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Statement submitted by International Presentation Association, 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

The International Presentation Association is a non-governmental organization with special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations. Representing Presentation women, associates and co-workers, our organization works in 23 countries. We are particularly concerned with the environment, sustainable living, and human rights, with a focus on women and children and indigenous peoples.

As recognized in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action sustainable development is possible only through empowering women. We welcome the vision of a “50:50 Planet” in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed. We affirm the Sustainable Development Goal 5 to achieve gender equality and Goal 4 for equitable education, as well as other interrelated Goals and targets.

Poverty has been identified as a primary obstacle to women’s empowerment. Most susceptible are those who reside in rural areas in developing countries, where agriculture is the primary livelihood. However, minor downturns in the financial markets of any country may wreak havoc in women’s lives, bringing many of them to the brink of poverty.

Other equally pertinent obstacles to women’s empowerment are reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals and targets. They include the lack of equal opportunities in education and in employment, little or no control over economic resources, discriminatory laws and policies, unsanitary living conditions, violence, forced migration, and lack of health care.

In addition, climate change has a disproportionate impact on women. Climate change forces the migration of many people and possibly continues and intensifies the poverty and other mental and physical challenges of those affected, especially women who were already at disadvantaged positions in their homelands. Yet women remain underrepresented in environmental decision-making such as setting policies and initiatives on climate change, despite the gender-differentiated impact of climate change and studies that have demonstrated that the efficiency of managing environmental matters increases when women are included.

Alarming, we also note the global trend toward the commodification of women. While laws and policies are often being promoted to placate the interests of big businesses, women, trapped economically, socially and environmentally, are forced into trafficking, prostitution, pornography, and even egg donation. Not only do they have very little or no input in what happens to them, but their basic human rights are disregarded.

Clearly it is a strong first step to have identified these problems. However we are concerned about the means of addressing them. Women should not be viewed as victims but as agents of their own empowerment. Women’s agency is about their capacity to own, manage and develop resources that will enhance their own lives and their families and communities. What we advocate is a vigorous commitment by member states for transformational change made on all levels of society worldwide — governments, corporate and private sectors, communities and families. In line with the Addis Ababa Action Plan on Transformative Financing for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, it is essential that legislation and

administrative reforms be enacted “to ensure women’s equal rights to economic and productive resources, including to inheritance and access to, control over and/or ownership of land and other property, credit and other financial services, information and communication technologies and other forms of technology and capacity building to utilize and maximize the potential of these services/assets”.

As an organization that is rooted in the life communities, we work to promote gender equalization from the bottom up, meeting women where they are. We form small neighbourhood collectives or cooperatives of women, allowing them to decide what their needs are, the priority in which they are addressed, and how best they can be met. While respecting their autonomy, we provide them with environments in which they feel safe and can obtain skills and education. Although many policies have privatized health and taken it out of the reach of most poor women, we find that training local women in health and hygiene is a way to maintain healthy communities. Health clinics are made accessible to the local women and they are also educated on the practice of simple curative home remedies, the prevention of diseases and the promotion of wholesome health.

Engaging women within the community collective structure in environmental protection issues helps reduce the mindless destruction of the environment. An example is The Garden of Oneness in Zambia, an initiative by one of the Presentation sisters to engage the local communities in the care of the earth and the interconnectedness of the whole of creation. By means of these collectives women are also economically empowered. They can be encouraged to seek the jobs newly available in the green economy and to seek investment funding for their own green enterprises. They are also supported in their efforts to be as equally involved as men with respect to decisions made concerning climate change. This is crucial since “Gender equality is essential to the successful initiation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of climate change policies”.

The neighbourhood collectives demonstrate that when women gather together in such groups locally supported by community-based organizations to share their troubles, educate themselves and engage in collective action on political, economic and sociocultural levels, they become empowered to contribute to the eradication of poverty and other obstacles and to promote sustainable development. Training women on how to assert themselves, to approach others and to share ideas helps generate a sense of community while at the same time increasing self-reliance. The knowledge gained by the women in these collectives builds self-esteem and the sense of self-worth. It empowers women to become aware of their rights and to bring their issues to the attention of the appropriate governmental agencies. They begin to understand that they can speak for themselves and in turn they become able to support other women. In many cases, they become mentors to other women.

In summary, we make the following recommendations.

First, encourage the formation of small neighbourhood based collectives, cooperatives or self-help groups on a small, medium or community basis, particularly in rural areas. These groups focus on women’s agency and collectivity.

Second, obtain firm funding commitments for the collectives from local or national governments, corporations, organizations and individuals. These commitments must include mechanisms for accountability and enforceability. They

must be met even in periods of financial downturns during which time funding becomes even more crucial for the sustainability of the collectives.

Third, allow the women in the collectives to make decisions in a safe, just and enabling environment as to what they have determined to be the most pertinent issues and how to address them, without fear of retaliation. This ensures that the most pressing issues will be efficiently addressed while at the same time building the sense of self-worth in the participating women.

Fourth, engage stakeholders to advance transformational change. These stakeholders should come from governmental, political, sociocultural, and economic arenas. Forming or encouraging the formation of collectives is one way in which a state may meet its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women to ensure the guarantees of basic human rights and equality for woman. Other stakeholders' interest in such collectives may be stimulated by economic incentives (such as beneficial tax treatments) or simply by awareness of the effectiveness of such collectives. In line with the Addis Ababa Action Plan on Transformative Financing for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, it is essential that legislation and administrative reforms be enacted "to ensure women's equal rights to economic and productive resources, including to inheritance and access to, control over and/or ownership of land and other property, credit and other financial services, information and communication technologies and other forms of technology and capacity building to utilize and maximize the potential of these services/assets".

As noted in the Beijing Declaration, "Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace".

This statement is endorsed by the following Economic and Social Council accredited organizations: Congregations of St. Joseph, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the good Shepherd, Dominican Leadership conference, International Public Policy Institute, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary — Loreto Generalate, Partnership for Global Justice, Salesian Missions, Sisters of Charity Federation, Society of catholic Missionaries, Passionists International, VIVAT International.