



STATEMENT ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD

11 OCTOBER 2021

The Zimbabwe Gender Commission was established in terms of Section 246 of the Constitution and operationalized through the Gender Commission Act of [Chapter 10:31] with an overall mandate to promote and ensure gender equality as provided for by the national Constitution.

The Commission joins the world in commemorating the International Day of the Girl Child (IDGC). This year's edition, which is running under the theme; **“Digital generation. Our Generation”** marks the 9th anniversary of the event which is commemorated on the 11th of October every year to raise awareness of the obstacles that girls all over the world face and to promote their empowerment and the fulfilment of their human rights.

Today the world revolves around technology (a digital world) and hence the theme cannot be more relevant. The need for and use of technology has been intensified by the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as with other gender disparities in resources and benefits, there is also a digital divide which results in men and boys benefitting disproportionately to women and girls in terms of access to and use of digital technology.

UNICEF reports that globally, the gender gap for internet users was 11% in 2013 and grew to 17% in 2019 and currently stands at 43% in least developed countries, thus a need for digital inclusion.

The digital era has thus posed new restraints for the girl child. Limited access to life-enhancing and life-saving information, e-learning that has largely replaced physical teaching, health services, applications and information to combat gender based violence, among other violations as well as lack of connectivity, lack of access to devices, low literacy, lack of digital skills and insufficient social media campaigns to confront stereotypes have been reported. In addition, stereotypes around technology, “being for boys” stop most girls from using digital tools.

To achieve gender equality, we cannot further ignore the digital divide. Technical skills and computer literacy among girls must therefore be prioritised to address the inequalities and exclusions to shape an inclusive digital generation.

However, there are risks associated with digital technology. Without gender-sensitive digital revolution, the girl child is vulnerable to and continues to suffer online bullying and harassment. The digital option only serves to provide yet another form of aggravated gender-based violence that takes place online rendering such spaces unsafe. This has restricted some girls' use of the digital technology for fear of victimisation and online safety concerns. Insufficient legal and other means of improving safety in digital platforms make it imperative for enhanced digital governance.

The Commission is encouraged by the fact that even though the journey towards achieving gender equality, equity and justice in Zimbabwe remains a long way, Government in conjunction with various development partners, has registered milestone achievements in promoting, protecting and advancing the rights of the girl child. ZGC commends the

Government for providing girls with scholarships in the science and technology fields through the Science Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) Programme and the establishment of Community Information Centres across the country as some of the initiatives to develop digital skills.

The Commission would like to call upon Government and relevant stakeholders to:

- Ensure affordable access to ICTs to facilitate online education and training;
- Mainstream gender in all COVID-19 relief and recovery policies and responses. The recovery policies must include increased access for girls to internet and mobile technology;
- Ensure the protection of the girl child at all levels;
- Fund innovative tech-based solutions to prevent and respond to GBV and sexual exploitation of girls;
- Align all laws relating to the rights of women and girls to the progressive provisions of the Constitution; and
- Put in place gender sensitive laws to prevent digital harms and protect users.

As we observe the International Day of the Girl Child 2021, we hope justice will be served on behalf of every girl child including those who have been married off young and sexually abused. The death of 14-year old Anna Machaya while giving birth at a shrine in Marange is just a tip of an iceberg. Many girls have lost their lives under circumstances identical to Anna's fate. Others survived but their future, their dreams, their rights, their liberty and freedom were stolen in a similar fashion. Hence, the clarion voice that calls for justice, inclusivity and tolerance for the girl child.

ZGC appeals, to all Zimbabweans to follow all health and other guidelines to fight against COVID-19. #staysafe

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