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Statement submitted by World Association of Girl Guides & Girl Scouts, 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

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural woman and girls

The last twenty years have brought forth unprecedented improvements in global standards of living, but today climate change, conflict, economic growth and food security have reframed the global development agenda and formed the core of a new development discourse. However, the rural nature of these problems is often overlooked. With only a few exceptions rural women and girls fare worse than rural men and urban women, girls and men.

Gender inequality in rural areas is often linked to low productive employment and educational attainment, malnutrition, ownership of land and property and the prevalence of gender-based violence. Women are responsible for up to between 60 and 80 per cent of food production in rural areas in developing countries, but their rights and socioeconomic status are rarely equal to those of men, and this disempowerment undermines their ability to attain food and nutritional security.

As the world's only movement for every girl and any girl, with 10 million Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in 146 countries, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girls Scouts is concerned about the many obstacles women and girls' in rural areas faces, not least due to the exclusion of economic and social development. Consultations with girls and young women in rural areas revealed the following challenges and solutions.

Equal access to productive employment and ownership of land

Looking across the entire value chain, from farm to table, women and girls are the driving force of rural development and in some parts of the world perform the majority of agricultural activities. The number of female-headed households has increased as more men have migrated to the cities. Women and girls are often very active in rural communities, but their role is often invisible. Despite representing a significant share of the farming labour force, women are often in low paid, insecure jobs or their work is unpaid and considered to be part of household chores.

Women and girls face further constraints that prevent them from fully engaging in rural economic activities and receiving equal pay for their work. While child labour in rural areas is wide spread, girls are particularly vulnerable as many of them face the double burden of performing household chores, such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, collecting water combined with agricultural activities.

Land tenure systems can make it difficult for women to access and own land and property. Women also do not have the same access to finances and technology, meaning that the distribution of income is titled against them. "If women in rural areas had the same access to land, technology, financial services, education and markets as men, agricultural production could be increased and the number of hungry people reduced by 100-150 million." (FAO, The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–2011).

Recommendation

To allow girls to break the cycle of gender inequality and poverty, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts recommends that closing the gender gap in access to assets, resources and services is crucial in rural areas.

- Agenda 2030 allows the implementation of certain targets under the Sustainable Development Goals as "nationally appropriate" — notably in the targets 5.4 and

5.6a around recognition of unpaid care and promotion of shared responsibility within the household; women's access to land and other forms of property, inheritance and other economic resources and financial services. This language substantially allows creating loopholes to continue systematic discrimination of girls and women, particularly in rural areas. Girls' and women's rights should not be subject to national context; therefore, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts urges Member States to review and enforce the legislation that gives girls and women equal rights to property and resources.

- Improving access is also achieved by ensuring women and girls have an equal say in decision-making processes within a family and ensuring gender balanced representation in all decision-making bodies involved in agriculture and rural development.

Access to education, employment and leisure opportunities

There are many reasons that prevent girls in rural areas from getting an education. Poverty, distance to schools, school fees, lack of access to sanitary products during periods and discriminatory gender attitudes are some of the major global obstacles to girls' education. Violence, child marriage and adolescent pregnancy and the threat of violence on the way to and in school also keep girls out-of-school. If poverty precludes a family sending more than one child to school, or if one child has to drop out of school to support the family workload, in the majority of cases it is a daughter rather than a son. School infrastructure is lacking in many rural areas, as well as qualified teachers.

Education and schooling — including formal, non-formal and informal learning — play a vital role in achieving gender equality. Education can either be a condition of gender inequality, or an opportunity to change discriminatory attitudes and practices.

Achieving a good education isn't enough. Girls need to have employment opportunities for after they leave school, and not all opportunities need to be in the cities.

Lack of access to leisure opportunities, such as girls' clubs and leisure facilities is a major issue for girls and young women in rural areas. Whether it is access to school, leisure activities or medical care, girls identify the lack of reliable and affordable transportation as a major challenge.

Recommendation

To improve girls' education and employment opportunities a focus needs to be placed on building a strong foundation from early childhood development to basic education. Disadvantage built in early years is difficult to remedy.

