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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: Implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by members of the Working Group on Girls: American Association of University Women; Anglican Consultative Council; Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul; Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd; Dominican Leadership Conference; Girls Learn International; Grail; International Council of Jewish Women; International Federation for Home Economics; International Federation of Business and Professional Women; International Movement for Fraternal Union Among Races and Peoples; International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary; League of Women Voters of the United States; Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic; Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association; Passionists International; Plan International; Salesian Missions; Salvation Army; School Sisters of Notre Dame; Sisters of Charity Federation; Sisters of Mercy of the Americas; Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur; Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues; To Love Children Educational Foundation International; Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund; VIVAT International; World Union for Progressive Judaism, non-governmental organizations 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.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

Statement

Promises Made

In 2008, the agreed conclusions from CSW 52 reaffirmed the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, including Section L, whereby governments committed to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against girls, publicly acknowledged that the advancement of women is not sustainable without attention to the rights of girls and highlighted the importance of policies and strategies to improve the situation of those in rural areas. They also identified poverty eradication as the greatest global challenge facing the world and stressed that the growing feminization of poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and other internationally agreed development goals, requires investing sufficient resources for gender equality and empowerment.

Equal access to education and health services, gainful employment, decision-making and productive resources (e.g., land, capital, credit, technology) for rural girls and women were also emphasized in the outcome document of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly (2000). It noted the large number of rural women working in the informal economy, with low levels of income, little job and social security, and discriminatory land and inheritance rights. It also called upon governments to incorporate a gender perspective into the design, development, adoption and execution of all policies and budgetary processes to support gender equality and empowerment.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), including their Optional Protocols, are noteworthy treaties designed to protect the human rights of girls. CEDAW's Article 14,

which focuses on rural girls and women, calls on States parties to ensure that they have the same rights as men and boys.

The 56th session of the CSW offers a unique opportunity for member states to (a) evaluate implementation of the agreed conclusions from CSW52 and (b) examine the empowerment of rural girls and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. The Working Group on Girls (WGG) encourages the CSW to review progress, provide policy guidance, and ensure the empowerment of all girls, including those in rural and urban areas, in order to ensure the full enjoyment of their human rights.

Promises Broken

Despite decades of treaties, laws, resolutions, statements, meetings and promises, the well-being of girls still lags behind boys. Research indicates that girls begin life from a position of disadvantage which continues throughout their life-span. In addition, data in the 2011 UNICEF report indicate that inequalities in access to opportunities, resources and services, including education, health and protection are significantly greater as they approach adolescence. Research also indicates that the situation is particularly dire for girls in rural areas, who are routinely denied the resources that they need to break the poverty cycle as a result of discriminatory cultural practices, property and inheritance laws, and unequal access to technology and services. As noted by the GA in 2011, for example, the rural environment is one of extreme poverty; overall, 70% of the 1.4 billion extremely poor (< \$1.25 day) in the developing world live in rural areas.

Data provided by the World Health Organization in the 2011 Interagency Statement indicate that the cultural preference for sons, due to prevailing beliefs that boys bring more prestige or wealth to a family than girls, has resulted in over 100 million missing girls due to female foeticide, infanticide,

malnutrition and neglect. In addition, UNICEF 2011 data indicate that only 50% of children under five living in the developing world were registered at birth, with substantial differences between children in rural and urban areas (34% vs. 59% in Africa; 28% vs. 52% in Sub-Saharan Africa; 24% vs. 41% in Least Developed Countries; 37% vs. 60% in Asia). Finally, a number of empirical studies indicate that rural girls are more likely than their urban peers to manifest delayed growth and development and to show evidence of anemia, iron and Vitamin D deficiency. In some countries (e.g., Mali, Senegal, Ghana), rates of anemia among adolescent girls (15 – 19) exceed 60%. Finally, girls face significant barriers to health care.

As a consequence of prevailing gender roles and their associated obligations, commitments and expectations, girls' educational, social, and economic opportunities are hampered. Girls, for example, are obliged to devote an unequal share of time to unpaid personal care work (e.g., children, sick elderly) and care-related activities (e.g., fetching water and firewood, food processing and preparation, cleaning and washing). And despite the fact that education yields many long-term benefits, including later marriage and greater opportunity to develop job skills, numerous studies have found that girls are more likely than boys to be denied their human right to basic literacy and education, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. The situation is worse for members of ethnic or racial minorities and girls who live in poverty or rural areas. Structural barriers in rural areas include poor electricity supply, distance (some live mountain areas with no transportation), danger walking home after dark, and girls' responsibilities helping their families earn a living. In one study, girls in rural areas were less likely than their urban peers to attend secondary school (66% vs. 84%); girls in rural areas were also less likely to complete secondary school versus their male peers (43% vs. 58%).

