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Statement submitted by VIVAT International, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

VIVAT International welcomes the opportunity to address the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women with priority theme, “Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. It underlines the prevailing realities of exclusions and violence that women and girls continue to experience.

Violence against women and girls, a universal phenomenon, is one of the most prevalent and destructive human rights violations. According to UN Women, in 2019, 243 million women and girls across the world were subjected to sexual or physical violence by an intimate partner, although it largely goes unreported. Violence against women and girls continues to be an obstacle to achieving equality, development, peace and to the realization of women and girls' human rights.

There are no dearth of international commitments and national policies and legislations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the equal rights of men and women. It lays down a strong foundation towards equality. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women defines vision of gender equality. Beijing Platform for Action and its reviews for the past 25 years reveals where the international community stands. Most of the countries have honored the mandate from their commitments at the UN through enacting legislations on violence against women, anti-human trafficking laws. Yet, violence against women and girls continues due impunity on one side, and shame, fear and stigma on the other.

Violence against women especially domestic violence has increased after the outbreak of COVID 19 pandemic. Domestic violence has been termed as the ‘shadow pandemic’ in this time of lockdown in many parts of the world as highlighted by heads of UN Women and the World Health Organization (WHO). Globally in the past 12 months 243 million women and girls aged 15–49 years were subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner (UN Women).

VIVAT members in many countries actively engaged themselves to extend services at the grassroots such as food distribution, assisting migrants stranded in the urban areas, providing transit shelter in schools, counselling, and legal assistance. There are examples of working with the local government administration. Our members in legal practice in India enrolled themselves in the Helpline for daily attending to cases of violence. When they received distress calls, they advised women to immediately call on police helpline for instant intervention or direct them to file complaint at the nearby police station. There were cases of physical and sexual violence, molestation of the minor by her father and cases of harassment by the landlord for rent.

The pandemic is a grim reminder that for many women and children, home is not the safe haven we imagine it to be. They may be protected from the Corona virus, but not from horrifying situations lie in wait around women staying indoors; and the systems are failing to protect them. Not only were more women facing violence, the frequency and intensity of violence against them also increased with the pandemic since many were cut off from family, friends, colleagues, and other support systems. The most shattering factor of the pandemic for women facing violence is isolation and being locked in with their perpetrators amidst fear, uncertainty, and financial insecurity is terrifying. Often there is lack of privacy and space, hence their communications are being monitored and it limits them from seeking external support. Legal solution and support systems, especially getting them out of the unsafe environment etc., are not possible immediately in a pandemic situation. Providing support to women facing domestic violence in pandemic times should be treated as

an essential service because women experience the impacts of the pandemic in more ways than one. As Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women said “Even before the pandemic, violence against women was one of the most widespread violations of human rights. Since lockdown restrictions, domestic violence has multiplied, spreading across the world in a shadow pandemic. This is a critical time for action, from prioritizing essential services like shelter and support for women survivors, to providing the economic support and stimulus packages needed for broader recovery.”

COVID-19 has adversely impacted women migrant workers whether they are working in the country or overseas. A large number of women migrant workers are in service industry or are domestic workers. Migrant women represent approximately 42 per cent of all migrant workers, 74 per cent of whom work in service-sector jobs, including domestic work. Approximately 73.4 per cent (or around 8.5 million) of all migrant domestic workers are women (International Organization for Migration- IOM). While the women migrant domestic workers living in the homes of their employers have added work, many domestic workers have lost their job due to lockdown. Because of the absence of legal protection, or social service benefits they end up working long hours. There are instances where domestic workers are being subject to emotional, physical, economic, and sexual abuse, in addition to excessive work demands. They bear with all these difficulties because of their economic vulnerability and losing job would push them into hardships. A VIVAT member working on anti-trafficking movement shares that COVID-19 have increased the number of people likely to be trafficked especially women, children, ethnic minorities, foreign citizens, and stateless migrants. Migrant workers have also felt the brunt of global lockdowns, as many were abandoned after losing their jobs, or abandoned in a context without receiving support.

Inclusion of women in addressing gender inequality is vital. Unless women are at the places where decisions are made change is not possible. They must be seen decision-making structures and systems the change will not be possible. Gender parity in decision making positions is a must. Parity also must be reflected in the way women are paid. Lessing of devaluation of women’s work as well as their inclusion in decision making at every level will be a concrete step towards true progress.

Recommendations to the Member States

Data collection of the cases of violence for establishing mechanisms to act upon them.

Remote helplines and radio programs in rural areas be promoted and executed with the greater involvement of the civil society organizations and volunteers.

Make policies that treat support to the cases of domestic violence as essential services and make these services accessible through promoting cooperation among local governments and civil society organizations (including faith-based and community-based organizations).

Uphold the commitments that promote gender equality by honoring commitments to human rights instruments, and the CEDAW Convention and 2030 agenda.

States must establish temporary grievance mechanisms with the existing governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Negotiate with states safe strategies for outreach to female migrant domestic workers, also including civil society in the process.

Developing policies Provide social protection and benefits to informal workers.

Ratify the International Labour Organization Violence and Harassment Convention 2019 and mitigate the impacts of domestic violence on work, and governments should move toward ratification and implementation of the convention.
