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Statement submitted by International Federation of Social Workers, 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

Social workers around the world work with people to promote their human rights and achieve transformational change in their lives. This includes the recognition that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in rural areas is critical to the social health and therefore the economic health of member States in line with the theme of the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women. This focus also addresses UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 to promote Gender Equality.

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) represents over three million social workers in 126 countries. IFSW is committed to social justice, evidenced in the events held each year on World Social Work Day. This and other evidence is collated in the Global Agenda Reports, published every two years, demonstrating the role of social work in sustainable social development. Social workers work with many partners in helping people through change in their lives. The federation provides opportunities for social workers and others, across the globe, to share and learn from each other including what works in reducing gender inequality and promoting sustainable inclusive communities.

Social Protection Leading to Change

IFSW supports the proposition that aid programs simply preserve the status quo and promote dependency rather than promoting the transformational change needed to achieve equality.

In 2016 IFSW reaffirmed the role of social workers in Social Protection Floors in not just meeting the need of the vulnerable and excluded people in society, but to engage with them in that process of positive change. A key factor for the profession is encouraging governments and international organizations to understand that social workers are not social administrators but they have skills, knowledge and expertise in working with people through change.

Issues:

Education and Training

As stated in Article 26 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), education is a human right. Equality in education opens up opportunities for social and economic development for women and girls in rural communities. As reported by UNESCO, (2016) gender disparity exists in 37% of countries; in 80% of those countries, girls are less likely to achieve the same educational outcomes as boys. Girls in rural areas of countries with overall lower levels of primary education completion are more disadvantaged than boys in the same areas (UNESCO, 2016).

Analysing how girls fall behind in their education in rural communities means working with those communities to understand the cultural norms of that society that often support the barriers to moving forward, building up support to achieve change. Where social workers are based locally and can engage with people they can support this change.

Examples can be found all over the world. Practical solutions like the supply of sanitary towels in some communities enables girls to stay in education. However, campaigns against child brides are critical but in themselves they are not enough, they need people working on the ground to help people move their cultural norms towards inclusive, equal societies.

In China the creation of the Open University of Social Work recognizes the importance of investing in the infrastructure of the rural communities. It uses new technologies to bring education to those communities to train skilled social workers to work with people living in rural communities. By training people in their own community, social workers can build community capacity in rural communities.

Health and Well Being

Good Health and Well Being is the Sustainable Development Goal 3. According to the WHO (2017), 76% of the extreme poor live in rural areas; guaranteeing access to productive agricultural resources for rural women contributes to decreasing world hunger and poverty, which advances the new Sustainable Development agenda for 2030.

Women face biological and socioeconomic challenges when it comes to the protection of health. The pandemic of HIV/AIDS in Africa has not only resulted in generational loss within many families but has revealed ethical dilemmas with the women and children who survive. Social workers often work with women and girls who are HIV positive about taking anti-viral medication to survive as they may lack access to regular medications or education about the need for continual usage.

The challenge of reproductive health, contraception and cultural norms remain a significant factor in helping women and girls achieve equality. This requires help and support not just for women and girls but work with men in changing cultural expectations.

The number of older women in rural areas has increased as many younger adults have moved to cities. Older women are especially vulnerable and do often not receive not even the basic care they need. Furthermore, they frequently become care takers for children who have been orphaned because of AIDS, war, or infectious diseases. Social workers around the world are involved in educating and providing support to older women and their families. We also encourage the development and use of new communication technologies to provide information about local services and give additional support to rural women and girls of all ages.

Climate and Environmental Factors

The current theme of the Global Agenda for social work and social development concentrates on the impact of the environment on people's well-being.

Global unemployment rate has increased from 170 million to 202 million and more than half of the people affected are women (UN, 2015). Creation of quality jobs still remains a major challenge for most countries around the world, especially in rural communities. Many people are leaving rural communities through climate change and environmental disasters.

Recovery from environmental disasters has been a key area of the development of expertise in IFSW Asia/Pacific. They have developed a training package that tours places in Asia explaining what works and what does not work. Key to successful rebuilding is the engagement of the victims in the rebuilding of their communities. Social workers are key communicators and coordinators in achieving recovery. The best recovery plans come when people are engaged quickly in their local economy. In rebuilding using local labour and paying the wages due for the work helps rebuild the whole economy, trade before aid is critical to successful recovery.

Summary and Recommendations

Rural women and girls, regardless of socioeconomic or geographical status, should be provided the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the sustainable development of our world. The establishment of gender equality, a reduction of violence against women, access to health care, economic empowerment, and adequate education and training for women will ensure that we move towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. These tenets are central to the mission of the International Federation of Social Workers. The organization therefore supports the Commission on the Status of Women with the following recommendations on female empowerment as related to the empowerment of rural women and girls:

- Implementation of policies that require the removal of harmful or violent practices against women including forced child marriage, partner violence, and female genital mutilation.
- Working within coalitions between the United Nations and civil society to help make access to healthcare a primary concern across the world. Specific action should be made to create equal access to quality health care, with special attention paid to the impact of context of health procedures that impact on people's quality of life.
- Economic empowerment and educational opportunity should be pursued by advocating for the global ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action. In so doing, government leaders will need to address the barriers and gender discrimination at a structural level, which prevent women from realizing their educational and vocational goals.
- Support the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative to help advance increased educational opportunities for girls.
- Gender equality must be a main consideration in governmental and civil support of new technological and agricultural industries, including the clean energy industries. Female voices should be an equal part of governmental discussions to take action on climate change and sustainable development.
- Economic policymakers at the national level should ensure balanced economic planning and development so that the rural communities can be developed and as a result, the economic conditions in those communities can be improved.

In all these recommendations governments and international institutions need to learn how to use social workers to achieve not only sustainable social and economic development but the gender equality for sustainable, inclusive societies.