EMPOWERING GIRLS TO TAKE ACTION:

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PROTOCOL

It is a delight to be here today among esteemed guests and passionate advocates, to celebrate 10 impactful years of Plan International Nigeria; in reaching over 36 million beneficiaries in the area of Basic Education, Livelihood Empowerment and Entrepreneurship, Youth Development, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Protection, and Childhood Development.

Let me extend my deepest appreciation to the organizers for the opportunity to speak on an issue that resonates profoundly with many of us that is empowering girls to take action.

I am here today not just as an advocate but as someone who has seen first-hand what happens when we give girls the support, tools, and confidence to step into their power. When we talk about *empowering girls*, we are not just speaking about helping individuals. We are talking about unlocking potential for entire families, communities, and nations. Empowered girls grow up to be women who drive change, who innovate, and who challenge the very structures that held them back.

We have some of the brightest minds and most resilient spirits among young girls across this nation, yet they face tremendous challenges in reaching their potential. So, today, I want to talk about why it's imperative to empower girls to take action within the Nigerian socio-economic and socio-political context, the obstacles they face, strategies we can employ and what we can all do to advance equality for girls.

The Importance of Empowering Girls

You might ask, why focus on empowering girls? It is because every statistic, every study, and every story tell us that investing in girls yields untold benefits. Educated and empowered girls have healthier families, contribute to stronger economies, help foster stable communities, and create inclusive, open and prosperous societies. Girls' empowerment isn't just about individual growth— it's about laying the foundation for sustainable development and societal progress which directly aligns with global goals like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, specifically quality education, gender equality, and reduced inequalities.

There has been considerable progress in recent decades in getting countries to acknowledge the importance of empowering women and girls, in order to promote greater equality in their relationships with men and boys, within their families and in society, but there is still a lot to be done. While the international community recognizes the important contribution gender equality can make to poverty reduction and inclusive growth, it also recognizes that equality must be, above all, a matter of basic social justice.

Imagine for a moment a Nigeria where every girl has the tools to lead, to innovate, and to create change. Imagine the exponential impact of this reality on our workforce, our economy, and our standing in the world. A strong and inclusive society depends on whether we uplift girls, and I believe that we can, by addressing the critical gaps they face, by creating opportunities for dialogue to influence policies that benefit girls; work with partners to promote access and opportunity for girls and build the skills and confidence of girls to achieve their potential and have more influence over decisions that affect their lives.

Challenges Facing Nigerian Girls Today

But let's acknowledge the reality. Girls, despite their resilience and potential, face complex, layered challenges. These challenges stem from multiple sources: socio-economic and socio-political factors, cultural expectations, and systemic barriers that prevent them from taking their rightful place in society. As social pressures and conditions evolve daily, these challenges do not remain static; they shift and intensify, requiring us to think creatively and respond effectively.

Let's examine some of these gaps more closely:

1. **Educational Barriers:** A significant number of Nigerian girls remain out of school, especially at the secondary level. In fact, it was recently reported by UNICEF that Nigeria has 18.3 million out of school children aged 6-14, placing Nigeria as the country with the highest number of out-of-school children globally[1]. This is the reality, despite significant increase in education expenditure at the federal and sub-national levels.[2]

   Of course, for girls, empirically, poverty, cultural norms, increased early marriages, gender-based violence and displacement and deprivation from insurgency and conflict, keep far too many girls from learning. Families facing economic hardship are forced to make difficult choices, which means making choices that almost always will disfavor the girl child.

2. **Economic Inequality:** Even as some girls are able to access education, they face barriers to financial independence and economic inclusion. Opportunities to develop practical skills and earn sustainable incomes remain limited. The job market remains challenging, especially in sectors like science, technology, engineering and finance, where women and girls are underrepresented. Without economic empowerment, girls are restricted in their choices and, ultimately, in their potential

3. **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence which** is another major obstacle to girls' empowerment. It is painful to acknowledge that many girls experience domestic and sexual violence. We see girls hesitating to pursue their education or career dreams because of these threats. When girls feel unsafe, they cannot thrive, and society loses their invaluable contributions.

4. **Cultural Norms and Biases**: In many communities, cultural biases cast girls into limited roles, restricting them from exploring their full capabilities. Girls are often expected to accept rather than challenge, to settle rather than strive. Girls with assertive behaviors are seen as difficult; they face assumptions about priorities and commitment; and are subjected to certain emotional expectations. These biases, often subtle yet pervasive, silence girls' voices before they even find them.

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[1] https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/05/nigerias-out-of-school-children-now-18-3m-unicef/;
https://punchng.com/group-unveils-programes-to-combat-out-of-school-children-crisis/#:~:text=Speaking%20on%20a%20recent%20TV,in%202024%2C%20according%20to%20UNICEF.
[2] https://businessday.ng/news/article/nigerias-20m-out-of-school-children-a-time-bomb-shettima-warns/

5. **Health and Safety Concerns**: Health access—especially for sexual and reproductive health—is a pressing issue. When girls cannot access proper healthcare, including mental health; sexual and reproductive health, and access to quality menstrual health and hygiene information and services, it impacts their physical and emotional well-being, and by extension, their ability to thrive.

Strategies to Empower Girls

If these challenges are many, so should our solutions. Here are some strategies that I believe will help empower Nigerian girls to take action-

1. **Access to Quality Education**: We must make education a non-negotiable right for every girl. To do this we must embrace a whole of government and whole of society approach and what this means is that government at the federal and most importantly sub-national level, and organizations working in this space must help families keep their daughters in school by providing scholarships to those who need it the most, create safe school environments with adequate sanitation facilities, and implement policies that prioritize girls' education and programs that increase girls' awareness of their rights and their ability to advocate for themselves.

