



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
11 December 2023

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-eighth session

11–22 March 2024

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Voluntary Service Overseas, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Strengthening Collective Actions for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

The Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) commends the Priority and the Review theme of CSW68. In line with the themes of CSW68, VSO accentuates for collective action to advance gender equality by holding leaders accountable, empowering women and girls and the feminist movement, developing laws and policies, and having social protection system in place. We firmly believe in global social inclusion and gender equality.

Despite many laws, legislation, policies and actions on gender equality, gender gaps still exist in the form of women's unequal access to productive resources and services, disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and other inequalities. Women tend to spend around 2.5 times more time on unpaid care and domestic work than men. There is also a high prevalence of gender-based violence, for example, one in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence, mostly by an intimate partner among other inequalities. With the world facing worsening climate disasters, poor and marginalised women and girls in developing countries bear the brunt of the impact of climate change. Smallholder women farmers and girls face increasingly hostile environments, bear the brunt of climate change and are subjected to gender-based violence, sexual violence, child marriage, and trafficking. Sadly, policy and decision-making arenas fail to consider gender inequality and women-specific circumstances, vulnerabilities, risks and needs. VSO projects including, CLARITY in Tanzania, Make Way in African countries, Pariwartan in Nepal, ACTIVE in Asia and Africa and others aim to address these challenges. VSO reiterates its commitment to addressing the root causes of gender inequality and exclusion and promoting transformative gender norm approaches that requires working at all levels. According to our own research, official and customary laws continue to legitimise and institutionalise exclusion.

VSO recognises that most forms of exclusion have their roots in gendered socio-economic political structures and power inequalities. VSO advocates for the centring of women and girls' rights and those of other excluded genders in policy and programming. VSO focuses on gender in the areas of health, education and livelihoods which are informed by its core approaches of social inclusion and gender, social accountability, and resilience.

Within education, VSO recognises that formal and non-formal education learning pathways play a key role in addressing education inequalities and build resilient and inclusive education systems. We consider non-formal and formal education and learning as a stepping-stone to rapidly scale up flexible education and learning options to reach all learners, particularly out of school adolescent girls and girls with disabilities.

VSO is committed to support the governments and civil society organisations to strengthen both formal and non-formal education learning pathways so that the most marginalized including women and girls with disabilities and adolescent girls are not left behind and they can participate in learning regardless of their socio-economic and cultural contexts. VSO calls for addressing harmful social norms and practices and the establishment of safer learning environments recognising that in many places, schools do not meet the accessibility the safety, hygiene or sanitation needs of girls, and there are stigma surrounding menstruation which impact negatively on girls' learning. This includes establishing systems for menstrual hygiene and support, girls' education in emergencies, addressing gender-based violence, having complain

response mechanism, safeguarding, girls' protection, accessible WASH services for girls with disabilities and climate friendly school environment.

Within the health sector, women in Africa bear a disproportionately large share of the global burden of disease and death, particularly in maternal morbidity and mortality. Africa accounts for more than half of all cases of maternal deaths worldwide and African women have a one in 42 lifetime risk of dying during childbirth compared with one in 2900 in Europe. Further, the average maternal mortality rate in Asia-Pacific is extremely high, at 127 per 100,000 live births, compared to the developed-country average of just 12 per 100,000. Most of these deaths could be prevented through quality antenatal, obstetric and perinatal care – including care given by midwives and skilled birth attendants. Further, mental health amongst women and girls is a growing problem, with more exposure to risk factors, discrimination, violence and abuse, and perinatal mental health. Fewer resources are allocated to mental health and there is a huge treatment gap. VSO is working in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Mozambique with vulnerable youth to promote mental health and psychosocial support, peer support systems and mental health referrals to bridge the treatment gap. 6 million female health workers are unpaid or underpaid, and the exploitation of women's labour has negative effects on health systems. VSO is advocating for decent working conditions for duty of care for paid and unpaid community health workforces and to ensure governments conceive CHW policies that promote women's economic empowerment.

In livelihoods, despite being responsible for most of the world's food supply, women farmers do not have control and access to the same resources or opportunities as men – land, finance, training, or technical input. For example, less than 15 percent of agricultural landholders around the world are women, and in certain contexts this is as low as 5 percent. Women also lack security in the workplaces and many work in unsafe formal and informal sectors with very little protective measure in place. Since the COVID 19 pandemic many women are still suffering the aftereffects having lost their jobs, hard-earned investments and savings and have had to restart with little support from the state or community.

Equitable access to gender-responsive social protection has a significant impact on women's and girls' empowerment and equality, and without gender-sensitive design can exacerbate the intersecting forms of discrimination women and girls face and push women further into poverty. We urgently need to increase our efforts to ensure social protection explicitly promotes gender equality, particularly ensuring resilience to health shocks such as climate shocks and outbreaks.

We recognize that resilient livelihoods flourish when all genders have equal opportunities to thrive. Gender inequities hinder economic progress and stifle sectoral growth. By dismantling barriers that impede access to resources, education, and economic empowerment, we pave the way for resilient livelihoods to take root through nurturing a more equitable society, where individuals of all genders can harness their potential, we unlock a transformative force that propels sustainable development. Resilience, social inclusion and accountability lies at the heart of our pursuit, encompassing the ability to withstand challenges, adapt to change, and foster sustainable progress. Gender equality based on justice serve as catalysts for building resilient livelihoods, resilient health, and education systems by unlocking the potential of individuals and communities.

We therefore call upon Low and Medium-income States:

- Address the root causes of gender inequalities and injustice including power inequalities, patriarchal structures, harmful social norms and practices, gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination based on disability, age, ethnicity amongst others through awareness raising, strengthening legal and policy

framework, financial commitments to gender equity and stopping impunity on all forms of gender-based violence.

- Address the gender gap in education and technology through investing in resilient, inclusive education systems that are safe, for women and girls, person with disabilities.
- Put in place measures for safer workspaces for women, including for women with disabilities in formal and informal setting including mining, farming, and marketing sector.
- Combat the gendered impact of climate change on health, in particular through removing obstacles to the criminalization, prevention of child marriage and SGBV (Sexual and Gender Based Violence) exacerbated by climate impacts, and investing in resilient health systems that enable continuity of essential maternal and reproductive health services before, during and after climate shocks, conflicts and other health emergencies.
- Ensure that social protection programmes are responsive to the needs of women and girls, especially those with disabilities, and are designed and implemented in a gender-responsive way, including social safety nets for climate and health related shocks.
- Invest in the local-level implementation of climate resilient health action plans, ensuring strong citizens engagement to make services accountable, and empower a generation of young women leaders in climate health action.
- Global community promotes policies that empower, protect women and remove all obstacles to inclusion of women and girls, LGBTIQI and excluded genders and communities, persons with disabilities in the economic, social and political spheres; puts in place a holistic and integrated approach in health, education and livelihoods and recognising the diversity of all persons and the intersecting nature of gender and other inequalities; supports the implementation of SDG5 through financial investments in gender equality; and enhances global commitment to social protection.
