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Statement submitted by Associated Country Women of the World, HelpAge International, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Mother’s Union, National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, National Board of Catholic Women, National Council of Women in Great Britain, Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform, Orchid Project Limited, Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) Limited, Wales Assembly of Women, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Widows Rights International, Womankind Worldwide, and World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, non-governmental organizations 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 United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, summed up many of the basic issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in his Nelson Mandela lecture in July 2020. “We live in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture... People’s chances in life depend on their gender, family and ethnic background, race, whether or not they have a disability, and other factors...”

Everywhere, women are worse off than men, simply because they are women. Inequality and discrimination are the norm. Violence against women, including femicide, is at epidemic levels. Women and girls still suffer multiple forms of aggression. Globally, women are still excluded from senior positions in governments and on corporate boards. Fewer than one in ten world leaders is a woman. The economic fallout of the pandemic is affecting those who work in the informal economy; small and medium-size businesses; and people with caring responsibilities – who are mainly women.

Inequality of women and men harms everyone because it prevents us from benefitting from the intelligence and experience of all of humanity. Increasing evidence shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on women and girls throughout the world in all aspects of life but most especially in relation to all forms of violence against women and girls that has been increasingly described as the dual pandemic. Once COVID is over, violence against women and girls will still be there unless action is taken urgently. COVID has increased the already huge numbers of widows across the globe – a demographic seldom mentioned in United Nations documents yet highly significant.

The Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women reporting to the United Nations in July 2020 said:

“The intersection between the COVID-19 pandemic, and its lockdown measures, and the pandemic of violence against women, has exposed pre-existing gaps and shortcomings in the prevention of violence against women as a human rights violation that had not been sufficiently addressed by many states even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures to combat COVID-19 have mostly been gender-blind with many states failing to consider measures to combat gender-based violence against women as essential services and as basic human rights that should not be restricted. A combination of such factors has resulted in the fact that lockdown measures imposed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic increased the risk of gender-based violence against women, especially domestic violence.”

The impact of the COVID -19 pandemic has been positive in some ways. Women have been recognised as being at the forefront in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in sectors such as health, welfare and social care as women make up over 70 per cent of the workforce in these sectors. Women have been the main family carers usually taking the major responsibility for ensuring food is available for the family or home-schooling children.

A recent policy briefing from UN-Women (Policy Briefing No. 18 September 2020) demonstrates that where women are in the role of political leadership they are offering effective leadership to tackle the pandemic in spite of strong negative responses both from some parts of the public and media. “...across the world women are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response, as Heads of State and Government, health-care workers, carers at home and community leaders and mobilizers, among other roles. Women leaders in several countries are excelling in the response, providing powerful examples of how women’s leadership and participation can bring

more effective, inclusive and fair policies, plans and budgets to address the pandemic. For women to be able to lead and participate fully in helping build back better, it is important to recognize what women leaders are doing, to ensure balanced representation in decision-making bodies, inclusion of their expertise and funding for gender-responsive interventions.” (UN Women)

Although on the frontline and having a clear understanding of what is needed to both tackle COVID-19 itself and its societal consequences, women still do not sit in representative numbers in senior management positions nor are invited regularly to the decision making table.

Barriers to women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, often include:

Gender-discrimination originating from expectations which impact all stages of the leadership lifespan;

Unconscious bias;

Gaps in access to education and employment;

Gaps in re-skilling including digital technologies;

The digital divide (lack of access to communications technologies or training in how to use them);

Lack of recognition and acknowledgement of qualifications achieved;

Lack of support at home with childcare and domestic labour and of affordable quality childcare;

The role of sexual and gender-based violence, including harassment and harmful practices such as FGM/C and child marriage, as a barrier to:

women in leadership (at all stages of the leadership lifespan),

women’s economic participation, and

women’s participation in public life, including online presence.

According to the International Labour Organisation, more than 60 per cent of the world’s working population are in the informal economy, with countries in the Global South accounting for more than 90 per cent and, in many geographical regions, women had higher rates of informal employment than men. The situation has been exacerbated by COVID-19 which had already resulted in a high level of unemployment and pushed more workers into the informal economy. Lack of employment has also made many women vulnerable to criminal activity.

A recent United Nations report stated that organized criminal groups are actively involved in human trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery, particularly sexual and criminal exploitation of victims in prostitution, forced begging, drug production and trafficking, forced marriage and benefit fraud. Moreover, organized criminal groups can also operate in legal markets by running legitimate businesses such as bars, restaurants, hotels and casinos, or by operating in the wholesale and retail, real estate, transportation, construction and money services sectors. COVID has made women and girls more vulnerable.

What needs to be done to counter the negative and ensure that women are able to contribute fully?

Put in place social protection measures that will support women and families including those who have lost their livelihoods;

Collect gender, age, disability and marital status disaggregated data so support can be focussed especially for women and girls where required;

Include women in all discussions and decision-making on tackling the virus as well as measures to move forward.

Enable civil society organisations to undertake activities and provide services which support the most disadvantaged by providing resources for them to carry out this work especially during the periods of greatest stress on public services.

The National Alliance of Women's Organisations acts as the secretariat for the United Kingdom Civil Society Women's Alliance, which is the result of a UK grass-roots movement to set up a mechanism for NGOs to relate to one another and to government. The CSW Alliance brings together individuals and organisations who work internationally or domestically and refer to international legal instruments. They all work with and at the Commission on the Status of Women. Many also work with other United Nations processes relating to women and girls such as Agenda 2030 and CEDAW.

The United Kingdom Civil Society Women's Alliance includes: Action Aid, Anglican Consultative Council, Care International, Christian Aid, Equality Now, International Council for Jewish Women, The Law Society, Help Age International, Plan UK, Trocaire, TearFund, Womankind Worldwide, United Kingdom Association for the United Nations Development Fund for Women.
