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Promotion and protection of the rights of children: promotion and protection of the rights of children

Well-being and empowerment of girls living in rural areas

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In its resolution [74/134](#), the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report at the seventy-sixth session on the implementation of the resolution, including improvements in the social, economic and political investments made by Member States towards empowering girls in rural areas, with a view to assessing the impact of the resolution on the well-being of the girl child. The present report pertains to advancements in the legal and normative framework supporting girls living in rural areas, social, economic and political investments towards empowering such girls and related challenges. It provides recommendations for continued progress.

* [A/76/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. Girls and women living in rural areas face deeply entrenched challenges, owing to their rural location, and gender-based discrimination. However, they are not a homogeneous group, and their complex experiences mean that they commonly face varied constraints on their social, economic and political empowerment, including inequities and exclusion in terms of access to health services, HIV prevention and treatment, sexual and reproductive health services, education, land ownership, water and sanitation, participation in societal decision-making structures, agricultural and other labour markets and fair and equitable employment. Globally, girls tend to face elevated levels of discrimination, violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, food insecurity, unpaid work, forced marriage, child labour, trafficking and harmful sociocultural norms.¹

2. Such dramatic challenges and barriers notwithstanding, investment in the social, economic and political empowerment of girls living in rural areas is evident in various ways and locations worldwide.

II. Legal and normative framework and commitments

3. States have an obligation to realize the rights of all girls and to end all forms of discrimination against them. This is enshrined in the relevant international legal framework and fundamental human rights treaties, including the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In particular, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols, the obligations of States parties to ensure the rights of all children equally thereunder and without discrimination of any kind are reinforced.

4. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and several conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) also contain relevant obligations.

A. Progress at the international and regional levels

5. Earlier efforts that first focused on the need to improve the lives of women and girls in rural areas have paved the way for more recent progress. For example, the need to improve the lives of women and girls in rural areas was first emphasized in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, over 25 years ago. In addition, the adoption in 2015 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presented opportunities for Member States to accelerate progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls living in rural areas.

6. In 2018, at its sixty-second session, the Commission on the Status of Women promoted the theme of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls, highlighting the situation of girls with disabilities in rural settings and the need to strengthen frameworks and policies that promote the empowerment of rural women and girls.

7. Also in 2018, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued general recommendation No. 37 (2018) on the gender-related

¹ FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and WFP, *Rural Women and Girls 25 Years after Beijing: Critical Agents of Positive Change* (Rome, 2020).

dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change, noting that rural and indigenous women (and, by extension, girls), as food producers and agricultural workers, are directly affected by climate change and disasters.

8. In 2020, the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), which requires measures to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, including for girls in rural areas, became the first ILO convention to reach universal ratification. Furthermore, the General Assembly declared 2021 the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour.

9. In recent years, the special procedure mandate holders of the Human Rights Council have consistently called for the adoption of comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns to challenge cultural attitudes that legitimize child marriage and to introduce mechanisms to register all marriages, especially in rural, remote and indigenous areas, where girls are at increased risk of child marriage. Relevant in this regard is the 2019 report on the visit to Nepal of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences ([A/HRC/41/42/Add.2](#)).

10. Marking 25 years since the International Conference on Population and Development, the Nairobi Summit of 2019 received more than 400 commitments from Heads of State and Government to ending harmful practices, nearly a quarter of which explicitly included actions involving ending child, early and forced marriage and unions, which disproportionately affect girls in rural areas.

11. In 2020, the African Union adopted a 10-year action plan to eradicate child labour, forced labour, trafficking in persons and modern slavery, covering the period 2020–2030. The African Union strategy for the period 2019–2023 also reinforces its Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa (2014–2018). The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution in 2018 on forced marriage in Europe. In 2019, the coalition of First Ladies of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) signed the Niamey Declaration of ECOWAS First Ladies: Call to End Child Marriage and Promote the Education and Empowerment of Girls.

B. Progress at the national level

12. Member States have taken steps to promote the empowerment of rural women and girls through the integration of the issue into national laws, policies, programmes, strategies and activities under international conventions and frameworks.

13. For example, in Malaysia, the Rural Development Policy 2030 pertains to education and the empowerment of young people in rural areas, including girls. Similarly, in El Salvador, the National Policy on Comprehensive Protection for Children and Adolescents includes objectives focusing on gender and rural areas. The new Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Children for 2020–2030 is aimed at creating equal opportunities for children, including girls in regional or remote areas. The National Climate Change Strategy of Peru includes considerations of gender and intercultural approaches in rural development. In 2020, Italy established a fund to encourage the development of female entrepreneurship in agriculture.