   But it's not just about sending girls to school; it's about keeping them there. Let's invest in mentorship programs where young girls have role models to encourage them to dream bigger and persist against all odds. Quality education means giving girls the tools they need to think critically, innovate, and aspire. Meaning instruction should be of high quality; and curricula should be inclusive, gender-responsive, and relevant to girls' lives.

2. **Skill Development and Entrepreneurship**: In today's world, digital skills and entrepreneurial knowledge are invaluable. Promoting programs that teach girls digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and leadership, will empower them to become financially independent, employable and participate fully in the economy including giving them access to capital and microfinance. This not only benefits them but also stimulates growth in their communities. Investment in girls' skills is an investment in Nigeria's future workforce—a workforce that needs innovation, creativity, and resilience that only empowered women can bring.

3. **Legal and Policy Frameworks that protect girls**: A girl cannot dream if she does not feel safe. As such, we need policies and laws that hold perpetrators of violence accountable, provide safe spaces for girls, protect them from abuse and exploitation, online and offline. But laws alone are not sufficient. They must be implemented and enforced, and everyone especially girls, must be aware of their rights under the law.

Online exploitation like sextortion and Child Sexual Assault Materials is on the increase but Nigeria is still grappling with having a solid framework to effectively deal with these issues, on time, real time. Sextortion is a crime that occurs when someone threatens to distribute nudes and private videos of another person when that person refuses to grant them sexual favors, or pay them some money.

Last year, the US National Center for missing and Exploited Children received 26,400 reports of financial sextortion.[3] Nigeria Sextortion Report submitted last year was 6,100 out of the 26,400 which is approximately 23% of the global sextortion reports received. In Nigeria, young girls are at risk of getting sextorted.

My advice! Never send sexual content to ANYONE! Whether to strangers or people you know. While it might sound obvious, many people still fall into this trap. Most times these criminals groom their victims for a period of time, gain their trust and use deceit or coarse victims into sharing nude photos or videos of themselves which they use to blackmail them.

For Child Sexual Assault Materials (CSAM) it is the fastest growing international criminal network that the world has seen. The internet is used to facilitate the sexual abuse of a child, including the production and sharing of CSAM online and taking, making and sharing, or showing indecent images of children mostly girls.

Furthermore, we need strengthened structures that support victims of sexual and gender-based violence, and expand access to healthcare that provide adequate mental, sexual and reproductive care.

4. **Community Engagement:** True empowerment will require a cultural shift. Changing societal norms is perhaps the most challenging yet

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[3] NCMEC serves at the forefront of global efforts to protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse through their CyberTipline).

rewarding approach. We all know how deep-rooted and defying cultures can be. It is an adaptive problem that takes time to tackle. The environment around girls plays a key role in their ability to thrive. Girls who live in disempowering environments may not have access to programs and resources, and even when they are available, they may be beyond girls' reach due to structural or cultural barriers or household dynamics that restrict their access to such services and support.

Which is why we must continue to involve parents, teachers, community leaders, and religious institutions to champion girls' rights. Encourage girls to think beyond traditional roles, inspire them to lead and involve them in empowering conversations like entrepreneurial and confidence-building conversations. When communities collectively support girls, they create environments where they are not only encouraged but celebrated for being bold and ambitious.

5. **To enhance our understanding, solutions, and tracking of outcomes for girls, it is crucial to invest more in gathering and analyzing gender-specific data.** This includes increasing data collection on both girls and boys to enable more effective targeting, program design, monitoring, and evaluation. Leveraging big data and technology will also help capture girls' perspectives and address data gaps, ultimately deepening insights into gender issues.

6. **Men and boys can be critical contributors or barriers to the empowerment of girls.** Men's attitudes and actions matter, given the key roles they play as fathers, partners, peers, and community leaders within the private and public spheres of girls' lives. Any effort to address the empowerment of girls must take into consideration the role of men and boys and ensure that girls are equipped to negotiate their relationships with men and boys as power relations shift.

Engaging men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality is essential to dismantling gender biases and encouraging societal change. For instance, modeling gender-equitable behaviors, advocacy and allyship like advocating for policies that prevent child marriage, reduce gender-based violence, and support female education. Their involvement helps redefine masculinity to include traits like compassion, support, and respect for girl's empowerment, which are essential to breaking down traditional gender norms.

Call to Action

As I close, I urge each of us here to remember: *Empowering girls is not a choice; it's a duty*. It's a commitment to a future where every girl has the freedom to take action. So, let us not wait for others to lead. Let each of us become champions of this cause.

To Parents and Educators: I urge you to nurture girls' ambitions. Don't let society limit their dreams. Encourage them to pursue their goals and help them build resilience to overcome challenges.

To Policymakers: We need stronger protections for girls, especially policies that reduce the barriers to education and employment and policies that enforce their rights to safety and health.

To NGOs, CSOs, INGOs and Donor Organizations: Your continued support in funding, mentorship, and programs makes an enormous difference. We must work together to create scalable, sustainable solutions that reach even the most remote communities.

To the Girls: My message to you is simple: you are powerful beyond measure. You have every right to dream, to act, and to lead. Find your voice and use it to lift yourselves and others. Stand up, speak out, and know that we are here to support you.

To Everyone Else: Support, advocate, and take action. Empower a girl today, and you empower generations to come.

In conclusion, I must not fail to commend Mr Usie Charles for his leadership, and the entire team at Plan International-Nigeria who have been at the forefront of ensuring children continue their education in safety and protecting them from violence; reducing maternal and child mortality among marginalized and vulnerable women and girls and empowering young people in Nigeria.

As we leave here today, let us be the force that drives the change we wish to see. Let us stand as allies for Nigerian girls—so they can stand as empowered leaders of tomorrow.

Thank you.