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Statement submitted by Regards de Femmes, 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 non-governmental organization *Regards de femmes* explores the topic of crises and women: windows of opportunity or threats of regression. The risk of long-term economic stagnation is re-emerging in our time. There is also the risk of setbacks to women's rights. The challenges of the twenty-first century cannot be overcome by ignoring or sidelining half of the creative force of humanity. Women's economic empowerment requires an effective transformation of the working world. The situation, current problems and their causes must therefore be analysed, while taking into account social gender relations in order to provide effective tools.

This new approach would require a deconstruction of traditional patterns and of the social, economic and political roles assigned to women and men Einstein said "It is harder to smash a prejudice than an atom".

The economic and financial crises make it tempting to marginalize women's economic activities and use them as an adjustment variable. Recession policies, or so-called adjustment policies, a result of the choices made by the International Monetary Fund (choices that, incidentally, have been extensively studied by that organization), the European Union and the World Trade Organization, have led to cutbacks in public services and social benefits. Women are often the first victims.

The current long-term economic, financial and social crises differ from previous recessions. Women, completely alien to these crises, are at risk of bearing the brunt of the impact, which could jeopardize their social gains:

- The threat of losing acquired rights and/or of stalled progress in the gains yet to be made so that existing formal rights can be effectively exercised.
- Social spending helps to offset economic and social inequalities between women and men. A decrease in spending primarily affects women, who constitute the overwhelming majority of low-wage earners.

Women are not property owners; they possess just 1 per cent of the world's property, receive 10 per cent of global income and account for 70 per cent of the world's poor. Poverty has a woman's face!

The crisis is also gendered in its characteristics and impacts. Women are the most powerful engine of economic growth in the world. Their contribution to economic growth is more significant than that of new technologies or the emerging markets of China and India combined. It is essential to:

- Formulate appropriate policies that connect women with the solutions proposed both in stimulus plans and in the subsequent transition stages.
- Invest in social infrastructure in order to alleviate the disproportionate burden on women, so that they can participate fully in all areas of economic, financial, social and political life.

Effective tools

There is a need to counter the risks of long-term stagnation by promoting equality between women and men in the social and economic areas.

Combating gender inequality is not only an ethical issue; it is also a matter of better managing human resources. A larger number of women in the labour market will create more wealth, consume more goods and services and increase tax revenue. Mixed teams in the workplace have greater potential for innovation.

Women's potential for development is particularly hampered by the following:

- Unequal sharing of family responsibilities (children, elderly parents, household duties, and so on).
- The shortage of public childcare facilities for young children.
- Horizontal and vertical segregation of the labour market.
- Segregation in school and university guidance.
- Non-recognition of their qualifications and the skills used in many occupations.
- Irregular work (involuntary part-time, informal).
- The gender pay gap.
- Violence and harassment of a sexual nature.
- The low number of women with responsibilities in business and politics.
- Unfavourable conditions for women entrepreneurs, insufficient support for business start-ups and transfers, and limited access to financing.
- The lack of positive female role models.
- The charge led by obscurantists and theocracies to legitimize the return of harmful traditions.

Women do not promote themselves in the same way that men do. They hesitate to apply for positions of responsibility, lack self-confidence, do not network, do not seize opportunities that arise and are too often reluctant to fight discrimination.

There is a general need to build a social organization that supports gender parity and equality. There is a need to introduce a gender dimension into social and historical analysis, policymaking and formulation, and advocacy and assessments.

The principle of gender equality/parity must be taken into account in public and macroeconomic policies, including budgetary, pension, transfer and labour market policies, from initial conception to final evaluation. Despite some gender-responsive budgeting efforts, much remains to be done. This approach must be applied to spending as well as to taxes, revenues and impacts. In that regard, "stabilization plans" do not constitute progress.

Neither assessment procedures nor decisions can be left to old boys' clubs. Nothing short of parity in all decision-making bodies will suffice to obliterate what is neither a sticky floor nor a glass ceiling, but the bastion of a chauvinist system.

Tackling segregation in the labour market

Barriers to gender balance in jobs and functions are unintentional and related to perceptions. They are entrenched in the education system, where girls and boys

choose different careers. Parents and teachers need to be more aware of the consequences of the career choices that young people make.

Gender parity in public spending on education would enable women to acquire the necessary skills for new jobs, information and communications technology and scientific positions at all levels.

Such support for the education of girls should then logically be extended to women in the work force in order to enable them to attain the same levels of responsibility and remuneration as men. Anything that promotes women's access to occupations and to economic and research activities should be supported. Contributions made by women, their high levels of training and their potential to meet the future needs of the labour market continue to be underestimated or ignored.

Scientific researchers must devote special attention to the goals related to women's empowerment, such as the contraceptive pill, a major discovery for women that has an impact on population. They must also combat existing obscurantist trends.

Whatever the indicators used, the situation of women remains unequal, which has a cost to society.

Equal access for women to decision-making positions has a positive impact on business performance. More women entrepreneurs provide added value and additional financial contributions to the economy as a result of innovation and job creation.

Focusing efforts on the conditions whereby women can enter the labour market and stay there, and closing the pay gap between men and women, promises more growth and better jobs, a means of preventing poverty, and a lower cost in terms of social healing. Poverty in Europe can mainly be found among women heads of household with children.

Progress towards gender equality may continue to generate growth and jobs. An increasing women's employment rate and a reassessment of women's salaries will create additional needs for services and increase purchasing power, consumption capacity and tax revenue.

Finally, *Regards de femmes* stresses the French-speaking dimension of its activities. The republican worldview arising from 1789 and from revolutionary universalism should by no means be applied solely to the French-speaking world, but should also be transmitted with the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and secularism, which constitute strong and dynamic points of reference. Once universal suffrage and triumph over dictatorships have been achieved, social and reproductive rights will still need to be secured throughout the French-speaking world and republican principles made universal, while ensuring gender parity.