



69th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69)

Report and ChildFund Alliance Engagement

I. Background: CSW69

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was established by [ECOSOC Resolution 11\(II\) of 21 June 1946](#) as a principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. The CSW is instrumental in promoting women’s and girls’ rights, documenting the reality of their lives throughout the world, and shaping global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Every year the Commission convenes a two-week session where member states, UN entities, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders gather at the UN’s headquarters in New York to discuss progress and gaps in advancing gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment. The 69th session of the CSW (CSW69) took place on 10-21 March 2025, with a focus on reviewing and assessing implementation of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), adopted in 1995 as a global agenda comprising [12 critical areas for action](#) to strengthen women’s rights and gender equality, including violence against women and girls, health, economic empowerment, and political participation.

As in years prior, CSW69 provided an opportunity for stakeholders to build consensus on and reinvigorate these 12 actions to continue and, where possible, strengthen policies and programs that target gender inequalities and boost women’s and girls’ agency and leadership. The [CSW69 Political Declaration](#) was adopted by consensus in spite of **concerns about whether a joint text would in fact materialize** given rows over terms such as “gender” and “gender equality” throughout the negotiations. The passing of **the declaration thus constitutes a win for advocates of gender equality and women and girls’ empowerment over newly emerged reactionary stances and tendencies** of some member states.

As in previous years, ChildFund Alliance Secretariat staff attended several high-level sessions and participated in numerous side-events. On 13 March, the **Alliance held its own official CSW69 side-event** on “[Children and the Promise of Gender Equality: Achieving Shared Care Responsibilities and Addressing Gender-Based Violence at Beijing+30](#)”. The session, spearheaded by the Alliance’s UN Representative, was **co-produced with Alliance member WeWorld** as well as partners Equimundo, Plan International, the Bahá’i International Community, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary/Working Group on Girls, Save the Children International, and the Women’s Refugee Commission. It was **co-sponsored by the governments of Austria, Australia, Ecuador and Italy**, and featured **children and young people expressing their concerns and hopes** for the future, in addition to a **high-level discussion among cabinet-level officials** from said member states and a panel with organizing NGO representatives (see pages 10-13 for details).

The following pages contain a **compendium of key takeaways and select outcomes of CSW69**, as well as summaries of select side-events **with thematic relevance to the work of ChildFund Alliance**.

II. Key Takeaways and Observations

Negotiations and Adoption of the Beijing+30 Political Declaration (until 10 March)

- The first day of CSW69 saw the adoption of the [Beijing+30 Political Declaration by consensus](#) (i.e., without a member state vote) as a **reaffirmation of member states' commitment** to “the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#)” as a **contribution to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, women’s and girls’ empowerment, and gender equality grounded in the “full enjoyment of their human rights”.
- The Political Declaration emphasizes specific commitments across the aforementioned **12 critical areas of concern**: women and poverty; education and training of women; women and health; violence against women; women and armed conflict; women and the economy; women in power and decision making; institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women; human rights of women; women and the media; women and the environment; and the girl child.
- The document also **calls for tangible steps toward gender equality**, such as improving women’s access to credit and entrepreneurial opportunities, alleviating the burden of unpaid care and domestic work, closing the digital gender gap, and guaranteeing girls' education alongside lifelong learning opportunities for women. It moreover affirms strong commitment to securing **healthcare and justice for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict zones**, in addition to pushing for **gender-responsive budgeting** within social protection frameworks, **increased financial support for civil society**, and enhanced multi-stakeholder partnerships to accelerate progress. The latter two are **encouraging given the contentious current political context characterized by a shrinking civic space and overall pushback against women’s and girls’ and children’s rights in general**. Notably, “**adolescent girls**” were mentioned in the Political Declaration for the first time – a win.
- The declaration was adopted in the morning of 10 March, the first day of CSW69, after a reported 48 hours of negotiations and intermittent uncertainty whether a declaration could even be adopted. The process nearly came to a head when the **Delegations of Argentina and the United States launched efforts to torpedo and undermine gender-related language**. (The USA is not a [CSW69 member state](#). However, we understand efforts were made to convince Argentina, which is a member of the Commission, to push back on gender and other language). Fortunately, **cooler heads prevailed** and the **final text upheld strong protections for women’s and girls’ rights**, in addition to **recognizing the various intersecting forms of violence** they face and **acknowledging gender-responsive measures** to alleviate the same. Despite the contentious and divisive moments during the negotiations, in the end all of the **193 UN Member States recommitted to protect women’s and girls’ rights and realize their full human rights and freedoms**.

- Some **observers and negotiators felt that not a lot of progress had been made** with the 2025 declaration. At the same time, in light of the accelerating global pushback against human rights – and women’s and girls’ rights in particular – there was **also consensus that the text had at least not regressed** compared to the [2020 Beijing+25 Political Declaration](#).

Noteworthy Developments, Announcements and Outcomes (10-21 March)

After a moment of relief following the adoption of the Political Declaration, CSW69 officially got under way. Over the two ensuing weeks, **diplomats and observers repeatedly spoke of palpable energy that was infusing the discussions and sessions, with mostly CSOs leading this drive**. At the opening of CSW69, **Secretary-General António Guterres reminded** us that, while the world has made progress since the 1995 adoption of [the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), important gaps persist in certain areas that disproportionately affect women and girls, including discrimination, violence, and unequal economic opportunities.

As is **relevant to the three Strategic Priorities of ChildFund Alliance’s Strategic Plan FY2026-30**, the Secretary General remarked the following:

1. On **Ending Violence Against Children** (referencing primarily girls and women), the Secretary-General called out the enduring pervasiveness of sexual violence and violence using digital technologies, as well as unequal access to childcare, health and education opportunities that increase a woman’s and girl’s risk of experiencing violence of some sort throughout their lives.
 2. Regarding **Humanitarian Action**, the SG referenced the **UN’s commitment to help raise \$300 million for women’s organizations in conflict and crisis settings**. He moreover reminded us of the denial of women’s and girls’ most basic rights in many countries, not only conflict settings, in addition to the horrific sexual violence from Sudan to Haiti. **Equality for women and girls**, the SG explained, is **“a casualty of surging conflicts around the world”**. He also said that giving women and girls their rightful seat at the table would enhance our chances of solving some of the biggest challenges of our time, from conflict to climate.
 3. On the **Climate Crisis and its Impact on Children’s Wellbeing**, the UN’s top diplomat highlighted the disproportionate impact of escalating climate disasters on girls and women. He **called for investments in climate adaptation and resilience via even more determined climate action**. The Just Transition to a Green Economy, furthermore, **must have women and girls at its center**.
- The UN Secretary-General also reminded the audience about the **commitments that member states had made in the [Pact for the Future](#) to revitalize the Commission on the Status of Women** in order to strengthen the relevance, accountability and inclusivity of the CSW, for instance through **improved mechanisms for child participation or access for CSOs (two top advocacy priorities of the ChildFund**

Alliance Secretariat at the UN). The purpose of revitalization is thus to turbocharge the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. **Kidest, an 11th-grade girl leader from ChildFund Ethiopia who represents Ethiopian girls on the [Working Group on Girls \(WGG\)](#) – an international NGO committee that works “for Girls, with Girls at the United Nations” by promoting the human rights of the girl child in all areas and stages of her life – co-authored the WGG’s [submission](#) on CSW revitalization. **ChildFund Alliance was also actively involved in preparing girl leaders for CSW69. Loretta Ching’andu – the Secretariat’s astute UN intern and a graduate student, as well as another young champion of women’s rights and humanity – facilitated a day-long pre-CSW69 workshop organized by the Working Group on Girls.** Over 200 young leaders participated in sessions aimed at sharpening their advocacy skills and learning how to most effectively engage for girls’ rights at the UN, approach leaders, and make their voices heard. In the coming weeks the co-facilitators of the CSW revitalization process, Botswana and Ireland, are expected to prepare an **Elements Paper** to outline the **contours for further consultations focused on more specific CSW revitalization options and proposals.****

