

# Statement for the 61th session of the Commission on the Status of Women by the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts

## Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work

As the world is one year into the 15 year journey of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the urgency of women's economic empowerment is gaining momentum. For years, despite increased recognition of the importance and the potential of women's and girls' economic empowerment, the pace of improvement in closing the gender gaps in the world of work has been incredibly slow. Too many women and girls are locked out of opportunities to: get equal pay, have access to land and property, work in the formal sector, acquire relevant skills, start a business, acquire positions of leadership, to name a few.

As the leading voluntary organization for girls and young women, with 10 million Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in 146 countries, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) is concerned that if we follow the recent pace of developments, women won't reach economic parity with men until 2133, according to the World Economic Forum. **Girls are not prepared to wait so long. The current generation of girls needs to see the transformative change during their lifetime.**

## Too many gaps, too little action

At the dawn of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as the groundwork for the Sustainable Development Goals is being laid, now is the time to move from the rhetoric to reality. This is an opportunity for the world to deliver on its commitments and exhibit genuine action to create a world where girls' and women's rights are genuinely protected, their work is respected and valued, their access to financial resources is not contingent on discriminatory legislation, and their life choices are not compromised by pervasive gender stereotypes.

Women's and girls' empowerment, including economic empowerment are critical to the delivery of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Yet, while the Sustainable Development Goals brought to light a number of critical areas for economic empowerment, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts remains concerned about the allowance of the implementation of certain targets under the SDGs 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 undermines the ambition of the targets and allows to create loopholes to continue systematic discrimination of girls and women. Discriminatory legislation and customary laws

prevent women and girls from exercising their right to land and other property. They tend to have less access to formal financial institutions and saving mechanisms (World Bank, Financial Inclusion Data, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/financialinclusion/topic/gender>). The unpaid work is essential for households and societies to function. Yet unpaid care work by women and girls remains unvalued, and its sheer volume leads to “time poverty” preventing them from doing other things, such as investing time in paid work or learning new skills. The 2030 Agenda has at its core an ambitious and honourable mission to “leave no one behind”. **Girls’ and women’s rights should not be subject to national context.**

**Constraints on women’s economic empowerment are rooted in unaddressed structural inequalities and values in the society.** One of the gaps in the 2030 Agenda is the absence of targets to address the deeply rooted discriminatory social norms, attitudes and behaviours that prevent girls and women from enjoying the full spectrum of their human rights. 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. Expectations in the choice of subjects at schools, such as “math and science are for boys”, steer girls away from these subjects. Due to strong correlation between education and future employment perspectives these traditional gender divisions limit career choices for girls and young women in adult life and lead to gender pay gaps (World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) (2014). “The World We Want for Girls beyond 2015” policy paper). All of these norms shape obstacles to women’s economic empowerment.

**Girls and young women remain particularly disadvantaged.** They are among the first victims of economic instability throughout the world. “They are the majority of the 628 million young people aged 15-24 who have neither a job nor an education.” (Plan International (2015). “Young, Woman and Unemployed: The Triple Challenge.”) Through childhood and into adulthood, girls and young women continue to be discriminated against from the early stages of life that limit their future economic opportunities: they are responsible for the household and for looking after their siblings, thus missing out on education; they are forced into marrying young and having children when they are still children themselves, thus being robbed off their education, health and long-term prospects; they are at a higher risk of violence and sexual harassment, which limits their mobility, and keeps them from participating in the life of the society.

**These are the gaps that if left unaddressed will undermine the opportunity to transform the lives for one billion girls worldwide.**

## Recommendations

Young women are the experts on their needs; they know what they need to unlock their full potential. They identify the gaps and challenges that prevent them from doing so, and their voice has been clear and loud - access to decent jobs and equal economic opportunities is a major problem.

To deliver transformative change for girls and young women, the World Association urges Member States, multilateral institutions, businesses and other stakeholders to demonstrate strong will and commitment to deliver on their promises.