14. In Australia, the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2010–2022) is aimed at providing targeted, culturally appropriate initiatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children. In 2020, the Australian Human Rights Commission published a report based on a multi-year consultation with indigenous women and girls in regional and remote areas.²

² Allyson Campbell and others, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020).

III. Social, economic and political investment towards empowering girls living in rural areas

A. Poverty and social inclusion

15. Many of the world's poorest persons are girls and women who live in unacceptable conditions, often located in rural areas. Interventions by multilateral organizations, national Governments and civil society organizations and networks are aimed at improving their conditions and empowering them.

16. The World Food Programme (WFP) and Oxfam America invest in the social empowerment of girls and women in rural areas through the R4 Rural Resilience Initiative, which is aimed at enabling vulnerable rural families to increase income security. In Eastern and Southern Africa, the Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools programme develops the agricultural, entrepreneurship and life skills of girls in rural areas.

17. Interventions are also aimed at overcoming documentation hurdles facing girls and others in rural and remote areas. In Liberia, for example, programmes to extend the reach of birth registration services in 2019 led to the establishment of 14 additional birth registration centres in hospitals and district offices in four rural counties. In India, an innovative programme that links a unique identification number to birth registration has increased the demand for birth registration in rural communities. In Haiti, new registrars and clerics have been trained to serve the most remote areas.³

B. Education

18. Thanks to investment in education, more girls are fulfilling their right to education than ever before. Since 1995, the number of girls enrolled in primary and secondary school has risen by 180 million, and girls are performing better than or at the same level as boys in reading and mathematics.⁴ Nonetheless, gender gaps in education that disproportionately affect girls, especially those in rural areas, remain.

19. Investing in girls' education reaps multiple benefits, including increasing their future employment and economic prospects and social protection. Girls who are able to obtain a high-quality education are less likely to marry at an early age or to be involved in child labour and are more likely to be formally employed and to have higher earnings.⁵

20. However, many girls continue to face multiple disadvantages that prevent them from completing their education, including living in remote or underserved locations. In that regard, protecting the families of girls in rural areas against economic shocks and providing incentives to parents to keep girls in school, such as through cash transfer programmes, are key interventions.

21. Even when in school, many girls do not acquire the foundational, transferable, science, technology, engineering and mathematics, digital, entrepreneurial and job-specific skills that they need for the future. Some programmes address that situation directly, such as one in Brazil that is focused on teaching girls in rural Goiás about

³ UNICEF, *Goal Area 3: Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation – Global Annual Results Report 2019* (New York, 2020).

⁴ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Gender Report – A New Generation: 25 Years of Efforts for Gender Equality in Education* (Paris, 2020).

⁵ World Bank, "Half of the population does not have the chance to achieve their full potential" (n.d.).

electronics, computer programming and robotics. Other programmes are aimed at developing systems to attract and deploy qualified teachers to rural areas, which has resulted in an increase in the number of countries with such systems in recent years.⁶

22. In the context of the switch to remote learning platforms in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, agencies have made investments to support a strong education response for all children, including girls in rural areas. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, Plan International and the Malala Fund developed the "Building back equal: girls back to school guide" to help to address the gender dimensions of pandemic-related school closures, including in rural areas.

23. As schools reopen, some countries have focused on increasing support for girls, such as providing re-entry guidelines for pregnant and young mothers, prevention and response mechanisms for school-related gender-based violence and remedial education programmes to prevent long-term learning loss, some of which are focused on girls in rural areas.

C. Health and HIV

24. Investment to improve access to health care for girls living in rural areas is evident in various contexts. For example, Thailand is upgrading local health centres in remote areas and promoting mobile units focused on prenatal and postnatal care, vaccination, breastfeeding support and other areas. In Afghanistan, the scaling-up of mobile clinics has reached more than 1.4 million vulnerable women and children in remote areas.⁷ In Yemen, UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and local authorities have established a network of community health workers in rural areas to provide basic health care for harder-to-reach girls, boys and families.⁸ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East has focused on identifying and responding to the urgent needs of girls and boys in remote and hard-to-reach places in the Syrian Arab Republic and isolated refugee communities in the West Bank following the introduction of restrictions owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its efforts have included extending mobile health services and food deliveries and providing menstrual hygiene kits, including for girls with disabilities.⁹

25. In countries with high epidemic burdens, the number of adolescent girls and young women (aged 15–24 years) acquiring HIV has declined modestly over the past decade thanks to concerted action to ensure that national programmes adequately scale up responses designed to benefit girls and young women and their sexual partners, including investment in sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and combination prevention and treatment approaches.¹⁰ For example, United Nations entities and others work to promote the empowerment of girls, in particular those living with HIV, and including those in rural areas, through awareness-raising action and the provision of sexual and reproductive health information, as well as by teaching life skills and financial management.

