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Statement submitted by International Federation of Social Workers, 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 International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) recognizes the importance of women's full participation and decision-making in public life and the elimination of violence, toward achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, the priority theme for the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The IFSW acknowledges that women's empowerment is imperative at the economic, social, and political levels for sustainable development attainment to be realized globally.

IFSW encompasses 141 social work associations, representing over 3 million social workers in 128 countries, According to the 2019 IFSW Statement on World Habitat Day. The 2016 Constitution of the IFSW declares IFSW's mission to advocate for social justice, human rights and social development through plans, actions, programs and promotion of best practice models within a framework of international cooperation. The 2012 IFSW Women Policy Update for Human Rights states that IFSW member organizations work with, and on behalf of women and girls, with attention to intersecting social factors, such as race, ethnicity, national origin, culture, religion, caste, class, age, gender identity and sexual expression, and (dis)ability, that make women differentially vulnerable in their own national, social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, IFSW supports indigenous, grass-roots, and professional organizations that seek to empower diverse women and girls in all sectors of society and identifies violence against women and girls as an urgent issue. The IFSW supports the full participation of women in all decision-making processes that affect the political, economic, social, educational, and health concerns of women and girls. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issues that marginalize women and create barriers to gender empowerment and equality: health and care work, poverty, violence and education.

Health and Care Work

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on women and girls' health, their roles in the care economy, and the health of their families (SDG#3, SDG#5, SDG#8). According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *The World's Women 2020: Trends & Statistics*, women account for 70 per cent of health and social workers globally. Women comprise an even higher percentage of care-related occupations such as midwifery, nursing and community health work which all require close contact with patients. In the COVID-19 pandemic, the burden of paid and unpaid care work has increased exponentially, putting women and girls on the frontlines without adequate support. Research from UN Women Data Count Gender and Covid-19 published in 2020 shows that poor working conditions, low pay and lack of voice in health systems add to the risks these frontline workers are taking. The health outcomes of frontline work have a gendered dimension as female healthcare workers are up to 3 times more likely to be infected with COVID-19 than their male counterparts, as noted in the 2020 UN Women Data Count on COVID-19: *Emerging Gender Data And Why It Matters*. There is also a racialized dimension that is the consequence of structural inequality in United States and United Kingdom. In United Kingdom, Black women are 4.3 times more likely than white women to die from COVID-19 (Global Giving Facts, 2020). Women and girls that are confined to the home through familial expectations or through COVID-19 restrictions become especially vulnerable to mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. Women are often isolated, unsupported and overwhelmed due to an increased need to care for family members and themselves while healthcare access is severely restricted. The COVID-19 outbreak has caused disruptions in healthcare that further place pregnant women's and children's lives at risk at-risk (WHO News Release, 2020).

The IFSW supports the United Nations Social Protection Floor initiative encompassed in SDG#1 which provides access to essential healthcare and basic social protections for all.

Poverty

Globally, women are the majority population of the 1 billion people in poverty. Women's poverty is a multidimensional issue, that is the result of various structural causes, such as, but not limited to, lack of access to education and training, the burden of unpaid work in the home that is placed on women, and low-paying jobs. Furthermore, this can result in food insecurity as well as the increased risk of violence for women and children, which continues the oppressive cycle. Women's employment can reduce poverty and result in economic empowerment. A 2020 analysis from the McKinsey Institute analysis showed that, due to the pandemic and the significantly increasing burden of women's unpaid care work, women account for 54 per cent total job losses globally. Women's economic disempowerment also has negative effects for the economy, with an estimated cost of 15 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment, UN Women, 2018).

Addressing the issue of women's poverty is essential in achieving SDG #1, SDG #2, and SDG #8 and will result in decreased violence against women while empowering and enabling them to join decision-making discussions. Social solidarity and community self-led development are core strategies supported by the IFSW that will facilitate achieving these inter-related SDGs.

Violence

An estimated 35 per cent of women have experienced some form of violence from a non-partner in their lifetime (Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women, UN Women, 2020). At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2020, violence against women was expressed as a pervasive issue exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, with cases increasing by 40 per cent in some countries as people find themselves in economically stressful and uncertain situations. In 2018, the UN delivered facts for Sustainable Development Goal goal 5, Gender Equality, stating that 49 countries lack laws protecting girls and women from domestic violence, 39 of those prohibit equal inheritance rights for daughters and sons. Women's full participation in lawmaking within governments and in other domains of public life is imperative to ending violence against women and girls. Social workers play a key role in empowering women and girls on an individual and structural level, as well as in addressing community norms and practices that lead to violence against women.

Education

Access to education at all levels is an essential component to creating equity in life chances for women and girls over the life course (SDG#4, SDG#5, SDG#10). Prior to COVID-19, women accounted for two-thirds of the 267 million young people not in education, employment or training (Economic Development, UN News, 2020). These numbers have only increased as the pandemic has caused mass school closures, greatly impacting the global student population. Increasing girls' access to education has shown to be transformational to the societies around the globe, strengthening economies and reducing inequalities (Girls' Education, UNICEF, 2020). Social workers develop and implement programs for women and girls' literacy and education, and advocate within social services and policy environments that services adapt, remain open and be proactive in supporting vulnerable communities and populations.

Recommendations

IFSW supports the Commission on the Status of Women with the following recommendations on female empowerment and gender equality as related to sustainable development. As each concern is interrelated, it is recommended that partnerships between the United Nations and civil society are supported and developed, grounded in the commitment to the full and inclusive participation of women in all decision-making bodies and processes that affect the political, economic, social, educational, and health concerns of women and girls and access to affordable healthcare and social protection for all:

Investment in education and training to promote literacy, education and economic opportunities.

Investment in universal, gender-responsive social protections through policies and programs that promote the physical, mental, sexual, and emotional health of women and their families.

Recognizing and supporting frontline workers with information, training, equipment and financial resources.

Governmental support of women's active participation in leadership and decision-making processes in their COVID-19 response and its aftermath.

Governments should fund programs to support women fleeing violence and implement policies to protect women from abuse and femicide.
