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Statement submitted by Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 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

Billions of people today do not have all their basic needs met due to the impacts of poverty. In addition to being a state of limited financial resources and a multidimensional human rights issue, poverty is also fundamentally the product of exploitative relationships between those who control resources and those who do not. In 2023, 1 in every 10 women is living in extreme poverty, projected to exceed 11 per cent of all women by 2030. Women and girls experience poverty because of exploitation at multiple levels: within and between countries; between communities; through their labour in both the formal and informal economy; and in the household.

From a feminist perspective, people, communities, and countries don't simply "live in poverty." Instead, they are being placed in a situation of impoverishment through continuous, harmful, and active decisions that are rooted in the political economy of neoliberal capitalism, militarism, and patriarchy.

Ending poverty and achieving gender equality require significant financial resources and societal determination to do things differently. But public commitments to sustainable development, including gender equality and poverty reduction, are being compromised by a growing reliance on the private sector, continued emphasis on growth, and preference for austerity measures; with poverty also being exacerbated by violence, war, and growing militarism.

This statement addresses these current approaches to addressing poverty, and the relationships between armed conflict and poverty, with proposals for feminist alternatives.

The failures of prevailing economic models became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely reversed progress toward achieving gender equality and ending poverty. Prior to the pandemic, the United Nations Secretary-General highlighted how "fiscal austerity has consistently produced regressive outcomes, especially for low-income women, given their greater reliance on public services and transfers, their role as default care providers when services are eroded, and their strong presence as front-line public sector workers that have been subjected to cuts."

During the first years of the pandemic, many countries expanded social protection and anti-poverty measures to address the cost-of-living crisis. However, many of these were short-term in nature, and only targeted specific populations. Meanwhile, as 99 per cent of the world lost income during the first two years of the pandemic, a few of the world's richest men doubled their wealth. For women and girls, this crisis deepened pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities across social, economic, and political systems.

Current approaches to economic empowerment of women are insufficiently transformative. Too often, the responsibility for "getting out of poverty" is shifted onto individual women and their ability to transform themselves into entrepreneurs, capable of taking risks in the market economy. In addition, the private sector and private capital are increasingly being introduced as a panacea to funding gaps on gender, including through so-called multi-stakeholder partnership approaches. However, ultimately, private capital and privately led solutions, driven by profit, cannot be relied upon to replace investments in public, universal infrastructure. This is particularly the case given that many private sector actors are currently failing to uphold women's human rights in their activities and are also failing to pay their share in taxes. An estimated 21 to 32 trillion United States Dollars are stashed in tax havens. Tax abuses, including secrecy jurisdictions and tax evasion, also perpetuate poverty, contribute to inequality, and continue cycles of neocolonial wealth drain.

These realities are amplified in contexts of fragility, armed conflict, violence, persecution, and emergencies, where social cohesion is already undermined, institutional capacity and services are limited, and women and girls are disproportionately impacted – directly linking poverty, gender-based violence, and catastrophic multi-generational consequences.

Currently, 110 million people are displaced worldwide due to armed conflict, violence, and persecution. 360 million people need humanitarian assistance, and an additional 260 million are facing acute food insecurity. Women and girls represent more than half of people who are internally displaced, and in some countries constitute a large majority of internally displaced persons. 70 per cent of women in humanitarian crises experience gender-based violence.

Despite these realities, world leaders continue to make the deliberate choice to prioritise war, violence, and power over human security. Studies estimate that completely ending world hunger by 2030 could cost just 330 billion United States Dollars in total. Meanwhile, in 2022, world military expenditures surpassed 2 trillion United States Dollars per year for the first time in history. This spending not only diverts precious resources away from key goals such as ending poverty and addressing the climate emergency, but it reinforces the cyclical and direct relationship between armed conflict and poverty.

Violations of social, political, civil, and economic rights can serve as drivers of conflict and political instability. Militaries and armed groups are often able to recruit and sustain their operations by exploiting poverty and vulnerability including through false promises of meeting human needs, as well as through illicit funds and resource extraction. Conflict disrupts food systems and leads to food shortages, forcibly displaces communities, destroys social and other infrastructure, and harms physical and mental health. For example, in Afghanistan, decades of conflict, exacerbated by drought, earthquakes, and human rights violations, especially against women and girls, have resulted in 90 per cent of the population facing poverty. This, too, is cyclical: repeated cycles of violence “post-conflict” can harm relief and recovery efforts, and post-conflict reconstruction and recovery approaches can exacerbate, rather than address, structural inequalities.

As recognised in United Nations Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security and the Beijing Platform for Action, pre-existing gender inequalities and violations of women’s human rights are also worsened during armed conflict. As a result of death, disappearance, and physical disability, many women in conflict-affected areas become widows and/or heads of household. Due to patriarchal norms, widows are often prevented from accessing their rights to inheritance and pensions, and face property grabbing, stigma and discrimination, and sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation. The children of widows can also suffer the consequences of these violations, as well as statelessness and early, child, and forced marriage or recruitment by armed groups.

Ending poverty requires comprehensive feminist action at all levels that strengthens universal, expansive, accessible public services and infrastructure. It is critical that solutions proposed within the United Nations, international financial institutions, and other actors do not reinforce and prop up the same systems that have created the problems. Instead, they must build their responses on an understanding that poverty – both inside and outside of armed conflict – is situated in the institutional, systemic, and structural failures of the prevailing political economy. They must focus on creating access to decent and secure jobs for women, creating an enabling environment for women’s equal participation in economic, social, and political processes, and on transforming the structures and systems that cause poverty and inequality.

Meeting the goal of zero poverty therefore requires redistributing existing wealth, building inclusive democratic economic governance, and resourcing public social infrastructure on the principles of solidarity and care. This includes:

- Developing mechanisms for truly inclusive democratic participation in global economic governance.
- Recognising, valuing, and redistributing social reproductive work, in particular unpaid care work, to create an enabling environment for women's equal participation in economic, social, and political processes to advance gender equality.
- Putting a stop to austerity measures. Instead, resourcing public budgets and expanding public spending with the aim to make public services and social infrastructure universal and accessible.
- Moving the money from militaries and weapons towards gender-transformative and comprehensive social protection systems, including food, water, health services, childcare, and education, incorporating protections for groups who are at the margins of society, such as migrants and landless and informal sector workers.
- Excluding essential public services and social infrastructure from privatisation processes, delinking them from the market and profit.
- Redistributing existing wealth on the principles of justice, solidarity, and care.
- Transforming the global trade order based on principles of equity and justice and working for tax and debt justice by cancelling existing debt and taxing corporations and the wealthy.
- Holding corporations accountable for violating human rights, in line with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- Incorporating a feminist political economy perspective in policies and programmes, including in peace processes, post-conflict reconstruction and recovery planning, and crisis response mechanisms. Post-conflict economic planning must prioritise gender-equitable investments in universal social protection systems and public services as well as creating an environment conducive to reconciliation and meeting human needs.
- Promoting economic rights, including the removal of laws and policies inhibiting women's access to land, inheritance, and financial services.