⁶ UNICEF, *Goal Area 2: Every Child Learns – Global Annual Results Report 2019* (New York, 2020).

⁷ UNICEF, *Gender Equality: Global Annual Results Report 2019* (New York, 2020).

⁸ UNICEF, *Goal Area 1: Every Child Survives and Thrives – Global Annual Results Report 2019* (New York, 2020).

⁹ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, "Disability inclusion annual report 2020", 2020.

¹⁰ Global HIV Prevention Coalition, *Implementation of the HIV Prevention 2020 Road Map: Fourth Progress Report* (Geneva, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), 2020).

D. Violence, sexual abuse and exploitation

26. Various forms of investment are aimed at reducing violence against and sexual abuse and exploitation of children, including girls living in rural areas. For example, to reduce violence in learning environments, UNICEF and partners launched the End Violence global coalition and the Safe to Learn initiative. To tackle online child sexual exploitation and abuse, including of girls in rural areas, 24 countries have implemented the model national response developed by the WeProtect Global Alliance, which engages with the information and communications industries for the purpose of ending that scourge.

27. As families faced unprecedented challenges in caring for their children in the context of pandemic-related lockdowns and school closures in 2020, UNICEF focused on a multisectoral approach to preventing violence and abuse in the home, including violence committed against girls in rural areas, by reducing the factors that contribute to such behaviour and by fostering parents' ability to cope with the pressure. In that regard, UNICEF scaled up investment in gender-sensitive child helplines and sought to ensure access for children and families, including for girls in rural areas. In the context of the pandemic, UNICEF has also worked to strengthen mental health and psychosocial support for girls and boys, including in rural areas, including through safe spaces, peer-to-peer activities, non-specialized psychological support and clinical mental health care in 116 countries.¹¹

28. To reduce the risk of violence and exploitation of young people in vulnerable situations, including girls and young women living in rural areas, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime provides support on life skills and the rule of law. For example, sport-based life-skills training on addressing harmful gender stereotypes has been implemented in 12 countries in Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East and Latin America and the Caribbean.

E. Harmful practices

29. Although numbers remained high, before the COVID-19 pandemic UNICEF had reported a significant decline in recent years in child marriage and female genital mutilation – harmful practices that can disproportionately affect girls in rural areas, where they can be more challenging to take on owing to entrenched conservative social norms and practices.

30. Investment to end child marriage has been targeted at root causes, including poverty, social exclusion and educational barriers, and at increasing girls' empowerment, reshaping social expectations, improving access to safe and high-quality education, strengthening girls' financial independence and developing national strategies and plans of action. Such programmes are evident worldwide, including in Ecuador, Egypt, Guinea, India, Malta, Nepal, Rwanda, Senegal and Togo. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage has supported regional efforts in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa and Southern Africa.

31. UNFPA and UNICEF continue to lead the Joint Programme to Eliminate Female Genital Mutilation, which works to provide prevention and protection services in 16 focus countries. In addition, UNICEF has worked in other locations, including through the Spotlight Initiative. Efforts have included promoting public declarations against female genital mutilation, establishing community surveillance structures, engaging with men and boys, empowering girls and promoting community

¹¹ UNICEF, *Goal Area 3*.

awareness-raising and judicial action. For example, Burkina Faso introduced three mobile trial courts in rural and remote locations, which led to 115 arrests and 34 convictions relating to female genital mutilation.¹²

F. Food and nutrition

32. Since 2000, thanks to investment to tackle food insecurity and childhood nutrition by Member States, multilateral agencies and others, the world has reduced by one third the proportion of children under the age of 5 years suffering from stunting. Similarly, 80 million more children are exclusively breastfed today than in 2000.¹³

33. The United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025) is an important commitment by the States members of WHO to ensure the sustained implementation of nutrition policies and programmes, including for girls in rural areas. In 2020, UNICEF accelerated the delivery of services for the prevention of stunting and other forms of malnutrition in early childhood, including for girls living in rural areas. In one example, Mali, with support from UNICEF, trained female leaders to run community-based awareness-raising activities for mothers in rural and marginalized communities.¹⁴

34. In 2019, WFP provided school feeding to 17.3 million children (50 per cent of whom were girls) in rural and urban areas and integrated gender equality and women's empowerment into its nutrition programmes.¹⁵ During school closures, WFP adapted its programmes to deliver take-home rations instead of in-school meals.

