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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: strategies for the eradication of poverty to
achieve sustainable development for all**

Statement submitted by Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 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

Towards Ending Poverty: Addressing Informal Work

Poverty eradication continues to pose unparalleled challenges for the global community, even though the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits all member states to eliminating poverty within the next fifteen years. The Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary and the International Association of Schools of Social Work strive to reduce inequality, strengthen human rights and address poverty, especially among the most vulnerable. We believe that women who work in the informal sector can play a key role as we move forward with the 2030 Agenda.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to “End poverty in all its forms everywhere” (Goal 1). This will be unattainable if the world’s most vulnerable populations continue to be excluded from existing legal and social frameworks. The structure of the economy fails to offer women equal access to opportunities and resources, and women living in poverty are often forced to resort to informal sector work to meet survival needs of their families. Since informal activities are seldom recorded or regulated, the sector is unrecognized as a contributor to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, in developing nations where the informal sector employs over half the workforce, its contribution to the economic and social wellbeing of people is undisputed. Still, informal workers are excluded from benefits and rights that formal employees enjoy. Strategies to eradicate poverty must be gender responsive and address multiple intersecting sources of discrimination. Recognizing and valuing the unpaid work of women in the informal sector will benefit the economy and help achieve Goals 1, 5 and 8.

According to Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016, one of the most vulnerable forms of informal employment is contributing family work where women represent 63% of those who are employed without direct pay in family businesses. Unpaid care and domestic work are also forms of informal employment which include tasks ranging from meal preparation to care-taking of vulnerable community members, to water fetching and waste picking. The value of this work goes uncounted in national statistics. Target 5.4 aims to “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate”.

Women’s engagement in the informal sector is often linked to strengthened social support networks at the local level. A recent survey of 70 grassroots community-based projects in 25 countries undertaken by the NGO Committee on Social Development highlights their potential to contribute effectively to economic wellbeing and social standing of members whilst serving to enhance political engagement and gender equality at community level. The success of women-led initiatives in raising livelihoods and improving food security was associated with enhanced self-esteem, better community relationships and active engagement in local decision-making. The findings show that a participatory, community-based approach is effective in both furthering social development and yielding economic benefit.

While such community-based groups are unprepared to cope with effects of climate change and related natural disasters such as drought and floods, their strong social cohesion has been shown to promote resilience in times of shock. Of 70 projects surveyed, less than 10 reported receipt of government funding. However, with adequate resources, community based initiatives at the local level present untapped potential. Examples of successful rural grassroots initiatives that offer innovative models for an integrated approach to eradicating poverty include the following:

- Local associations of rural producers in Bahia, Brazil which sustainably process locally grown products, prevent food wastage, provide a local market and supply a government feeding programme.
- A cooperative enterprise managed by persons with disabilities in Edo State, Nigeria that supplies Kerosene, a scarce resource, to remote areas.
- A women-led Community Development Support Center in drought-prone Marange, Zimbabwe that gained respect of traditional male leaders by developing varied income-generating projects including a drought-responsive initiative that promoted conservation of natural resources.
- Self-help savings groups among landless Dalit people in a rural community of India which helped to re-distribute land, strengthen interaction beyond caste divisions, and reduce the rates of child marriage and school drop-outs for girls.

Although informal employment has positively impacted the lives of workers who would otherwise have no means of living, it also has gender-specific repercussions. In rural areas with limited water resources, women and girls are charged with making water available to their households and communities. Fetching water is an unpaid, time consuming, physically taxing responsibility that prevents women and girls from generating formal incomes or getting an education. Drought, flooding and deforestation increase the unpaid time and risk involved for women and girls to retrieve water in areas where climate change and severe weather conditions have greatly limited access. Recent evidence on the relationship between gender inequality in education and GDP growth levels suggests that greater equality in schooling positively correlates to GDP. To this point, government investment in increased access to water will allow time for girls to attend school, while also spurring economic benefits.

The HABITAT 3 Conference in Quito, Ecuador envisioned cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. The New Urban Agenda (NUA) includes an explicit commitment to “recognize the contribution of the working poor in the informal economy, particularly women, including the unpaid, domestic, and migrant workers to the urban economies ...” and goes further to say: “their livelihoods, working conditions and income security, legal and social protection, access to skills, assets and other support services, and voice and representation should be enhanced” (# 59). Recognizing and giving value to the significant social, cultural and economic benefits that arise from integrating the informal economy into urban life is a key strategy to eradicate poverty.

One important strategy highlighted during HABITAT 3 was harnessing the transformative power of grassroots communities through participatory planning and budgeting. Testimony given by women living in slums and informal settlements in

countries as diverse as Brazil, India, South Africa and Peru, attest to the vital role they can play in participatory planning and upgrading schemes at local level. Knowing the needs of their communities and gathering necessary data for local authorities becomes a bargaining tool, enabling women to have a seat at the table. Here they voice the felt needs of the community and participate in planning for basic services so often denied to residents in the most marginalized areas of the city.

Informal waste pickers and those engaged in recycling provide important environmental services that help to mitigate climate change, reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and re-constitute recyclable materials. Although their work helps to reduce pressure for extraction of raw materials, it is seldom valued in urban planning and budgeting.

Our experience in Belo Horizonte, Brazil provides an illustrative “best practice”, drawn from more than 25 years of engagement with local waste pickers organised in cooperatives. Social mobilization led to the approval of a state-wide policy in 2008 that recognized the importance of informal cooperative enterprises. Local authorities laid the legal groundwork for partnerships between waste pickers’ cooperatives and municipal recycling programmes and the profession was legally recognized. Progressive legislation has led to the recognition and inclusion of informal sector workers and helped to “recycle lives”. This is illustrated by Asmare Cooperative, which helped homeless members acquire livelihoods and move off the streets, thereby achieving visibility, dignity and social inclusion.

We call on Member States to address issues affecting women in poverty in the informal sector by promoting strategies focused in four areas:

1. RECOGNITION

The economic, environmental, and community contributions made by informal workers should be explicitly recognised and support for grassroots groups strengthened.

2. POLICY

(a) Policies affecting the well-being and livelihood of those in the informal sector should be gender-sensitive and informed by women’s voices and needs.

(b) Access to basic social protection should be a fundamental right for all, whether engaged in formal or informal work. We urge the implementation of ILO Recommendation 202.

(c) Adequate regulations to ensure occupational health and safety such as access to emergency healthcare should be afforded to all workers, whether employed formally or informally.

(d) Legal frameworks should be expanded or created to encompass informal workers with particular attention to land-use and tenure rights, general rights to work, and the removal of barriers which marginalize them.

3. INFRASTRUCTURE

Recognizing that access to water and sanitation is a basic human right and a condition for a life of dignity for all, governments should fund and provide affordable access to essential services, involving local people in planning infrastructural improvements.

4. PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The active participation of informal workers in developing policies and planning solutions should be prioritized.
