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Statement submitted by National Alliance of Women's Organizations and Wales Assembly of Women, non-governmental organizations 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

Succeeding in achieving women's economic empowerment is at the heart of succeeding in the attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals, their targets and the optimism surrounding them remains critically challenged by persistent inequalities, prejudice and stereotypes and regression of rights and progress. Systemic barriers to women's economic, as well as political and social, equality enable violence against women including domestic abuse, rape and commercial sexual exploitation. This is exacerbated by austerity policies that disproportionately further disadvantage women across Europe.

Failure to ensure the participation of women of all ages in the economy through good jobs is a limitation of women's rights and hinders growth and the economy. We need to underpin the political will for change by determined actions and gendered approaches across all sectors.

Women earn less, have fewer economic assets, experience the burden of unpaid work and care, face greater poverty in paid and unpaid work and more often face risks from informal and unprotected employment than men.

Education and training

Education, formal and informal, has a vital role to play in ensuring that women are empowered in the changing world of work. Concerted action must be taken to ensure that women and girls are able to access continuing and lifelong education and training, both formal and informal, ensuring that women are able to adapt their skills as work changes. Increased access to education and training which provides technical skills and appropriate language skills are vital.

Women should be equipped with skills sets to pursue work and careers in multiple areas, and to become entrepreneurs. A specific focus on industries and sectors where women are under-represented, including STEM careers and subjects, will be fundamental for worldwide economic development.

Specific, targeted efforts, including reasonable adjustments, should be made to ensure vulnerable groups including migrant women, refugees, those living in rural areas, older women, disabled women and other minority groups access the education women need to be empowered in and for the world of work.

Legal protections

Steps need to be taken to end discrimination in the workplace and ensure legal protections for women throughout their life course:

- in relation to pregnancy and maternity discrimination;
- in relation to sexual harassment;
- in relation to parental leave and pay and flexible working arrangements that support women's progression in the workplace;

- in ensuring access to justice for those women subject to discrimination, including multiple discrimination based on their gender and other characteristics;
- in protecting women from all forms of violence, including in workplaces
- in relation to commercial sexual exploitation.

Care economy

Steps must be taken to avert the developing crisis in care. Globally public policy fails to recognise women and girls spend more time on unpaid care work. They also make up the major part of the care workforce, often working in poorly paid, precarious jobs. Care responsibilities can prevent women from joining or progressing in the labour market and reduce time for, rest and self-care. Performing household tasks and caring for other family members can prevent girls from attending school and so limit their life chances.

The migration of working age adults, epidemic of HIV and AIDS and increase in non-communicable diseases and dementia have all also contributed to older women taking on a greater share of unpaid care. Older women are often main carers for spouses and grandchildren. The value of this unpaid care, too, often goes unrecognised and unsupported.

Limited investment in childcare, austerity programmes that are reducing public services and failing to take provision of child and adult care into account in other public policies like working age adjustments or provision of public services in general, exacerbate the problem. The care economy, including childcare, care in the community and residential care should be underpinned by the principles of dignity and rights for women who use the services as well as for those who provide them, paid and unpaid.

Action is necessary including through:

- committing to research and analysis, including time use surveys to assess the issues and develop the means of responding to care demands and rebalancing care responsibilities within families and across communities;
- revaluing care and developing policies that take unpaid care work into account;
- changing attitudes to care and promoting shared family and caring responsibilities;
- ensuring appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare and adult social care.

The gender pay and pensions gap

The gender pay gap and resulting pensions gap, where pensions are available, must be closed through lifting women's income and developing a comprehensive action plan on both that adopts a whole life course approach including action:

- to eradicate gender stereotyping and its impact on subject choice and careers guidance in schools;

- to tackle segregation at work which drives women into low paid work and places barriers to their progression at work;
- supporting Living Wage commitments, including in procurement, in the public and private sectors to lift wages across the board;
- valuing care and improving provision and access to childcare and adult social care, parental and paternal leave and flexible working; and
- ending sexual harassment, discrimination and violence against women in the workplace.

Informal and precarious work

There is a growth of informal and precarious work, particularly in feminised sectors. Employment with insecure work contracts such those known as “zero hours” contracts in the United Kingdom for example, has grown and the lack of more secure employment and pressure from employers are compelling women to accept these terms which bring uncertainty and can lead to financial hardship. Government should protect against the impact of precarious work including by:

- protecting against contracts that prevent employees from taking other work;
- ensuring that systems like zero-hours contracts are not used in public or private sector employment.

In addition, we cannot ignore the move within some United Nations agencies to embrace the term ‘sex work’ in relation to women (people) sexually exploited through their involvement in prostitution which we believe according to the United Nations’ own conventions and treaties a human rights violation.

Entrepreneurship

We ask that Government ensures the economic empowerment of women through promoting equality in work and in the economy through: recognising the rights of women to participate, use their potential and enjoy economic independence, demonstrating the business case for equality and for women in good jobs; promoting social capital; and ensuring that economic policies have a requirement for equality for their success as well as dedicating programmes and finance to women’s entrepreneurship.

Consideration of women’s entrepreneurship should ensure that only real entrepreneurship is reported on and not activities that have been made insecure, particularly following the financial crisis and austerity policies, including in the privatisation of care.

Leadership, commitment, facilitation and financial opportunity

We ask that steps are taken to ensure that, globally, political will is refreshed and institutions and public bodies work for gender equality using both mainstreaming and positive action measures. We ask that steps towards women’s economic empowerment take account of women’s experience throughout the life course and recognise that inequalities and barriers based on gender intersect with

other characteristics such as age, disability, marital status, race and sexual orientation as well as socio-economic factors including migration.

This will require action including ensuring:

- robust and comprehensive gender and equality impact analysis;
- national economic, investment and growth strategies are developed and delivered to promote women's equality and rights at all ages;
- gender budgeting is at the heart of public spending practice;
- collection and analysis of data disaggregated by sex, age other equality grounds and on the basis of socio-economic disadvantage;
- ensuring investment and micro-financing is targeted towards all women
- ensuring access to digital and other resources is opened up for all women.

We ask that that women's voices are heard at the beginning and be central to all public policy and decision making, according to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women whole life view.

Conclusion

Failure to achieve the economic empowerment of all women will mean failure to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals as a whole. UK NGO CSW Alliance supports and encourages the work of the High Level Panel for Women's Economic Empowerment in securing change across governments for women's rights and equality.