35. Generating evidence on the importance of preventing malnutrition in the most vulnerable children, including indigenous girls and those living in remote or rural areas, is essential. To that end, WFP, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UNICEF and civil society partners conducted dozens of rapid response missions in South Sudan in 2019 to improve treatment equity for the most vulnerable children and women in remote locations.¹⁶

G. Water, sanitation and hygiene

36. In 2020, with support from UNICEF, 7.3 million women and girls, mostly in rural areas (in countries reporting sex-disaggregated data), gained access to safe drinking water and 9 million gained access to basic sanitation services. The promotion of gender-friendly and sex-segregated toilets is essential for adolescent girls to practise safe, secure and dignified menstrual health and hygiene. In 2020, UNICEF helped to equip more than 3,800 schools with separate sanitation facilities for girls and boys, with 80 per cent of such schools in rural areas.

37. An understanding of water, sanitation and hygiene needs in rural areas, as well as the gender dimensions thereof, is needed to guide effective investment to improve the lives of girls. In that regard, for example, the Government of Cambodia has expanded its water, sanitation and hygiene management information system to reach rural areas

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Projections are based on analyses conducted by the UNICEF/WHO/World Bank Group Joint Malnutrition Estimates Working Group. See UNICEF, WHO and World Bank Group, "Joint malnutrition estimates: key findings of the 2019 edition", March 2019.

¹⁴ UNICEF, *Goal Area 1*.

¹⁵ WFP, document WFP/EB.A/2020/4-A.

¹⁶ UNICEF, *Goal Area 1*.

and to disaggregate data by gender and other factors.¹⁷ In another example, the Sudan launched its first national assessment of water, sanitation and hygiene in schools and included research into issues affecting girls in rural areas, such as urban and rural disparities and access to private washing and menstrual health and hygiene facilities.¹⁸

H. Participation of girls in rural areas

38. The participation of girls in decisions that affect their lives helps to strengthen civil society, advance accountability, build social cohesion and promote effective policies. The creation and strengthening of strategic platforms (such as children's parliaments and child clubs), dialogue mechanisms with decision makers and skills development all help to advance girls' participation.

39. In Nepal, a child-friendly local governance strategy has institutionalized the participation of girls and boys in planning committees, including in rural communities. The African Girls Can Code initiative, jointly implemented by the International Telecommunication Union and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), equips girls, including those living in rural areas, to take up studies and careers in information and communications technology.

40. Initiatives focused on COVID-19 prevention and response also involve girls and women, including those in rural areas. For example, in Iraq, over 500 girls and young women became COVID-19 peer educators, engaging more than 17,000 girls and young women. In Bhutan, more than 2,000 female Scouts disseminated messages to help to curb the spread of the virus. Globally, UNICEF has adapted a version of its Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation for the pandemic and promoted the scaling-up of its implementation.

IV. Challenges and the impact of the pandemic

A. Continued poverty, discrimination and deprivation

41. Persistent negative sociocultural norms, discriminatory gender norms and other complex restrictions on rural women and girls continue to limit their access to land, services, productive resources, infrastructure, social protection, financial services and other assets. That ultimately limits their ability to exercise agency and leaves them excluded from or underrepresented in institutions, governance, leadership and decision-making structures. In addition, some forms of corruption, such as bribery and the use of sex as currency, disproportionately affect women and girls and further limit their access to basic services, especially in rural areas.¹⁹

42. Rural areas tend to be left behind in the implementation of social protection programmes – and women and girls in particular tend to be left out of schemes to alleviate rural poverty. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, rural and agricultural development aid included only a small fraction of projects with a view to transforming negative gender roles and empowering women and girls in rural areas. Since then, only a few low-income countries have begun introducing social protection measures

¹⁷ UNICEF, *Goal Area 5: Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life – Global Annual Results Report 2019* (New York, 2020).

¹⁸ UNICEF, *Goal Area 4: Every Child Lives in a Safe and Clean Environment – Global Annual Results Report 2019* (New York, 2020).

