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Statement submitted by Anti-Slavery International, Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, Global Campaign for Education, Soroptimist International, and Stichting CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, non-governmental organizations 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

Child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU, child marriage) is a gross violation, abuse and impairment of human rights and a global problem that crosses borders, cultures, traditions, and religions. Annually 12 million girls are married worldwide, with huge variations in prevalence between and within countries. The vast majority of girls who are affected by child marriage are from the poorest households and living in areas affected by conflict or fragility.

Ending child marriage is key for the priority theme for the sixty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Child marriage is both a driver and consequence of poverty, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and denying girls their rights to education, health, and autonomy. Gender inequality and lack of universal free education means most families with limited resources prioritise the education of sons over daughters. Taking girls out of school when they marry or enter a union limits their opportunity to earn an income, and they tend to live in poverty along with their families. Furthermore, many married children can experience levels of suffering, coercion and control that meet international legal definitions of slavery and slavery-like practices, often with economic powers of 'ownership' and control exercised over them. Child brides are also more susceptible to domestic violence, health complications, and lack of decision-making power over their bodies and lives.

It is in this context that we submit the following recommendations for the Agreed Conclusions of the sixty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women:

1. Address macro socioeconomic inequalities, which directly and indirectly hurt girls and drive child marriage

(i) Establish progressive, redistributive global financial governance frameworks which prioritise the elimination of poverty and of gendered socioeconomic inequality, and investment in social services, such as education and health, especially sexual and reproductive health services, noting that girls in poorer households are at greater risk of being pulled out of school and/or being pushed into marriage, and have a higher likelihood of teen pregnancy.

(ii) Support the development and adoption of a legally binding UN-led Tax Convention and close tax loopholes to address the estimated \$480 billion lost by countries annually in potential tax revenue, largely owing to aggressive tax avoidance by the wealthiest companies and individuals, which could otherwise be redirected into key public services that contribute to reducing child marriage, such as education and health services – especially sexual and reproductive health services.

(iii) Reform the global financial governance system and address the inequalities that push countries into debt, leading to cuts in public spending that further limits girls' access to education and health services.

2. Respect, protect and fulfil girls' right to education

(i) Guarantee access to twelve years of quality, free, compulsory, safe and gender-transformative education for all girls, including those at risk of child marriage and married girls, including in situations of poverty, humanitarian settings, conflict, climate, and other crises.

(ii) End discriminatory policies and practices that exclude pregnant girls, married girls and young mothers from school and fund national strategies that support the re-engagement of girls and young women in education after pregnancy.

(iii) Ensure the provision of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education and information about where and how to access sexual and reproductive health services in and out of schools, which includes discussion around consent, bodily autonomy and relationship dynamics.

(iv) End period poverty and provide safe, private toilets and sanitation facilities and products for all girls to manage their menstrual hygiene in school.

2.1 Education financing

(i) Increase education financing by implementing the recommendations contained in the Call to Action on Financing Education launched at the Transforming Education Summit in 2022, and incorporate strategies in domestic financing to address child marriage and support girls at risk of marriage and married girls.

3. Design and implement gender responsive budgets to realise girls' and women's human rights and gender equality

(i) Increase financing in ordinary budgets using gender-budgeting tools; adopt measures such as subsidies, aid, development cooperation, cash transfers, and gender-sensitive loans and financing; and create mechanisms for budget accountability.

(ii) Address fiscal biases against girls and women through the allocation of budgets to reduce intersectional socioeconomic inequalities and the adoption of tax justice measures.

(iii) Integrate gender and human rights impact assessments fully into national budgets and economic policies with a view to eliminating poverty and inequality.

(iv) Increase investment in child marriage programming, particularly through Official Development Assistance, noting that funding decreased from \$1.8 billion in 2020 to \$1.7 billion in 2021 despite already being significantly under-funded.

4. Use evidence-based cash transfers programmes to protect girls at risk of child marriage

(i) Develop national child marriage strategies that promote policy coherence and cross-sectoral links, maximising resources for – and effectiveness of – cash transfers oriented towards ending child marriage. Incorporate cash transfers into national strategies to end child marriage; include child marriage reduction as a specific objective of cash transfer programmes; and promote inter-sectoral links between policies and programmes.

(ii) Ensure social sector investment in availability and quality of education is balanced with increasing demand through an appropriate combination of cash transfer programmes. Prioritise investment in quality local primary and secondary education and remove user fees; consider combinations of unconditional cash transfers to address material poverty, conditional (or labelled) cash transfers to promote access to education accompanied by youth- and girl-centred social norms change programming, and cash transfers conditional on delayed marriage in child marriage hotspots.

(iii) Finance cash transfers and other social protection measures to ensure they cover areas of high child marriage prevalence, including in humanitarian contexts and for migrant and stateless populations.

5. Address the gendered impact of unpaid care work

(i) Adopt and implement policies that recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, noting that girls and women disproportionately undertake such work, affecting their education and labour market participation.

(ii) Recognise the value of the care economy and use fiscal policy to reduce and redistribute workloads through gender-responsive taxation systems that ensure adequate investments in policies that promote girls' and women's rights and gender equality, noting that girls and women disproportionately undertake unpaid care work.

(iii) Invest in long-term social norms change work within communities and at scale to transform patriarchal gender stereotypes and relationships of power to rebalance the division of labour within the home and promote gender-equitable decision-making and leadership.

6. Remove gender-based discriminatory provisions in law to ensure respect for girls' and women's economic rights

(i) Eliminate institutional, systemic and structural discrimination against women and girls, including through laws, policies, regulations, programmes, administrative procedures or structures, services, norms and practices that directly or indirectly restrict equitable access to (matrimonial) property and land ownership, inheritance, employment, credit, and/or citizenship, and which place women and girls at increased risk of violence and child, early and forced marriage and unions.

(ii) Take measures to tackle poverty and increase female labour force participation, particularly in stable and highly skilled jobs, to ensure more girls can stay in school and avoid child marriage. Promote political participation, representation and leadership of women and girls from diverse backgrounds to be the ones creating the laws, policies and economic models that impact the daily lives of girls and women.

(iii) Tackle policies and regulations that still allow the practice of child, early and forced marriage through loopholes, such as informal unions, cohabitation or other arrangements that are not formalised, registered or recognised by a religious, customary or State authority.

7. Post-child marriage support

(i) Put in place social protection measures and develop economic empowerment initiatives for individuals who leave marriages that qualify or have qualified as child marriage, with a focus on providing them with sustainable livelihood options. Such programmes should prioritise fostering economic independence and financial literacy, ensuring they can support themselves and their children without being forced back into child marriage due to economic insecurity.

(ii) Create specialised support services such as helplines and shelters that can provide counselling, legal advice, and rehabilitation programmes for survivors of child marriage. These services should cater to their specific needs, including trauma-informed care, healthcare, and financial assistance.

8. Data collection

(i) Establish appropriate systems to collect disaggregated data on the multiple dimensions of inequalities and poverty, including the impact on the levels of incidence and prevalence of child, early and forced marriage and unions, noting that existing findings show a positive correlation between child marriage and socioeconomic inequality.