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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 VAAGDHARA, 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

Indigenous community account for over 476 million people, residing in 90 countries worldwide and representing over 6 per cent of the global population. Within this group, women constitute a significant yet untapped economic resource. Ensuring their empowerment through equitable opportunities is paramount for encouraging inclusive economic growth, particularly in a time where such inclusivity is important. In India, the indigenous people or Adivasis, account for approximately 8.6 per cent of the total population, comprising more than 700 distinct groups. Despite their rich cultural diversity, these communities often reside in remote and underdeveloped regions, facing systemic marginalization and barriers to essential services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Limited participation in development processes, skewed policy attention, and inadequate awareness and skills exacerbate these challenges.

Women within indigenous communities face compounded discrimination based on gender and indigenous identity, exacerbating their vulnerability. They encounter numerous difficulties, including restricted access to education and skill development, economic marginalization, gender disparities, land and resource rights issues, and disparities in healthcare. Despite their invaluable contributions, indigenous women often confront marginalization and lack access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. While striving for gender equality is a fundamental developmental goal, it's crucial to recognize that women's economic participation is integral to both growth and stability.

In India, indigenous women represent a segment of the population that often faces unique challenges when it comes to financial literacy and significant barriers to accessing and utilizing the growing digital technologies. These challenges arise from a combination of various socio-economic and ecological factors, culture, and limited access to resources and education.

Women who once enjoyed their food and farming sovereignty, assured livelihood and nutrition of their family, are now becoming susceptible as increasing influence of digital technologies are undermining their traditional and happier ways of life. With strong community bondage, they used to be deeply connected to their cultural practices, with understanding of their local ecosystem. However, the limited knowledge of digitalization and its scope is now posing them towards misinterpretation of knowledge, eroding their traditional wisdom, and weakening their strong connect with their resources. More importantly, the lack of digital intelligence exacerbates these challenges, further marginalizing women by excluding them from accessing crucial information, market opportunities, financial support, participation in planning processes, and acquiring technical knowledge related to ecological practices. Further without economic intelligence, they often face limited access to financial resources, livelihood opportunities, and entrepreneurship support. Lack of ecological intelligence results in environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources, and loss of biodiversity, leading to challenges in accessing clean water and fertile land for agriculture, affecting their livelihood sustainability and overall well-being. Additionally, limited civic intelligence restricts their participation in decision-making processes and contribution to developmental planning. Addressing the lack of digital intelligence is critical for enhancing and balancing the economic, ecological, and civic intelligence, enabling them to be empowered and evolve as community influencers. Each of these factors reinforces the others as they influence each other's development. It is important to recognize that women had been pivotal in keeping the indigenous knowledge and solutions preserved, which can offer solutions to many common global challenges. When their indigenous knowledge is

clubbed with civic and digital intelligence, indigenous women can effectively contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

On these lines, women in west central India, mostly belonging to the small and marginal farming communities, have been exemplifying and demonstrating their indigenous knowledge and community solutions to address various challenges hindering their development. Their lifestyle, rooted in the principles of ‘Swaraj’ or Self-sufficiency, has enabled them to overcome those challenges. By following these principles, they have been able to reduce their dependency on external environment for earning livelihood, ensuring food security, health and nutrition of their family. Their traditional lifestyle and practices, based on circular economy, is a source of their resilience, making them self-sufficient and sovereign for fulfilling their needs.

Revered as the creators of life, women hold the key to solving global challenges. Despite this, they often bear the brunt of hardships. Empowering women across all sustainable development goals – particularly in areas such as food sovereignty, agriculture, and overall well-being – is vital to building equitable, inclusive, and thriving communities.

VAAGDHARA urges the policy makers, civil society, and other stakeholders to recognize and address the unique challenges faced by indigenous women across the globe and harness their potential as agents of change which will certainly contribute to building a more equitable and prosperous society.
