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Statement submitted by Catholic Institute for International Relations, 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

This statement is made in a context where the world is faced with numerous challenges, which directly impact the lives of women and girls, preventing them from fulfilling their full potential in society. It is a well-known fact that women and girls continue to excessively bear the burden of poverty, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Globally, women represent 49.6 per cent of the total population, but only 40.8 per cent of the total workforce in the formal sector. Women's labour tends to concentrate in insecure jobs in the informal sector with low income and very few rights, which require few skills and only basic education. Up to 7 in 10 women around the world experience physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime. One out of 4 pregnant women has suffered abuse during her pregnancy. Domestic violence is outlawed in 128 countries but 1 in 3 women are still beaten, coerced into sex. Sixty million girls are assaulted for simply going to school. Misogyny is often disguised as conservative interpretations of religious and/or sacred texts expressed and reasserted by social and cultural norms, which limit women's rights.

Gender inequality, generated by unequal power relations, enormously affects women and girls, exposing them, in a disproportionate way, to sexual and other types of violence. Gender inequality is about power imbalances, which requires a multi-sectorial approach that generates social and cultural transformation.

Many of the countries in which Progressio works have very fragile governance structures where women and girls are particularly marginalized and underrepresented. Progressio's expertise is in supporting poor and marginalized people, especially women, to empower themselves. By focusing on the role of civil society in state-building, Progressio aims to put people and communities at the centre of social transformation in fragile states.

Progressio calls for the inclusion and direct involvement of women and girls in all aspects of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Fighting for gender justice and gender equality in all aspects of society's life is vital for achieving the newly agreed set of sustainable development goals. The empowerment of women and their contribution to shaping a more equal and just world has been acknowledged, and now it is time that gender equality and women's and girl's rights are prioritized and guaranteed.

Only if women and girls are truly empowered and surrounded by an environment where men and boys, traditional and religious leaders, as well as other local, national and international stakeholders support them in realizing their rights, can the full range of sustainable development goals be implemented. To achieve this, women's rights need to be institutionalized.

Religion could play a transformative role in changing behaviour and stereotypes, which takes into consideration the new context. Faith leaders can become a catalyst by openly acknowledging, appreciating and enhancing the contribution of women and girls to their societies including leadership. Faith leaders are very influential in pressing for legal and policy reforms and should aim at tackling gender inequality at a local, national, regional and international level. In post-conflict societies, this becomes more apparent given the weakness of governance structures responding to

the needs of the population and the lack of political participation of women in those structures.

On Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Women's Rights and Gender Equality and the role of Faith and Social Norms in realizing these rights for girls and women:

In most developing countries, especially Fragile States, cultural traditions and social norms together with customary law guide social behaviour. While many traditions and norms, including religious beliefs, can give women strength and empowerment, some of them are restricting women in making free decisions, including decisions over their own body.

Those guiding norms and traditions, as well as customary law, are seldom written down. Countries who have necessary gender equality or women's rights, youth and health policies in place (in line with international human rights law or international agreements), often lack the support or knowledge about these policies and laws.

It should therefore be a priority for governments and the international development community, to increase knowledge about the Sustainable Development Goals, which constitute the latest important international agreement with sections on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, including reference to previous agreements that have not yet been implemented in some contexts. A particular focus of the education of the civil society and stakeholder in the judicial system should be on challenging social norms and customary practices that violate the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals in general, and the targets related to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in particular.

Progressio welcomes that the new sustainable development framework include a standalone goal on "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" with two targets relating to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (5.3/5.6) which relate to eliminating harmful practices and ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.

While it is paramount to strengthen legal mechanisms that penalize harmful practices and enshrine gender equality and women's rights in legal documents, much of the work has to be done on the community level in order to achieve transformative change for gender equality and women's and girl's empowerment.

The Commission on the Status of Women this year can make the first step by encouraging religious representatives to talk about how to eliminate harmful practices. This dialogue should be guided by the results of a consultation with women on harmful practises. While the international community has learned much about child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, more work needs to be done to raise awareness of harmful practices like initiations that encourage girls to have sex with men and other practices that have a negative impact on women's health and freedom to decision-making about matters like family planning. To foster the increase of women's and girl's access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, a significant investment in data and mobile applications should guide investments of key development stakeholders.

The following quote from a young woman from Zimbabwe shows in which environment she grows up: Here, when a woman gets married, they have bridal

showers. I go to a lot of them. They take it as a platform to talk about everything that is relevant for women before they get married. In sum, they are telling us what a 'real' woman is. In all bridal showers, there is one key message: If your husband should see you as a real woman, you always need to be submissive. He gets married to you, because he wants to have a submissive wife. They also tell us, that our role is in the kitchen and bedroom. Different Women, such as the pastor's wife, aunts and elderly who are respected in our community, say it in different ways, but the key message is: Get married and be submissive. (Laurelle Mbaradza, 30)

Recommendations

- A consultation with women and women's rights organisations on which harmful practices exist and what solutions they are proposing to eliminate them.
- A consistent and coherent approach to ensure the successful elimination of discriminatory norms and harmful practices that affect women and girls. Governments, faith leaders and other key international community players should accomplish this effort in a constructive and systematic manner.
- Religious leaders should be supported in their efforts to improve the lives of women and girls in line with international agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals. We are bound to make progress by championing religious leaders and faith based organisations to challenge discrimination against women and girls with a focus on harmful practices as well as on improving their access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and education.
- Ensuring that more female and other religious scholars are given opportunities to participate actively in reshaping attitudes and behaviours with actions that promote the respect for women's rights and dignity and condemn violence and injustice.
- Investment in data, especially include under 15 year old in Demographic Health Surveys and start collecting data on harmful practices, and work with young people on developing mobile applications that suit their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights needs and are accessible and affordable.