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Statement submitted by Congregation of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd and the Sisters of Mercy, non-governmental organizations 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The priority theme of the 61st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women presents hope, opportunity and challenge in a rapidly changing world. The two-pronged theme ‘women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work’ is set within an ever-changing, optimistic, yet highly volatile world. A useful way of critiquing women’s economic empowerment is to observe growing trends in the economic, social and political realm. In a recent address to the Second Committee of the General Assembly, global economist, Ms. Dambisa Moya suggested six “headwinds” that indicate a growing disadvantage for women and girls seeking economic empowerment. These range from development in technology, new demographic imbalances, natural resource depletion, income inequality, debt and lack of economic growth.

Technological developments are creating a jobless underclass. The digitization of cities under “smart cities” projects in rapidly growing economies risk leaving behind girls and women of all ages who may not have access to appropriate technologies or the ability to participate on an equal basis with others. A demographic imbalance with continuing population growth and underinvestment in quality education has dire consequences in particular for girls, and poses conflicts between continuing education and unpaid care work.

Natural resource depletion creates an imbalance between supply and demand, resulting in supply constraints for arable land, potable water and minerals. These reinforce pre-existing obstacles to girls and women, including: lack of women’s access to land rights, girls’ disproportionate time in carrying water, and the increasing feminization of agriculture. The green economy/green growth has not evolved towards more equitable land and resource distribution. Persistent global income inequality is often the result of economic, trade and investment rules that conflict with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The world is overburdened by debt, amounting to \$240 trillion dollars. The impact of austerity measures on girls, women and families only serves to further marginalize and impoverish them. Economic policies that seek to stimulate growth and productivity actually widen inequalities and impact most negatively on those ‘left behind’ - posing a threat to the future of the planet.

These headwinds are intertwined with systemic issues of neoliberalism, fundamentalism, militarism, racism and patriarchy that erode human rights and dignity, further disempowering girls and women. This interplay between personal, familial and community life trajectories as well as systemic oppression, perpetuates cumulative disadvantage and vulnerabilities across the life cycle. It is within this unjust environment that girls and women struggle for their dignity and human rights to be upheld for gender justice, economic justice and climate justice.

Girls:

While the theme for the Commission on the Status of Women puts the emphasis on women’s economic empowerment in a changing world of work, this will not become a reality without special attention to the plight of girls, who are the agents of change for the future. The perpetuation of girls’ economic, political and

social exclusion must be broken through concerted efforts for improved nutrition, health, and education for all girls. This requires significant investment now and will have long-term gains, not only for girls, but for their communities, nations and the world. If the cycle is not broken, today's generation of girls will continue to populate the jobless underclass, work in the informal sector, receive low wages, be landless, and be vulnerable to exploitation and gender-based violence. We must address the systemic causes of being "left behind" and work on all levels to dismantle the systemic inequalities that give rise to financial and economic exclusion, sexual and gender-based violence and the violation of basic human rights.

Grassroots Experience:

Reaching out to women and girls rendered vulnerable to economic and social marginalization in regions all over the world has been the thrust of the Congregation of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd and the Sisters of Mercy for over 200 years. This accompaniment of girls and women who are furthest behind makes a significant contribution to the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Systemic barriers generated and reinforced at the macro level negatively impact girls and women at the micro level such as in local communities.

A people-centred, human rights-driven framework, with adequate resource allocation, and genuine participation of girls and women is an important way to address systemic change and create a more just world with improved wellbeing for all.

Girls and women are implementing substantive projects, even though historically they have not been included in program development beyond tokenistic consultation processes. Yet their experiences can provide valuable lessons as governments work to fulfil economic, social and political inclusion of women and girls.

There are a number of examples of women-led projects in local settings, such as "Maisha" in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or the Good Shepherd Welcome House in Cebu, Philippines. These projects seek to address the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty through a gender and human rights-based lens. They respond to immediate needs for water, food, housing, land, school fees, medical care, refuge and counselling in situations of domestic violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking. At the same time, these programs create awareness, knowledge and skills to tackle systemic barriers. The girls and women participating in these programs are the backbone of their local communities, struggling on a daily basis to live while seeking to understand structural injustices reinforced by patriarchal systems of male dominance, control, ownership and violence. Today, these unjust systems manifest themselves in the form of 'land grabbing' for industrial purposes or agri-business, extractive and energy-related megaprojects, gender-based violence, and corporate enterprises that exploit natural resources for profit with little or no concern for persons, social or environmental issues. See MaishaFilm.com.

In another example, the outcomes of sinister and structural oppression of women and girls can be witnessed by reading first-hand accounts of women's experience of trafficking. An eight-year study, conducted by Angela Reed and Marietta Latonio, who worked with 40 formerly trafficked Filipino women in Cebu,

revealed that rather than being subjected to random acts of victimization, women and girls experience a process of victimization beginning in early childhood — rendering them easy prey to traffickers.

The women’s narratives affirm the dire circumstances of the multidimensional aspects of poverty, unveiling the reality of the experience in a way that no theoretical way can. Their narratives indicate multiple oppressions, including gender discrimination, poverty, rural isolation, domestic violence, limited educational opportunities and family disintegration, while also drawing attention to human rights violations and systemic oppression across the life trajectory. Their narratives also confirm that opportunities for work in the local environment were rare, and that the provision of adequate food and clothing was difficult, considering that many families were struggling to maintain a basic livelihood. Lack of government, social, and economic infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, was highlighted, indicating that the burden of national debt that served to curtail government infrastructure investment was taking its toll on the people. See “I Have a Voice: Trafficked Women in their Own Words”.

A Concern:

The same dynamic that drives corporate and elite interests in exploiting vulnerable groups for profit also perpetrates violence against girls and women in the commercial sex industry. Within this theme of women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work is the notion and promotion of “sex work” and prostitution as “dignified work”. This notion is contrary to the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. The commercial sex industry is further reinforced by the very profitable pornography industry and human trafficking syndicates that reinforce profit over persons, male dominance over gender equality, and facilitate physical and sexual violence against girls and women.

To ensure women’s economic empowerment in a changing world of work we recommend that the Commission on the Status of Women:

- Engage the downward trend of women’s economic marginalization through addressing divisive technological developments, changing demographics, natural resource depletion, inequality, debt and the current paradigm of economic growth so that girls and women are not further excluded.
- Prioritize the important insights gained from the narratives of women and girls into the themes of marginalization and systemic abuse.
- Urge Member States to fully resource implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially to reach local, grassroots projects.
- Urgently invest in girls’ economic empowerment.
- Challenge and dismantle power structures that subjugate girls and women.
- Implement International Labour Organisation Recommendations 202 and Sustainable Development Goal 1.2 on National Floors of Social Protection.