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### Commission on the Status of Women

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### **Statement submitted by Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary — Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

### **Sustainable Energy for Rural Women's Empowerment**

Rural women and girls bear the brunt of energy poverty across the developing world. Unless this is recognized and clear steps taken to redress inherent structural inequalities in ways that empower rural women and girls, the ambitious vision of Sustainable Development will remain an unfulfilled dream.

Agenda 2030 aims for a world where there is universal access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy (#7) and a commitment to policies which will lead to this by the year 2030 (#27). However, as the Secretary General noted in his 2017 report on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the current rate of progress in meeting SDG 7 lags behind what is needed to achieve sustainable energy access for all. Most of the 1.06 billion people who still function without electricity live in rural areas, and half of them live in sub-Saharan Africa.

One of the greatest impediments to sustained economic and social development in Africa is the lack of affordable access to a steady, clean and safe supply of electricity. This has a profound effect on women, on their contribution to livelihoods, the wellbeing of their families, and their productivity in the economy. It negatively impacts the health of the environment, as deforestation constitutes a growing contributing factor to climate change. In many regions, the pervasive problem of energy poverty is a fundamental barrier to eradicating poverty (SDG 1), reducing hunger (SDG 2), attaining health and education for all (SDG 3 & 4) enabling sustainable livelihoods (SDG 8) and ensuring environmental sustainability (SDG 13, 14 & 15).

### **Challenges from Energy Poverty: Sub-Saharan Africa**

Energy poverty is not gender neutral. More than 80 per cent of rural households in Sub-Saharan Africa rely on wood and charcoal as their primary source of energy while candles, kerosene lamps, and torches serve as their source of lighting. Rural women and girls bear a disproportionate share of responsibility for household chores and domestic care work and for collecting traditional biomass fuels such as wood, charcoal and agricultural waste. Not only is this a heavy burden on women's time and energy, but it comes at a great cost to their safety and wellbeing when traveling, especially at night. Without lighting, women and girls become extremely vulnerable to sexual assault.

Lighting affects women's education, health, and safety. Many girls do not have the chance to go to school because they are responsible for the daytime work. However, if given electricity, girls could have the chance to study at night while still fulfilling their duties at home. Internet access is crucial to providing information, communication and research capabilities for teachers, students, health care providers.

Energy is crucial when it comes to health. Women in childbirth are especially vulnerable to the consequences of the lack of electricity. The timing of childbirth cannot be chosen, and when a woman is in labour, attention cannot wait until morning. Many deaths due to pregnancy and childbirth can be prevented with access to proper lighting and operating services.

Three billion people — most of whom are women and girls — are still cooking with open fires, using traditional sources of biomass, solid fuels such as wood, charcoal, crop waste and cow dung. Chronic exposure to the resulting household air

pollution threatens the health of rural women and girls. According to the World Health Organization, the use of inefficient fuels for cooking is associated with 4 million premature deaths annually stemming from pneumonia, strokes and heart disease. Furthermore, soot and methane emitted by inefficient stove combustion are pollutants that contribute towards climate change.

### **Opportunities: Access to Energy as a catalyst for women's economic empowerment**

Reliable, affordable access to modern energy sources has a positive impact on rural women's welfare. It also serves as a catalyst to women and girls' empowerment, improving their education and health chances, reducing the demand for child labour and enabling expansion of women-owned small enterprises. For women, benefits of improved energy access highlight availability of equipment at health clinics, options for safer night deliveries, improved energy sources in schools and nearby grinding mills. As the time needing to be spent in collecting fuel decreases, women have more time for their income-generating activities and girls have more time to study at night, thereby improving their education chances and decreasing their absenteeism.

### **Grassroots experience**

Our organisations work closely with rural women and girls in eight countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. The experience of our members highlights the ways in which women and girls are empowered when innovative, participative and integrated approaches are taken to designing programmes that not only provide energy but help to sustain livelihoods.

The African Photovoltaic Project run by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo provides dependable energy and electrified water purification to clinics, maternity wards and schools in six villages. This has brought great benefits to these communities, improving competence and safety in maternity clinics, enhancing communication possibilities through internet access and providing added valuable resources to teachers, nurses and students. Continuous electrical power has benefited women through enhancing water pumping/purification, refrigeration, communications and lighting.

The promotion of climate-friendly solar powered cook stoves has improved cooking, and facilitated the development of small scale food-processing enterprises. These enable women to process local fruits and other products, produce local cassava or maize flour and baked items for local rural markets while also reducing harmful emissions. One replicable example introduced by UN Women and FAO (Food & Agricultural Organization) in Mali empowers women while addressing food insecurity and climate change.

In Tanzania, UN Women and Barefoot College partnered to create a programme that teaches women how to install and maintain solar energy panels, enabling them to bring electricity to their villages. Grandmothers were empowered with skills and expertise. An independent assessment of a similar initiative - Solar Sister - has shown that supplying solar lanterns to rural women in Tanzania improved education, health and saved valuable time which was then used for productive activities. Funds saved from the purchase of kerosene were freed for other household expenses and increased income. Examples such as these show that solar energy not only improves livelihoods, but also empowers women, giving them more control over resources and enhancing their agency and status in the community.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Renewable energy and fuel-efficient technologies for lighting, cooking, recharging batteries, refrigeration and providing internet access have significant positive results for rural women on a range of human development indicators. But efforts to empower rural women will not succeed unless the gender dimensions of energy provision — and its lack — are fully acknowledged and addressed. Gender equality is one of the critical pathways for a successful transition to sustainable energy for all by 2030. The reverse is also true. Ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy empowers rural women.

We ask the Commission on the Status of Women to consider the following recommendations:

- Funding allocation for energy-smart women-led programmes in rural areas needs to be prioritized in Sustainable Development planning. As primary energy managers in rural households, women play a powerful role in achieving SDG 7.
- Indicators for SDG 7 and SDG 6 do not explicitly call for disaggregated data by sex and rural/urban status yet both goals are interlinked and key to rural women's empowerment. It is recommended that the Inter Agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators consider the important gender dimension of rural energy provision and address this omission.
- Introduction of innovative energy technology needs to be complemented by educational and locally sensitive programmes that build on existing community networks. These should integrate community based initiatives aimed at improving household livelihoods and developing small enterprises.
- Energy planning and policy-making need to take full account of gender impacts. It is not enough for rural women to be considered as beneficiaries of energy programmes. Women need to play a leadership role in promoting decentralized renewable energy access and be actively involved in decision-making bodies with proportionate representation on energy councils at national and global levels.
- Energy, gender and climate change are closely interlinked. Gender perspectives and women's empowerment must be incorporated into all policies relating to climate change adaptation, climate smart agriculture, energy provision, and actions to reduce and respond to disaster risks, ensuring women's full participation at all levels.

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