¹⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *The Time is Now: Addressing the Gender Dimensions of Corruption* (Vienna, 2020).

as part of their COVID-19 response, and those are mostly administrative adaptations, in-kind transfers, school feeding and utility waivers.²⁰

43. In particular, indigenous women and girls in rural areas continue to face severe discrimination and non-recognition in many parts of the world. Given the overall lack of access by women and girls to income sources, savings and the ability to influence decisions about their own lives, the distancing and movement restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic are likely to increase their economic hardship, poverty and deprivations.²¹

44. Notably, girls with disabilities in rural areas often face multiple forms of discrimination based on both disability and gender, which are often compounded by a lack of access to water, sanitation, health care and education.²²

B. Educational restrictions

45. Globally, more girls than boys do not attend school, and the relative disadvantage of girls compared with boys increases with poverty and rural location. For example, in the Arab region, girls and women with disabilities in rural areas are documented as having the lowest rates of literacy, educational attainment and school attendance.²³

46. Girls in rural areas seeking access to high-quality education face countless barriers, including deep-seated gender inequalities, household poverty, geographical isolation, political marginalization, parental attitudes, long distances to schools and inadequate safety and sanitation facilities in learning environments. Only 53 per cent of schools globally have access to handwashing facilities that have soap and water, which are essential for menstrual hygiene management. In addition, educational opportunities outside of school, such as vocational training, may not be relevant or available to girls in rural areas. Adolescent girls, including those in rural areas, who do not attend school are more vulnerable to forced marriage, early pregnancy, violence and trafficking in persons than those who attend school.²⁴

47. Disaggregated data on education participation and learning outcomes among women and girls living in rural locations or indigenous communities are limited. Most countries track only enrolment and not completion rates, yet attendance is a better measure, as girls' attendance may be cut short owing to domestic responsibilities, work outside the home, a lack of adequate sanitation, child marriage or pregnancy or gender-based violence and harassment in learning environments.²⁵

48. School closures as a result of the pandemic have led to drastically negative outcomes for children, as they often rely on schools for nutrition, psychosocial support and health services. Children in rural areas are also at risk of being put to work in harmful conditions and experiencing nutritional challenges owing to curtailed or discontinued school-feeding programmes. The pandemic is likely to have increased

²⁰ FAO, "Social protection and COVID-19 response in rural areas", 8 April 2020; and FAO, "Rural women: striving for gender transformative impacts", Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition summary of online discussion, No. 142, 2017.

²¹ FAO, IFAD and WFP, *Rural Women and Girls 25 Years after Beijing*; and FAO, "Social protection and COVID-19".

²² *Disability and Development Report: Realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities 2018* (United Nations publication, 2019); and Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, general recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women.

²³ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, *Disability in the Arab Region 2018* (Beirut, 2018).

²⁴ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020*; and FAO, IFAD and WFP, *Rural Women and Girls 25 Years after Beijing*.

²⁵ See [A/HRC/26/39](#).

the number of girls being pushed into child marriage, as well as exposed to gender-based and sexual violence.²⁶ Early in the COVID-19 crisis, critical resources are likely to have been diverted away from sexual and reproductive health services and HIV testing, prevention and treatment.²⁷

49. Home-schooling options are likely to discriminate against girls in rural areas owing to social and gender norms, which tend to direct limited resources to boys.²⁸ Girls in the poorest homes may also be less likely to have a quiet place to concentrate on their studies and/or to receive the necessary parental support.²⁹ Out-of-school girls may also struggle more to gain access to distance-learning programmes owing to increased care and domestic duties.³⁰ As a result, fewer girls may return to schools when they reopen.³¹

50. The digital divide has wrought havoc among students in rural communities and excluded ever more girls from access to education in the context of pandemic-driven school closures. UNICEF reports that over 70 per cent of students who cannot be reached with remote learning alternatives live in rural areas.³² This is compounded for girls owing to the demands of their unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, which may prevent them from participating fully and effectively in online and digital learning.³³ In addition, in many countries information and communications technology skills favour boys, and girls are less frequently afforded use of household computers and the Internet.³⁴

C. Limited access to services

51. In many parts of the world, major health inequities continue to exist between rural and urban areas, in part as a result of more limited access to health services, health-related information and culturally appropriate services. Girls in particular are threatened by that scenario. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, 52 per cent of adolescent girls and young women in rural areas are unable to make decisions about their own health.³⁵

52. Indigenous women and adolescent girls are even less likely to benefit from services than the general population.³⁶ In addition, mainstream health-care providers tend to undervalue the traditional health practices of indigenous women and girls, further exacerbating inequities.³⁷ Rural women and girls with disabilities are

²⁶ UNICEF, “COVID-19: a threat to progress against child marriage”, 2021.

²⁷ United Nations, “Policy brief: the impact of COVID-19 on women”, 9 April 2020.

²⁸ World Bank Group, “Gender dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic”, 16 April 2020.

²⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Combatting COVID-19’s effect on children”, 2019.

³⁰ Save the Children, “COVID-19: millions out of school, jeopardizing the future of children in West and Central Africa”, 3 April 2020.

