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**International Day of the Girl Child**

 **11 October 2022**

**Empowerment of girls is an indispensable precondition for just and sustainable societies: UN experts**

*GENEVA (10 October 2022)* –*UN human rights experts\* today celebrated gains made through girls’ activism while warning against major gaps and potential retrogressions that could hinder progress. On the occasion of the tenth International Day of the Girl Child, the experts issued the following joint statement:*

“On this tenth International Day of the Girl Child, we seize the occasion to pay tribute to all the courageous girl activists across the globe and to their admirable transformative potential as child human rights defenders. Their voices should be amplified within the UN and beyond as they are key in offering concrete solutions to major challenges our societies face.

Girls have been mobilising worldwide to demand and catalyse change on critical global issues. They are at the forefront of initiatives aimed at transforming societies towards social justice, gender equality and sustainability. This is occurring despite barriers that they continue to face in participating in public and political life, because of persistent gender-based discrimination, exclusions and violence within families, communities and societies at large.

Girls experience unique challenges to their activism, rooted in the intersection of gender and age, and exacerbated by numerous other intersecting factors. Retrogressive narratives that perpetuate discriminatory gender and age-related stereotypes suggesting that women’s and girls’ roles should be limited to the private sphere, family and procreation considerably affect their participation in public life, silence their voices and render their contributions invisible.

The empowerment of girls through the respect, protection and fulfilment of their fundamental human rights is an indispensable precondition for just, inclusive, peaceful and sustainable societies, and the achievement of gender equality. While in recent years their participation has increasingly been promoted, major gaps persist, compounded by predominant gender stereotypes and patriarchal social norms.

The significant barriers to girls’ enjoyment of the rights to freedom of expression and opinion and to peaceful assembly and association are often deeply rooted at home, in the family and in the community. Everywhere girls continue to live under varying degree of patriarchal control and experience wrongful stereotyping, both of which prevent and punish participation in public life. The perception of young activists as challenging established gender norms may lead to aggression, including threats and violence, or lack of support from their families, communities and the general population, as well as the authorities.

Access to education, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, professional training, productive resources, economic opportunities and information as well as digital connectivity continue to be limited for many girls, particularly those living in rural or precarious settings. Often, they are not sufficiently aware of being rights-holders nor are they duly informed about their rights, which is a fundamental prerequisite for their agency and activism.

Child and forced marriages as well as forced, unwanted or child pregnancies; female genital mutilation; sexual violence, including rape; curtailed access to sexual and reproductive health services, information and goods, including those related to menstrual health, contraception and abortion care, and the denial of their autonomy in relation to these matters, are also major human rights barriers to girls’ activism.

The lack of safety and security are major barriers to girls’ agency and activism. The frequent occurrence of attacks, harassment and violence in the street and on public transport, deter and limit girls’ activities and travel outside their home, which impedes their access to and use of spaces for freely exercising and self-assertion.

Digital gender-based violence and harassment add a further layer of challenges to girls’ activism. Digital technologies may be used to blackmail, control, surveil, coerce, harass, humiliate or objectify girl activists. Online attacks are often orchestrated against them with the aim of discrediting, delegitimising and defaming them.

Beyond the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing crises caused by conflict and displacement, climate change, natural disasters, sharp socioeconomic inequalities, political instability and rampant digitalisation have had a considerable impact on the possibilities for girls to fully and freely engage in all aspects of life including through activism.

Girls’ equal rights and opportunities in all areas, namely family and cultural life, economic and social life, political and public life, safety and health, including sexual and reproductive health, are the basis for creating an enabling and just environment for girls.

The dignity and agency of all girls must be recognised and actively promoted, supported and protected, while ensuring safeguards against threats, violence and reprisals, and undertaking concrete steps to remove the structural barriers and the systemic disadvantages that they face. We also remind States and others that by virtue of being persons under the age of 18, girls are children and, as such, must be provided with special protection measures. This must always be done, though, prioritising for girls be duly informed about their human rights from the youngest age, empowered and supported to be active decision-makers in their own lives and fully participate in public affairs, engaging creatively in all fields. The root causes of the numerous barriers faced by girls in their attempts to contribute to transformative actions should be tackled through targeted measures by States and all stakeholders concerned. The adoption of a comprehensive human rights-based approach that is child rights-centred, while being gender-responsive and intersectional is crucial to ensuring a sustainable environment for girls’ activism.

States have an obligation to recognize and respect activism\*\* as an exercise of the rights to participate in public life, to freedom of opinion and expression and to freedom of assembly and of association. They also need to proactively remove the structural and systemic barriers that impede girls’ activism and their enjoyment of human rights. States should ensure an enabling environment for girls’ activism and create the necessary frameworks and policies to promote and guarantee their inclusion and participation in decision-making processes. States should facilitate collaboration and building solidarity within and across movements, organisations and generations, promote family and community support, bridge the gender-related digital divide, ensure enjoyment of the equal right to quality education, and build gender- and age-sensitive normative and institutional frameworks at the national and international level.

Without tackling the persistence of a global discriminatory cultural construction of gender, often based on the misuse of religion, and the continued cultural justifications for discriminatory laws and practices among States and other stakeholders, there can be no sustained progress. The failure to eliminate discrimination within the family undermines any attempt to ensure gender equality in all areas of society. The time has come to review with a critical lens the unfulfilled commitments made to girls and take corrective actions. It is a long overdue political commitment which must be fulfilled without delay. There is no acceptable justification to deny the human rights of girls by allowing oppressive patriarchal practices to continue which are detrimental to girls’ future opportunities, dignity and agency.

ENDS

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\*\*[Making sure girls and young women are always heard](https://unworkinggroupwomenandgirls.org/reports/making-sure-girls-and-young-women-are-always-heard/)

*Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the* [*Special Procedures*](https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council) *of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms. Special Procedures mandate-holders are independent human rights experts appointed by the Human Rights Council to address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. They are not UN staff and are independent from any government or organization. They serve in their individual capacity and do not receive a salary for their work.*

*The*[***Committee on the Rights of the Child***](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crc/pages/crcindex.aspx)*, chaired by Mikiko OTANI (Japan), monitors States parties' adherence to the*[***Convention on the Rights of the Child***](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx)*and its Optional Protocols on involvement of*[***children in armed conflict***](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OPACCRC.aspx)*, and on*[***sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography***](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OPSCCRC.aspx)*. The Convention to date has*[***196 States parties***](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&clang=_en)*. The Committee is made up of*[***18 members***](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRC/Pages/Membership.aspx)*who are independent human rights experts drawn from around the world, who serve in their personal capacity and not as representatives of States parties.*

The [**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women**](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/cedaw/pages/cedawindex.aspx) monitors States parties’ adherence to the [**Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx), which to date has [**189**](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&clang=_en) States parties. The Committee is made up of [**23 members**](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CEDAW/Pages/Membership.aspx) who are independent human rights experts in women’s rights drawn from around the world, who serve in their personal capacity and not as representatives of States parties. The [**Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**](https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/opcedaw.aspx) allows the Committee to receive and examine complaints by individuals or groups of individuals under the jurisdiction of a State party to the Optional Protocol, claiming to be victims of a violation of any of the rights set forth in the Convention. To date, [**115**](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8-b&chapter=4&clang=_en) States have ratified or acceded to the Optional Protocol.

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