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Statement submitted by Education International and Public Services International, 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

‘A Woman’s Place is in Her Union!’ Unions are Central to Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work

Women’s economic empowerment is key to the realisation of women’s rights, and to achieving a truly gender equal world. It is about far more than women’s ability to participate equally in existing markets or their contribution to economic growth. Economic empowerment for women starts with guaranteed access to, and equitable participation in, quality education from early childhood onward. Economically empowered women have access to decent work, control over economic resources and over their own time, participate meaningfully in economic decision-making at all levels, and can access quality public services. Economically empowering women means building their autonomy to exercise real power and control over their own lives, so women can organise themselves for change in the world of work.

The Changing World of Work

Today, the changing world of work is characterised by more precarious and informal labour relations that affect the poor, especially women and vulnerable groups, most acutely. Austerity and structural adjustment programmes around the world have led to public services being rationalised, digitalised and commercialized, in the name of new public management and efficiency. This compromises access to, and availability of, public services, and worsens working conditions for public service workers. Job segregation — both horizontal and vertical — is profound. Racialized women and those experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are particularly marginalized. Women’s employment in the global economy tends to be concentrated in particular sectors such as domestic work, education, health and social care, hotel, retail, catering and cleaning services, textiles, and the agricultural sector.

More than 300 million people in developing countries are employed within global supply chains — 44% are women. Today’s global supply chains are characterised by exploitation and precarious, often unsafe, work. Too few workers have access to social protection including maternity benefits, paid sick leave, pensions, worker compensation, or unemployment insurance. Trade union organizing and collective bargaining are actively discouraged, sometimes through legislation, but too often through the use of threats and physical force.

Technological advances can bring new opportunities for workers when the right combinations of labour market and other policies are in place. Such advances may spare women and men some of the more difficult or dangerous tasks (e.g. heavy lifting), and can play a role in overcoming occupational segregation. However, one immediate challenge is how to extend to the online ‘gig economy’, for example, the same enforceable fundamental labour rights that we continue to struggle for in the offline economy.

Having a Job is Not Enough ...

In regions where women are able to access and participate in education, they consistently outperform men. However, this success is not reflected in the transition

from education to employment: too often, being young and female, in addition to belonging to other marginalised groups, makes it considerably harder to find jobs. When they do manage to find a job the majority of the world's employed women, find it frequently does not guarantee sufficient income to meet the most basic needs. Women are over-represented in temporary, insecure jobs that pay low wages, and are seen as 'low skill'. Globally, women earn on average 24% less than men, and they are less likely than men to receive a pension.

Gendered perceptions of women's roles in society, particularly in relation to care-giving, contribute to occupational segregation, and the undervaluing of jobs generally performed by women, both within and outside the care sector. Lack of decent work opportunities accompanied by the retrenchment, privatisation and outsourcing of public services, the promotion of export processing zones, and the exponential growth in supply chains (now the dominant model of global trade), has increased pressure on women to migrate for work, notably as domestic workers, or to work in the informal economy.

... And Too much of the Work Women do is Undervalued

Unpaid care work remains a significant barrier to women's labour force participation and economic empowerment. The time and opportunity costs of unpaid care work can have a severely negative impact on women's access to paid employment, and define the types of jobs women are able to do. Although every society and economy benefits from women's unpaid care work, it has largely been ignored by economic and social public policy initiatives. SDG 5 highlights the importance of recognising, redistributing and reducing care work.

Investment in social infrastructure and the recognition of care as a collective responsibility for society are key components in 'gendering' macroeconomic policies to ensure that economic and social policies work for both women and men. Gender-sensitive macroeconomic policies must be accompanied by policies and legislative measures which: challenge and change social norms and address structural barriers, including multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination; improve access to quality public education and training throughout the lifecycle; promote employment and pay equity policies to tackle occupational segregation and gender pay gaps, including with respect to pensions; introduce or reinforce family-friendly workplace policies; and guarantee quality public services. Women's labour participation will increase when the care sector is properly funded: investing in care narrows the gender pay gap, relieves the burden of unpaid care, reduces overall inequality, and helps redress women's exclusion from decent jobs.

Gender-Based Violence in the World of Work

Gender-Based Violence is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world, and violence in the world of work is one of the biggest obstacles to women's economic empowerment. Women experience violence at work in many ways, including physical, sexual and psychological abuse, intimidation and bullying. 40-50% of women experience unwanted sexual advances, physical contact or other forms of sexual harassment at work, and an increasing body of evidence shows that domestic violence has a clear impact on the workplace. Violence impacts labour market participation, job segregation, wages, job security and health and safety.

Going ‘Back to the Future’ for Decent Work and Quality Public Services

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines decent work as ‘productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity’. The four pillars of decent work are job creation, worker’s rights, social protection and social dialogue. To secure women’s economic empowerment in today’s changing world of work, we need to ‘go back’ to these central tenets of decent work.

Recognising that the human face of labour informality is female, ILO Recommendation 204 provides strong guidance on reducing serious decent work deficits, including creating more jobs in the formal economy; extending social protection and legal protection as well as minimum wage coverage; and respecting the right of workers in the informal economy to organise and take part in social dialogue.

Let’s Continue to Organise for Women’s Economic Empowerment

The rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining are fundamental labour and human rights, essential to the effective exercise of labour rights. Organising empowers women to directly and collectively negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment. More than 70 million women belong to trade unions globally.

Women’s leadership within trade unions has lifted gender issues to the forefront of union campaigns, social dialogue and collective bargaining. By organizing and bargaining collectively, women have secured better wages and working conditions, narrowed the gender wage gap, won maternity protection, paid leave and other provisions to help reconcile work and family responsibilities. Union women have addressed the issue of sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in the world of work, and negotiated workplace policies and support, including support for victims of domestic violence.

The fight for universal access to a fair wage is a central issue for the international trade union movement, and unions are united on three fronts: organising for a minimum wage on which all workers can live with dignity; organising to raise existing minimum wages that are too low to constitute a living wage; and organising to ensure compliance so all workers receive an established minimum living wage. Led by the International Trade Union Confederation, unions are also campaigning for a new ILO Convention and Recommendation on ‘Violence and Harassment in the World of Work’.

Let us not be satisfied with economic empowerment for women; let us strive instead for economic justice: women must have the autonomy to exercise real power and control over their own lives; women must be in a position to organize themselves for change, and governments and employers must respect, protect and fulfil their human right to do so.