



## **Zonta International Statement**

### **to the 70th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

Zonta International, a leading global organization of more than 25,000 members in 64 countries dedicated to building a better world for women and girls, respectfully submits the following statement to the Commission on the Status of Women for its consideration in advancing and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls.

Zonta International reaffirms its commitment to advancing gender equality and ensuring that all women and girls can fully exercise their rights. The greatest challenge to achieving equitable legal systems lies not only in the persistence of discriminatory laws and practices, but in the systemic barriers that continue to deny women and girls equal protection, participation and access to justice. At the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, President H.E. Annalena Baerbock urged the global community to build upon the foundation laid by the courageous women of the past, whose struggles paved the way for today's advocates to advance equality. Her call underscores the critical importance of women in decision-making and leadership positions, as well as the urgent need to confront structural obstacles that hinder systemic reform.

#### **Recognizing the barriers of equal access to justice.**

Achieving gender equality within justice systems requires addressing the multiple barriers that prevent women and girls from realizing their rights. Women and girls who face overlapping forms of discrimination are most at risk of being left behind, experiencing injustices that extend beyond the



traditional categories of economic, social, cultural, and political rights to include digital, disability, geographic, intergenerational and linguistic injustices, among others. Recognizing and responding to this complex and intersectional nature of injustice is essential in building truly equitable systems.

A critical entry point to access to justice is **education**. Unequal access to quality education continues to limit opportunities for women and girls globally and weakens their ability to understand, claim, and defend their rights. Without these tools, women and girls remain excluded from meaningful participation in justice systems. Access to quality education is foundational to understanding and asserting one's rights. Yet in many regions, girls are disproportionately denied schooling or forced to drop out. For example, the Global Programme to End Child Marriage 2024 Annual Results Report from the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Children's Fund documents that in that this year alone, more than 8.4 million girls were supported to enroll in, return to, or remain in school, underlining how access to education for more girls is possible if the focus could be shifted in communities.

But access must go further, it must embed legal literacy and empowerment across one's lifetime. Curriculum within education institutions should integrate women's rights and equality, and formal educational systems must partner with legal aid providers to build foundational awareness of rights. The Council of Europe's analysis of legal aid systems argues that raising awareness of rights and legal aid from early education is critical. Without such grounding, many women and girls lack the tools to meaningfully engage with justice systems or to challenge discriminatory practices.



**Social and systemic norms** present another formidable barrier. Discriminatory practices and entrenched stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality, restricting women’s mobility, silencing their voices, and discouraging engagement with legal structures. These norms not only marginalize individuals but also establish systemic injustice.

Deep-rooted norms, stereotypes, and patriarchal expectations impose invisible barriers. They shape behaviors across families, communities, religious institutions, and state bodies. When social norms devalue women’s voices or restrict their mobility, even robust laws may remain ineffective in practice. The United Nation’s Office on Drugs and Crime’s “A Practitioner’s Toolkit on Women’s Access to Justice” points out that institutional policies, bureaucratic culture, and gender-blind spots in judicial systems can obstruct women in their roles as victims, claimants, or litigants.

In the context of child marriage, norms around gender roles and early marriage continue to be strong drivers of this harmful practice. Young women and girls forced into early marriage end their education early, take on domestic responsibilities beyond their capabilities, and face greater health risks, which puts them at a significant barrier in understanding and accessing the justice they deserve.

The intentional **exclusion of women from decision-making and leadership roles** within justice systems reinforces inequality. When women are absent from positions of authority, legal systems often fail to reflect or address their realities. Ensuring women’s equal representation and influence in leadership and decision-making is indispensable for designing legal frameworks that are



inclusive, fair, and responsive. Even when women can access legal forums, the absence of women in leadership or decision-making roles in courts, ministries, or local community bodies often limits responsiveness to their needs. Systems designed without women’s active voices tend to overlook their specific needs, such as gender-based violence, caregiving burdens, or intersectional discrimination.

