

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd; Feminist Majority Foundation; Girls Learn International; Global G.L.O.W.; Loretto Community; Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Loreto Generalate; International Association of Schools of Social Work; International Council of Jewish Women; International Federation of Women Lawyers; International Federation of Women in Legal Careers; International Presentation Association; Passionists International; Salvation Army; Sisters of Charity Federation; The Grail; VIVAT International; Zonta International ; International Federation of Business and Professional Women

The Working Group on Girls (WGG), a coalition of over 40 national and international non-governmental organizations with accreditation at the United Nations, came into being in the lead up to the Beijing Conference in 1995. Since then, the WGG has been advocating with and for girls, for full implementation of their human rights in all areas and stages of life. We promote girls' agency and seek to lift up their voices throughout the UN system and ensure the inclusion of their needs in its international agreements. We urge leaders at all levels of the UN and in civil society to listen to what girls have to say about the realities of their lives as they assert their right to equality and equity in all aspects of society, a right promised but still far from fully delivered.

We can wait no longer. Once and for all, we must achieve the aims of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and UN Women's multi-partner movement for bold action on gender equality: Generation Equality. Girls' lives and full development depend on it. Girls need tangible change, *now*. This will require the fullest commitment of member states and civil society partners. Girls are showing us the way. Here is what they have to say:

Girls are increasingly at-risk, not only due to the COVID pandemic and the climate crisis, but by **the unwillingness of adults to prioritize girls' rights to equality and commit to addressing all the ways girls continue to be left behind.** Progress that has been made is backsliding, and girls suffer inequities on all fronts:

Girls report the impact of Covid-19 has eroded previous gains:

Reduced access to education with remote learning not accessible to all;
Increased home and family care responsibilities and reduced access to menstrual products, further interrupting their education;
Increased discrimination and other vulnerabilities including alarming rates of family violence and sexual assault;
Reduced access to information and justice;
Increased risk for marriage and teenage pregnancy;
Reduced financial security and increased economic inequality;
Reduced food security and assistance;
Restricted social contacts and support from extended families; and
Increased family stress, loneliness, anxiety, depression.

Girls continue to carry the burden of inequality in all spheres of life. This is a grave injustice and infringement of their human rights.

Girls continue to be given second class status in homes, schools, communities and work spaces due to cultural attitudes limiting their access and participation in activities and opportunities that enable the advancement of boys but leave girls behind. “Girls have to work twice as hard as boys and are still denied equal opportunities.” Girls are often criticized and told they cannot do X

“because you are not a boy.” These attitudes are often reinforced by religion, which does not always support girls’ beliefs about gender equality and thus serves to silence them. Likewise, global media portrays girls and women in stereotyped and objectified ways and does not represent or support their true diversity and expression of their identities. This is particularly true for gender non-conforming and transgirls, differently-abled girls, girls of color, girls living on the margins.

Oppressive cultural norms, attitudes, and practices take a toll on girls and contribute to the stress they experience on a daily basis, which affects their overall mental health. They do not feel free to express themselves, and may be ostracized, diminished, bullied, scapegoated, or victimized by other forms of gender-based violence. This again is especially true for LGBTQIA+ girls and for girls who seek to express their identity and power in gender non-conforming ways. **Girls need safe spaces** to speak, to be heard and supported, to articulate and realize their deepest identities and potential, to express their ideas and beliefs. They **should not have to self-censor** in deference to patriarchal notions that shut down conversation when the word “feminist” is used or seen as too radical. “We have to re-do how we teach about gender equality – it is not about superiority. It is about full and equal respect.”

Girls have said that **inequality begins at home**, as parents cling to traditional gender roles and expectations, and fail to grasp girls’ realities and the issues confronting them in current times. Girls are often unable to discuss taboo topics when they are in desperate need of support in navigating their adolescence. Even in families that are supportive, their ability to be a mentor or role model may be limited as parents struggle with the legacy of their own upbringing. Families need help in learning to provide an empowering climate for their daughters to flourish. Girls say parents need to listen, to understand their issues, to be willing to change their mindset. “We cannot delay the conversation any longer...We are risking millions of girls being abused because parents are dismissive or unwilling to discuss what is happening to them.”

Girls remain vulnerable to gender-based violence when harmful norms diminish their agency by dismissing gender-based violence against them, even in families, and expect them to tolerate it. Likewise in schools, and en route to school, girls face the threat of GBV while not being seen as credible reporters. They lack access to justice when their rights and safety are violated. “We are often mocked and re-victimized by institutions that are supposed to support us.” Girls say, crimes of gender-based violence must be punished, and corruption must be addressed!

Governments and institutions have failed to sufficiently represent and protect girls’ equal rights or provide mechanisms for their voices to be heard and to participate in decision-making at various levels. Girls seek to claim the power to build their own capacity, to represent their own issues, demanding and creating responsive solutions to the issues of gender inequality. They are ready, capable and already demonstrating their ability to be leaders, and applaud those governments and institutions that are committed to making leadership equally accessible to all.

They do not want a world in which 75% parliamentarians, 73% managerial decisionmakers, 67% climate negotiators and 87% people at the peace table are men. Nor will they accept a world in which almost 1 in 5 women experience violence at the hands of a man they know, women and girls do 3 times more unpaid care work than men, and the global gender pay gap is stuck at 16%. They especially reject that every year 12 million girls are married before age 18. (Data from

#NationsUnited: Urgent Solutions for Urgent Times – Gender Equality, Ch.4, Youtube.) Clearly, we need to change systems that prevent girls full potential. Their voices will not be silenced.

Girls know their own experience, and what is needed for their (and society's) true flourishing. Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg represent just a few of the many girls who are becoming empowered changemakers. These activists know that access to participation at all levels, via mechanisms that are institutionalized (not only special events) is needed so that girls' voices will be heard. They want more than to be welcomed to the table, but to be partners in designing/co-creating the table. They know firsthand the depth and intersectionality of their issues and what is needed for a sustainable future. They say: **“Engage us and we will become the leaders we were meant to be.”** (Gender and Adolescence – High Level Event, 75th UNGA, 9/30/20)

Girl's Full Equality and Empowerment requires the following:

Freedom from all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence;
Dismantling of patriarchal and cultural attitudes, norms, practices and policies that harm girls and deny them equality and equitable treatment in all areas of society;
Engaging families, boys, communities and societal institutions in learning what gender equality and equity mean and why they are important.
Equal and equitable access to quality education, vocational training, work and mentorship opportunities, including STEM areas, for future independence and advancement;
Commitment to ensure girls' **completion** of school, increasing their survival rate and potential income, and decreasing the likelihood of child marriage;
Education in sexual health and reproduction, and access to services and resources;
Right to safety in all spaces; Zero tolerance of child exploitation.
Participation in decision-making at all levels, with institutionalized mechanisms to guarantee their representation.

Justice delayed is justice denied. Once and for all, girls must be supported in developing their full potential and becoming the leaders they were meant to be. It is their birthright as human beings. The Working Group on Girls stands in full support of girls' rights in all stages of her life.