

The Working Group on Girls CSW70 Written Statement

This joint statement was prepared by the listed organizations accredited with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). We are members of a coalition known as The Working Group on Girls and advocate for the full implementation of the human rights of the girl child in all areas and stages of her life. We promote girls' agency and the continuous inclusion of their voices, needs, and rights across the United Nations system, within international agreements, and at national and local levels.

We welcome this year's theme "Ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, including by promoting inclusive and equitable legal systems, eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices, and addressing structural barriers" of the 70th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. More than three decades after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, legal equality remains unrealized. Discriminatory systems and weak enforcement of existing laws continue to obstruct the rights, development, and participation of women and girls. As Secretary-General António Guterres has warned, at the current pace, legal equality may take 300 years to achieve. Girls cannot wait - urgent and concrete action is required now.

Despite global commitments, millions of girls continue to suffer under legal systems and cultural frameworks that entrench discrimination and deny them basic rights. Around the world, cultural and religious frameworks are often misused to justify gender-based discrimination and harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. These acts are not cultural heritage—they are human rights violations that inflict irreversible physical and psychological harm. Each year, an estimated 12 million girls are married before the age of 18, often forced into unions that rob them of their childhood, education, bodily autonomy, and future opportunities. These marriages are perpetuated not only by poverty and gender inequality but also by legal loopholes, lack of enforcement, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms that view girls as property rather than as rights-holders.

In Afghanistan, the erosion of girls' rights has reached a state of emergency. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, girls have been systematically excluded from education, barred from secondary and tertiary schooling, and restricted from movement, public spaces, and even humanitarian aid distribution. The de facto authorities have dismantled nearly all protections for girls and women, with child marriage rates increasing sharply as families—faced with economic desperation and lack of opportunity—see early marriage as the only available path. The elimination of legal protections, closure of schools, and enforcement of gender apartheid must be unequivocally condemned and addressed by the international community.

Across various contexts, cultural laws and practices are often used as justification for rights violations, cloaking oppression in tradition. We reject the notion that culture or religion should be

used to legitimize the systemic denial of girls' rights. Culture must evolve to uphold, not undermine, the dignity, autonomy, and human rights of girls.

Recent findings from an online survey conducted by The Working Group on Girls with adolescent girls aged 14–19 also highlight the persistent gaps between legal frameworks and girls' lived realities. Across diverse regions, girls reported facing discrimination through laws, policies, or practices related to gender-based violence, property and inheritance rights, child marriage, child labor, sexual and reproductive health and rights, access to education, participation in leadership and advocacy, financial inclusion, and exposure to environmental degradation. Among these, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights emerged as the most urgent concerns.

While some girls indicated that they would feel comfortable seeking help from police, community leaders, social services, or informal networks, many expressed that they do not know where to go for help or do not trust the justice system. Barriers such as community expectations, fear of retaliation, stigma, and financial costs often prevent them from seeking justice. In cases of gender-based violence, girls shared that they are often ignored, disbelieved, or blamed, and that authorities frequently fail to treat such cases with seriousness and impartiality.

A majority of girls reported low confidence in legal and justice systems to deliver fair outcomes, particularly for youth, and identified limited awareness of rights, harmful cultural norms, and lack of accessible information as major obstacles. These findings underscore the urgent need for justice systems that are gender-responsive, youth-friendly, and inclusive of girls' voices in policy design and implementation.

As the world marks thirty years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we must confront an undeniable truth: for millions of girls, rights promised remain rights denied. The time for pledges has passed. The world must now unite in bold, coordinated, and girl-centered action to ensure that every girl—regardless of geography, status, or circumstance—can live free from violence, discrimination, and fear, and thrive with dignity, justice, and hope.

We call on governments and multilateral bodies to take the following urgent actions:

1. Ban all forms of child marriage, with no exceptions, and establish 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage for girls and boys. Strengthen enforcement of existing laws against child marriage, and close legal loopholes that allow for child marriage under the guise of parental or judicial consent.
2. Promote social transformation through education and engagement with communities and faith leaders to shift norms and dismantle systems that sustain early and forced marriage.
3. Governments, community leaders, and civil society must collaborate to eliminate female genital mutilation in all its forms, promote rights-affirming cultural practices, and include girls as active participants in transforming their own communities.

4. Hold governments accountable for systemic discrimination against girls, where state actors are actively dismantling girls' rights. Refuse to normalize gender persecution and apartheid, and support women and girls through safe, coordinated, and rights-centered humanitarian interventions.
5. Ensure that international legal frameworks and human rights mechanisms explicitly condemn cultural and religious justifications for discrimination against girls, and work with local communities to promote cultural practices that are rights-affirming.
6. Support grassroots and girl-led movements in restrictive settings by providing safe channels for advocacy, funding, and protection.
7. Reaffirm that access to education for all girls remains a non-negotiable global priority.

Access to justice for girls must also be prioritized and be more than legal reform on paper—it must translate into tangible, lived equality. No girl should be forced into marriage, denied an education, or silenced in the name of tradition or political ideology.

We call on governments, civil society, international organizations, and communities to create and sustain enabling environments within justice systems where girls and women feel safe, respected, and believed. This includes accessible reporting mechanisms, anonymous survivor-centered processes, and protection services such as safe shelters, free legal aid, confidential therapy, and trauma-informed psychosocial and medical support provided by qualified professionals.

We urge states to ensure that justice systems are youth-friendly, inclusive, and accessible. Rights-awareness and justice education must be integrated into school curricula and widely shared through online platforms and community initiatives. Prevention education should be prioritized to empower girls to know their rights and exercise them confidently.

Free legal counsel and financial assistance must be made available to every girl seeking justice. At the same time, girls' and women's leadership, agency, and advocacy must be promoted and protected, positioning them as active partners in shaping equitable and inclusive justice systems.

We further call for transparency, accountability, and community trust to be embedded within all legal institutions. Communities should be educated and mobilized to serve as allies, with local leaders, educators, and social service representatives championing girls' access to justice and safety.

All harmful traditional practices, including child marriage and female genital mutilation, must be decisively addressed and eliminated.

Comprehensive healthcare, including sexual, reproductive, and mental health services, must be made accessible and affordable for all girls and women.

Gender bias, stigma, and corruption that prevent girls from seeking or receiving justice must be eradicated. Law enforcement, judicial, and healthcare authorities must be trained and equipped to respond to cases with fairness, empathy, and professionalism. Diversity within the justice system must be encouraged to reflect and represent all communities.

We urge governments to enforce laws against gender-based violence and femicide without delay. To guide policy and ensure accountability, gender-disaggregated data must be systematically collected and reviewed.

Finally, we call for comprehensive legislative and policy reform that promotes gender equality and equity in every sector. Justice must not remain an aspiration—it must be a lived reality.

Now is the time for action—collective, sustained, and transformative action—to build a world where every girl can live in safety, with dignity, and in full enjoyment of her rights. Justice for girls is justice for all.

ENDORSEMENTS:

Feminist Majority Foundation
Girls Learn International, Inc.
Dominican Leadership Conference
International Council of Jewish Women
VIVAT International
Stella's Girls, Incorporated
Passionists International
Just Like You Global Foundation
Grail, The
International Presentation Association
Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association
AHAM Education Inc
Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Loreto Generalate
Global G.L.O.W.
Zonta International
Loretto Community (Sisters of Loretto)
US Women's Caucus, Inc.
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd
Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary
Education for Social Justice Foundation
Society of the Sacred Heart