³¹ Antonique Koning, Jamie Anderson and Yasmin Bin-Humam, “Women in rural and agricultural livelihoods facing COVID-19”, Consultative Group to Assist the Poor blog, 27 July 2020.

³² UNICEF, “COVID-19: are children able to continue learning during school closures – a global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies using data from 100 countries”, 2020.

³³ UNFPA and UNICEF, “Adapting to COVID-19: pivoting the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage to respond to the pandemic”, 23 September 2020.

³⁴ Diogo Amaro and others, “COVID-19 and education: the digital gender divide among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa”, UNICEF Connect blog, 4 August 2020.

³⁵ Data were drawn from population-based surveys (2011–2016) from 28 countries in which 83 per cent of all women aged 15 to 24 years in sub-Saharan Africa live. See UNAIDS, “Women and girls and HIV”, 2018.

³⁶ UNFPA, UNICEF and UN-Women, “Fact sheet: indigenous women’s maternal health and maternal mortality”, (2018).

³⁷ FAO, IFAD and WFP, *Rural Women and Girls 25 Years after Beijing*.

particularly likely to experience restrictions on their sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.³⁸

53. In rural areas, girls who are most vulnerable to HIV owing to a wide range of factors, such as poverty, gender inequalities, harmful cultural practices and sexual violence, are disproportionately underserved in terms of critical information and services. Those young women have a lower level of knowledge of HIV and less access to testing and modern contraceptives. As a result, the incidence of HIV infection among adolescent girls and young women (aged 15–24 years) remains inordinately high, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.³⁹ However, rural/urban disaggregated data relating to HIV incidence are scarce, with little information on girls below the age of 15 years.

54. Adolescent girls in rural areas are also vulnerable to food insecurity and malnutrition. Half of adolescent girls in low-income and rural settings in low-income and middle-income countries eat fewer than three meals a day, and adolescent girls may be especially vulnerable to malnutrition, as gendered cultural norms mean that they often lack access to food, education and life opportunities.⁴⁰ At the same time, adolescent girls and women of reproductive age have higher-than-average nutrient needs.

55. The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant negative health and nutrition implications for the rural poor, including girls, and could result in an additional 6.7 million girls and boys under the age of 5 years suffering from wasting over the next 12 months. That would represent a 14 per cent rise and more than 10,000 additional child deaths per month, mostly in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.⁴¹ In some cases, girls and others in rural areas are dying from treatable diseases because health centres and staff have been diverted to fight COVID-19.

D. Gender-based violence and harmful practices

56. On average, one in three women worldwide will experience gender-based violence in her lifetime. According to an analysis by UN-Women, physical or sexual violence committed by a husband or domestic partner is more prevalent in rural than urban areas in 26 countries.⁴² Those figures are likely to be even higher, given that rural women and girls are less likely than their urban counterparts to report such violence.⁴³ The economic and household stress combined with the physical distancing wrought by the pandemic have led to a reported increase in gender-based violence and domestic violence worldwide, including in rural areas.⁴⁴ Globally, 19 per cent of all detected victims of trafficking in persons are young girls, 72 per cent of whom were trafficked for sexual exploitation.⁴⁵

57. Girls with disabilities are often subject to forced sterilization or abortion, disproportionately vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape and more likely to be subjected

³⁸ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, general recommendation No. 34.

³⁹ UNAIDS, *Global AIDS Update 2020: Seizing the Moment – Tackling Entrenched Inequalities to End Epidemics* (Geneva, 2020).

⁴⁰ UNICEF, *Goal Area 1*.

⁴¹ Henrietta Fore and others, “Child malnutrition and COVID-19: the time to act is now”, *The Lancet*, vol. 396, No. 10250 (27 July 2020).

⁴² Analysis by UN-Women of data from the Demographic and Health Surveys Program STATcompiler database, available at www.statcompiler.com.

⁴³ FAO, IFAD and WFP, *Rural Women and Girls 25 Years after Beijing*.

⁴⁴ Koning, Anderson and Bin-Humam, “Women in rural and agricultural livelihoods”.

⁴⁵ *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020* (United Nations publication, 2021).

to gender-based violence. Girls with disabilities living in rural and remote areas are at increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse compared with those without disabilities.⁴⁶

58. In rural areas, girls are more vulnerable to both online and offline sexual abuse, harassment, sexual extortion and grooming. The scarcity of public information on the prevention of such crimes, the difficulty for victims to report abuse and the prevalence of gender stereotypes reinforce this vulnerability.