The Universal Periodic Review mechanism itself offers insight: its evolving framework emphasizes not just reporting but enabling states to address structural barriers, including access to justice, especially for marginalized groups. Moreover, country-level Universal Periodic Review submissions often highlight how women, especially those with disabilities, continue to be marginalized. In Malawi, for example, civil society has repeatedly called attention to the fact that courts are inaccessible for persons with disabilities and that women with disabilities are often excluded from legal proceedings due to lack of accessible formats, interpreters, or accommodations.

Zonta International calls on Member States and the United Nations to recognize the barriers to moving forward with equal access to justice by:

- Addressing education policies to ensure they are comprehensive, gender-responsive, and inclusive of legal literacy and legal empowerment across the lifetime for all women and girls.
- Ensuring girls’ access to quality education at all levels, improving retention rates, supporting interventions that encourage girls to enroll in school and make the transition

from primary to secondary school and addressing the unique needs of young married girls to allow them to return to school and complete their education.

- Transforming norms, redistributing power, and engaging men and boys to dismantle harmful attitudes within the review of systemic change.
- Ensuring women leaders and decision-makers are present at local and national levels to have an equal voice while creating reforms.

### **Ensuring fair and equal practices of law and eliminating discriminatory policies.**

Eliminating the barriers that deny women and girls equal access to justice requires more than acknowledgment of inequality; it demands intentional and sustained structural reform. Legal frameworks and policies must be reviewed and revised to remove discriminatory provisions that limit women's rights, including in constitutions, family codes, property and inheritance laws, and criminal statutes. Beyond reform, states must proactively legislate to guarantee equal rights and protections for all women and girls, in alignment with international commitments such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Justice systems themselves must be restructured to respond equitably to the realities of women and girls. Gender-responsive budgeting, mandatory impact assessments, and comprehensive training for judicial, police, and administrative actors are essential to embed equality into institutional practice. Accessible reporting mechanisms, including anonymous and gender-



sensitive channels, strengthen accountability and rebuild trust in these systems. Efforts to prevent and respond to gender-based violence are undermined where legal, social, and health institutions lack the financial and human resources necessary to provide protection, support, and accountability. Sustainable progress demands investments that ensure all women and girls have access to safe reporting mechanisms, survivor-centered services, and effective enforcement of laws against violence.

Central to these reforms is the promotion of women's leadership and participation in decision-making roles. For example, addressing root causes of inequality also requires recognizing and responding to the disproportionate effects of climate change on women and girls. Environmental disasters and shifting ecological conditions exacerbate existing social and economic vulnerabilities, disproportionately impacting access to resources, safety, and legal protections. Justice systems, social services, and legal frameworks must integrate climate-responsive measures to safeguard women and girls and prevent environmental factors from deepening inequality. Women in positions of authority across courts, government agencies, and oversight bodies help ensure that policies reflect the diverse needs of the population and advance systemic, rights-based change.

Zonta International calls on Member States and the United Nations to ensure a gender-sensitive, gender-equal voice within policy and practice reform within justice systems by:



- Mandating women’s full and equitable participation in decision-making and leadership roles, particularly in the development and implementation of climate action, disaster relief, and peacebuilding initiatives at local, national, and global levels.
- Demanding reporting mechanisms and response protocols include gender-based issues such as gender-based violence and maternity care.
- Recognizing the needs of women and girls’ rights within the legal systems, specifically with law enforcement.
- Addressing the removal of discriminatory provisions that limit women’s rights, including in constitutions, family codes, property and inheritance laws, and criminal statutes.

Zonta International calls on the global community to ensure gender-equal access to justice, which in turn requires legal reform and demands systemic change. There needs to be an acknowledgment of structural barriers to women and girls, and a guarantee to inclusion in decision-making and leadership roles. Zonta International emphasizes that without women in positions of authority across legal, political, and governance structures, justice systems will continue to fail to reflect the realities and needs of half the population. Advancing equality in law, policy, and practice, combined with comprehensive education and empowerment initiatives, is essential to create inclusive, equitable, and responsive legal systems. By committing to these measures, the international community can ensure that justice is not a privilege, but a right accessible to all women and girls, enabling societies to flourish on the foundation of fairness and equality.



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