- With reference to the growing global backlash against girls’ and women’s rights – compounded by conflicts and crises, shrinking civic space, and increased restrictions on individual freedoms – Secretary-General Guterres announced that because **progress and rights can no longer be taken for granted** but must be defended, the **UN System has now adopted a new internal [Gender Equality Clarion Call](#)** addressed to all its leadership personnel. It reaffirms that (and why) **gender equality lies at the very heart of the UN’s three pillars: peace and security, human rights, and development.**
- In her [opening reflections](#) at one of a string of official side events convened by UN Women, CSW’s principal organizing UN agency, **Executive Director Sima Bahous** identified the following [priority actions](#) to drive real change:
 1. **A digital revolution** to close the gender gap in technology
 2. **Freedom from poverty** through strong social protection
 3. **Zero violence** by transforming harmful norms and supporting survivors
 4. **Equal decision-making power** for women in politics and beyond
 5. **Peace and security** that prioritizes healthcare over warfare
 6. **Climate justice** that ensures progress does not come at the planet’s expense
- Ms. Bahous moreover urged that now is the time to “transform commitments into results”. **H.E. Robert Rae, Permanent Representative of Canada to the UN** (and the current President of the UN Economic and Social Council, ECOSOC), [spoke](#) of the urgency to “**ignite the momentum to ensure that gender equality remains at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**”, and called gender equality “**the foundation of a just and sustainable world**”. In referring to the [Gender Equality Acceleration Plan](#), an initiative launched by the UN Secretary-General to pivot the UN to effectively deliver for women and girls, **Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed** similarly remarked that gender equality “**holds the key to unlocking progress on the SDGs and lasting peace**”. According to

UN Women, **the action plan is to “re-ignite the spirit of Beijing”, with young women and adolescent girls at its core, and with a focus on financing for gender equality and mobilizing gender data.**

- The Commission also adopted the **biennial resolution “Release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts”**. It was proposed by Azerbaijan and urges, among other things, all parties to armed conflicts to fully respect international humanitarian law and take all necessary measures to protect the civilian population (see [press release](#) for details).
- In their **second consecutive [joint declaration](#)**, the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** and the **African Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council (AU ECOSOCC)** reaffirmed their unwavering commitment to advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment. **EESC President Oliver Röpké** noted that **there cannot be equality without accountability**, while **AU ECOSOCC President Louis Cheick Sissoko** called for urgent, transformative action to **make gender parity a reality in governance, economic empowerment and digital inclusion**. The declaration defines **seven key priorities and calls to action**:
 1. Advancing women’s leadership
 2. Ending gender-based violence (GBV)
 3. Bridging the digital gender divide
 4. Women’s economic empowerment and the Just Transition
 5. Recognizing unpaid care work
 6. Ensuring women’s inclusion in peace and security efforts
 7. Strengthening accountability and data-driven policymaking
- The EESC and AU ECOSOC furthermore stressed that **achieving the SDGs requires comprehensive and integrated approaches that mainstream gender equality** across all policies and called on all stakeholders to collaborate to **ensure that gender equality remains a global priority** and accelerate progress.
- **Civil society’s crucial role as an integral element to sustaining progress was acknowledged** throughout CSW69. This is due to civil society’s relentless advocacy for gender equality and the strengthening⁶⁹ report of women’s and girls’ rights, as was repeatedly noted by high-level representatives, as well as their **role as catalysts for change and watchdogs**, among other reasons. As relates to the CSW Revitalization Process, **H.E. Gladys Mkhawa, Permanent Representative of Botswana to the UN**, emphasized that **many of the same issues were raised by civil society, the UN Secretariat, and member states**. The role of particularly **young people in global decision-making is integral to the revitalization effort** for they possess valuable insights on pressing issues ranging from technology and AI to aging.

- Overall, observers referred to the atmosphere throughout the two weeks of CSW69 as **energizing and infused with optimism** – with reaffirmations towards women’s and girls’ empowerment and gender equality, and **repeated acknowledgment of the indispensable, life-saving role that civil society plays** in achieving full gender equality and ensuring women and girls can enjoy their full human rights.
- Nonetheless, as we look ahead to CSW70 in 2026, it is important to anticipate potential challenges ahead. Commentators observed that **“the elephants are already in the room”**. Next year’s Commission will be chaired by **Costa Rica**, which on 2 April 2025 [withdrew its support for the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) “by stripping institutional funding and public interest status from the 17 SDGs”. Regarding the aforementioned efforts by other delegations to throw a spanner in the works of adopting a Political Declaration and continue progress towards gender equality, the global development community media platform Devex aptly observed on the concluding day of CSW69 that the **United States “sent a strong signal that it plans to leverage its financial and diplomatic muscle to reverse a range of progressive UN policies, from access to sexual and reproductive health and rights to quotas tailored to achieve gender parity in UN institutions”**. This is best illustrated in the [United States Explanation of Position on the CSW69 Political Declaration](#), which states that **“globalist endeavors like the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs lost at the ballot box. Therefore, the United States rejects and denounces the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, and we will no longer reaffirm them as a matter of course”**.

Select Key Figures

- Despite a 39% decrease in out-of-school girls in the last 20 years, 122 million girls still remain out of school globally
- Nearly 4 in 10 adolescent girls and young women globally do not complete upper secondary school, with girls from rural poor backgrounds and marginalized communities even less likely to finish schooling
- 50 million adolescent girls and young women today are unable to read or write a simple sentence
- 9 out of 10 adolescent girls and young women in low-income countries do not have access to the internet, while their male peers are twice as likely to be online
- Failing to invest in education and training for young people, especially girls, costs the world over \$10 trillion. In sub-Saharan Africa, the [cost rises to \\$210 billion, more than 10% of GDP](#)
- At the current rate of progress, [girls will continue to be married as children until 2092](#)
- Globally, 1 in every 8 women and girls aged 15-49 (12.5%) was [subjected to sexual and/or physical violence](#) by an intimate partner in 2023
- In 2023, almost 1 in 5 girls aged 20-24 years (18.7%) was married before age 18, down from about 1 in 4 in 2003 (24.1%)
- 50 million girls alive today have [experienced sexual violence](#)

- 230 million girls and women have [undergone FGM globally](#), with prevalence greatest on the African continent, where over 144 million women and girls have suffered from the procedure
- 1-2 million girls and women in the world have undergone FGM in small, isolated communities and among diaspora from practicing countries
- Each year now, over [2 million girls undergo the practice before the age of 5](#)
- Girls today are less likely to marry under the age of 18, compared to 25 years ago. Still, 1 in 5 girls globally marry or are married in childhood
- Nearly 12 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 are expected to give birth in 2025. Among younger adolescent girls (aged 10-14), for whom the risk of pregnancy is even bigger, this number is estimated at more than 325,000
- The average incidence of child marriage in conflict-affected countries is 14.4 percentage points higher than in non-conflict settings

Summary of Principal Impediments to Female Empowerment and Call to Action

Summing up the gist of messages shared and advocated during the two weeks of CSW69, the following should be noted:

- **Adolescent girls remain disproportionately disadvantaged**, with structural barriers limiting their access to education, financial independence, and safe environments
- **Investment in girls is not just a moral imperative but an economic necessity**, as empowering girls leads to broader societal and economic gains
- **Girls must be at the center of decision-making**, as they best understand their needs and challenges
- **Governments must prioritize education and protection policies** that actively remove barriers to girls' success
- **Global funding must be increased for girl-led initiatives** that focus on education, healthcare, and gender-based violence prevention
- **Universal access to quality education must be ensured**, especially in crisis and rural settings
- **Digital and financial inclusion** must be supported to empower girls economically
- **Communities and families** must be engaged to shift cultural norms that hinder girls' progress
- **Governments and organizations must act urgently** to translate commitments into tangible policies and programs
- **NGOs and the private sector should invest in girls** through scholarships, financial support, and exchange programs
- Other major hindrances to achieving gender equality that were repeatedly cited across sessions (see summaries of child-centered side events below) include a **lack of data, shrinking spaces across the world for women and girls to make their voices heard, women's and girls' access to justice**, and **too little engagement of men and boys** in practicing positive masculinity and thereby becoming champions of women's and girls' rights

III. Child-Focused Resources

This section contains a selection of child-centered resources (various research, initiatives, etc.) promoted during CSW69 with relevance to the work of ChildFund Alliance.