59. Girls in rural areas are also more susceptible to child marriage and female genital mutilation. Across all regions, girls who live in rural areas are more likely to be married than their urban counterparts. That means that, each year, some 15 million girls are married before they reach the age of 18 years, largely in the poorest households and rural areas of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁷ The exact number of girls and women worldwide who have undergone female genital mutilation remains unknown.

60. Pandemic-driven school closures and social restrictions threaten to result in a large-scale increase in child marriage. According to UNICEF, 10 million additional child marriages may occur before the end of the decade as a direct result of the pandemic.⁴⁸ The pandemic has also threatened to reverse progress towards eliminating female genital mutilation by 2030 and is expected to lead to the first increase in child labour since the first global estimates made in 2000.⁴⁹

E. Climate issues

61. Rural areas worldwide are experiencing severe impacts of climate change, which also exacerbate existing gender inequalities and increase hardships for women and girls.⁵⁰ With limited mobility, decision-making power and entitlements, women and girls in rural areas face unique difficulties when it comes to absorbing the shocks and consequences of climate-induced crises.⁵¹ For example, climate-induced drought hampers the collection and storage of water and fuel – tasks typically performed by women and girls in rural areas. That both increases their workload and compromises their safety as they spend additional hours performing the tasks. Their limited access to productive resources and services also inhibits their knowledge and ability to adopt climate-smart practices.⁵²

62. The socioeconomic crisis induced by both the pandemic and climate change has a disproportionate impact on rural communities, and especially on indigenous communities and minority groups, women and girls and other marginalized groups.⁵³ Nevertheless, women and girls in rural areas continue to be instrumental in adapting to and mitigating the negative impacts of climate change based on their unique knowledge, skills and experiences. For example, studies show that rural female

⁴⁶ See [E/CN.6/2018/3](#).

⁴⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF, *Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All: Findings from the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children* (Montreal, 2015).

⁴⁸ UNICEF, “COVID-19: a threat to progress against child marriage”.

⁴⁹ UNFPA, “Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family planning and ending gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage”, interim technical note, April 2020; and ILO and UNICEF, “COVID-19 and child labour: a time of crisis, a time to act”, 2020.

⁵⁰ Rajendra K. Pachauri and others, eds., *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report* (Geneva, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015).

⁵¹ FAO, “Rural women”.

⁵² FAO and CARE, *Good Practices for Integrating Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Climate-Smart Agriculture Programmes* (Atlanta, 2019).

⁵³ Rachel McMonagle, “Secure land rights: a sustainable solution at the intersection of climate change and COVID-19”, Skoll Foundation, 20 September 2020.

farmers are playing a key role in conserving biodiversity, protecting indigenous crops resilient to climatic variability, adopting low-carbon technologies, spreading knowledge and urging leaders to take action towards sustainable solutions.⁵⁴

F. Land rights

63. For rural families, land is often the most important household asset, as it is essential for agricultural production and for providing food security and nutrition. Nevertheless, in many countries, women and girls in rural areas have limited access to and unequal rights to inherit, own, use and control land.⁵⁵ According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, at least 60 per cent of countries still discriminate against a daughter's right to inherit land in either law or practice.⁵⁶ That inhibits their ability to undertake long-term planning and reduces their food security.⁵⁷

64. The pandemic has heightened the vulnerability of rural women and girls in terms of their right to land. During the pandemic, widows have risked disinheritance and loss of access to land after the death of a husband. Their security of land tenure has also been threatened as unemployed migrants return to rural communities and increase pressure on land and resources. Some women and girls in rural areas are facing land grabs by those angling to take advantage of the turmoil of the pandemic.⁵⁸

G. Labour and agricultural issues

65. In developing countries, 43 per cent of people who rely on agricultural livelihoods are women and girls. Child labour being common in rural areas, girls form a significant part of the agricultural workforce. Rural girls are generally more likely than boys to both work in agriculture and perform household chores. Rural and indigenous girls and young women engaged in agriculture are more likely to work informally, be undervalued and poorly paid, work long hours and have limited access to social protection, income security and adequate health care.⁵⁹

66. Rural and indigenous women and girls spend much of their day engaged in domestic chores, including collecting water and firewood, processing and preparing food, travelling and transporting household goods and products, and caregiving. Such tasks are unpaid and restrict girls' time and mobility, leaving them with less time to attend school and risking increased exposure to harassment and violence.

67. Girls and women working in poorer areas, including rural areas, are at heightened risk of being trafficked and exploited owing to gender power imbalances, a lack of oversight in workplaces and their working alone in remote areas.⁶⁰ The "invisibility" of some sectors, such as domestic work, facilitates exploitative

⁵⁴ Venge Nyirongo, "Rural women's economic empowerment and the road to 2030: agency for climate action", *UN Chronicle*, 15 October 2019.

