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Statement submitted by Servas International, 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

Our Primary Message

As a non-governmental organization with a mission since 1949 of promoting peace and with a presence on all continents, Servas International firmly believes that there can be no lasting peace without economic and social equality. Substantial reduction in poverty is therefore a crucial prerequisite in ensuring peaceful coexistence and cooperation globally. Women and girls largely bear the brunt of poverty, which keeps them in dire circumstances and prevents them from reaching their potential in society. It is essential that UN member states take every step possible to offer protection for women and girls, to provide economic opportunity for them, and to enable their full and equal participation in all aspects of society.

Women, Poverty, and Actions to be Taken

Contrary to Goal 1 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, poverty in the world has not been eradicated but instead has been steadily increasing. The three dimensions of poverty—health (nutrition, child mortality), education (years of schooling, school attendance) and living standards (housing, water, sanitation, electricity)--are worsening and, at the same time, are affecting women and girls disproportionately.

Servas International calls on all UN member states to do their utmost in assisting and supporting women and girls to build resilience and to live their lives in dignity. While this assistance and support needs to be extremely wide-ranging, we wish to highlight three specific areas where urgent action by member states is essential.

a) Women and Food Production

The control of land in many countries is increasingly in the hands of agribusiness, undermining the ability for women and men on small farms to remain on the land and to realize a livelihood from it. Many women and men have been forced to seek employment elsewhere, often in low-paying jobs in large factories or as farm labourers in other countries.

Small farmers typically have a strong connection to the land on which they live, and their intensive farming practices simultaneously care for the soil and achieve levels of production that can sustain not only them but many other persons as well. It is estimated that approximately 60% of the food of the world is produced by small-hold farmers. Usually it is women who do much of the farm work, either with the men or, if the men are employed elsewhere in order to earn additional family income, completely on their own.

We call on UN member states to take all possible steps to enable diversification in income and livelihood. This includes changing laws so that women not only work the land, but also can either share ownership equally with men or own it outright.

More broadly, we urge UN member states to reverse the current trend of land and resource ownership being increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few. We also call on the member states to strive for a system of global economic governance and decision-making that fosters much greater economic equality for all.

b) Women and Natural Disasters

People in poverty are extremely vulnerable to environmental degradation and other natural disasters, with the impacts of climate change now among the greatest challenges that they face. Taken together, these disasters deepen their desperate situation, often displacing them from their communities of support as they search further afield for ways to meet their basic needs of life.

We urgently call on all UN member states to reassess fundamentally their half-hearted responses to the climate crisis. We call on the member states to refocus toward immediate and comprehensive solutions to the climate crisis that are based on human rights, such that the initiatives and programs give priority to people's needs rather than to private profit, protect fragile ecosystems and ecologically sustainable food systems, and uphold indigenous rights to land and resources and to free, prior and informed consent.

More specifically, we call on UN member states to make significant additional investment in renewable-energy technology and infrastructure that is community-owned and democratically managed. We also urge the member states both to deliver on their climate finance pledges and to review those financial commitments regularly in order to increase financial support as needed.

c) Women and Armed Conflict

Poorer countries are more prone to armed conflicts. Wars weaken governance and undermine economic production. They can also make access to humanitarian aid difficult. With compromised government institutions and hindered capacity for the provision of goods and services, resilience in the face of conflict is severely diminished.

In times of armed conflict, women and children suffer disproportionately. A century ago, 90% of war casualties were armed combatants. Today, about 90% of all war casualties are civilians, 80% of whom are women and children. According to a UNICEF report, the reason for this drastic shift is that today's armed conflicts take place less and less on the battlefields and are increasingly fought either on the streets of villages and suburbs--where the distinction between combatant and non-combatant disappears--or in remote rural areas where people are often forced to care for the provisions of fighters, where children are frequently abducted to serve, and where women can be easily abused and raped.

Despite the reality that violence against women is used as a weapon of war, women in locations of conflict have proven to be resilient. They continue to produce food, fetch water, and find shelter for themselves, their children and others in need. They handle traumatization and keep spirits up while men are engaged in the fighting. If continuing to live in their region or country becomes untenable, they pack, leave and manage life in refugee camps or in surroundings completely different from those they are familiar with.

In spite of this capacity for resilience, compassion, and practicality, women are excluded from peace negotiations. A study by the International Peace Institute found that, among the 182 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011, there was a 35% increase in the probability that a peace agreement will last fifteen years or more when women are included in the peace processes. Furthermore, the participation of civil society, including women's organizations, increases by 64% the likelihood that the elements of a peace agreement will continue to be implemented over the long-term.

Evidence suggests that women participants in peace processes are usually focused less on the spoils of war and more on reconciliation, economic development, education and transitional justice—all crucial elements of a sustained peace. Consequently, women in peace negotiations take care to address issues that can help overcome poverty and foster economic opportunity for all members of society.

We therefore call on UN member states to take all possible steps to:

- Stop arms delivery into any armed conflict and insist on immediate and unconditional ceasefire in order to give diplomacy an opportunity to succeed
- Reduce military expenditures, and redirect funds toward immediate humanitarian aid and toward health, education, housing and social programs, with women centrally involved in the decisions related to these
- Protect women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination, thus providing them with a safe, supportive environment within which to live and contribute to society, and
- Promote the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation and leadership of women in ending conflict and building peace.

Conclusion

Servas International strongly recommends that UN member states take all steps presented in this statement. We firmly believe that these actions would help significantly in reducing poverty, in saving the environment, in preventing armed conflict, and in serving to achieve global equality, justice and peace.