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Statement submitted by International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific, 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

Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value, and Equal Rights

The right to work is an inalienable right of all people. Gender equality in all work and labour must not only include equal opportunity, but truly reflect reality (rather than any social construct) and must achieve equal results.

International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific focuses on facilitating the full implementation of United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in order to move from standard setting and norms to actual implementation of the rights guaranteed by the Convention. This is achieved through the progressive interpretation, universalization and implementation of women's human rights as articulated in the Convention and other international human rights treaties.

In this context, we are deeply concerned about the overwhelming lack of de facto economic rights of women, in concert with the current orthodox economic model that creates mass exploitation of women in all aspects of work and labour for the purpose of profit. Job segregation, unequal pay, casualization of work, unsafe work conditions, migrant work, all contribute to a disempowering, rights-violative system of labour and employment in which a majority of women currently participate. The economic model creates social and geopolitical instability as it builds on the mass movement of people seeking economic opportunities, investments in extractive industries and in natural resource exploitation, and erodes the ability of the state to promote and protect people from the negative impacts of unsustainable business practices by diminishing the tax base, reducing the scope and application of domestic laws through free trade zone exemptions and encouraging transnational monopolies. In addition, we remain concerned that Agenda 2030 cannot remedy this situation, as it is not a truly sustainable and systemic paradigm shift.

"Women's work", regardless of hierarchical position, is rarely defined by equal dignity and worth. Although Goal Eight of the Sustainable Development Goals seeks to promote full and productive employment and decent work, the prevailing reality is no nation in the world has achieved equal pay for work of equal value or equal rights. Rather, employment continues to be a conduit to enslavement, exploitation, harassment and discrimination against women. The work of International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific and partners in South East Asia shows that in the global apparel industry where profits determine a race to the bottom to secure cheap labour, payment of living wages is not the norm, with women earning only 85% of the wages earned by men and facing sexual harassment and pregnancy-related discrimination. To address the epidemic of exploitation, a fundamental shift is needed to remove the barrier that neoliberalism poses to women achieving their economic rights and rights at work.

Until then, we believe that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other human rights instruments offer frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals, analytical, conceptual and practical tools to appropriately influence policy, planning and practice towards achieving gender equality, women's economic rights and women's rights at work.

For example, the adoption of Temporary Special Measures can accelerate de facto equality in work through quotas. However, due to the undeniable link between widespread limitation of women through work and the current economic model, any Temporary Special Measure will not create sustainable development or gender equality without economic remodelling.

Although all past and present socio-political dimensions have characterized “women’s work” as precarious, casual, informal, low-skilled, unskilled, unpaid, unrecognized, unvalued, undervalued and invisible, it is the present economic model that guarantees that work for women is overwhelming exploitative, unsafe and discriminatory. We believe the existence of the current model of neoliberal global economics is inimical to women’s human rights. International Financial Institutes have routinely stated that gender equality is good for both national and global economies (regardless of the economic model), evidencing there is no economic rationale for continuing the discrimination against women through work.

In this context, Agenda 2030 does attempt to eradicate extreme poverty in all its dimensions by recognizing that employment (in decent work with a living wage) is the most effective way to safeguard against multidimensional poverty. However, to truly reap the rewards of the substantial contributions to the global economy women make, all women must be afforded the equal right to work. This includes: stateless, migrant, refugee and asylum seeker women, indigenous women, rural women, nomadic women, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, queer and intersex people, women with disabilities, including psychosocial disabilities, married and pregnant women, sex workers, homeless women, women living with HIV/AIDS and women who use drugs. All these women have made, and continue to make, substantial contributions to the global economy, yet are denied their universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In reflecting on the lessons learnt from the Millennium Development Goals, we recognize the Sustainable Development Goals are an improvement. The Millennium Development Goals did not include a goal on employment, only a target, introduced in 2008 under Goal 1 addressing poverty and hunger, that called for “achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people”; and Goal 3 on promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment was reduced to a proxy indicator for girls’ education. Whilst the Millennium Development Goals were criticized for casting women’s role in society as only girls and mothers, the Sustainable Development Goals do transcend these stereotypes, although they do not necessarily challenge them. Despite this improvement, the Sustainable Development Goals fail to challenge the structural causes of inequality. Instead, Agenda 2030 premised as it is upon the continuing existence of neoliberalism, entrenches structural and systemic barriers. As Stephen McCloskey states “We cannot afford to invest another fifteen years in targets that dance around the structural causes of poverty”. The Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women found that Millennium Development Goals Three, despite its narrow focus, galvanized efforts that led to improved data collection and accountability to gender equality. The similar time-bound nature of the Sustainable Development Goals may also accelerate what would otherwise be relegated to the time of “progressive realization”. We hope the Sustainable Development Goals does bring renewed enthusiasm for protecting, promoting and fulfilling one’s human rights, but we

remain mindful that they are, like their utilitarian predecessor, only focused on ends rather than the means of poverty and inequality and therefore, will never be a sustainable solution to achieving women's economic rights and women's rights at work.

Furthermore, the private sector organizes much of the world's economic activity, and has near absolute power over technology and resources. It is also a decisive influence on how the state complies with fulfilling women's human rights, women's economic rights and women's rights at work, whilst also being held largely responsible for delivering the Sustainable Development Goals. However, we recognize the dangers of allowing the private sector to fill the development finance gap given their continual human rights abuse, unabated environmental destruction and lack of democratic and transparent accountability to people and the planet. In this respect, Public Private Partnerships for sustainable development must be regulated and private sector partners must be scrutinized and held accountable to international human rights norms and standards if we are to achieve sustainable development and gender equality for all.

Ultimately, we must accept that the eradication of poverty will not result from more wealth, but from equality, including equality at work. We cannot "buy" the Sustainable Development Goals, nor can we buy our way out poverty. But we should also not have to buy our universal human rights or trade them for work or income. To this end, we call for the Commission on the Status of Women to address these issues in its 61st Session deliberations:

1. Equal pay for work of equal value and an enabling environment and corporate culture that respects and protects women's human rights. This includes men's responsibility to care and domestic work.
2. Engage analytically and strategically to address the impact of the current economic model on women's human rights, and specifically address private sector regulation and effective accountability mechanisms.
3. Synthesize the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women with the Sustainable Development Goals in order to strengthen our understanding and commitment to the right to decent work, a living wage, social protection and collectivization.
4. Develop forward thinking strategies to prevent future mass unemployment of unskilled and low-skilled female labour force due to the technology revolution.