

Working Group on Girls Statement

The Working Group on Girls, with a membership of seventy Non-Governmental Organizations, having strong grassroots engagements with girls in all regions of the world, welcomes the theme of the 61st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women “Women’s economic empowerment in a changing world of work.” However, while the Commission is focusing on the women’s economic empowerment the Working Group on Girls wishes to highlight that this singular focus on women, to the exclusion of girls, is short-sighted. Real change in women’s economic empowerment will be achieved only when girls are empowered.

The recent UNICEF Report, *Harnessing the Power of Data for Girls*, notes that “Achieving the SDGs will not be possible without reaching all girls, starting with the most disadvantaged.”

Some startling facts confront us with regard to the reality of today’s girl. There is little empowerment! The longitudinal study undertaken by Plan International in “Real Choices, Real Lives: Ten Years On” informs us of how family dynamics, economic status and the physical and cultural environment interact to offer opportunity or to impede progress. The report, describing the lives of girls, states “we are seeing household chores, in many cases, become a dominant part of the daily routine and their own expectations of life begin to solidify.” The study is asking what is the impact on girls’ lives of the intersecting vulnerabilities of poverty, age and gender. The evidence demonstrates that the families in the study live in the context of gradual economic decline, several have become both economically and socially marginalized.

The Adolescent Girls Advocacy and Leadership Initiative reports that, in adolescence, 600 million teen girls struggle with “widespread poverty, limited access to education and health services, and persistent discrimination and violence”. The report further indicates that teen girls represent the most economically vulnerable group, “considerably more so than adult women or adolescent boys” usually lacking opportunities for financial access or for means and resources to be able to experience education or training for employment opportunities.

Social workers and enlightened educators often make the case that beyond a lack of support for economic opportunities – many cultural practices and norms actually pose barriers to any girl’s understanding of her own potential for economic empowerment. The younger the girl child, the more likely she becomes “free labor” for her family. Various cultures create toddler play structures prepping the youngest girls to swiftly

learn “girl chores”. Girls are taught the classic tasks of unpaid labor in the developed world as consistently as in un-developed nations. The “saving grace” of the developed world is that girls become engaged in mandatory state schooling at some point – which initiates the processes for potential escape from abject poverty

According to UNICEF, over 700 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday (classified by UN as Child Marriage), with 250 million of these having been brides before turning 15. In the poorest nations, as in the poorest regions of every nation, girls (particularly rural girls) are more at risk of early marriage – and an entrance into non-paid labor: housework, child-rearing, care of elders, etc. UNICEF states: “Girls who marry are not only denied their childhood, they are often socially isolated – cut off from family, friends & support – with limited opportunities for education and employment... Child brides are often unable to effectively negotiate safer sex, leaving themselves vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, along with early pregnancy ... and are also less likely to receive proper medical care while pregnant.” As we know, this latter situation increases the likelihood of both infant mortality and maternal mortality in the girl child.

As dire as the facts above, the situation is worse for the girl child forced into the shadow economies of Trafficking, whether for labor, for transporting of drugs or weaponry, or for sex perpetration – which not only yield no benefit, economically or other-wise to the girl, but can do unspeakable harm.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014 report that the number of trafficked girls detected increased through the period 2007 – 2010. The most recent estimate in the 2014 report is that girls constitute 21% of the victims.

The State of the World’s Children 2016: A fair change for every child notes that emergencies and protracted crises affected the education of an estimated 75 million children and young people 3 – 18 years of age. Many are living without proper access to food, shelter, health care and education. Around 150 million children under the age of 14 are engaged in child labour. Child trafficking is on the rise with 5.5 million children engaged in forced labour, with thousands subject to abuse, forced into marriage and coerced into militias, despite the prohibition of such practices under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

All of this paints a bleak picture of lack of effective measures to economically empower girls – moving from Plan International’s longitudinal study through The

Adolescent Girls Advocacy and Leadership Initiative report to the most recent 2016 report on the state of the world's children.

Women's economic empowerment begins with girls. Women's economic empowerment into mainstream neoliberal economics prioritizing profit over persons will not effect change. In effect it only consolidates structural and systemic injustice and exacerbates the situation of the girl child's susceptibility to labour and sexual exploitation, domestic work and being trafficked. Economic empowerment towards gender equality, zero tolerance of gender based violence, with access to the means of food production, decent work, equal pay, ending of all unpaid care work, access to education, training, and health care are pivotal to the transformation required for true economic empowerment of women.

How do we begin the work to empower girls, socially and economically? Start with disaggregated data. Know the hard facts statistically as they relate to women and to girls (classified as females under 18 years of age); between the girl child and the boy, (also including other gender assignments); between urban and rural girls, and other distinguishing descriptors of the relevant area: nation, province, region, city or any locality under study. This simple step provides essential data in understanding the details, issues, and the work that lies ahead, like a road map in dealing specifically with girls.

Significantly, when creating programs, such as initiatives and trainings that potentially empower women, include a range of teen girls, in a block large enough that their voices can be joined in conversation and discussion with each other and with the adults in the room. They are the guides as to what they need in order to emerge, to be supported, to be empowered, and to be given the chance, structure, and opportunity to flourish economically and otherwise. In such venues and surveys, it is critical to provide space to actually listen to the voice of girls in these designated settings (or isolate the specific data from girls in fact-finding initiatives).

Listen to the voice of girls. We have all become enamored of the voice of Malala Yusefzai, the well-spoken young girl who took a stance for Girls Education in her Taliban community, who was raised to fame in the aftermath of a potentially fatal gunshot by said Taliban. Malala is significant, not because she alone is eloquent, but because she is representative of the voices of legions of girls across the globe who can emerge as articulate spokespeople and partners in the effort to understand the needs of the girl child in the vicinity she represents. Invite girls to the table.