- [Girl Goals: What Has Changed for Girls? Adolescent Girls' Rights over 30 Years](#) (UNICEF, Plan International) examines what has and what has not changed for adolescent girls over the last 30 years, highlighting the current status of girls when trend data are not available. Numerous policy recommendations are included to ensure every girl's right to thrive. These suggestions look at feasible models and approaches that can help accelerate progress towards the SDG commitments for adolescent girls, taking into account fiscal constraints and a range of urgent issues countries are facing today.
- UNICEF's [We Deserve Better Outcomes Report](#) summarizes key outcomes from its "We Deserve Better" initiative. It highlights insights from adolescent girls on the importance of participatory policymaking in social protection and recommending strategies to enhance gender-responsive approaches.
- [Designing and Implementing Low-Cost Childcare Solutions: Lessons from the World Bank's Africa Gender Innovation Lab \(GIL\)](#) is a case study presenting lessons learned by the GIL and its partners from pilots of different models of low-cost childcare provision across four countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- [Pathways to Prosperity for Adolescent Girls in Africa](#) (Center for Global Development, World Bank, Population Council) explores evidence-based strategies for adolescent girls' empowerment, highlighting effective interventions that enhance their economic, social, and health condition while identifying gaps and areas for improvement.
- [STAAR, Gender-Transformative Social Protection in Crisis Contexts: Guidance Note](#) expounds on gender-transformative social protection in crisis contexts, providing key principles, programmatic recommendations, and design considerations to enhance resilience and gender equality in humanitarian and fragile settings.
- The Malala Fund presented the findings and laid out actions for global decision-makers in [Girls' Vision for Education: Delivering on Girls' Needs and Priorities for Education](#), with a clear message that girls know exactly what they want from their education; and that governments and global institutions must listen to them, act to advance gender equality in schools, and realize the right to secondary education for all girls. The report serves as a valuable resource for girls and organizations supporting them to help spark conversations and reimagine an education that truly works for them.

IV. ChildFund Alliance’s Side Event at CSW69

Children and the Promise of Gender Equality: Achieving Shared Care Responsibilities and Addressing Gender-Based Violence at Beijing+30

(12 March)



2025 marks 30 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the founding blueprint for advancing women’s rights and gender equality globally. Three decades later, continued progress on gender equality is under threat and women’s rights are under attack around the world. In this context, **ChildFund Alliance and its member WeWorld** conceived of and spearheaded a side event (see [recording](#)) with partners **Equimundo, Plan International, the Bahá’i International Community, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary/Working Group on Girls, Save the Children, and the Women’s Refugee Commission** in an effort to create a space of optimism and hope at CSW69. The session was co-sponsored by the **Permanent Missions to the United Nations of Austria, Australia, Ecuador and Italy.**

The event, “Children and the Promise of Gender Equality” focused on **how supporting shared care responsibilities, implementing gender-transformative humanitarian interventions, and enabling the meaningful participation of children and young people could help tackle gender-based violence**, as well as allow us to envision a future where gender equality is a reality, where the rights of current and future generations are valued and protected.

The session opened with statements by young leaders and children expressing their aspirations for gender equality and their demands to policymakers. **Siloé, a young Congolese-Irish leader**, called on participants to challenge the societal norms that discourage girls from assuming leadership roles, and to recognize how online gender-based violence threatens to silence young activists – especially girls and young women.

“The future is not something we passively inherit, but something we actively create.”

- Siloé, Youth Advisory Panel Member, Plan International, Ireland

Ruby, from Nepal, highlighted how gender-transformative programming can be lifesaving and emphasized the importance of engaging men and boys as allies.

“Together we can create a world where every girl, boy, and individual, whatever their gender identity or sexual orientation, can live free from fear.”

- Ruby, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary/Working Group on Girls, Nepal

Ayandziswa, a young climate activist from Eswatini, [reflected](#) on how advancing gender equality is essential to shield society as a whole from gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and exclusion.

“We need platforms to dream, speak, and act. Solidarity isn’t just unity, it is power. Equality isn’t just a battle between genders, but a movement for all. Stand up, speak up. Strengthen one, strengthen all.”

- Ayandziswa, youth climate activist, Eswatini

Nour, from Lebanon, [shared](#) how discriminatory nationality laws that prevent women from passing their nationality to their children leave children feeling like second-class citizens in their own countries.

“The time has come for international efforts to ensure that no-one is excluded from rights due to outdated laws that do not align with modern civil rights standards.”

- Nour, Lebanon

In a [video](#) shared by ChildFund Alliance about WeWorld’s life-saving work in Afghanistan, a girl shared her aspiration to become a teacher so that she may spread literacy within her community and educate girls and women in particular.



From Ireland to Nepal and Eswatini to Afghanistan, child and youth advocates reminded us that achieving gender equality means creating space for every voice.

In the ensuing high-level panel discussion facilitated by **Jana Berchtold, UN Youth Delegate, Austria**, representatives from the governments of Italy, Ecuador, and Australia shared their experiences regarding the key challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality with children and young people. **Arianna Tanca Macchiavello, Minister for Women and Human Rights, Ecuador**, spoke about how Ecuador is protecting girls from sexual violence through comprehensive sexuality education, improved sexual and reproductive health and rights, and adapting legal frameworks to improve protection in digital spaces. **Anna Ascani, Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies, Italy**, spoke of the critical importance of education as a weapon with which to eradicate gender inequality. **Dr. Anna Cody, Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission**, shared powerful examples of how community-led solutions led by Indigenous groups, particularly those that engage boys, have played a critical role in addressing gender-based violence and domestic violence in local communities.



High-Level panelists reaffirmed the power of education, legal reform, and community-led solutions, including engaging boys to end gender-based violence and advance equality for all young people.

A civil society panel moderated by **Stefania Piccinelli, Head of International Programs at WeWorld**, featured CSOs sharing insightful learnings from research and programming on transforming gender dynamics and enhancing the role of children and young people. Research by **Equimundo**, presented by **Giovanna Lauro**, indicates that **young men and young women think about gender equality in starkly different ways**, with many young men feeling gender equality has gone “too far”. She emphasized the importance of engaging young men on gender equality early in their lives, noting that “adolescence is too late”. **Lily Jacobi, Women’s Refugee Commission**, shared research on the prevalence of sexual violence against adolescent boys and male youth in humanitarian emergencies. She spoke about new guidance and resources on **how humanitarian responders can create humanitarian interventions that**

are more inclusive, accessible, and appropriate to the needs of adolescent boys and male youth survivors of sexual violence. Reflecting on gender-transformative humanitarian interventions, **Stefania Piccinelli** urged participants to **think beyond the needs of the initial stages of emergencies**, noting that we are now living in **an age of protracted humanitarian crises** – for example, the average displacement now lasts 17 years. Reference was made to **WeWorld’s new report on Afghanistan, “Her Future at Risk: The Cost of Humanitarian Crises on Women and Girls”**, which traces and explains how the intersection of natural disasters, conflict, and the systematic attack on the rights of women and girls has created a protracted crisis where women and girls are disproportionately impacted. **Debora Cobar** of **Plan International** urged the **meaningful participation of girls in decision-making on issues that affect their lives**, noting that their inputs **lead to more impactful practices**. She provided examples from Guatemala, where girls came together to lead campaigns against child marriage. **Martha Moghbelpour, Bahá’i International Community from India**, closed the panel with stories of solidarity and collective action from India, where **boys and girls, men and women have come together to advance gender equality**.