At the onset of puberty, or even before, some girls are forced into marriage, ending their education, limiting their freedom, and increasing their risk of domestic violence, adverse pregnancy outcomes and HIV infection. In the poorest regions of the world (mostly rural), 35% of girls are married before age 18; levels range from 45% in South Central Asia to 40% in sub-Saharan Africa, to 25% in Latin America and the Caribbean. In some countries (e.g., Niger, Mali, Chad, Guinea, Bangladesh) more than 60% of girls are married before age 18. Research has documented that girls in rural areas have higher rates of maternal mortality, obstetric fistula, and violence, while access to services, law enforcement, and legal protection remains limited or non-existent.

The rural environment is also characterized by limited access to decent work, widespread unemployment, poor quality jobs, low pay, inadequate labour rights, little social protection, and a lack of a representative voice. In 2009, the ILO Report “Give Girls a Chance” reported that these structural barriers are exacerbated for girls due to their lack of education and training, inadequate transportation, and constraints due to unequal care and household responsibilities. Consequently, rural girls are employed in more precarious forms of informal employment, including domestic work, where they face numerous health risks, including abuse by both the women and men in the household. Girls in rural areas, and particularly those from ethnic minority areas, are particularly vulnerable to being recruited to work far from home with false promises of decent and legitimate work and are subsequently trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. At least 1.8 million children are exploited in commercial sex or pornography worldwide, the vast majority of them being girls.

Recommendations

To improve the conditions of girls in rural areas, we urge Member States to:

1. PROMOTE A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY

Strengthen the implementation of all existing commitments, in particular the provisions of the CRC, CEDAW (including Article 14 on rural girls/women) and the goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, in particular Section L. We strongly support the development of a joint General Resolution/Comment on harmful practices affecting girls to help fulfill obligations under CEDAW/CRC and ongoing monitoring on the implementation of these noteworthy treaties.

2. SUPPORT ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT VIA EQUAL ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES

Fulfillment of human rights is a precondition for girls to successfully transition to adulthood and to become empowered both economically and socially. Barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights persist in practice (e.g., gender stereotypes, patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory practices within families, communities and institutions) and in law (e.g., land, property, inheritance rights) and must be removed with urgency. Legislative and administrative reforms must promote the economic empowerment of girls through policies, strategies and programs that ensure equal access to education at all levels, physical and mental health services, employment opportunities and economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property, credit, natural resources and appropriate technologies. Positive employment opportunities for girls in rural areas must be expanded.

3. INTENSIFY EFFORTS TO REDUCE POVERTY AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

The feminization of poverty requires investing sufficient resources for gender equality and the empowerment of girls, taking into account the diversity of needs between those in urban and rural areas. Promoting gender equality and empowerment within rural communities helps to reduce poverty, hunger, disease, environmental degradation and violence. We urge greater investment in rural

development and agriculture, labour-saving technology, and clean and renewable energy in rural communities.

4. INVEST IN QUALITY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Investment in quality education and training in rural areas, including vocational and literacy training, is a central intervention with strong multiplier effects. Comprehensive national education strategies must include long-term funding that ensures adequate education infrastructure and prioritizes girls' education in all development plans and poverty reduction plans.

5. IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS.

Effective policies and programmes for girls' empowerment and rural development will require strengthening countries' capacity to collect and analyse data that are disaggregated by sex and age, as well as by rural and urban populations. Examples of good practices and lessons learned in promoting gender equality and girls' empowerment in rural areas should be compiled and shared, with a view to replicating and scaling up successes.

6. LAUNCH PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS TO CREATE AWARENESS

Public campaigns are vital to eliminate discrimination in the public and private spheres based on the notion of girls' inferiority and support positive attitudes and behaviors that encourage girls' full partnership in all areas of life. Campaigns must utilize the media and address the active role of men and boys by establishing gender equality and emphasizing the societal benefits for all of girls' empowerment. Studies also indicate that gender biases and stereotypes are influenced by parents, school, the media, and reinforced by the peer group.

***The Working Group on Girls represents more than 100 organizations around the world promising to advance the rights and status of girls in achieving their full potential.*

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