- Governments must take serious measures to increase the value placed on girls' quality education at family, community and national level and tackle the discriminatory expectations around girls' role in the society. Girls in rural areas should be able to benefit from 12 years of free, safe, quality education.
- Education certainly has its' intrinsic value but girls also need to grow by providing them with job-relevant skills that are in demand by employers. Moving from agriculture to agri-business is a must to provide employment opportunities for young people. These efforts must attract young people into the sector and remove the impediments that restrain the more active participation of women and girls' in the agricultural value chain.

- Governments need to allocate resources and set up targeted schemes for young women entrepreneur programmes, as well as provide support and funding to civil society organizations to run programmes for young women.

Understanding how gender based violence affects rural women and girls

Across the world, violence against women and girls remains one of the most flagrant and most tolerated human rights violations. While violence affects all groups of women, rural and indigenous women and girls are particularly vulnerable. Many aspects of lives of girls in rural areas, such as work in the fields in isolated areas, fetching water from distant locations or walking miles to or from school, expose them to risks of violence, Traditional harmful practices, such as forced and early marriage and female genital mutilation are also more prevalent in rural communities.

As the public eye has shifted over the last decade to the prevalence of gender based violence, little is still known about the experience of rural women and girls compared to those living in urban areas. The dearth of reliable data and understanding on this issue is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

Girls and women are often reluctant to report being attacked and harassed out of fear of being ostracized by their community and family and having no faith in institutions that are supposed to protect them. Neither there are services where they can go for support or information in the community.

Recommendation

- Governments and local authorities should take strong measures through organising public awareness campaign and prevention education that address unequal power relations between boys and girls, men and women, and condone discrimination and violence.
- Governments need to invest in data collection efforts to understand the nature and scale of violence against women and girls (particularly against girls under 16) in rural areas.
- Robust support mechanisms for survivors, including practical and emotional support, as well as improved access to justice need to be guaranteed by the Governments and local authorities.

Ensuring good nutrition throughout the life cycle

Girls are more likely to suffer from nutritional deficiencies than boys are, for reasons including reproductive biology, low social status, poverty, and lack of education. Sociocultural traditions and disparities in household work patterns can also increase girl's chances of being malnourished. Gender inequality can be a cause as well as an effect of malnutrition.

Second to the first two years of a child's life, during adolescence, girls' experience the most rapid rate of physical growth, gaining up to 50 per cent of their physical weight and 20 per cent of their physical height. Yet there is little disaggregated data about the progress being made on improving the nutritional outcomes of adolescent girls.

Recommendation

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by malnutrition, but they are also the critical actors to finding lasting solutions. The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts recommends five ways to ensure good nutrition through the life cycle, especially in adolescence.

- Gender inequality is an important underlying cause of girls' undernutrition. Addressing harmful norms and perceptions that regard girls as inferior to boys and prioritize boys' access to food is key.
- Girls should be protected from early marriage and pregnancy. The minimum age of marriage for girls must be increased to 18 and governments must take decisive measures to reinforce the legislation.
- Invest in increasing girls' understanding of healthy nutrition.
- Increase women's and girls' involvement in decision making at all levels in both public and private domain.
- Disaggregate nutrition data by age and gender.

Underlying discriminatory social norms and harmful attitudes and practices

The underlying ideologies of male superiority and discriminatory social norms legitimize different manifestations of discrimination against girls and women both in the private and public domain. These are particularly dominant in rural areas. There are many norms and expectations around the types of work done by women and men, girls and boys; about the value of women's work and the value of girls' education. These continue to shape the unequal status and role of girls and young women in the society. Girls' aspirations and opportunities need to be unconstrained by stereotypes and harmful social norms.

Recommendation

- Bold and concerted actions by Governments, civil society and business sector are needed to challenge and transform the harmful norms through a combination of legislative reforms, national awareness raising campaigns and educational programmes for both boys and girls.
- Human rights and gender equality education should be integrated into school curricula to tackle the ideologies of male superiority, as well as increase girls' awareness and understanding of their rights.

The 2030 Agenda is a historic agreement that has the potential to deliver significant change for girls and women. Persistent inequalities that undermine rural girls' and women's status and well-being should be prioritized on governments' agenda not to leave anyone behind.