Members of the CSO panel discussed how supporting shared care responsibilities, implementing gender-transformative humanitarian interventions, and enabling the meaningful participation of children and young people can help tackle gender-based violence.

In remarks that concluded the event, **Kathleen Sherwin** of **Plan International** offered reflections on the solutions offered by all speakers, girls and women – namely engaging men and boys as both allies and beneficiaries of gender equality, urging a sense of positive masculinity, creating safer digital spaces, and supporting community-led solutions, new approaches to humanitarian programming, and the meaningful engagement of children and youth.

V. Highlights of Select Child-Focused CSW69 Side Events

POWER4Girls: Invest in Girls, Transform the World

(10 March)

Organized by UNICEF, UN Women, Purposeful, Governments of Sierra Leone and Canada

This pivotal side event launched CSW69 by shedding light on the urgent need to invest in adolescent girls and discuss strategies for advancing girls' rights globally.

- **Kitty Van Der Heijden, Assistant UN Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director, Partnerships**, emphasized that adolescent girls are often overlooked in gender policies, despite being a crucial demographic for global development. She cited concerning statistics from a UNICEF report, including that girls are twice as likely as boys to be out of education, employment, or training; that 1 in 5 girls is married before reaching adulthood; and that adolescent malnutrition rates have barely improved in 27 years. Taking action to counteract these and similarly frightening findings is the purpose of the [Power4Girls](#) initiative, which aims to expand access to education, financial resources, technology, and safe spaces for girls worldwide.
- **Millie Bobby Brown, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador**, highlighted that **despite progress over the last 30 years, true gender equality remains elusive**. Some concerning statistics shared were the [122 million girls globally that are still out of school](#); that [self-harm is a leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19](#); and that **1 in 5 adolescent girls experiences intimate partner violence**. Ms. Brown then called for greater investment in girls' education, protection from violence, access to healthcare, and digital and economic opportunities.
- **H.E. Chernor Bah, Minister of Information & Civic Education of Sierra Leone**, expressed pride in being a feminist and highlighted Sierra Leone's commitment to girls' empowerment, citing that his country allocates **22% of its national budget to education** (the highest in Africa); introduced **free education policies for girls**, especially in STEM fields; achieved **gender parity at the primary level**, with secondary and tertiary levels showing significant improvements; and that Sierra Leone's "[Hands Off Our Girls](#)" campaign, led by the First Lady, has been instrumental in tackling violence against women and girls.
- Speaking next was the **Hon. Baroness Harriet Harman KC**, a member of the United Kingdom's House of Lords and the government's newly appointed **Special Envoy for Women and Girls**, who first reaffirmed the UK's strong commitment to gender equality. She then explained the necessity of intergenerational support, stating that young women must have agency and be allowed to speak for themselves. She moreover referenced the structural barriers that limit women's voices at different stages of their lives and called for a dismantling of these restrictions. Ms. Harman also stressed that **girls around the world share common aspirations, namely to be free from domestic work burdens, child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, violence, and female genital mutilation**. She then proceeded to outline the UK's approach, which includes amplifying girls' voices, supporting girl-centered organizations through partnerships such as the [Girls First Fund](#) and [Girls](#)

[Not Brides](#), and strengthening education systems with modules on consent and healthy relationships. Her concluding words were directed at men and acknowledged the **crucial role of male allies in championing gender equality**.

- **Bianca, an Adolescent Girls’ Leader and Member of UNICEF Global Girl Leaders Advisory Group**, stressed the urgent need for decision-makers to genuinely engage with girls, rather than merely inviting them into spaces as a symbolic gesture (i.e., “tokenism”). She also called out officials who leave meetings after making their speeches, thereby showing a lack of genuine interest in young people’s perspectives. Bianca also referred to **Romania as a global leader in ensuring children’s right to meaningfully participate in decision-making** through a historic law – but she stressed that a law on paper is insufficient and must be implemented effectively.
- **H.E. Nawal Kishor Sah, Minister for Women, Children, and Senior Citizens of Nepal**, outlined his country’s commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, highlighting the following key initiatives across different areas: **education** – increased school enrollment rates for girls through scholarships and free sanitary pads in public schools; **health** – significant reductions in maternal mortality and expanded sexual and reproductive health services, including cervical cancer screenings and HPV vaccinations; **economic empowerment** – programs like the Micro-Enterprise Development Program provide training and financial support for women entrepreneurs; **ending child marriage** – Nepal aims to eliminate child marriage by 2030 through leadership programs and community partnerships; and **support systems** – establishment of one-stop crisis management centers providing medical, legal, and psychosocial support for gender-based violence survivors.
- **Meng Horng, an Adolescent Girl from Cambodia**, convincingly argued that **girls can not only transform themselves but also entire communities** when they come together. Having grown up in rural Cambodia, Meng found herself confronted with **societal beliefs that girls should not pursue higher education or careers in technology**. Systemic barriers, including a lack of resources, mentorship, and support hold many girls back. This is why she joined the initiative *Technovation Girls*, where she learned to use technology to solve community problems. Also, at age 15 she developed a mobile application and participated in competitions and exchange programs, which fueled her passion for STEM. With support from UNICEF Cambodia and the startup community, Meng co-founded *Ladies in Tech*, another initiative that provides skills training, career consultations, mentorship, and hackathons to empower young girls in STEM, allow them to share their stories, and discover their hidden passion for a career in STEM. ***Ladies in Tech* has so far empowered 200+ girls in Cambodia to pursue careers in technology**.
- **Ambassador Gesa Bräutigam, Germany’s Special Envoy for Feminist Foreign Policy and Director for Human Rights and Global Health**, said that Germany believes investing in girls is a smart strategy, not just a justice issue. **Gender inequality stifles economic potential that costs the global economy \$10 trillion annually** (the IMF calculates global GDP in 2024 to have been \$105 trillion). The Ambassador noted that the kind of advocacy and intervention needed is that which calls for the dismantling of stereotypes and transformation of existing systems that perpetuate

inequality, rather than merely addressing or reacting to the symptoms. For its part, Germany's development policies prioritize education, leadership, and economic empowerment for girls.

