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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 Socialist International Women, 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

The Socialist International Women welcomes the vital discussion of ‘Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work’ at the sixty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The empowerment of women in all aspects of their lives lies at the heart of what the Socialist International Women believes in and is the core purpose of all of our activities. From campaigning for women’s right to vote and combating discrimination of women in politics, to promoting the elimination of violence against women in all its forms, the Socialist International Women is strongly committed to the achievement of gender equality across all platforms. Far too often women worldwide are severely restricted by societal, political, and corporate behaviours which negatively impact on their working lives and their ability to be financially prosperous and independent. As a direct result, many women, who may be the sole earners in their families, are forced into low-paid occupations and inhumane working conditions which cause immense suffering and poverty for themselves and their dependents.

The Socialist International Women also welcomes the review of the conclusions of the ‘Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls’. It is of critical importance that workable solutions to the issues women face regarding their participation in the development of their societies and economies are urgently implemented. To this end it is vital that all Member States, UN entities and civil societies work in collaboration while reviewing the conclusions of the Millennium Development Goals. This way we can collectively learn and apply what we have learned to supporting and accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals for the benefit of all.

There have been many significant achievements in the fight for gender equality in the workplace which are an inspiration for women and girls worldwide. In some of the most progressive regions, notably where women are more politically active, there have been gender sensitive changes in legislation and in corporate responsibilities which have made the working lives of women far safer, more productive and personally fulfilling than in previous generations. In some cases, increases in the number of nursery places available has enabled women to return to work sooner and maintain full time roles. There are also now more regions where companies are legally obliged to provide paid maternity leave and the protection of women’s jobs so that they may return to their role after they have given birth. There is also an increasing trend towards flexible working, such as flexible hours, or working from home. Although this aspect may not have developed purely for gender equality reasons, it has nonetheless helped many women to juggle work and family commitments more effectively.

Despite these welcome improvements there is still much urgent work to be done for the millions of women who remain entirely excluded from, exploited or marginalised in the workplace. The challenges for women have been further increased in recent years by worldwide financial collapses, environmental damage, such as flooding, hurricanes and conflicts. There have also been unprecedented speeds of change in the requirements of the working environment. In some regions entirely new types of job have been created with significant changes in the skills

and knowledge needed to remain competitive in the job market. In other regions, economic collapse or stagnation has resulted in the retraction of funding for gender sensitive programmes. This has pushed many hard won gender sensitive initiatives backwards into regression. Overall women have been more severely affected by these changes than men, resulting in poverty and suffering.

Of continuing concern is the unacceptable gender pay gap for women performing the same tasks as men which significantly contributes to women's poverty levels. Although there are considerable regional differences, with pay gaps in some regions being more extreme than in others, the issue remains worldwide. Also of deep concern in some regions are the gender disparities in access to education and training for women and girls, which results in them being less able to access meaningful, well paid employment.

Societal attitudes to a woman's role in parenting and maintenance of the home continue to affect levels of support for working mothers, such as the availability of childcare provision. In some regions childcare for working mothers is absent altogether, in others it may be available but underutilised due to a negative cultural view of women working outside the home. For many women, cultural norms dictate that the only roles open to them are un-paid child-rearing and household tasks, with no rights to owning any property or earning an independent income. Furthermore, many women who do work outside the home, some of whom are the sole wage earners in their families, are forced to accept low paying, part-time roles with limited employment rights and no opportunities for career progression in order to survive and feed their children.

Even in progressive regions where women have been able to acquire education and skills, and have free access to employment, this has not produced true gender equality in the workplace. Many women remain in lower paid roles and are unjustifiably excluded from promotion to senior roles. In effect, these women are penalised both for their gender and for their time spent child-rearing and caring for their families.

Constant advances in technology and the increasing globalisation of corporations has meant that companies can pick and choose from almost anywhere in the world to find the candidates they wish to hire. In order for women to remain competitive in the job market their skills must keep up, which makes investment in education and training for women and girls vital. Without it, women are not only at a disadvantage in the work environment; they are also often socially isolated, personally under-utilised and financially impoverished.

For true women's economic empowerment to become a reality, the focus on the following key areas is essential as these are the root causes of gender inequality within communities and regions: (1) Elimination of all forms of violence against women, (2) Free education for women and girls, (3) The eradication of poverty worldwide. The Socialist International Women urges all Member States, UN entities and civil society to focus on developing and implementing solutions in these key areas — particularly ensuring the adequate allocation of funding to accelerate the full realisation of women's economic empowerment within all communities and regions worldwide.

The Socialist International Women believes it is vitally important that men are fully engaged collaborators in the achievement of the economic empowerment of women. The Socialist International Women is fully supportive of the United Nations campaign HeForShe which works to inform men of the realities and suffering that gender inequality causes for women and girls and motivates them to become proactive actors in creating positive change. At present, the majority of the world's financial and political power is concentrated in the hands of men and most company board members are men. This makes it imperative that all men come to understand the essential worth of women and the contribution they make within our societies, and appreciate the values of mutual respect and the honouring of human rights for all citizens.

The Socialist International Women recommits to supporting the economic empowerment of women by discussing this topic at its meetings and encouraging its 140 member organisations to campaign and advocate in their respective countries and urge their governments to implement policies, legislation and initiatives that support and progress the economic empowerment of women.

The Socialist International Women takes this opportunity to call upon all Member States to:

- Promote support within political debate at national and local level for the development of policies, programmes and legislation which create, encourage and maintain the economic empowerment of women.
- Encourage the development of education programmes and information initiatives for both women and men within schools, universities, public administration and private corporate environments which promote gender equality and the benefits of economic empowerment of women for all citizens.
- Ensure Sustainable Development Goals at local and national levels embrace gender inclusive policies and practices which encourage gender sensitive funding and development to ensure that economic empowerment of women is consistently promoted and supported.
- Support and promote the principle of Global Goal 5, 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' at all levels of national and community decision-making to ensure that gender sensitive issues and topics are on meeting agendas and regularly discussed.