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Statement submitted by ISIS — Women’s International Cross-Cultural Exchange, 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

Rural women and girls — particularly in Africa — are well recognized for their diverse roles as farmers, community mobilisers, caregivers, small business owners and consumers, among other critical parts they often play. While the contributions of these rural women and girls to the social and economic advancement of their communities and nations is widely acknowledged, this has yet to translate into significant gains in terms of empowerment and gender equality for these critical agents of progress. It is therefore clear that opportunities to address structural and systemic barriers that marginalize rural women in comparison to rural men (and often urban women) must be explored by all.

Fragile, conflict and post-conflict contexts present specific challenges for gender equality and for the prospects of women and girls' empowerment, particularly following a prolonged absence of peace and security. This is linked to violent conflict's distortion of society and changes in gender roles, the growth of destructive coping mechanisms, the normalization of violence — largely against women — discontinuation of social services, displacement among other challenges. While conflict itself has unique effects on women and girls, these are further differentiated based on factors such as geographical location, age, socio-economic status or ethnicity. With Isis-WICCE's primary focus on women and girls impacted by conflict, the organisation's research and interventions have been concentrated in rural areas where the larger numbers of women affected by conflict are often located.

While rural women and girls are largely the primary survivors of armed conflict, their voices and representation are often excluded from formal peace processes or decision-making on peace and security. Existing gender inequalities, the absence of women at peace tables, and the nature of peace talks as negotiations between warring parties and formally educated technocrats often translate into the underrepresentation of rural women during transitional and post-conflict decision making processes. This then manifests itself in the shortage of rural women's voices and the absence of specific policies and actions addressing the needs and specific status of rural women affected by conflict. With the renewed global commitment to peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development represented in sustainable development goal 16, rural women must be centred in national policy making and implementation on peace and security. National Action Plans to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 must make a deliberate effort to ensure rural women's active influence and involvement in planning and implementation.

Rural women in post-conflict settings also experience diverse forms of sexual and physical violence, which thereafter physically and psychosocially limits their ability to return to their primary work in agriculture, to seek decent employment opportunities or experience the social economic resilience requisite for their empowerment. In the absence of trauma management support to address the psychological impact of war on these women and girls, rural women and girls' ability to experience empowerment is significantly curbed. A recent research study conducted in rural post-conflict Northern Uganda by Isis-WICCE, Tilburg University, Mbarara University and Makerere University confirmed the need for government social protection or economic support schemes to centre trauma management in order to ensure women's improved livelihood, increased income and overall wellbeing. As such, mainstreaming trauma healing in rural development programming provides a valuable opportunity for improving the social and economic status of rural women, advancing gender equality and progress towards the sustainable development goals.

Rural women and girls' limited access to productive resources such as land — key elements for their empowerment — is also magnified following armed violence as it often results in the death or disappearance of husbands and fathers, the gatekeepers for access to clan land and in some cases, finances. Consequently, a significant portion of rural women and girls affected by conflict tend to be war widows, female household heads, mothers to 'clanless children' and half widows. These women and girls shoulder a greater burden as caregivers but are often further marginalized due to discriminatory cultural attitudes, norms and behaviours that disfavour the economic and social advancement of single women in rural communities. This results in significant gender gaps in access to justice for rural women who often lack the financial means to seek legal advice, to physically access distant courts and to track lengthy legal processes. This is often worsened in contexts with parallel customary laws that do not support women's ownership of productive resources particularly land. Equal access to justice is an important part of goal 16 and a prerequisite for the achievement of goal 5 for rural women and girls whose livelihood, wellbeing and empowerment is strongly linked to their ability to access and own land. Legal reform efforts and community level responses to this end are of great importance.

While the gender gap for secondary and tertiary education remains across Africa, the gap in quality of education between peaceful and conflict-affected settings or urban and rural areas cannot be ignored. Young women and girls in rural post-conflict settings — due to missed years of education — often register lower educational outcomes in addition to having lower levels of education at higher ages. This inevitable education and skills gap affects women and girls' opportunities for empowerment as social, economic and political agents in society. To this end, a stronger focus on rural girls' retention rates, an improvement in the quality of education in rural areas and support to adult education initiatives or improved access to information for rural women, provide an opportunity to promote gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls.

It is important that the specific situation of rural women and girls in conflict-affected settings is carefully considered and addressed. While their location in rural communities presents specific peculiarities that must be examined and attended to, the impact of conflict on individual women and girls, on social practices, public service delivery, social structures, among other driving factors for empowerment must not be neglected. Ultimately, rural women and girls must be involved in defining and implementing the response geared to gender equality and women's empowerment in rural settings.