- **H.E. Robert Rae, Permanent Representative of Canada to the UN**, added that investing in girls is about justice and unlocking society's full potential, which is why gender discrimination affects not just women but society as a whole. **Feminist policies hence benefit everyone, including men**, by fostering a more equitable and prosperous world.
- **Maureen Greenwood Basken of Wellspring Philanthropic Fund** urged funders to invest in adolescent girls' leadership and, citing [data from UNFPA](#), argued that **investing in girls generates a 10-fold economic return**. Proven interventions exist in education, health, and marriage prevention – and *Power4Girls* is a vehicle for large-scale investment that combines government systems with grassroots efforts to create sustainable change. Ms. Greenwood thus reinforced earlier panelists' argument that **investing in adolescent girls is not merely an ethical imperative but an economic and social necessity**.
- **Kirsi Madi, Deputy Executive Director at UN Women**, spoke critically of **the slow pace of gender equality, with a girl born today reaching 40 before achieving equal representation in parliaments and 68 before child marriage is eradicated**. She called for a change in the current **underinvestment in adolescent girls, with less than 6% of global development assistance** benefiting them. Ms. Madi urged governments and philanthropists to broaden financing and invest in girls, and reaffirmed UN Women's commitment to amplifying girls' voices and leadership with partnerships like those with UNICEF and Purposeful. She also pledged support for closing the gap in girls' secondary education and ending child marriage, and reaffirmed the importance of standing with girls, working together for a more just and equal future for all.
- **Melvina, a young Feminist Activist from Sierra Leone with Girls Leading Change**, spoke of the **transformative power of young girls who are not waiting for permission to change oppressive systems but instead are organizing, questioning, and uniting in ways rooted in love, sisterhood, and solidarity**. She noted girls' exclusion from decision-making spaces despite their significant contributions to movements, before calling out the systemic barriers that prevent girls, especially from the Global South, from accessing spaces where decisions are made. Melvina also shared the story of **Zaina, a 19-year-old girl from Sierra Leone who refused an arranged marriage after learning about her rights in a girls-led collective, which led to the marriage being called off and her being able to continue her education**. Girls are already doing the work to transform their communities, but they need broader support to achieve **system-wide change backed by investment in girls** – not just in the form of words but action and resources to ensure they are safe, educated, and empowered to lead.
- **Rosa Bransky, Co-CEO of Purposeful**, similarly emphasized that girl leaders are not only envisioning a better world but actively working towards it, even in challenging times like now. Because in spite of the world being in a state of crisis in manifold ways, girls continue to mobilize and organize for their rights and futures. She called for global support of girl activists, emphasizing that **Power4Gils represents a new kind of strategic partnership**, namely one that unites large agencies such as UNICEF with grassroots organizations that directly resource girl activists at scale

across more than 100 countries. The initiative aims to bring together partners to support girl leadership and activism directly, which ensures that efforts to empower girls are scaled and sustained across the globe.

Transforming Patriarchal Masculinities and Misogynist Norms in Online Platforms to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls Across the Online-Offline Continuum

(10 March)

Organized by UN Women and Equimundo

This side event brought together experts from various organizations to address the **impact of patriarchal masculinities and misogynistic norms in online spaces, examining their role in perpetuating violence against women and girls (VAWG) across both the digital and physical realms**. The discussion explored the intersection of masculinity, political discourse, and technology's influence on gender attitudes. Speakers emphasized the need for platform accountability, the regulation of big tech, and the growing challenges posed by AI-driven content moderation. The session also highlighted the **increasing politicization of masculinity and gender issues, with young men often associating opposition to the establishment with resistance to gender equality**. While many reject feminism as a term, they paradoxically support gender equality in specific contexts, such as women's empowerment and LGBTQ+ rights. This contradictory stance underscores the **complexity of gender discourse in the digital age**.

- **Taveeshi Gupta, Director of Research, Evaluation, and Learning at Equimundo**, emphasized that structural **violence against women and girls is deeply embedded in online platforms** and cannot be addressed in isolation. She pointed out that **backlash against feminist activists** manifesting through online harassment, threats, and [doxxing](#) is a sign that their advocacy is having a **tangible impact**. Ms. Gupta also stressed that feminist movements must remain resilient in both online and offline spaces to counter these misogynistic norms.
- **Joni van de Sand, Co-Director of the MenEngage Alliance**, called for a multi-stakeholder approach to tackle online misogyny and patriarchal masculinities. She called for greater transparency from tech companies, stricter regulations on AI-generated hate speech, and stronger protection mechanisms for gender justice advocates facing digital harassment. Ms. Van de Sand reiterated that technology is not neutral – it is profit-driven, often exploiting users' emotions and insecurities for financial gain. She emphasized that addressing these issues requires sustained advocacy and collective action across sectors.
- In closing, **Karla Velasco, Policy Advocacy Coordinator at the Association for Progressive Communications**, addressed the role of big tech in perpetuating digital misogyny. She noted that despite consultations with civil society, major **tech companies lack meaningful engagement and diversity in decision-making processes**. Transparency reports from these companies often omit disaggregated data, making it **difficult to track and hold them accountable for content moderation**. She noted that platforms such as X have shifted from human rights-centered policies

to a more unregulated approach of free speech, raising concerns about platform bias and the growing spread of hate speech. Ms. Velasco also said that according to research, AI-generated Islamophobic and anti-Semitic advertisements remain active on X even after being flagged. This failure points to the **inadequacies of current moderation systems in detecting and removing harmful content**. She thus questioned the governance of digital spaces, asking who truly controls online platforms and whose interests they serve.

The event ended with an urgent call for a multi-stakeholder approach in addressing online misogyny and patriarchal masculinities.

Reimagining International Cooperation: Youth as Architects of Change

(11 March)

Organized by Plan International and the Permanent Mission of Germany to the UN

International cooperation has historically been shaped by power structures that often marginalize young people – particularly young women and girls from the Global South – in decision-making processes. [Germany's Feminist Development Policy](#) emphasizes gender transformative and intersectional approaches to dismantle these structural inequalities. **Young people (including children) are essential drivers of social change and justice, yet their voices remain underrepresented in shaping global development agendas**. This side event explored how young people – especially young feminists – can actively shape international cooperation policies and practices, focusing on amplifying the contributions and leadership of young people in creating equitable, sustainable, and inclusive societies.

- **Helga Schmidt, Germany's Candidate in 2024 for the post of President of the 80th General Assembly of the UN** (and from 2020 to 2024 Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE), said that the leaders of tomorrow are today's young changemakers. Particularly in recent years have young people been rising up to demand justice and accountability, climate justice, intersectional social justice, and so on – and these conversations are the ones that must shape global discussions. The German diplomat went on to say that **climate issues are deeply intertwined with power and unequal access to opportunities, especially for women and girls**. She echoed the sentiment of many a progressive leader at CSW69 when noting that young people are more and more excluded and prevented from making their voices heard. Their fundamental rights are also increasingly overlooked, in contravention to children's rights being enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). **Another sign of hope is the Pact for the Future**, noted Ms. Schmidt, because it renews the world's commitment to multilateralism. Importantly, **it is the member states that negotiated the Pact, which lays the groundwork for more inclusive processes that take young people's voices into consideration**.
- Following the opening remarks, **Vithya and Amélie, two female leaders of the Youth Advisory Council at Plan International Germany**, delivered the keynote. They asked how genuine policy

change could take effect if **one half of society's concerns and needs are not adequately taken into consideration**. Without this, no policy will ever be truly inclusive. It is furthermore the young people who are leading climate strikes and gender movements in an effort to make their opinions and knowledge heard because they know what the issues are, which of those impact them the most, and how. Young people are also those who will inherit these issues and will be the ones who will need to contend and live with them. That is one reason why young people want to be seen as equal – and international cooperation is essential for this. Vithya's and Amélie's **call to action was to fill the need for more spaces where young people are recognized to speak and policymakers listen**. That is how we must create a future, they urged.

