



Wednesday, 11 October 2023 - International Day of the Girl Child

**Statement by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**

Safeguarding girls' lives, health and future through minimizing unwanted pregnancies and guaranteeing access to safe abortion

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) welcomes the continuing progress made by State parties to promote girls' sexual and reproductive health rights, to safeguard their lives and future. However, the Committee notes with concern that there remain considerable gaps across all parts of the world, as well as rollback and regression in some regions, in the protection of girls' access to safe abortion and post-abortion services without due consideration to protecting their lives, physical and psychological health and future, nor acknowledging their vital role and potential contribution to the nation's human capacity and economy. The Committee recalls, as an example, its [statement](#) on "Women's access to safe and legal abortion: Urgent call for United States of America to adhere to the CEDAW Convention", adopted on 30 June 2022. In this regard, it notes that a growing number of girls in the United States, and in particular girls from marginalized communities, racial and ethnic minorities, and rural areas, migrants, girls with disabilities, living in poverty, or in abusive or violent circumstances, and LGBTI, are suffering an alarming deterioration in access to abortion, following the United States Supreme Court decision overturning the constitutional right to abortion in June 2022 (see, also, UN experts [statement](#)). Hampering girls' access to safe termination of unwanted pregnancies conflicts with States' obligations to guarantee the rights of girls to equality, autonomy, privacy, and reproductive freedom, the fundamental right to safeguards from hazardous health situations, as well as their freedom from gender-based violence and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

It is estimated that 21 million girls aged 15–19, in low- and middle-income countries, become pregnant every year. These pregnancies are often the result of child marriage and early unions, sexual abuse, or lack of sexual and reproductive health education. About half of these pregnancies are

unintended, and about 55% of unintended pregnancies end in an abortion, which is in many cases unsafe, and conducted without [quality of care](#). The lack of knowledge about pregnancy, abortion, sexual and reproductive health, and motherhood, among girls under 15 years of age is serious throughout the world and does not appear in many official statistics. Globally, the birth rate for girls 10–14 years in 2022 was estimated at 1.5 per 1000 girls that age, with higher rates in sub-Saharan Africa (4.6) and Latin America and the Caribbean (2.4) ([WHO](#)).

Pregnancies place girls at physical, emotional and socio-economic risk. The higher the legal, social and economic barriers to abortion are, the greater the risk ([UNFPA](#)). In recent decades adolescent birth rates have significantly decreased globally. Still, about 14% of girls give birth before the age of 18. Adolescent motherhood is more common among girls with lower educational attainment or of low economic status. Early pregnancy, and delivery during childhood, can derail girls' otherwise healthy development into adulthood and have a negative impact on their education, livelihoods, health and future. Many girls who are pregnant are pressured or forced to drop out of school, which can impact their educational and employment prospects and opportunities. Early pregnancy and childbearing can also have social consequences for girls, including reduced status in the home and community, stigmatization, rejection and exposure to gender-based violence by family members, peers and partners, and forced marriage. Moreover, maternal conditions are among the top causes of premature mortality, and of death among girls aged 15-19 often resulting from a failure of the State to effectively regulate health services and safeguard their lives ([UNICEF](#)).

Access to modern forms of contraception and to safe and quality abortion is a human right under international law, and especially crucial for girls. The CEDAW Convention was the first human rights treaty to explicitly require States parties to ensure access to family planning (art. 12(1)). In its jurisprudence and its [2014 statement](#) on "Sexual and reproductive health and rights: Beyond 2014 ICPD review", the CEDAW Committee calls for access to a wide range of contraceptive methods, and for total decriminalization of abortion and the legalization of abortion. CEDAW further urges States parties to make lawful abortions accessible, eliminate informational barriers to safe abortion, ensure service acceptability and quality by provisions according to the World Health Organization standards, and train health-care providers, to better fulfil their obligations to safeguard the lives, health, socio-economic well-being and future of girls. The Committee on the Rights of the Child ([GR](#)

[20](#), para. 60) has called on States parties to “decriminalize abortion to ensure that girls have access to safe abortion and post-abortion services, review legislation with a view to guaranteeing the best interests of pregnant adolescents and ensure that their views are always heard and respected in abortion-related decisions”. The joint statement by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the CEDAW Committee on Guaranteeing sexual and reproductive health and rights for all women, in particular women with disabilities (2018), declares that “[i]n all efforts to implement their obligations regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights, including access to safe and legal abortion, the Committees call upon States parties to take a human rights based approach that safeguards the reproductive choice and autonomy of all women, including women with disabilities”. This call must also be applied in the case of girls with disabilities.

CEDAW urges States parties to take action to minimize the rate of unintended pregnancies of girls, and guarantee access to quality termination of unwanted pregnancies of girls, by *inter alia*:

- 1) Adopting policies that minimize the rate of unintended pregnancies, including by abolishing child marriage; providing gender sensitive education on sexual and reproductive health and rights; enhancing girls ability to make informed decision about their reproductive life; and, ensuring provision of affordable, and if necessary free, quality contraceptive information and services, including a full range of safe and effective contraceptive methods (GR 24, paras. 18 and 23).
- 2) Ensuring safe and quality abortion for girls, while focusing on their wishes and needs, and safeguarding and securing their rights to life, equality, autonomy, privacy, and reproductive freedom as well as their freedom from gender-based violence and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.
- 3) Effectively protect girls from the physical, psychological and socio-economic risks associated with unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion and giving birth at a young age, including by decriminalizing abortion; ensuring that the regulation of abortion does not force girls to resort to unsafe abortions; taking steps to prevent the stigmatization of girls seeking abortion; and ensuring the availability, accessibility and affordability of health-care facilities that provide safe and confidential abortion and post-abortion services for girls.

The International Day of the Girl Child is an opportunity to move towards a global reality in which every girl is safe from unwanted pregnancy and its health

and socio-economic consequences, and protected in the case where they wish to terminate the pregnancy

Background:

The [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women](#) monitors States parties' adherence to the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#), which to date has [189](#) States parties. The Committee is made up of [23 members](#) who are independent human rights experts drawn from around the world, who serve in their personal capacity and not as representatives of States parties.

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