

## The Civic Initiatives Center for National Minorities

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to deliver my statement. My name is [inaudible] from the Republic of Moldova. Today, I would like to address issues continue to affect many girls from different parts of the world. The issues of forced and early marriage. This is a sensitive topic and in some Roma communities it is often avoided or justified as a tradition. But we must remember that tradition can never be used to excuse harm. Forced marriage is not cultural, it is a form of violence. It takes away girls' childhood, their opportunities, and rights to choose their own voices. I have met girls who are married at the age of 14 or 15. They want to study, they want to grow, to have a dream, but instead, they are told they are a woman now. No, they are still children. Forced early marriage is not a Roma cultural practice, it is driven by poverty, limited access to education, gender inequality, and the lack of support systems. Because of the silence around it, the problem continues. To the [inaudible] and government of the Republic of Moldova, we must break the silence, we must work with families, community leaders, we must create trust, ensure that girls have access to education and safe environments, because when a girl stays in school, she gains knowledge. When she gains knowledge, she gains confidence, she learns that she has a voice and a right to shape her future. So today, I want to be very clear, forced and early marriages must end. Every girl deserves the freedom to education and support. Girls' rights are human rights.