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Statement submitted by International Movement ATD Fourth World, 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

This statement is presented by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, a movement of solidarity among and in collaboration with the most excluded families around the world. Founded in 1957 by Joseph Wresinski in France, ATD Fourth World, active in 34 countries, brings together people from different cultures and social classes in order to think, act, and live together differently to end poverty.

As recognized in the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2012, the violence of the deprivation and contempt associated with extreme poverty isolates individuals and families, and locks them in silence to the point where they doubt that they are part of the human community.

Women living in multidimensional poverty thus face discrimination based on their gender, as well as discrimination as a result of extreme poverty. Their empowerment will thus require special attention to this double burden of discrimination in order to achieve a development that is sustainable, just and inclusive for all.

Poverty is violence, and women are disproportionately affected

The intersectionality of poverty, gender identity, as well as other identity factors such as race and sexual orientation, creates layers of discrimination and exclusion that have to be taken into account when designing policies for the advancement of women's rights and poverty eradication. In the latest participatory research, led by ATD Fourth World and Oxford University entitled, *The hidden dimensions of poverty*, aspects related to identity (including gender) were specified as modifying factors that could either intensify or mitigate poverty. In most cases, being a woman or girl means being treated less fairly by men or other groups, in all areas of life, whether at home, at school, at work or in public life.

In many developing countries, girls start working at an early age to support the household, which affects their availability for schooling. As a result, in one third of the world, and especially in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, gender parity still has not been reached even in primary schooling. Because of gender discrimination, girls suffer poor treatment in schools, in the street and at work, especially as domestic workers, and some may suffer hidden violence at home.

In both developed and developing countries, oppression within the frameworks of patriarchal power dynamics is made exponentially worse by the deprivations and humiliation of poverty. In Europe, the 'feminization of poverty' is visible with the proportion of women amongst people in poverty increasing. According to the European Anti-Poverty Network, in 2015, women were more likely to experience poverty or social exclusion than men by 1.4 percentage points (with a rate of 24.4 per cent for women, and 23.0 per cent for men). Furthermore, women leading single-headed households are more likely to be financially poor, and in 2015 in the European Union, women made up almost 85 per cent of all single-parent households.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed more about women in poverty and their dire living conditions: violence, food shortages, childcare struggles, etc. These women, living in society's shadows, took on invisible labour that often is not remunerative and mobilizes a great deal of their time: family tasks, supervision of their children's schoolwork, and support for relatives in the neighborhood. The context of global pandemic finally brought some of women's invisible labour to light as they are now seen on the frontlines of the pandemic, either as caregivers or in low-wage jobs.

According to the UN Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights 2013 annual report, the invisibility of care work exacerbates poverty. Because women tend to be more involved in caregiving, they more often need to rely on social benefits. Relying on social benefits or charity and doing care work rather than remunerated work, tends to be shrouded in shame and humiliation. The invisibility of poor women's labour leads to real and perceived feelings of incompetence, unworthiness and failure in life, which only exacerbates their exclusion from society.

Additionally, people in poverty and women particularly face the burden of global climate change disproportionately. The poorest communities are highly dependent on their local resources and livelihoods for their survival. According to a UNDP policy brief on gender and climate change, women charged with securing water, food and fuel for cooking and heating face the greatest challenges; they also experience unequal access to resources and decision-making processes, with limited mobility in rural areas.

It is clear that overcoming the disempowerment of extreme poverty does not depend only on economic development, but also, and primarily, on ensuring access to fundamental economic, social and cultural rights for women and girls around the world.

Poverty is a systemic obstacle to the full and effective participation of women in public life

Because poverty constitutes a violence that deprives a large number of women of their fundamental rights, it is a systemic obstacle to the full and effective participation of women in public life and in decision making. Poverty is thus to be understood as not only a lack of income, but also a lack of power and an inability to make one's voices and concerns heard.

Discrimination and stigma against women dominate in all societies. In most sectors, whether private or public, women are not well represented in decision-making processes. For instance, and according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as of February 2019, only 24.3 per cent of all national parliamentarians were women, a slow increase from 11.3 per cent in 1995.

