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Statement submitted by Human Rights Consortium, and Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform, 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 Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals are off track. The summit in September identified an aspiration to get back on track; however, concrete commitments are needed to change direction. This is true at all levels: international, national and local.

Poverty is the driver of poor outcomes for billions of people, and is now deepening, exacerbated by Covid-19, climate, conflict and political crises worldwide that are driving costs of basic necessities up, while preventing development of effective, rights based policies supporting people to lead dignified lives and make meaningful decisions for themselves. Poverty is deeply gendered, and women and girls are overrepresented among the poor, hungry and powerless worldwide: the results include poor health outcomes and intergenerational inequality, while at societal level, the feminisation of poverty also drives human trafficking, increases the risk of violence and exploitation, and inhibits democracy and social development.

The perfect storm of multiple crises, from the deepening climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, to widening conflicts and political instability in many regions, is putting women and girls in a more precarious situation than ever. Already there are reports of increasing child marriage and exploitation of girls, which is directly associated with family destitution. Worldwide, trafficking of women and girls similarly targets the most marginalised, and in many regions, women and girls are at increased risk of poverty as well as violence and exploitation due to the climate crisis, which also drives conflict and migration flows. In the global North in particular, increasingly punitive social protection systems and lack of access to care mean that many women are forced to accept the lowest income jobs or stay outside the labour market. This renders women increasingly invisible in policy making, and is increasingly exacerbated by populist policies, often seeking to roll back progress on gender equality.

There is an urgent need to focus on tackling poverty, as a priority within the Sustainable Development Goals, and as part of this, to emphasise the gendered nature of poverty, in line with the Political Declaration of the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2023. This requires an analysis of the drivers of poverty, which are clearly visible through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals, and include lack of access to education, key services and facilities as specific drivers of female poverty, alongside social norms perpetuating gender inequality. Investment in education for women and girls is a core need, vital to address poverty and indeed all Sustainable Development Goals worldwide; community education is a crucial component, ensuring a life course approach and enabling current as well as future generations of adult women to benefit. Investment in care is another key priority, which also contributes to economic development and creating sustainable, green employment, while enabling women and girls to engage in society and make choices about their own lives. Finally, social protection systems play a key role in protecting women and girls; however, it is important that systems are gender sensitive, and developed in a context of gender equality. Action is needed in particular on social protection systems that build on traditional social models of a main (male) breadwinner, and lack flexibility, which often penalises part time and low income work, and therefore indirectly drives women to disengage from the labour market.

In a Northern Ireland context, recent research clearly demonstrates that the cost of living crisis is driving communities to the brink. Use of food banks in Northern Ireland increased by 30 per cent between 2021–22 and 2022–23, with demand more than doubling since 2017–18. This highlights long term challenges, such as high levels of joblessness and unpaid work, and insufficient public support, which also

affect the capacity of communities to engage with public information and decision making. The same findings are underlined in research by the Women's Regional Consortium, which has repeatedly highlighted that women act as shock absorbers of poverty and take on debt, hunger and chronic stress in families and communities, with physical and mental health impacts affecting both women themselves and family wellbeing.

This research highlights that up to half of low income women are in debt, and some went hungry even before Covid-19. The latest research from June 2023 shows that this is now the everyday reality for an increasing group of women, including women in low paid work, while there is also a wider economic impact as women no longer can afford basic services such as haircuts or café visits. Illegal lending, which in Northern Ireland includes links to paramilitaries formerly involved in the regional conflict, continues to have a foothold in many communities. This highlights how persistent poverty attracts unscrupulous agents, typically seeking profit, and indicates how poverty increases communities' vulnerability to anti social forces, including gangs and criminal groups.

The case study of Northern Ireland also highlights the impact of state level policies on women and poverty. The context of public policy making in the United Kingdom for the last 13 years has been an era of austerity, with cuts to social infrastructure and support systems. Low pay has become endemic in many sectors, in a context where eligibility to social protection cuts off abruptly, and entitlement to other support systems often depend on eligibility for the most basic social protection system. For many women, in particular women with dependents, this constitutes a de facto removal of agency, with further impacts on child poverty, with its multitude of harms. Current evidence from across the United Kingdom also shows that women are leaving the workforce due to lack of access to affordable childcare. Women and girls from minoritised backgrounds are particularly affected, highlighting the intersection of poverty and discrimination.

There has also been a distinct failure to develop legislative and policy solutions that could have helped address many of the gendered elements of poverty. Despite political commitments to an anti poverty strategy at various stages of the Northern Ireland peace process, there has been no substantive action by the devolved Assembly or Executive to deliver. Likewise, the commitment within the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement to develop a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights, which was to draw on international standards, could have provided a vehicle for the incorporation of international instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights domestically in Northern Ireland. Yet the United Kingdom Government continue to veto the delivery of this commitment.

While clearly an example from the global North, the situation above provides a clear picture of how gender neutral policy making and gender unequal decision making structures lacking diversity combine to perpetuate and feminise poverty. Gender parity, indirectly referenced in the Political Declaration of the UN SDG Summit in September 2023, is vital above all to ensure that a gender lens is consistently applied to policy and decision making, and to scrutiny of those decisions. Gender parity is also essential to safeguard and develop democratic structures, locally, nationally and globally, by ensuring the widest possible evidence base is included. The democratic deficit arising from underrepresentation of women is a long standing issue, but the current situation directly and significantly deepens the crisis, in particular for minoritised women and girls. Where women have no voice in decisions affecting their lives, there is an immediate breach of their human rights, and also a situation where the risk of eroding confidence in public institutions increases. This, in turn, increases the space for anti rights and anti social forces, contributing to

political instability and deepening the existing crises. Where this scenario plays out, women and girls are likely to become further marginalised and increasingly in extreme poverty in many regions of the world, with significant impacts on the global economy, migration flows as well as democratic development.

Action on poverty and especially women's and girls' poverty is possible, and a better, more equal future is achievable. Therefore, it is incumbent on all UN Member States to act now. The international human rights framework, and especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, provides a roadmap to securing rights, while the Sustainable Development Goals set a clear path for tackling poverty. Women and girls also have clear views and priorities of their own, and engaging women in all decision making is a critical step in creating sustainable progress. This process must begin now; future generations will judge the outcome.
