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Statement submitted by Bright Light Projects, 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

Gender Equality and Empowerment of all Women and Girls is our Best Bet at Achieving Sustained Global Economic Growth in Eradicating Poverty

Goal #5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls is the foundation for achieving a prosperous world within the three core elements of sustainability namely: Social inclusion, Economic growth, and environmental protection.

Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective fits into the basic theory of livelihood support, community resilience, self-reliance, and entrepreneurship which so far stands as our best attempt at eradicating abject poverty. Nelson Mandela puts it better “Poverty is natural, it is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the action of human beings.”

Fighting poverty requires a local approach, the world is not on target at achieving the SDGs by 2030 largely because in some regions of the world the SDGs are completely disconnected from the local population. We have not done a great job of localizing the SDGs and boosting internal resource mobilization has become a great problem. Development triggers from bottom to top, and not from top to bottom. Providing opportunities for women, especially in rural communities is key to fighting poverty because women are the breadwinners and better managers and entrepreneurs responsible for managing households in poor hamlets and villages for example in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

Social protection systems, access to public services, and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls could be achieved within the framework of the following key recommendations:

Support Rural Women, Entrepreneurs and Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs)

The impact of COVID-19 lockdowns has had a multiplier effect, especially for disadvantaged and struggling economies that do not have the internal infrastructure to sustain such prolonged lockdowns. This is even worse for rural women and girls who are already held back by gender and economic inequalities, especially in patriarchal communities with deep-rooted social norms like in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

About 87 per cent of women reported a decline in income following the lockdowns. Besides unpaid domestic work, women contribute about 60-80 per cent of food production both for household consumption and for sale but they lack access to markets and credit. Stimulating private sector finance by providing financial incentives for entrepreneurs and SMEs in agriculture, and renewable energy products, without energy there is no sustained growth. The role of SMEs is critical for economic development. Government and partners to provide financial incentives for women in agriculture including SMEs to continue operations, expand demand and supply chains online, establish technological infrastructure and digital platforms, and support women in climate-sensitive communities who find it difficult to sell their produce online

Access to Affordable Reliable Energy for Women in Rural Communities

In most rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa, the women are the energy source, fetching firewood for cooking and carrying water (about 20 hours a week). In 2019, Air pollution killed about 1.1 million people in Africa with half of the deaths

from indoor pollutants, mostly firewood and coal from cooking. Indoor pollution affects children's intelligence and causes major health issues like lung damage, breathing issues, and more. Heavy investments in renewable energy mostly solar and wind could reduce both indoor and outdoor air pollution and stimulate sustained growth

No development can thrive without affordable and reliable energy to power food processing plants, manufacturing, tech hubs, digital solutions, roads, and highways. Storage facilities are needed to increase the longevity of poultry, livestock, and agricultural products from rural women to meet the needs of the growing population.

Women's Empowerment is key to reducing Climate Change

Women's empowerment is key to reducing climate change. More educational opportunities for women will lead to family planning and birth control. Women will have fewer children and this will slow population growth relieving stress on ecosystems. There is less talk about women's empowerment when it comes to climate change issues. How can we achieve sustainable growth by leaving behind half of the workforce (women) population of the world?

Enhance Private Sector Finance is Key

Women face enormous hardship and discrimination when it comes to accessing financing. The private sector should ease eligibility criteria and repayment for collaterals for women running SMEs, especially in rural communities where women are the majority breadwinners in their households. This will act as an incentive to expand demand and supply outlets especially SMEs and entrepreneurs in agriculture and renewable energy products.

Training sessions on how to mobilize capital and resources for SMEs, especially for those whose businesses are not registered is key in enhancing public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.

Some developing countries have the highest rates of women entrepreneurs globally. The MasterCard Index of Women Entrepreneurs report for 2021 (MIWE) for three years in a row ranked Botswana (38.5 per cent), Ghana (37.2), and Uganda (38.4) are the countries with the most women-owned businesses globally. This highlights the resilience and the great significance, of the socioeconomic contributions of women entrepreneurs and the need to support women small and medium-sized Enterprises as our best path to achieving Sustainable Development goals.

In many countries for example in sub-Saharan Africa, customary laws often override the judicial systems including land laws and property rights making it difficult for women to start and advance their businesses. Other barriers include lack of funding, very limited opportunities for higher - education and leadership, and many other customary laws. There is a lack of an enabling environment for women to thrive in these countries. MasterCard's research indicates that "Women entrepreneurs in Africa are resilient and adaptable, particularly those in low and middle-income economies, often surpassing men in terms of entrepreneurial activities"

Skills Training and Entrepreneurship are key to enhancing Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

Skills training and entrepreneurship are the foundation for any sustained growth. With the looming of Artificial intelligence, the public and private sectors should focus on localizing the SDGs with internal resource mobilization creating hands-on training facilities encouraging more women to take up vocational skills training as a deterrent to AI. Even women in administrative positions should be encouraged to pick up a

technical skill that will give them an advantage in the future. At Bright Light Projects our vision clearly expresses the need for sustainability and entrepreneurship by supporting our beneficiaries to become self-reliant and contribute positively to the development of their communities.

Rethinking Future Workspace with Artificial Intelligence (AI), Gender, and Wage Gaps

In the United Kingdom for example, despite five years of mandatory reporting on gender gap pay, about 79.5 per cent of the big companies have made very little progress on gender parity and wage gaps. The global inherited inequalities for centuries hinder progress on gender parity and wage inequalities. Companies should be encouraged to use Gapsquare – a platform that was created in 2015, it uses AI to track and analyze pay data by gender, ethnicity, and other categories.

According to data from Goldman Sachs, up to 300 million jobs could be replaced by AI, and administrative jobs mostly occupied by women will be the most affected disproportionately widening the gender pay gap. The danger of AI if not handled futuristically and proactively will eliminate many women out of the workforce worsening the already existing gender disparities. We must be able to rethink and restructure policies in the workspace that are needed to create more opportunities for women, using Gapsquare is one of those proactive measures and should be encouraged globally in creating a much more inclusive and balanced workforce.

We require a collective, honest, proactive, approach to boost the role of women in attaining a sustainable, inclusive, and gender-sensitive future. Empowering women and girls is at the core of the 17 sustainable development goals and ignoring these facts only compounds the already existing stereotypes and reinforces deeply rooted societal norms paving the way for a much unequal, undeveloped, and gender insensitive world that is counterproductive for any sustainable development agenda within the five pillars of sustainable development namely: People, Peace, planet, Prosperity, and partnership.

At Bright Light Projects, we believe our best approach to fighting abject poverty is to Encourage, Educate, Inspire, and Empower women and girls through skills training and entrepreneurship. Dependency creates a big window for inequality widening economic disparities, a big hindrance to global development efforts.
