necessity of addressing the distinct needs of rural girls. This necessitates including girls' voices, realities, and participation in this important conversation to ensure true gender equality and economic empowerment.

To improve the conditions of rural girls and to ensure the full enjoyment of their human rights and unlocking their potential, Plan International urges Member States to:

Let Girls Learn

- Ensure universal access to quality and safe early childhood, primary and secondary education, tertiary education, and technical and vocational skills training including in emergency settings to ensure gender-sensitive teaching and curriculum, as well as the provision of safe and separate sanitation facilities with adequate menstrual hygiene facilities.
- Ensure that domestic resources for education prioritize ensuring access to quality education for the poorest and most excluded children, in particular girls.
- Promote the achievement of gender parity in access and use of information and communications technology. Develop and implement tailored policies and programming with civil society and private sector stakeholders that address the gender-related barriers affecting such access and use.
- Support and promote demand-driven skills and enterprise development programs targeting youth, especially young women and adolescent girls.
- Direct investments to address entrenched discriminatory policies and practices in order to reduce barriers faced by young women in getting and keeping decent work of their choosing. Promote their full participation in the public and private spheres.

Let Girls Lead

- Adopt a lifecycle approach to women's and girls' empowerment by creating an enabling environment from very early in life. This includes: dedicated efforts to dismantle discriminatory gender norms, 12 years of safe, gender-sensitive, quality education, life-skills and demand-driven skills training, and access to financial services and literacy for girls and young women.
- Ensure and promote the high-quality and effective participation of girls and young women, and youth- and women-led civil society organizations in local, national, regional, and global decision-making bodies and processes. Include women's and girls' participation in key decision-making roles.

Let girls Decide

- Adopt and accelerate the implementation of laws, policies, and programs to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of all women and girls, including their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters

related to sexuality and reproduction, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

- In collaboration with civil society and other stakeholders, ensure universal access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, information, and education, in order to enhance women's and girls' control over their own bodies, improve their overall health, and enable them to participate fully and equally in education and decent work.
- Ensure that girls and women at risk of, or affected by child, early, and forced marriage and unions have universal access to comprehensive legal, social, physical, mental, and sexual and reproductive health services and information free from discrimination, coercion, and violence, in order to ensure their full recovery and reintegration into society.

Let Girls Thrive

- Undertake all necessary policy and legislative reforms, and promote policies and programs to address gender-based economic exclusion and violence to ensure that girls and women can access financial services, including credit, loans, and bank accounts, on equal terms with boys and men.
- Take all necessary actions, including harmonizing, reforming, passing, enacting, and implementing legislation, policy frameworks, and accountability mechanisms to eliminate all forms of violence against girls and young women, including through training police, the judiciary, and legislators on laws and rights related to gender-based violence, and on age- and gender sensitive means of documenting and following up on reports of such violence.
- Provide and maintain safe and reliable public transport, footpaths, market places and public facilities, including sanitation facilities with adequate menstrual hygiene management, to support girls' and women's mobility. Public spaces free of discrimination and violence enables girls' and women's to access education, and enables them to seek employment and participate more widely in social, economic, and political life.
- Reform, harmonize, implement, and enforce legislation and policies to ensure that all women and girls are registered at birth, have adequate official birth certificates, and are able to obtain official identification without restrictions, limitations, or barriers such as spousal, parental, or guardian's consent.
- Undertake targeted measures to recognize, reduce, and redistribute women's and girls' disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work by encouraging men to share equally in care and domestic work and through access to adequate parental leave; affordable and accessible quality child care; flexible work hours; and social security mechanisms, without reductions in labour and social protections, in line with the right to just and favourable conditions of work.