- At the ensuing intergenerational dialogue **Inken Denker, Head of Division for Feminist Development Policy at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)**, remarked that **traditional women empowerment approaches do not change the system but usually place the burden on women themselves**. This explains the need for reforms that are transformative and actually do change the system. The **rights of children and young people are integrated into Germany's development cooperation**, which also includes participation, specifically via a [Youth Advisory Council](#) that **has resulted in a more institutionalized form of youth participation in Germany**. Moreover, we must improve local CSO participation, work on ways to simplify processes for CSOs to receive more funds, and facilitate more direct financing for local CSOs. **Changes do take time but a shift in mindsets is underway**, noted Ms. Denker.
- **Sarah Hendricks, Director of Policy, Programme & Intergovernmental Division at UN Women**, referred to young women as "accountability actors", "bridge builders", "redefiners" of the tables of power, and added that the CSW69 Political Declaration constitutes part of an "arc" of that engagement. She then noted that UN Women's feminist foreign policy means getting rid of bias and putting young women and girl's perspectives at the center of policymaking. War also has a particularly harmful and disproportionate effect on women and girls, which is why there is an **urgent need to have women at the tables of negotiation and conflict-prevention**. The UN system – via the CSW revitalization process, among others – is already creating more spaces for young female leaders to be "redefiners". On funding, Ms. Hendricks expressed the need for ongoing dialogues around bringing together all gender-related funding in order to consider improved **"flexible financing" models like "feminist funding" that channel funding to and thus empower female rights-holders**. Regarding the pushback on women's and girls' rights, we are at a pivotal inflection point with the achievements of the last 30 years hanging in the balance. Those most impacted by the pushback and funding cuts will be organizations on the ground, many of which are being led by women and young people. We need to create a bubble of protection around them.
- Two female youth leaders subsequently shared their perspectives on what is needed to keep the promise of the Beijing Declaration. **Sadeen from Jordan** made clear that policymakers and **those in power must abandon their paternalistic approach to youth inclusion and ensure that the many existing and future youth-led initiatives are no longer excluded from global funding**

sources. This continues to be the case even though youth are the ones leading some of the most impactful and innovative programs and actions. Access to funds is thus urgently needed. As part of this, meaningful youth engagement requires a dismantling of existing structures for policymaking and enabling better access for young people.

- **Solange from Rwanda** urged that action is needed beyond pledging, particularly as regards education, the transformative power of which is so great. **Refugees in particular must be given more and better education opportunities** for they usually have left everything behind. The situation is especially dire for children brought up in a refugee camp or multiple refugee camps, where one day teaching might be in English and the next day in Swahili, then French the following, and so on. In order to alleviate this, it is **important that policymakers – and their citizens as well – do not generalize issues regarding refugees** who come from different countries and whose personal predicaments are all unique. Solange urged that we bridge in particular the significant gaps in accessing education among refugees compared to local populations.
- **Jhussahara, a Girls' Rights Activist from Plan International Peru**, closed the side event with a call to action that the **“tokenistic and box-checking involvement and inclusion of young people continues to be totally insufficient”**. What is needed is a community-driven approach that would **allow those on the ground to manage the funding**. This approach also needs to be institutionalized in order to be sustainable.

Supporting the Mental Health of All Women and Girls

(11 March)

Organized by the Permanent Mission of Hungary to the UN,

Compared to men and boys, women and girls experience unique mental health challenges, exacerbated by existing gender inequalities. These inequities contribute to poorer mental health outcomes for women and girls, creating barriers to their empowerment, especially for those in vulnerable situations. Furthermore, women and girls often face obstacles in accessing mental health services due to limited resources and persisting societal stigma. This side event expounded on existing gaps in policies and public services and presented solutions and best practices that ensure the best possible mental health outcomes for all women and girls.

- **Flora May Bedra-Golan, Israel’s Minister for Social Equality and Women's Empowerment**, spoke of “a special time for the women of Israel against evil”, noting that the mental health of women constitutes a cornerstone of Israeli society. **Mental health** is not only a personal but a social concern **with deep social and strategic importance**, she said, adding that women must put their differences aside (political and otherwise), band together, and stay united for other women all around the world.
- **Tatjana Macura, Serbia’s Minister without portfolio in charge of gender equality, prevention of violence against women and economic and political empowerment of women**, called violence against women and girls a global crisis leaving deep psychological scars that can last a lifetime,

including eating and sleeping disorders or higher rates of suicide attempts. Older women are particularly vulnerable to violence and, with only 5.2% of physical abuse cases reported, **women overall have been “forced into silence”**. Importantly, if we are to end GBV and its devastating effects on mental health, women and girls must know where to seek help if needed. **Mental health is a right and not a privilege.**

- **Katalin Novák, Minister for Families of Hungary**, said that her government had achieved several milestones with its family-friendly policy, which defines **“family as the bedrock of society”**. Over 1 million jobs have been created for women over the past ten years and Hungary has one of the highest female employment ratios (and one of the lowest female unemployment numbers), the Minister claimed, citing its **childcare benefits and income tax exemptions for mothers under 30 years of age or those with more than four children**. On the education front, Ms. Novák explained that children in Hungary learn about family life as early as elementary and high school, including how to care for and nurture relationships. Hungary also remains strongly committed to eliminating violence against women.
- **Edward “Ted” Chaiban, Assistant Secretary-General, Deputy Executive Director, Humanitarian Action and Supply Operations at UNICEF**, added that poor women are at particular risk of mental and sexual violence, and that **one woman dies every ten minutes because of violence from a partner or close relative**. Mental health literacy should be one focus area of intervention, so that women and girls can learn about the challenges of mental health and how they can properly and most effectively address them.
- The discussion concluded by pointing out the importance of emphasizing and making better understood **the value of shared care responsibilities**, and that we need better data collection that is fine-tuned to post-pandemic realities.

Who Runs the World? Girls' Activism Shaping the Future

(March 12, 2025)

Organized by the Delegation of the European Union to the UN, the Permanent Missions to the UN of Brazil, Poland, Timor-Leste, Togo, and Plan International

This side event focused on empowering young women and girls in their activism, ensuring safe access to public spaces, and amplifying their role in global human rights discussions. Panelists highlighted activism as an umbrella concept encompassing diverse advocacy efforts and emphasized the need for systemic protections for young female activists worldwide.

- **Amber, a young transgender activist from the Philippines**, highlighted the exclusion of transgender women from policy negotiations despite their contributions to society, including paying taxes. She called for solidarity, stating that **"the attacks on these communities affect us all. Transgender women are women, and their rights are human rights."**
- **H.E. Katarzyna Kotula, Minister for Equality of Poland**, spoke of the interconnectedness of gender equality struggles. She stressed that girls face the same barriers as women regarding

access to education, healthcare (including sexual and reproductive rights), and protection from gender-based violence. She underscored the **diversity and impact of girls' activism**, highlighting the work of young activists like Vanessa from Uganda who campaigns for climate justice and a young Indian activist fighting against child marriage and for girls' education

- **H.E. Hadja Lahbib, European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness, and Crisis Management**, noted the inspiration drawn from young activists. She outlined the [EU's Roadmap for Women's Rights](#), reaffirming commitments to eliminating GBV, including online harassment, ensuring inclusive education, promoting girls in STEM, as well as supporting young women's participation in political and public life, especially in times of crisis.
- The event concluded with a resounding commitment to supporting girls' activism, ensuring their voices are heard and providing the necessary resources to enable them to lead. The speakers emphasized that **investing in young women's activism is not just about justice but about building a sustainable, equal future.**

Child Protection in the Context of Gender and Sustainable Development: The Role of the African Union

(18 March)

Organized by the African Union

This side event explored African solutions to promoting gender equality and violence prevention, many of which are captured in the AU's framework on child protection as part of the continent's [Agenda 2063](#). It calls on all AU member states to abolish every practice and custom that is detrimental to the development and growth of the child.

- **Angela Martins, Acting Director for Social Development, Culture and Sport at the African Union**, introduced the session and noted that in addition to violence prevention and gender equality and others, the AU is very active in ending child marriages (see [AU Campaign to End Child Marriage, 2014-17](#)). Ms. Martins said that the AU is ready to continue leading the way but that this requires the commitment and engagement of all AU member states.
- **Dr. Isata Mahoi, Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs of Sierra Leone**, stated that the AU's influence and leadership across various initiatives to protect children and girls from early marriage, a harmful practice that perpetuates the cycle of poverty, has been evident. The Minister then elaborated on her own country's legislation ([Prohibition of Child Marriage Act](#)) that was passed in July 2024 to build on the progress made in reducing both child marriages and child pregnancies. Another bill that would prohibit FGM is currently under parliamentary review. Also, Sierra Leone is undertaking further initiatives such as supporting the reintegration of child soldiers into society. The [Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts \(AP CAAC\)](#) supports child soldiers who were recruited during the civil war (1991-2002), throughout the course of which **over 55,000 girls and women were raped**. Other endeavors of Sierra Leone include investments in STEM to enable more girls to enter these sectors. Dr. Mahoi noted that through its various

initiatives, the AU has significantly contributed to gender equality in Sierra Leone. At the same time, member states need to come together because there is “**so much violence against girls and a big shortfall in aid**”. Where there is no peace, there will be no sustainable development, she said.

