



## **Zonta International Statement to the 68th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

Zonta International, a leading global organization of more than 26,000 individuals in 63 countries working together to build a better world for women and girls, presents to the 68th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women the following statement for consideration of the Commission in its deliberations on accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective.

The lasting effects of COVID-19 have had devastating consequences for women and girls and threatened decades of progress in the fight for gender equity. UN Women estimates that more than 340 million women and girls—an estimated 8 percent of the world's female population—will live in extreme poverty by 2030, and close to one in four will experience moderate or severe food insecurity. At the same time, 129 million girls are out of school, and women and girls are facing new and increasing challenges as a result of climate change and conflicts around the world.

To address poverty and enable women and girls to realize their full potential, the global community must come together to ensure women and girls' equal access to quality education at all levels, expand women and girls' access to information and communications technology, and address the unique and disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and girls.

### **Ensuring equal access to quality education at all levels.**

Girls' access to quality education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels is essential to their ability to realize their full potential and enjoy long-term economic security. However, millions of girls remain out of school altogether and lack of secondary schools in many rural areas means girls often live very far from the nearest school. Girls need to be able to travel safely to and from school, and school facilities must include sex-segregated toilets and washing facilities, complying with SDG targets 4.A and 6.2, so girls do not miss school once they begin menstruating. Married girls need to be allowed and encouraged to return to school and should be supported with catch-up classes and childcare services if needed.

Zonta International calls on Member States and the United Nations to ensure equal access to quality education at all levels by:

- Addressing barriers to girls' education, including strong cultural norms that favor boys' education and delegate household obligations to girls, inadequate sanitation facilities in schools, unsafe school environments, gender-based violence and child marriage.
- Ensuring girls' access to quality education at all levels, improving retention rates, supporting interventions that encourage girls to enroll in school and make the transition from primary to



secondary school, and addressing the unique needs of young married girls to allow them to return to school and complete their education.

- Recognizing and elevating the voices of adolescent girls through formal and informal educational opportunities and community initiatives.

### **Expanding access to information and communications technology.**

According to the International Telecommunication Union, 2.9 billion people still do not have access to the internet, including four out of every five women in the least developed countries. According to UNESCO, more than 1.3 billion children, age three to 17, do not have access to the internet in their homes and are, therefore, cut off from the resources, information and opportunities that connectivity provides. Access to service providers is not the only barrier for women and girls. Additional barriers to internet access include costs to connect, limited digital skills, and social and cultural norms that prevent women and girls from freely using the internet.

In addition to providing equitable, affordable and safe access to the internet, ensuring that women are represented in technology and other STEM fields is also critical to closing the digital gender divide, elevating women's economic and employment opportunities and addressing women and girls' unique experience and perspectives in technological advancements of the future. Programs like Zonta International's Amelia Earhart Fellowship, established in 1938, and its new pilot program for women in STEM are necessary to encouraging women to pursue education, career opportunities and leadership roles in information technology, STEM, aerospace engineering and space sciences – all fields that are expected to continue to grow and provide future opportunities for individuals with the right skills.

Zonta International calls on Member States and the United Nations to expand access to information and communications technology by:

- Ensuring universal access to the internet.
- Addressing specific barriers to women's access to the internet, including cost, service quality and digital skills and competencies.
- Investing in digital skills education for women and girls, so they can fully and freely access the internet and participate online.
- Increasing investments in girls' education and support STEM Education and digital skills development for girls at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels to ensure lifelong access to learning opportunities and economic and employment opportunities of the future.

### **Addressing the immediate and long-term impacts of climate change on women and girls.**

Climate change includes social and intergenerational injustice; those who have contributed least to the climate change crisis are the most impacted. Climate change also affects women and men differently due to the gendered division of labor, cultural norms and different societal roles. Girls face discrimination and abuse based on their gender. Poverty, ethnic background and disabilities may multiply these challenges. Understanding the current status of women and girls, unequal structures and



unfair cultural norms, and making changes are important to tackle inequalities in structures that place the greatest burden of the consequences of climate change on girls and women.

Equal economic opportunities need to be part of the solutions to the climate crisis. The economic impacts of climate change more severely affect populations in developing countries, especially those who depend on agriculture, whose actions and lifestyle, at the same time, contribute less to climate change. In these environments, women's and girls' unpaid agricultural and domestic work is essential to the livelihoods of their families and communities. Climate change threatens the material resources on which these livelihoods rely, and increases domestic and subsistence workloads, therefore primarily impacting women and girls.

At the same time, persistent gender discrimination in accessing education, training, material and financial resources, technology, and land property hinders women's and girls' opportunities to diversify their livelihoods. Besides gender disparities in accessing and controlling resources, women in these environments also have reduced access to income-generating opportunities, either locally or through migration, face high gender pay gaps and often cannot even control the proceeds of their own labor, when cultural norms put them under the control of the male "heads" of their households. Conversely, women's economic empowerment boosts productivity, diversifies income and increases income equality.

Zonta International calls on Member States and the United Nations to address the immediate and long-term effects of climate change on women and girls by:

- Actively taking into account human rights, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in defining and implementing national climate action plans, including gender-responsive measures that are more effective and respectful of human rights.
- Upholding the principles of climate justice agreed to in the Paris Agreement and ensuring that the most marginalized groups do not bear the brunt of the climate crisis.
- Ensuring that climate adaptation and mitigation plans address the unique needs of women and the barriers to women's full participation in the economy, including childcare and elder care services, occupational segregation, informal work, the gender pay gap, and legal and social restrictions.
- Recognizing the importance of women as decision-makers, educators, caregivers, community leaders and experts across sectors and utilizing their unique perspectives and expertise to develop successful, long-term strategies to address climate change.

These issues are not new issues. They have long been recognized and addressed in the 67 previous sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women by Zonta International and many other non-governmental organizations who share our commitment to a gender-equal world. There have been countless discussions and expressions of support and goodwill. Now, the global community must come together to demand urgent action to address poverty and all its related issues and empower all women and girls, so that we can begin to see positive change in the coming year, not some time in the future. Now is the time for action!



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