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Statement submitted by Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, 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 Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund provides grants globally to fund locally generated projects that advance the rights of women and girls. Virginia Gildersleeve International Funds' funding model is based on the understanding that these female leaders have the expertise to identify key issues and create lasting solutions in their own communities. During our 47-year history, we have funded more than over 550 projects in 94 countries, reaching more than 140,000 women and girls.

The perspectives of grassroots women leaders are critical to achieving women and girls' empowerment; as one grantee Project Director in Nigeria said, "[grassroots groups] understand the systems of their environment and are better positioned to develop useful ideas through first-hand experience and observation that can change the lives of grassroots women for the best." To provide a mechanism for these voices to be heard, we conducted a survey this Fall of nearly 40 of our grantee Project Directors across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the Pacific and Latin America. Of these responses, sixty-three percent said that their projects focused directly on economic empowerment of women and girls. As a nongovernmental organization with special consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council, the Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund submits these urgent recommendations on the priority theme, women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work, on behalf of these women through this statement to the 61st Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Through the recent survey, local women leaders have identified several ways in which the changing world of work has empowered women in their communities. Of these, the most prominent were the following:

New Technology:

Technological advances have increased opportunities for women and girls. One project focused on disabled women and utilized voice activated software to enable quadriplegic women to learn how to become social media and graphic art specialists. Several other projects focused on computer maintenance, internet skills and coding, providing a new avenue for economic empowerment. Technological advances not only have helped women and girls overcome barriers, but have also ensured their inclusion in traditionally male dominated fields.

Vocational and Skills Trainings:

Many funded projects focused on vocational or skills training providing women and girls with a variety of ways to generate income, while teaching them how to market and sell their product, how to create savings and loan associations, and how to maintain proper records. Women participating in these projects have enhanced their income, made additional investments, and in some cases, paid for school fees for their girl children. Vocational and skills training are of particular importance when girls are forced out of school as a result of early or forced marriage, early pregnancy, or financial hardship. One Project Director in Zimbabwe said, "If girls do not access education, they become uneducated women and hence economic empowerment cannot be achieved."

In addition to highlighting the projects that were working best in their communities, a Project Director from Zimbabwe indicated that the most important steps to empower women were to:

- Promote a gender responsive learning environment at all levels of education. This environment must be safe and free from violence, inclusive and conducive to learning and help boys and girls to transition to the work force;
- Enable girls to contribute to economic development...Promote Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics as well as Technical and Vocational training for both boys and girls;
- Align policies and budget priorities with gender inclusiveness and create systems to track progress toward gender equity;
- Scale-up best practices in gender responsive education.

In addition to the above recommendations, the Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund's grantees are also insisting that the United Nations put more emphasis on supporting programs that are designed and implemented by women at the grassroots level, especially women-led organizations and associations. "The women are best placed to identify solutions to the challenges that they are facing."

Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund joins our grantee in Kyrgyzstan in saying "Grassroots groups are creating real change. They are the ones that best understand what the real issues are in their communities and countries. They have tangible stories to tell." As women and girls from all over the world meet in New York for the 61st session of the Commission on the Status of Women we call on all member states to ensure that the viewpoint of grassroots women and girls are brought to the conversation in order to ensure all voices are heard in the promotion of full gender equality and women's empowerment.