⁵⁵ FAO, IFAD and WFP, *Rural Women and Girls 25 Years after Beijing*; and [A/74/246](#).

⁵⁶ UNICEF, UN-Women and Plan International, "A new era for girls: taking stock of 25 years of progress", March 2020.

⁵⁷ FAO, "Empowering women to leave no one behind: FAO and African Union launch regional outlook on gender and agrifood systems", 28 October 2020.

⁵⁸ McMonagle, "Secure land rights".

⁵⁹ FAO, IFAD and WFP, *Rural Women and Girls 25 Years after Beijing*.

⁶⁰ ILO, "Rural women at work: bridging the gaps", 8 March 2018; and Kieran Guilbert, "Traffickers found targeting more children as COVID-19 school closures fuel danger", Reuters, 2 February 2021.

practices and trafficking in girls.⁶¹ In addition, child domestic workers, who are typically girls who move from rural to urban areas, tend to be more vulnerable to exploitative working conditions.⁶²

V. Recommendations

68. States and other relevant actors could implement cross-cutting and integrated policies and programmes that tackle the multiple forms of discrimination against girls in rural areas and that respond to the multidimensional aspects of adolescent girls' lives. Those policies and programmes may take into account the views of girls in rural areas, in particular with regard to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. They could also accord priority to efforts to change social, cultural and traditional norms that drive discriminatory mindsets.

69. States and other relevant actors could promote legal and policy reform that systematically addresses issues affecting girls in rural areas, including property and land rights, control of resources, harmful cultural practices, violence, exploitation and abuse and lack of access to services, technology and participation. Such reform could include redoubled efforts to end child labour.

70. States and other relevant actors could scale up social protection schemes, economic safety nets and poverty alleviation programmes that are gender-sensitive in design and implementation. Those efforts may address the unique needs of girls in rural areas and be aimed at preventing deepening poverty and exclusion as a result of the pandemic.

71. States and other relevant actors could develop interventions that eliminate structural and other barriers that inhibit girls in rural areas from gaining access to high-quality formal and informal educational opportunities. That requires investing in equitable and accessible educational systems, programmes and pandemic response plans.

72. States and other relevant actors could improve the accessibility, affordability, equitable coverage and quality of services for girls in rural areas, with particular consideration given to adolescents, including in terms of physical and mental health care, sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, water, sanitation and hygiene and nutrition services, and prevention and response support for HIV, gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and adolescent pregnancy. Furthermore, girls themselves should be engaged in the design of services and service delivery.

73. States and other relevant actors could promote legislation that criminalizes child marriage, undertake campaigns to challenge attitudes that legitimize child marriage, increase access to high-quality and safe schooling for girls in rural areas, strengthen the agency of girls at risk of child marriage and provide support for already-married girls.

74. States and other relevant actors could strengthen multisectoral child protection systems in rural areas to prevent violence and ensure holistic support for girls who are at risk of experiencing, or who have experienced, violence, exploitation and abuse. Special attention is required to reach girls with disabilities and other marginalized girls in rural areas.

⁶¹ *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

⁶² ILO, *Practical Guide to Ending Child Labour and Protecting Young Workers in Domestic Work* (Geneva, 2017).

75. States and other relevant actors could actively create opportunities for adolescent girls living in rural areas to share their voices and perspectives and to influence decisions that affect their lives, bodies, education, careers and futures within their households, communities and political processes.

76. States and other relevant actors could implement commitments to sustainable rural development and gender equality through the design of gender-responsive climate change frameworks and strategies; the promotion of gender-responsive climate financing, infrastructure, services, technology and social protection; the scaling-up of gender-equitable climate-smart agricultural practices; and the recognition of the traditional ecological knowledge of women and girls.

77. States and other relevant actors could promote policies, programmes and investment that facilitate the greater sharing of domestic and care work responsibilities within rural households, as well as broader livelihood opportunities for women and girls, including entrepreneurial opportunities and gender-equitable reform of the agriculture sector.

78. States and other relevant actors could systematically invest in the collection of development and humanitarian data disaggregated by gender, age and location, which is critical to undertaking intersecting analysis of the experiences of girls in rural areas and to developing more evidence-based policies and programmes.

79. States and other relevant actors could mobilize resources to increase long-term gender-inclusive and age-inclusive investment in rural areas. That includes public investment through budget allocations and galvanizing relevant private sector investment.
