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### Commission on the Status of Women

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by Sambhali Trust, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Economic empowerment is fundamental to achieving gender equity and sustainable development. Increasing women's access to economic resources and opportunities is beneficial for both the individual and the State. For women, economic empowerment enhances their social and political participation and increases their access to human rights. For the State, it stimulates economic growth. Yet women remain economically disempowered across the globe. This can be clearly observed in Rajasthan, India — the region in which our organisation, Sambhali Trust, operates.

In our submission to the 61st Meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, we wish to highlight four factors which continue to inhibit the economic empowerment of women in Rajasthan. These are: limited educational opportunities; gender-based expectations of when and how women can engage with the workforce; socially entrenched forms of discrimination based on caste and religion; and the shrinking industries in which women traditionally find work. We further argue that with the changing world of work, influenced by globalisation and an increasing reliance on technology, women in Rajasthan face particular challenges to becoming economically empowered.

The maintenance of traditional gender roles in Rajasthan continues to position women unequally to men. Economic empowerment thus becomes particularly difficult for these women to obtain as they are expected to prioritise their unpaid caregiving work over other opportunities either in higher education or employment. As a grassroots organisation working with the women of Rajasthan, Sambhali Trust offers these women an opportunity to access the resources required to increase their economic status. The mission of Sambhali is to provide underprivileged Rajasthani women and girls with an education in English, Hindi and Maths, as well as training in vocational and social skills, to support them in developing confidence and self-esteem, and help them work towards financial independence.

Education provides the platform for increasing the economic empowerment of women. In recent years, Rajasthan has seen a substantial increase in educational attainment amongst its populace. Despite a significant increase in rates of female literacy over a 20-year period, entrenched patriarchal attitudes held within the region continue to keep Rajasthani women's literacy at the lowest rate in the country. The 2011 Census found that women's literacy remained at 53% compared to the country average of 65%. The rates are particularly low for women based in rural areas. One of the reasons for these low literacy rates is poor educational facilities for girls. Even though Government initiatives such as the Right to Education Act (2008) has increased the number of places in schools for girls, the quality of education they receive within these facilities is questionable. Girls receive a poorer standard of schooling than that of boys with reported teacher to student rates as low as 1:100, poor infrastructure including limited access to sanitation, and weak resourcing in terms of educational materials. These factors affect girls' learning, impacting their ability to become economically empowered later in life.

Another reason for the low educational attainment is that girls in Rajasthan face challenges finishing their education. Specifically, marriage practices impact upon girls' ability to complete their schooling. In a State such as Rajasthan where

the nature of patriarchy has led to the highest number of child marriages in the country, girls are regularly expected to leave school early to fulfil household and childcare responsibilities. Even for those girls who marry in adulthood, their role impacts their ability to pursue further education and training which would enhance their professional opportunities. The role of family honour, entrenched gender roles and the belief that the most appropriate place for women is in the home, all combine to detrimentally effect the ability of women to be economically empowered.

Even when women in Rajasthan are educated, they still face fundamental barriers to achieving economic success. Education does not automatically equate to employment opportunities. According to the 2011 Census, 73% of women in Rajasthan were unemployed. The report further found that 1.1 million women in the region are looking for work.

In addition, a further issue of concern is the limited options for employment within traditionally female industries. When women are permitted to work, the positions they hold are often gendered. In the context of Rajasthan, women's most common forms of work are in producing textiles. Nine out of ten employed women in India work informally. Insecurity of employment, lack of workers' rights and benefits, and the challenges of undertaking work in the private sphere all combine to create difficulties for women in the informal economy. Globalisation has also reduced the bargaining power of informal workers who cannot compete with large corporations who have the ability to offer products at a reduced cost.

In terms of Rajasthan's formal manufacturing sector, although the Government is investing strongly in this industry, the employment of women is not prioritised. The Rajasthan Government has taken steps under its Resurgent Rajasthan program to increase the effectiveness and competitiveness of the region's textile industry in order to compete against manufacturing centres in locations such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. Although a primary goal of these initiatives is to increase employment in the region, the recruitment of women is not explicitly prioritised. It is vital that policies and programs for increasing employment are used to increase women's economic empowerment especially in a region where women's workforce participation is notoriously low. It is therefore essential that economic initiatives are accompanied by a gender mainstreaming strategy to ensure women's equal access to these opportunities.

With its increased reliance on technology and robotics, the changing world of work has the potential to negatively impact women. Manufacturing is a clear example of a traditionally female industry which faces significant challenges in a technologically-fuelled environment. With increased technology, the need for manual labour will decline. Those who remain in the industry will require strong technological skills in order to retain employment. They will also most likely be men. Although India has nationally embraced the technological revolution and is renowned for its capabilities in this area, regions such as Rajasthan have been less successful in training its workforce in the area of technology. According to a 2016 Report by the District Information for School Education, only 29% of schools in Rajasthan have access to computers with an even lower rate for primary schools at 5%. Only 55% of schools have the level of electricity required to operate a computer. The Rajasthan Government is seeking to amend the situation by mandating teacher training and considering the possibilities of using solar power to

operate computers in areas without electricity. However, in order for this policy to successfully increase women's economic empowerment, the Government needs to ensure that girls have equal access to computer training. Computer literacy for adult women is also fundamental. Economically empowering girls and women in Rajasthan requires developing their technological capabilities so that they have the tools required to participate in the changing world of work.

To conclude, economically empowering women in Rajasthan involves confronting the gender inequity which underpins all facets of society. This means ensuring that girls and women receiving equal levels of education to boys not only in terms of school access but in the quality of schooling received. Access to training in technology is also fundamental. Further, employment initiatives in the region, whether they be in manufacturing or other industries, must prioritise the recruitment of women. By incorporating a gender mainstreaming approach which ensures that women and girls have equal access to resources, we can begin to dismantle some of the cultural and social foundations which continue to keep Rajasthani women in an economically inferior position.

The issues explored in this submission present themselves within the particular cultural context of Rajasthan, however they reflect the global state of gender inequity. Across the globe women's rates of education are significantly lower than men and gender norms limit the opportunities for women to participate in the formal workforce. In this context, it is critical that the Commission on the Status of Women and related agencies address women's empowerment and the changing world of work in a holistic fashion. If the focus remains solely on creating and enabling women's workplace participation without addressing structural factors like education and gender norms, then the underlying causes of women's economic disempowerment will not be addressed. Sambhali advocates a holistic approach which recognises the complexity of gender-based inequality so that no woman will be left behind as globalisation advances and the nature of work continues to evolve.