- **Challenge the underlying values and tackle discriminatory social norms and harmful behaviours**

The underlying ideologies of male superiority and discriminatory social norms legitimize discrimination against girls and women in political, social and economic spheres, both in the private and public domain. The 2030 Agenda failed to comprehensively address the social norms that hold women back and set up indicators to track progress throughout women's life cycle. In the meantime, the latest UN Report of the Secretary-General High-level Panel on the Women's Economic Empowerment (REPORT OF THE UN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S HIGH-LEVEL PANEL ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT (2015). "Leave no one behind. A call to Action for Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment.") identified that changing the negative norms that limit girls' and women's access to work should be at the top of the 2030 Agenda to expand women's economic opportunities.

Any efforts to empower girls and women require addressing the global pandemic of gender-based-violence. Not only it is a blatant violation of human rights, it is also an essential precondition for empowering women economically. The risk of violence limits girls and young women's mobility, in turn depriving them of effective access to education, resources, and other services.

**We need bold and concerted actions by Governments, civil society and business sector 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.**

- **Make the Invisible Visible**

Despite the unique challenges that girls face, they are too often invisible in government policies and strategies as a group with unique needs. In monitoring and evaluation efforts, girls again fall through the cracks of data that measures the impact and drives policy. Despite widely held perception that social norms are unquantifiable, a key development in data collection has been the improvement in data sources that now make it possible to measure social norms (OECD (2014). "Measuring women's empowerment and social transformation in the post-2015 agenda." Caroline Harper, ODI; Keiko Nowacka, OECD Hanna Alder, ODI; Gaëlle Ferrant, OECD).

**The Governments need to ensure the national data under each Sustainable Development Goal target is disaggregated by age and sex, so that the progress for girls is adequately captured. Governments should also aim to collect disaggregated data to track progress on transformation of social norms that hold girls and women back.**

- **Adopt a human rights-based approach**

In recent years the rhetoric of investing in women and girls as “smart economics” has been very dominant. A report by McKinsey Global Institute suggests that 28 trillion USD can be added to global annual Global Domestic Product (GDP) if women participate in the labour force on par with men. While indeed women’s economic empowerment has significant multiplier effect, it is not the only means to spur economic growth, but first and foremost a matter of human rights and social justice. Economic empowerment impacts on girls’ and women’s ability to take control of their life, exert influence in the community and make decisions for themselves and their families, whether it is getting access to health care, education, or escaping from abusive relationships. When more than half of the world’s countries have at least one law that limits women’s economic opportunities (Women, Business and the Law 2016: “Getting to Equal.”) the argument of “smart economics” fades in the face of the human rights violation.

**Governments must adopt a human rights-based approach to women’s economic empowerment and reform discriminatory legislation that prevents women and girls from participating on par with men in the economy of the country.**

- **Build the capacity of girls and young women to participate in the economy**

Globally, opportunities for young women to enter the labour market are more limited. The obstacles preventing young women participating effectively in the world of work are multifaceted and need to be tackled in their complexity. For example, gender gaps in education at all levels must be closed to set a level playing field for young women to enter the labour market on par with young men. Gender gaps in pay associated with occupational segregation are due in part to gender differences in educational choices, therefore engaging girls’ in male-dominated disciplines in schools can lead to wider career choices for young women.

According to the World Youth Report 2016 (World Youth Report (2016). <http://www.youtheconomicopportunities.org/resource/5023/report-united-nations-world-youth-report-july-2016>), young women across the globe are still getting less chances to become entrepreneurs as compared to young men. Equipping young women with skills, confidence and opportunities to set up their own businesses is essential in creating a generation of female entrepreneurs. It is often through civil society organizations’ programmes that young women gain the financial literacy and entrepreneurship skills, but also the “soft skills”, such as leadership, problem-solving and confidence which are valued in the labour market.

**Governments need to take measures to tackle the stereotypes that prevent girls from choosing male-dominated disciplines, such as STEM to open up career choices for young women. They 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 through non-formal education platforms.**

The 2030 Agenda is a ground-breaking and historic agreement that has the potential to deliver significant change for girls and women. The key is for all stakeholders to demonstrate strong will and commitment to deliver on their promises.