



**Oral Statement on behalf of the Congregation of Our  
Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd  
to the  
50<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission for Social Development  
Agenda Item 3(b)**



**Empowering Girls: The Untapped Potential at the Bottom of the Youth Pyramid**

This statement is based on the experience of my Organization – Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd - working in 72 countries focusing on women and girls living in poverty. We are happy to see that the United Nations and Member States are addressing the issues of youth, particularly poverty and unemployment. But girls make up a significant proportion of that youth population and are an untapped potential at the bottom of the Youth Pyramid.

Across much of the developing world by time a girl is 8 or 9 years, she spends her day tending house, cooking, cleaning, and collecting firewood and water. She eats what is left over after the men and boys have eaten, she is less likely to be vaccinated, to see a doctor, or to attend school. Because of discriminatory cultural norms, many girls living in poverty are forced to marry at very young ages and are vulnerable to HIV, sexual violence and physical exploitation. Girls living in poverty are vulnerable to being trafficked internally from rural to urban areas and across borders, suffering multiple abuses and being traumatized in the process. Girls are devalued because of gender bias and seen as unworthy of investment or protection by their families, their community and national Government.

In many places girls and young women do not enjoy the basic rights of voting, cannot inherit land, are subject to female genital cutting, and do not have the right to stop unwanted sexual advances or gain justice. As the world seeks to fight poverty and respect fundamental human rights, girls remain nearly invisible to those in positions of power—and yet it is only through major and sustained improvements in the condition of girls that the poverty will be eradicated.

One person in eight is a girl or young woman age 10–24.<sup>1</sup> The advancement of women is not sustainable without attention to the rights of girls and their empowerment.

It is critical to consider girls human and social capital from a human rights perspective providing the infrastructure that is necessary for her wellbeing, education and empowerment. This can easily be provided through the implementation of the **Social Protection Floor Initiative** guaranteeing access to health care, education and basic service of water and sanitation for all. With this in place the human and social capital of girls will yield dividends - An extra year of primary school boosts girls' eventual wages by 10% to 20%. An extra year of secondary school adds 15% to 25%. Girls who stay in school for seven or more years typically marry four years later and have two fewer children than girls who drop out.<sup>2</sup>

In addressing youth poverty and unemployment, attending to the gender dimension of the youth populations is vital. Youth, girls and boys, young women and young men are the key to preventing the intergenerational reproduction of gender inequality. Together they can make a difference.

Winifred Doherty, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd  
Chair of the NGO Committee for Social Development  
Co Chair of the Working Group on Girls.

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<sup>1</sup> Girls Count A Global Investment and Action Agenda.

<sup>2</sup> Girls Grow: a Vital Force in Rural Economies.