

## **WAGGGS STATEMENT 54<sup>th</sup> SESSION OF THE UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

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**The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) believes the girl child must be at the centre of efforts to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.**

The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action states in Section L that ‘all barriers must be eliminated to enable girls without exception to develop their full potential and skills through equal access to education and training, nutrition, physical and mental health care and related information.’ In addition Section L pledges to address violence, harmful cultural attitudes and practices to eliminate all forms of discrimination against girls and promises to promote girls’ awareness and participation in their own lives and their societies.

Girls and young women suffer disproportionately in too many areas. Access to education and the quality of that education still has a significant gender bias. As food prices rise, hunger and poverty affect more people, with women and the young most at risk and girls the last priority. Climate change, lack of water and crisis in fisheries and other natural resources destroys the future of girls and boys. Restrictive cultural practices limit girls’ opportunities, constrain their roles to that of care giver and domestic helper and puts them at risk of illness, neglect and violence. HIV AIDS continues to impact more directly on the life chances of women and girls and over three million girls a year still suffer the trauma and long term consequences of female genital mutilation.

We know that girls and young women are the most crucial constituencies in our communities if we want to transform opportunities for all and ensure a sustainable future for humankind. There are more than 600million girls living in the developing world and one-quarter of the population in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa are girls aged 10 to 24. Transforming the lives of girls and young women is the beginning of a ripple effect. By taking a life cycle approach and addressing the needs and priorities of girls, young women, adults and older women benefit. By empowering girls and the women they will become, entire families and communities are pushed out of poverty and away from hunger. Educated girls and young women earn more money, start their families later and have fewer children. When girls understand about their own health and their rights, whole communities are healthier and safer. When girls are free from sexual violence, coercion and destitution they are free from HIV and AIDS. When they are free of HIV AIDS, their children are born healthy. Empowered girls become women who invest in their families and start a process of education and care that breaks the poverty cycle and changes family and community perceptions of girls from being a burden to being valued and worthy.

Despite knowing that investment in girls is the most powerful response to many of the dilemmas facing human kind, the international progress in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is appallingly slow, and when directly concerning the girl child often even slower. Less than half a cent of every US dollar spent on international assistance programmes is invested directly in girls.

Through its mission to 'enable girls and young women to discover their fullest potential as responsible citizens of the world,' WAGGGS is already placing the girl child at the centre of the solution. Education and leadership programmes, community action and advocacy campaigns reach out to 10 million girls and young women and their communities in 145 countries.

**In order to rapidly and significantly improve the situation of girls around the world, WAGGGS recommends that the international community, governments and civil society ensure that the girl child is placed at the centre of policy in the following four areas: girls' empowerment; education and training; adolescent health and rights; and participation in decision making.**

### **Girls' empowerment**

Girls' empowerment entails a process whereby girls gain more control over their lives, become active and valued members of their communities and are able to make informed choices about issues that directly affect them.

Discrimination against girls and young women can be based on class, race, ethnicity and age. Barriers include unequal power relations, limited opportunities for education, inadequate access to health care and services, cultural biases and poor economic conditions. As a result girls and young women are disenfranchised and marginalized. They are subject to violence and abuse, with domestic violence the leading cause of women's injury and death, more so for women aged 15-44 than malaria, war, traffic accidents and cancer combined.

WAGGGS calls on the international community, national governments and the civil society to empower girls by:

1. **Providing** a safe and supportive environment in which girls and young women can cultivate their own set of values and grow in confidence.
2. **Increasing** commitment and action on empowering girls and young women as a priority for policy and budget decisions
3. **Advocating** that the media, including new communication technologies, promote positive images of women and girls
4. **Involving** men and boys in dialogues on gender roles and encouraging positive interaction with women and girls.
5. **Tackling** cultural gender discrimination and promoting gender equality

### **Education and training**

70 percent of the world's 130 million out of school children are girls and there are 42 million fewer girls than boys in primary school. Girls who miss out on primary education grow up to become the women who make up two-thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate people and every year of schooling lost represents a ten to 20 per cent reduction in girls' future incomes.

Cultural and patriarchal family structures tend to prioritise the needs of boys over girls. Economic hardship can mean many parents often co-opt their children, especially girls, as additional labour resources. Other obstacles to girls' education include a shortage of school space, lack of female teachers, long distances to travel, unaffordable fees, cultural norms that reinforce women's traditional roles and violence. Even if girls are educated, their

earning potential is often lower than men as fewer women study subjects that lead to economic success.