For women living in poverty, the cumulative aspects of gender discrimination, powerlessness and poverty result in extremely limited capacity to meaningfully participate in decisions affecting their lives. As a result, women in poverty find themselves in a vicious circle where their needs and interests are less taken into account by policymakers and their voices not heard, and therefore the policies and programmes required to help lift them out of poverty are never put into place.

Full and effective participation as a transformative pathway to empowerment for women living in poverty

'The right to participation is strongly linked with empowerment, which is a key human rights goal and principle. Effective participation can build capacity and rights awareness. It allows those living in poverty to see themselves as full members of society and autonomous agents rather than subjects of decisions taken by others who see them as objects of assistance or mere statistics.' Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona on the Participation of persons living in poverty (2013), [A/HRC/23/36](#)

Participation is a powerful tool for empowerment and when happening in the right conditions, can become a transformative pathway to self-confidence, dignity and agency. ATD Fourth World's experience around the world has proven that when given the space for full and effective participation in decision making processes that affect

their lives, people living in extreme poverty can play an important role in developing effective ways to improve their conditions. ‘Leave no one behind’ - a principle that is at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - requires policies and programmes that are empowering to even the most excluded members of society.

Several conditions must be met to ensure a fair and non-exploitative process that can foster the empowerment of women living in extreme poverty, enable them to speak for themselves and participate in decision-making processes that directly affect them. These conditions include building a feeling of trust, creating an environment that is safe and secure at the mental and physical levels, granting time to prepare for the process, verifying that the language used is understandable by all, ensuring that vulnerable groups not be put at risk, and guaranteeing confidentiality when needed.

It is crucial to acknowledge that specific preparatory steps need to be taken by the practitioners or academics working with these vulnerable groups. As stated in the UNDS 2019 handbook *Leaving No One Behind*, “It should also be acknowledged that engaging meaningfully with the most marginalized and excluded groups may take extra time and resources on the part of UN staff themselves. This requires UN staff to build their own capacity and adapt their behaviours.” This reflects on the importance, when designing participatory processes with institutions, of having partners ready to change and adapt their behaviours and mindsets, including being open to a different type of thought processing and vocabulary.

To create the conditions for meaningful participation of people living in poverty, ATD Fourth World has developed a methodology called the Merging of Knowledge, which aims to facilitate dialogues between people facing extreme poverty, policy makers, and practitioners in relevant fields, with the final objective to propose policy changes based on the knowledge of these different stakeholders.

Creating such spaces of conversation is one of the many necessary steps to including the voices of women experiencing poverty to global political platforms. Participation means working with people in poverty, not as passive receivers of aid, but as active contributors and partners in solution-building. When people living in poverty can participate meaningfully in research and programming, the knowledge created contributes towards more effective policy design at national and international levels and ultimately towards the eradication of poverty.

ATD Fourth World also offers opportunities for participation in the workforce, by giving a decent wage and work to women living in extreme poverty. Through programs such as Working and Learning Together (WLT), ATD Fourth World seeks to fight back against the invisibilisation of poor women’s labour by recognizing the value created by those outside of the traditional labour force. WLT promotes alternative work experiences and training that allow people affected by extreme poverty to generate new economic resources and reestablish social engagement. Working to make the economy more inclusive for women living in poverty is a necessary path to a sustainable future.

Recommendations

In light of the aforementioned, ATD Fourth World calls on Member States to:

Uphold their commitments to and fully implement the Sustainable Development Goals, noting particularly that Goal 1 - No Poverty - and Goal 5 - Gender equality - go hand in hand and are mutually reinforcing.

Eradicate extreme poverty by looking beyond income and exploring integrated approaches to ensuring the indivisible rights to education, healthcare, housing, decent work, and livelihood, and recognizing the contributions of people living in poverty. It also entails challenging social and institutional maltreatment.

Implement social protection systems and floors as defined by the ILO Recommendation 202.

Create participatory mechanisms allowing for the meaningful participation of women in decisions making that affect their lives, in particular women in poverty.

Ensure that women's right to information is readily available by giving easy and effective access to information.

Combat the invisibility of women's labour and seek redistribution of household responsibilities.

Strengthen the monitoring of the Agenda 2030 implementation through the inclusion of international labor and human rights standards, and calling on UN Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights and members of treaty bodies including CEDAW, UPR, CRC, and CESCR.