- **Åsa Regnér, CEO of Save the Children Sweden**, said it has never been more important than now for the AU to be invested in children's and girls' rights, gender equality, and people-driven approaches. Investing in children through skills development is crucial, especially for girls who are key actors in driving gender equality. [181 million children in Africa live in conflict zones](#), and girls across Africa continue to experience high levels of threats to their wellbeing, further exacerbated by climate disasters. [Two thirds of child marriages happen in areas with higher than average climate risks](#). Ms. Regnér called on AU member states to implement the commitments they made at the [2021 African Girls' Summit](#) in Niamey, Niger. The [African Union Convention on Ending Violence against Women and Girls](#) is an important milestone in this regard, she said, before concluding by calling on the AU to prosecute all perpetrators of violence against women and children and hold them accountable.
- **Veronica (Vero) Kamanga Njikho, UNICEF's Global Lead on Prevention of Harmful Practices (Child Marriage & FGM)**, noted various initiatives that UNICEF is leading and supporting, including the [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child \(ACRWC\)](#) from 1990, last November's [First Ministerial Conference on EVAC](#), various FGM-ending initiatives across Africa, enhanced data collection, and protecting girls online.
- **Maggie Kathewera Banda, Founder and Executive Director of the Women's Legal Resource Centre (WOLREC)**, a women's rights NGO in Malawi, cited numerous gender equality initiatives that have proved impactful. Among those are **community-level trainings for traditional leaders and working with grassroots women's movements in an effort to impart women's and children's rights** – with the hope that village and religious chiefs and grassroots partners pass this knowledge on to other communities. WOLREC itself has supported 104,000 women with \$50 grants, in addition to providing legal advice, mediation or **legal rights education so that women understand the law and learn to claim their rights**. A **children's parliament** was also established to enable children to speak for themselves with duty bearers. **Another focus is on men and boys who must be part of the solution and practice positive masculinity**, rather than ending up as perpetrators of violence against women and girls. Other endeavors include capacity-building for local authorities so that they understand how to apply and enforce existing laws. Across these efforts it is **key to ensure that all experiences from the grassroots level are elevated to the national level**. In Malawi, Save the Children supports the work of WOLREC.
- **Lucky Crown Mbewe, Executive Director at the Centre for Youth Empowerment and Civic Education (CYECE)** in Malawi, added that in order to be successful in advancing gender equality, there must exist a strong partnership with the respective line ministries at the national level. Education and economic empowerment are particularly important, as well as **promoting child-based community structures with local leaders**. Mr. Mbewe also spoke of the **need for increased financial support for survivors of violence** and to **fund opportunities for children to return to**

school once they have been reintegrated into society. Regarding the engagement of young leaders, youth academies are another initiative that has proved effective in strengthening students' abilities to engage communities on key issues from child exploitation to HIV/AIDS. CYECE collaborates closely with UNFPA, UN Women, UNAIDS, and Plan International (on advocacy).

- In the ensuing Q&A, the speakers representing governments noted that member states can do much but not everything, and that **CSOs are indispensable partners**. It was also mentioned that **devising effective solutions is routinely hampered by a lack of data**. In this sense, it is also important to leverage technology responsibly to advance gender equality. **Most importantly, noted the speakers, children must be included.**
- In her closing remarks, **Amongi Betti Ongom, Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development of Uganda**, recommended that while the AU has been good at taking action in areas where good lessons from past interventions have been learnt, more needs to be done in this regard. This explicitly includes the **participation of children in the form of rendering decision-making processes more inclusive so that children's voices are heard**. In addition, parents must spend more time with their children across the board and “not be so busy”. In this sense, **leaders must inculcate the importance of spending more time with children**, also to encourage and empower them to participate. Lastly, the Minister called out online harm and lamented that cellphones, which are allowed in schools across Africa, are being used “without any guardrails”.
- **Avni Amin, Unit Head for Rights and Equality at the WHO's Department of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Research**, noted that **health workers are** in a unique position to provide treatment and care, but they are also “**challengers**” to **traditional and social norms that are harmful to women and girls**. This means health workers are important opinion leaders that governments ought to pay attention to. Ms. Amin also cited two new WHO guidelines on FGM and child marriage that will be released in the near future. She closed by stating that **ending child marriage and other harmful practices also makes economic sense and yields significant economic returns for member states**.

When Women Lead: African Solutions at the Intersection of HIV/AIDS and Gender Equality

(19 March)

Organized by the African Union

This side event focused primarily on HIV/AIDS but offered important insights into other areas of women's and girl's rights that are relevant to the work of ChildFund Alliance.

- **H.E. Monica Mitsvanga, Zimbabwe's Minister for Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development** and current Chair of Southern African Development Community (SADC), spoke of the adoption of the 2016 CSW Resolution 60/2 on Women, the Girl Child and HIV – which placed women and girls at the highest risk of various social and economic vulnerabilities – as a key document impacting gender equality. In particular, efforts to enhance

the capacities of women and girls to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS are indispensable in driving gender equality. The Minister added that women and girls are also hampered by access to health, which severely restricts their ability to make choices about their future. This makes the resolution an important tool to assess the progress made against the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. **During a time of pushback against women and girls rights, we need to push back against the pushback**, the Minister declared. In this context also, the issue of public-private partnerships is crucial as we are going through a time of heightened insecurity and unpredictability regarding government and public funding sources.

- **Kelly Dambuzza-Chifani, Gender Based Violence Portfolio Official at the SADC Secretariat**, noted that the regional bloc had aligned its protocol (i.e., all commitments from all 16 SADC member states) to the 17 SDGs. She lamented that progress towards ending HIV/AIDS in the SADC region continues to be hampered by poverty, historically rooted social norms and structures, and economic inequalities primarily affecting women. Ms. Dambuzza went on to explain why **the strongest instrument and most effective method to combat HIV/AIDS is to strengthen women and girls' rights**. Moreover, she noted that a [scorecard on sexual violence](#) had been developed to track SADC countries' progress on fighting this and other ills. In addition, in 2023 SADC member states' ministers of health adopted indicators of gender to assess and track progress against HIV/AIDS, including **effective engagement of men and promotion of positive masculinity**. As a region, the SADC has established a mechanism to track progress against the goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and is currently undertaking its midterm review on implementation.
- A **panelist from UNAIDS** spoke of the **urgency to salvage the wins and successes that have been achieved over the past three decades** and recalled that the Minister from Zimbabwe had already noted the **importance of finding new funding sources**. He also stated that **education remains a key pathway to ending sexual violence and GBV**, and that by keeping girls in schools until secondary education their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS is significantly reduced. He noted UNAIDS's push for free secondary education for all children, and that **making the case for education remains as important as ever**. At the same time, these commitments are always only as good as the willingness to implement them. Nonetheless, a world without HIV/AIDS is a real possibility, he concluded.
- **UN Women's representative** on the panel emphasized that remarkable progress on preventing and treating HIV/AIDS has been achieved over the last 30 years, but that **real progress would require women and girls to truly be at the center of the discussion**. She also recognized the aforementioned 2016 CSW Resolution 60/2 as a call to action, adding that women and girls know what must be done for them to be protected, while lamenting that they are still not being heard. This only increases the **urgency for women and girls to be allowed to meaningfully participate in devising solutions to the issues that impact them more than anyone**. She felt encouraged and deemed it crucial, however, that especially youth-led women's organizations were at the forefront of this effort. In the end, **the necessary (and hoped for) political will and resources will**

not be as effective without a concomitant shift in individual mindsets on gender equality (i.e., that which is said and taught in homes).

