



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
9 November 2016

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-first session

13-24 March 2017

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, Peace Boat, Solar Cookers International and Soroptimist 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

The sixty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women rightly prioritizes women's economic empowerment. The future we want can only be achieved by supporting strategies that free women's time and resources to participate in sustainable economic development. Categorically, women are the world's poorest citizens. Empowering women is critical to leave no one behind in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Solar Cookers International, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, Peace Boat US, and Soroptimist International support women's economic empowerment in the innovation, use, and promotion of solar technologies in the changing world of work.

Finding a source of energy for basic household chores is a gargantuan task for the nearly 3 billion families who cook and make water safe to drink over open fires. In regions of extreme poverty, biomass and fossil fuels are more expensive as a proportion of household income than in more developed regions. This creates a cycle of energy poverty which degrades human quality of life. Solar cooking addresses these challenges because solar-thermal cookers use free solar energy, generate no emissions, and reduce energy dependence on fossil and biomass fuels. Because solar energy is free, it may be the only energy source that can help break the cycle of poverty.

Lack of energy access is a primary barrier for women's participation in sustainable economic development. To empower women and girls in vulnerable populations, it is imperative that women can access alternative, sustainable sources of energy. Because women's traditional tasks themselves involve human energy, or are the source of obtaining unsustainable fuels, addressing energy poverty is the foundational step to achieve women's economic empowerment.

Many aspects of the human experience and environmental impact are changing at an accelerating pace. Inclusion of women in economic development will ensure that women will be empowered to create a role for themselves and make significant contributions to our sustainably developed world and future.

Changing global temperatures have impacted crop yields, human safety, and fresh water resources. Traditional women's work is often closely linked to agriculture. Though environmental impact from climate change knows no socio-economic borders, the first to be most affected by changes in weather and climate are often the most vulnerable to shocks. To feed themselves and cook for their families, women must adapt quickly to limited resources and continuously search for alternative solutions. These quests can be increasingly dangerous as women and children leave safety to gather or purchase household fuels.

Many women experience violence in their quest to acquire household fuels; when women experience danger when they are in remote areas gathering cooking fuel, rape, disfigurement, and even death can be the tragic result. Physical and emotional trauma affect women's and girls' ability to participate fully in many normal, satisfying activities, and impact a woman's desire and ability to continue her life or her work. Decentralized solar energy can improve women's safety by reducing exposure to predators and violent attacks.

In rural and indigenous communities, cooking is often performed over a traditional fire inside unvented living quarters. The cooking smoke that results degrades respiratory health. Because solar cookers are no-emission cooking appliances and can heat water to make water safe to drink, women have reduced respiratory diseases and waterborne illnesses are reduced, too. Therefore, solar cooking improves a woman's respiratory health, improving her quality of life and her strength of spirit for meeting her working challenges.

So women who live in extreme poverty must confront their daily burdens of work despite three deficits: lack of health, lack of affordable and sustainable energy alternatives, and lack of physical safety. It is first necessary to remove these challenges before women can accept their rightful role in the changing world of work.

This is not a problem for only today's generation of women. A lack of affordable, sustainable energy alternatives results in generations of children being stuck in the cycle of energy poverty. When women spend up to nine hours every week or more to provide cooking and water heating fuel for their household, their potential is limited proportionally. In order to build a sustainable future, no one can be left behind. Therefore, improving energy access with solar technologies is a first achievement that frees women to participate in sustainable economic activities. Therefore, providing access to affordable, alternative, renewable energy is an essential step to engage women in sustainable economic development activities.

Freed from a portion of the time and money costs associated with obtaining fuel, women can be key participants and leaders in promoting solar technologies in their communities to improve quality of life for all. As quality of life improves, women can assume leadership roles in their communities and economic opportunities in their homes. Inclusion of women, and drawing on women's lived experiences and wisdom, empowers women through their work.

Improved environmental sustainability, including access to clean water, remains a global goal for civil society. The time and cost expense of household fuels leave little or no resources for education, contribute to gender inequality, and result in higher risks of rape, attack and murder when searching for biomass fuel. A solar cooker can save up to one ton of wood per year thereby reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 1.46 tons per year of average use for every solar cooker. Solar cooking technologies enable women to improve their quality of life by providing a new, free source of energy to cook and make water safe to drink. Additional benefits for women include improved respiratory health.

Access to energy is improved as well. Solar thermal energy is a decentralized source of power: women can access energy for their family's basic needs independent of centralized energy infrastructure or sophisticated transportation systems. Women living in the most remote areas can access solar thermal energy for cooking on-site, without depending on vendors or a degraded environment to provide fuel. Because solar thermal energy is collected and used locally, women's safety is protected, and women's time and money are conserved.

Solar cookers have helped in the promotion of gender equality and in the empowerment of women. When a woman has access to local, free, no-emission solar-thermal energy, she can begin to break the cycle of poverty that grips her

family. Many types of solar cookers permit cooking without being attended by a woman or child, freeing additional valuable time for other family or community tasks, entrepreneurial activities, or study. Women can regain time that used to be spent gathering or earning fuel for cooking – both dangerous and unsustainable.

The climate is changing rapidly, and the human community must respond at an accelerated pace. Freeing time and resources for fifty per cent of our world's vulnerable population — our women — will enable them to make significant contributions through their work and in the world's most distressed communities. Empowering women to fully engage in the changing world of work is critical to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and solar cooking is an important first step.

We call on the Commission on the Status of Women to identify solar energy as a key contributor to women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work, particularly for women who live in remote tribal areas.

NOTE: This statement is supported by the following NGOs in: Special Consultative Status: Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation and Peace Boat US

General Consultative Status: Soroptimist International.
