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Statement submitted by Casa Generalizia della Societa’ del Sacro Cuore, Loretto Community (Sisters of Loretto), Salesian Missions, Inc., Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 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

We welcome the opportunity to address the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women and wish to express our insights on the priority theme of ‘challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls’. In particular, we wish to highlight women’s empowerment through the intersection of Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Water and Sanitation (SDG 6).

Water is increasingly becoming scarce and commodified. Worldwide, hundreds of millions of people do not have access to water. Former Deputy UN Secretary General, Jan Eliasson articulately drew attention to the importance of water and the dire need for a global focus on water. He states, “Safe drinking water and adequate sanitation are not only essential human rights, but are integrally linked to broader efforts to provide well-being and dignity to all people. I commend Member States for recognizing the right to water and sanitation in the 2030 Agenda, and for adopting Sustainable Development Goal 6 to realize it” (“Water & Sanitation, A People’s Guide to SDG 6, A rights-based approach to implementation,” 2017). In order for the Sustainable Development Goals to contribute to addressing the world’s water crisis, we must explicitly and consistently focus on water justice.

Globally, our networks and communities have been working with rural women and girls to uphold their human right to water and sanitation. Unjust economic, political and social structures perpetuate a growing disadvantage for rural women’s empowerment illustrating that they are truly “left behind”. Such structures include, but are not limited to: discriminatory laws and practices that block rural women and girls’ access to their rights to water, unjust distribution of resources, lack of recognition for the work women do in the informal sector, and lack of political voice and participation. In addition, there is a culture of violence against women when defending their water rights. Women have fought to defend watersheds, which have been destroyed, depleted, and contaminated by waste left by big corporations. They have fought hard to highlight the health issues such activities bring to rural areas. The death of Berta Caceres, a rural human rights defender, is a case in point.

Some themes related to rural women are: water and displacement, water and violence, water and health and well-being, water and culture, water and land, water and education, water and social, political and economic empowerment.

In many communities, rural women and girls are the providers of water within their family. Each day, multiple times, they walk great distances to gather water at local wells, bringing them to their families for domestic uses, including cooking and cleaning, as well as nourishment of themselves and the land they tend. While they risk their health walking, they also are at risk of violence and of bringing contaminated water to their families. Therefore, this informal work also precludes them from attending school, depriving them of their right to education.

Mining companies across the globe have contaminated fresh water in rural areas and opposition to such projects are often put down through illegal measures, including murder. Many rural women and girls face large scale displacement from their homes due to these activities, as well as threats to their health and cultural heritage.

In “developed” countries, boil advisories have been set in rural communities that are deemed high risk for water contamination; or they are asked to only purchase bottled water which further marginalizes these women and water resources.

The examples above illustrate stark chasms created by the overburden of responsibility for water placed on rural women, and points to the adverse effects of mining and privatization of water. A powerful way of critiquing the aforementioned challenges is through a human rights lens, allowing us to observe the trends occurring in the political, economic and social spheres in relation to water.

We call for a human rights-based approach to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6. This will ensure that the global pledge made by Member States addresses radical disparities in relation to the human right to water and sanitation. For example, in the Preamble to the 2030 Agenda, governments acknowledge the human right for all to safe drinking water and sanitation. This includes rural women who are among those most knowledgeable, yet most often left behind in decision-making and policy processes.

In order to uphold the human right to water and sanitation, we must work together towards transformative change at the systemic level. This means that targets 3-6 of Sustainable Development Goal 6, relating to integrated water resources management (IWRM) must pass the “Rights-based Litmus Test” developed by the NGO Mining Working Group (“Water & Sanitation, A People’s Guide to SDG 6, A rights-based approach to implementation,” 2017, p.12-14). In relation to gender equality, mining, and the right to safe water and sanitation, the “Rights-based Litmus Test” requires that all policies ensure practices that: 1) Do no harm, 2) Realize the rights of all, 3) Include the participation of those most affected and be accountable to them, and 4) Assure the sustainability of the right to safe water and sanitation for generations to come. These criteria are supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as various UN instruments, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

In Sustainable Development Goal 6, Target 5.5, States are required to “recognize the need to ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life”. The implications for this are that rural women and girls do not only have a right to full access of participation in governance and policy, but have experiential knowledge to offer. Rural women and girls can offer insights and provide concrete evidence of water crisis and policy failures; they can point to the systemic gaps, such as unsustainable usage, unjust distribution, and inequitable access. The empowerment of rural women and girls stems from their experience and their ability to participate. They have a right to contribute to policies that affect them and their communities.

Recommendations

In order to ensure the empowerment of rural women and girls in relation to water we recommend that States:

Commit to a rights-based approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with a particular emphasis on Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 6.

- Engage the downward trend that rural women are marginalized by addressing the water crises through a human rights lens, addressing issues with natural resource depletion, exclusion, distribution, pollution, violence, discrimination, criminalization, inequality, and systemic abuse.

- Address issues of water availability, access, affordability, quality and safety through realization of the human right to water.
 - Support and prioritize the insights from narratives and experiences of rural women and girls in relation to the sustainable management of water.
 - Undertake new initiatives for sustainable water development in ways that do not exploit rural women and their land recognizing the social, economic, and political impacts on the local community; including access to education, labour systems, judicial systems, and healthcare.
 - Initiate water development projects that are transparent, sustainable, and ethical and that will create positive transformational change.
 - Prioritize the human right to water over and above commercial use.
 - Provide adequate public financing of water services that serve the public interests
 - Integrate and provide for the full participation of rural women and girls within all decision-making processes involving programs, policies, and laws regarding their rights to water, thereby ensuring that women and girls do not get left behind.
 - Ensure water protectors can safely exercise their human rights without obstruction or intimidation.
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