



Zonta International Statement to the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Zonta International, a leading global organization of more than 28,000 professionals in 62 countries pledged to empower women through service and advocacy, presents to the 65th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women the following statement for consideration of the Commission in its deliberations on women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

For more than 100 years, Zonta members have been working toward our vision of a more equal world – a world in which women's rights are recognized as human rights and every woman is able to achieve her full potential, a world where women have access to all resources and are represented in decision-making positions on an equal basis with men, a world where no woman lives in fear of violence.

Today, that vision seems further away than ever. The world is facing unprecedented challenges, including a global pandemic, widespread gender inequality and climate change. While these challenges are felt by communities across the globe, they uniquely impact women and girls. The effects of COVID-19, in particular, have had devastating consequences for women and girls and threaten progress already made in the movement for gender equality.

The economic impacts of COVID-19, again while significant for everyone, are felt more harshly by women, who generally earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs and are more likely to work in the informal sector. With more than 1.52 billion students out of school at the height of the pandemic and increased healthcare burdens put on families, women have been forced to take on greater care demands at home, while also facing potential cuts and layoffs. Women also have less access to social protections and lead most single-parent households. The situation is even more dire in developing economies, where 70% of women are employed in the informal sector with few protections against dismissal or paid sick leave.

Women's health is also negatively impacted when resources and priorities, including sexual and reproductive health services, are reallocated during times of crisis. Women and girls have unique health needs, but they are already less likely to have access to health services and adequate insurance, especially in rural and marginalized communities. As a result, there has been an alarming increase in the number of teenage pregnancies, as resources have been shifted from routine reproductive health services to respond to COVID-19.

Additionally, women may be more at risk due to occupational gender-segregation. Women are 70% of the world's health workforce and are more likely to be on the front lines, especially as nurses, midwives and community health workers. They are also a majority of health facility service staff, including cleaners, laundry and catering.

Violence against women and girls has also increased exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual or physical violence by an intimate partner in the last 12 months. That number surged as social and economic stresses combined with measures to restrict movement and outside contact. In countries with reporting systems in place, increases of more than 25% in cases of domestic violence were reported.

Widespread income loss and economic insecurity among families are also likely to increase rates of child marriage. As schools closed, girls not in school became at greater risk of child marriage. If they are away from school too long, they may not return.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have a lasting impact for many years to come, and a sustainable recovery will require changes in laws and policies to ensure an equitable recovery for women and men. Women are heads of state in only 21 countries; yet, despite women's underrepresentation, their leadership and response to the COVID-19 crisis has proven to be more effective and resulted in fewer deaths than their male counterparts. More women need to move into leadership positions where they can influence and change policies and laws to ensure an equitable and sustainable recovery that benefits women and men, girls and boys.

Zonta International calls on Member States and the United Nations to address the long-term impacts of COVID-19 and ensure women and girls' full and equal participation and decision-making in public life 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.
- Providing educational and leadership opportunities to women and girls to ensure that there is equal access to positions of power and influence.
- Ensuring equal representation in decision-making bodies at all levels of government, as well as in the private sector, where decisions about employment, working conditions and advancement to upper management are made.
- Creating enabling environments for gender justice activists and women human rights defenders to achieve significant, sustainable change.

- Addressing cultural norms so that women, given the opportunity, can engage in paid work, be empowered economically, and contribute to the well-being of their families, communities and society as a whole.
- Guaranteeing adequate and equal remuneration for women's work and equal access to social services and protection policies.
- Creating working environments that facilitate women's participation in decision-making positions.
- Abolishing laws that restrict the types of jobs that women can do or that allow husbands to object to their wives working.

COVID-19, however, is not the only crisis impacting women and girls. Climate change also disproportionately affects women and girls, from natural disasters to food security, access to clean water, health and migration. Like the response to COVID-19, studies have found that greater female representation in national parliaments leads countries to adopt more stringent climate change policies, which are greatly needed if our efforts to curb the effects of climate change are to be successful. 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:

- Including women and prioritizing women's health and responses to gender-based violence in disaster preparedness and response plans.
- Acknowledging and including women's voices about the harmful impacts of climate change, as well as listening to and learning from their attempts to mitigate and adapt to those impacts.
- Developing policies and frameworks to address climate change that recognize its gendered impacts and integrating gender equality into all approaches to mitigate the effects of climate change.
- 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.

Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls will not be realized without the elimination of violence against women and girls. Zonta International calls on Member States and the United Nations to address gender-based violence by:

- Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child so that women and girls are protected from discrimination and violence.
- Ensuring that violence against women and girls is criminalized and appropriately punished and that excuses on the grounds of culture, tradition, religion or so-called "honor" are not regarded as a justification for any form of violence against women.
- Developing, adequately funding and implementing national-level plans to end child marriage.

- Providing training and support to all those who interact with and assist victims of violence, including police officers, medical personnel and judges, so they can better recognize, understand and respond to all forms of violence against women.
- Dedicating specific resources to essential services for women and their families escaping violent situations.
- Including community leaders, and men and boys, in efforts to eradicate violence against women and girls.
- Supporting the African Union's call for a treaty to end violence against women and girls.

We can see the potential to lose ground in our efforts to achieve gender equality reflected in the lack of female faces amongst politicians, health experts and economists leading the charge against the global crises facing our world, including COVID-19. The need to ensure women's full and effective participation in decision-making and to eliminate violence against women and girls has never been more urgent. It is vital that women have a seat at the table and that their efforts are included in recovery initiatives and long-term solutions across all sectors of society.

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