The UNESCO definition of education shows three distinct types: formal education, informal education and non formal education whereby non formal education is organised educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve an identifiable learning clientele with identifiable learning objectives. WAGGGS believes that non-formal education makes a significant contribution to the full personal and social development of an individual. UNICEF has identified that involvement in girls' organizations over extended periods has a positive impact on girls' civic participation and in counteracting societal pressures.

WAGGGS calls on the international community, national governments and civil society to ensure girls' free, quality and comprehensive education by:

1. **Supporting** organizations involved in the promotion of the education of girls and young women
2. **Increasing** political commitment to give women's and girls' education a higher priority
3. **Introducing** poverty-reduction strategies to ensure that the right to education is the right of every child
4. **Eliminating** gender discrimination including through the promotion of educational programmes that challenge traditional attitudes of men and boys toward women and girls
5. **Providing** universal access to basic social and education services
6. **Recognizing** non-formal education as a positive method of learning

### **Adolescent Health and rights**

Rapidly changing social and economic conditions around the world have a significant impact on the health of girls and young women. Today, girls face many risks from social, cultural, behavioural and environmental factors, as well as discrimination and a lack of access to health information, education and services.

27 percent of girls 15-19 in sub-Saharan Africa are married and 28 percent give birth by age 18. Every year, some 14 million adolescent girls give birth. Consequentially, pregnancy complications and childbirth are the leading causes of mortality among girls between the ages of 15 and 19. And female genital mutilation has affected 138 million women and girls in Africa and the number continues to rise.

The AIDS epidemic has a disproportionate impact on women and young girls, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where three women are HIV-infected for every two men. Among young people (15–24 years), that ratio widens to three young women for every young man.

Sex is still a taboo topic and sexual education remains controversial in many countries. It is often difficult for girls and young women to get accurate and reliable information about sex and sexuality and to be able to talk freely and confidently about issues they face, including birth control, pregnancy outside of marriage, teenage pregnancy, premarital sex, morality, abstinence and STIs.

Seven in every ten of the world's hungry are girls and women. Most poor people who battle hunger deal with chronic under-nourishment resulting in stunted growth, weakness and heightened susceptibility to illness.

WAGGGS calls on the international community and national governments to ensure that girls' and young women's health issues and concerns are addressed by:

1. **Providing** girls and young women with appropriate education, information, skills and access to health services and counselling to enable informed and responsible health choices, including providing non-formal education programmes for the social, personal and sexual development of girls and young women
2. **Alleviating** the constraints faced by women in accessing food and ensuring gender responsive interventions to improve household food security and nutrition
3. **Providing** young women with opportunities to be involved in the planning, delivering and evaluation of sexual education
4. **Supporting** youth organizations which provide safe spaces for girls and young women to discuss sex and sexuality free from discrimination
5. **Providing** opportunities for girls and young women to become economically and socially independent so their health decisions are in their own hands and their economic and work choices do not put their health and wellbeing at risk

#### **Participation in decision-making**

The world's population is young and an estimated 87 per cent of the world's adolescents live in countries affected by poverty, hunger, disease and violence. Exposure to these problems without any chance to address the issues can lead to social despair, delinquency, alcohol and substance abuse. Girls and young women are especially absent from the decision making process, an absence that continues into womanhood with, for example, only 17 percent of parliamentary seats across Africa held by women.

When children have the opportunity to identify the problems that affect their lives and, most importantly, find and implement the solutions, it builds their self-confidence and encourages them to value the positive impact they can have on the lives of others. If citizenship and community action are learnt and practiced as a girl, the woman they become will be a compassionate leader.

WAGGGS calls on the international community and national governments to ensure that girls and young women are included in all decision-making processes by:

1. **Ensuring** the right to freedom of expression and access to information for girls and boys on an equal basis
2. **Ensuring** children, particularly girls, have access to decision making processes at all levels
3. **Recognizing** children, particularly girls, as powerful agents of change in all areas of society
4. **Building** an intergenerational partnership based on mutual trust and respect and the development of shared goals
5. **Ensuring** equal representation of girls in all formal and informal decision-making bodies
6. **Challenging** the role of young men in society so they take responsibility for their own activities and develop equal relationships with young women