**Operationalizing the Accountability Framework to End Harmful Practices and Advance Gender
Equality**
(20 March)
Organized by the African Union

This side event revolved around the [African Union Compliance and Accountability Framework \(AUCF\)](#), which was launched in late 2022 to enhance the bloc's capacity to ensure that AU Peace Support Operations (PSOs) are continuously conceived and conducted in compliance with international human rights law, including regional human rights instruments, international humanitarian law, as well as applicable standards of conduct and discipline such as Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.

- **Ms. Angela Martins, Acting Director for Social Development, Culture and Sport at the African Union**, initiated the conversation by noting that the AUCF is being piloted in six AU member states. Several AU rapporteurs are due to report in the near future on the progress made since the AUCF's launch. Another notable recent AU endeavor is the [African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls \(AU-CEVAWG\)](#) that aims to boost the AU's collective efforts to empower girls and women through the elimination of all forms of violence they face.
- **Mr. Silo Mattu** of the AU Commission further explained that the AUCF was created to ensure the tracking of progress made in countering the deprivation of millions of girls of their childhood and suffering throughout life, including in the areas of education and health. Describing it as "a roadmap blueprint for action", Mr. Mattu added that **in the end accountability will depend on the actual cooperation from AU governments**, but that this side event constituted an opportunity for member states to reaffirm commitments and responsibilities, as well as to further and fully operationalize the accountability efforts, a charge the AU says it is ready to lead.
- **Mr. Saturnin Epie, Chief, of UNFPA's Representation Office to the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)**, also urged the operationalization of the accountability framework to end FGM and child marriage, two issues deeply rooted in social and communal norms. The AU's aforementioned Agenda 2063 also commits member states to end FGM and child marriage, areas in which some progress has been made but where the goal remains to reduce these harmful and often deadly practices to zero. Meanwhile, the [UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation](#) is doing its part in contributing to pushing governments to incorporate the AUCF into their national policies.
- **Mrs. Maggie Kathewera Banda, Founder and Executive Director of the Women's Legal Resource Centre (WOLREC)**, added that because these practices remain deeply embedded in social norms and traditions, progressive policies cannot simply exist on paper but must be implemented and

built on evidence-based approaches. Furthermore, there will need to be a big concerted effort on raising awareness of the AUCF among all actors, including governments, civil society, and so forth.

- In his closing remarks, a **representative of the government of Zambia** described the challenges with collecting reliable data for accurate monitoring and accountability. Since member states' data collection is very costly, the representative suggested that governments privatize it. It must also be more timely and regular (rather than every four years). An additional hindrance is AU countries' lack of integration systems (birth registrations, education information) at the national level, with oftentimes several ministries responsible but little integration amongst them. Adequate resources to analyze the data are also missing. Therefore, **program data at the grassroots level must be collected by civil society, followed by an interlinking of the various information systems of all stakeholders (governments, CSOs, etc.) to enable accurate reporting. In this context also, there is a need for continuous capacity-building and enhancement of synergies among CSOs, religious and traditional leaders.**

The Nexus of Violence against Women and Girls and Gender, and Female Leadership in Counteracting the Same

(19 March)

Organized by the African Union

- **H.E. Amongi Betti Ongom, Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development of Uganda**, shared her government's efforts in boosting women's as girls' participation in policymaking, pushing back against domestic violence, implementing Uganda's [National Action Plan III on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2025](#), and increasing the number of women in government. The Minister noted that while physical violence has been reduced, **economic violence is rising** which "keeps women's spirits down". **GBV erodes confidence and opportunities for women to attain leadership positions in public office, in addition to constituting a deterrent to collective engagement.** What is needed is **gender-responsive budgeting, ensuring survivors' access to justice and health care**, among others. She said that Uganda aspires to be a state where women are valued, respected, heard, and taken seriously – and that so-called "**champion policies**" that **align national frameworks with international commitments are needed.** This is, she explained, because the fight for equality cannot be won in isolation, particularly at a time when the space for women and girls is shrinking at the international level and at the national level in some countries. Thus the Minister urged women and girls to continue to speak out loud and make their voices heard.
- **Patricia Munabi Babiiha, Executive Director of the Ugandan NGO Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE)**, cited various data from her organization's research at community level. For example, she noted that **when women are economically empowered, they are more able and likely to enter into leadership positions.** On the topic of budgeting with gender equality in mind, Ms. Munabi acknowledged that progress has been made since 2015. She specifically

pointed to Uganda's budget which – thanks largely to the government's collaboration with its many partners – now includes such considerations. Ms. Munabi referenced her organization's "[Budgeting for Peace](#)" study, a cost-benefit analysis on achieving a violence-free life for women and girls (see all [publications](#)). The report uncovered that a mere **0.0015% of the 2023–2024 national budget was allocated to VAWG/GBV interventions** (equal to \$21 million). The study furthermore revealed a decline in investment during four key fiscal years even as GBV cases remain an issue. She advocated for **intentional financial allocations that not only respond to violence but also create enabling environments for women to lead safely and meaningfully**. On the whole, **Uganda loses \$8.4 billion annually as the cost of GBV** – money that could be spent on better education and health services for example. An estimated **\$3 billion is the cost in psychological damage to women and girls**, and 45% of those affected have suffered physical violence of some sort in Uganda. Partner-perpetrated violence is also on the rise, and in 2024 99% of sex-related crimes were against women and girls. Only 46% ended up in court, of which a mere 11% ended in convictions. Evidently, access to justice remains a major challenge and obstacle for women's and girls' empowerment.

- Covid-19 also did its part in contributing to a peak in GBV. Yet it is **possible that now more cases are emerging due to more women reporting violence**. In this sense, the data is also "positive". A lot more needs to be done, however, such as a **"sanitization" of the political space so that women feel comfortable and empowered to participate as equals**. This is particularly urgent during political campaigns, when women routinely become a target, a situation perhaps best encapsulated by one Ugandan politician who said that "a man cannot sit on the same chair where someone sits who is bleeding" (paraphrased).
- A **World Bank representative** expounded on the challenges of preventing GBV and lamented the **lack of funding for young leaders to be part of deliberations and decisions**, engage in speaking opportunities, and train in diplomatic speech. Government delegations must include young people in their official delegations as well.
- **Daphine Jena from Urgent Action Fund Africa** noted that GBV is still on the rise even in countries where laws already exist. **Donors and funders need a "hybrid system" approach where long-term interventions** (e.g., changing traditional and religious values in society) **are combined with short-term endeavors. Donors need to realize that, as long as nefarious customs and traditions exist, no long-term change will happen**. And as violence continues, it continues to evolve as **new forms of violence emerge**. Innovative financial mechanisms appear to have been used to effectuate real change. However, **donors need to diversify and funds are needed to enable reporting in the first instance**. This is because a "combination of evidence and good timing can actually achieve more than advocating for a legislative change".
- In her concluding remarks, the Minister from Uganda argued that **"the institutions perpetuating violence are culture and religion"**. Traditional harmful practices like FGM persist in secrecy, often protected by communal silence, and only grassroots women, especially mothers, stand between this violence and their daughters. There must also be a review of the "normative" – denoting socialization and sensitization in early years – so that from the start there is **no doubt about**

women's and girls' rights and their equal role in society. It is not men's right to violate that of women. Finally, the Minister reiterated the need to adopt hybrid funding programs, devise trackable budgets with gender-specific codes, and prioritize women's protection in national development plans.