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Statement submitted by Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 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

Women and girls are dynamic leaders of change, strengthening their communities and protecting the planet. Their full participation in all facets of life is fundamental to the achievement of gender equality, sustainable development and democratic governance. Yet women and girls still face barriers to equal representation in positions of leadership in many fields and at all levels of decision-making. Women and girls worldwide continue to be marginalized from the political sphere due to discriminatory laws, cultural practices, institutional barriers, and disproportionate access to quality education, healthcare, and resources.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action identified “Women in Power and Decision-making” as one of 12 critical areas of concern. It called for measures ensuring women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making, and urged steps to increase women’s ability to participate in leadership. Objective 5.5 of the 2030 Agenda calls on Member States to “Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life,” recognizing that this is vital to the achievement of gender equality and sustainable development. Five years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, and 25 years after Beijing, it is imperative that governments and all stakeholders recommit to these objectives, and accelerate action for their implementation.

Addressing the needs of girls and women is impossible without representation of their interests in top decision-making positions. Evidence shows that an increase in the participation of women in politics affects how their needs are prioritized in policymaking. In addition to advancing gender equality, women in leadership can make a difference to sustainable development benefitting whole societies in the areas of health, education, community wellbeing, poverty reduction, and the protection of Earth. Women’s leadership is empowering and benefits their communities, countries, and the world as a whole.

Closing the gender gap by ensuring women’s right to political participation requires cross-cutting approaches to global, national and local issues and specific actions from key institutions. Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners have been committed to supporting women’s and girls’ leadership from their inception. In the words of our founder Catherine McAuley, “Whatever be the station (women) are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence.” Today, the Mercy Global Action Emerging Leaders Fellowship offers women leadership and skills-based training. This provides them with a foundation to actively participate in policymaking at all levels to achieve systemic change. The program features five components including field immersion in Cambodia, the United States and Ireland; monthly webinars on topics of leadership and justice; online resources; original research projects; and mentorship. The components allow for a deeper understanding of leadership, critical thinking on global issues, and capacity to influence change.

A major global barrier to women’s and girls’ full participation and leadership is sexual and gender-based violence, which often renders them silent. As a result, they are unable to participate fully in society, have influence, and to advocate for human and Earth rights. Addressing patriarchal structures, masculine stereotypes of power, discriminatory practices, and threats and acts of violence against women and girls is an important step towards building an enabling environment for equitable and meaningful participation. Part of the solution includes engaging boys and men in promoting and supporting girls and women as leaders and decision makers, and holding accountable those who obstruct women’s and girls’ abilities to engage in leadership roles.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed widespread and deeply-rooted injustice, especially towards women and girls. While this existed long before this global public health crisis, it has been further exacerbated. The socio-economic crisis that has accompanied the spread of the virus has had wide-reaching and devastating effects. The new report “Hope in a Time of Pandemic: Reflecting on COVID-19 through a Mercy Lens” contains stories and experiences of the impacts of the pandemic, including an increase in gender-based violence in many countries.

COVID-19 and lockdowns risk increasing the rate of gender-based violence and make quarantine more painful and deadly for some women and girls than the virus itself. As a direct result of quarantine rules, agencies around the world have reported a 30 per cent increase on average in calls to domestic violence hotlines. Perpetrators of violence often take advantage of situations where women and girls are isolated or separated from the community and/or the extended family. The “stay at home” orders increase the risk of violence to women and girls, especially those who are isolated with their abusers, or lack access to support systems, medical care, justice and shelters. Services for women and girls experiencing gender-based violence are imperative. Governments, therefore, must recognize these services as essential and keep them operational during the pandemic.

Education and safety were at the heart of Catherine McAuley’s concern for women seeking shelter at the first House of Mercy. The women she encountered struggled to find safe employment where they would be free from sexual abuse. Before Catherine opened the House of Mercy, she found herself unable to help a woman in need and was deeply troubled by the lack of safe spaces for women. This experience roots Mercy’s call to serve women and girls in vulnerable situations.

Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners are continuing this legacy, working to address protection gaps during the COVID-19 pandemic. A Mercy Partner in Australia who is a psychologist based at McAuley House shared that her counselling sessions have been crucial in addressing underlying trauma; 80 per cent of women living there have mental health issues, and more than 40 per cent have experienced childhood or sexual abuse. These vital sessions have continued online, keeping the connection going and ensuring those who are now living in the community are less alone.

Women and girls who are experiencing marginalization, isolation and financial hardship are often at greater risk of human trafficking. Loss of employment, increased poverty and socio-economic stress, lockdowns and travel restrictions, a lack of access to social protection, and a rise in online interactions leave them more vulnerable to being coerced by traffickers. Girls are no longer being monitored in educational settings where daily interactions with trusted teachers and other workers takes place. This leaves them especially vulnerable to exploitation and enables traffickers to offend with impunity. We call for more collaboration and conversation about these increasingly hidden realities.

A representative of Ireland’s Mercy Efforts for Child Protection Against Trafficking with the Hospitality Sector states that they have been particularly conscious of the girls who find themselves in environments of abuse and who lack any access to social supports and services because of lockdown measures and school closures. Policymakers must be mindful that border closures and lockdowns do not impede child trafficking and that any girl “moved as little as one, two, three feet for the purpose of exploitation is a victim of trafficking.” Governments and communities must be vigilant to the realities of exploitation and respond with measures for prevention, prosecution and protection.

Girls experience specific abuses at the intersection of gender and age that have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The growing risk of violence and sexual exploitation combined with increased poverty and food and economic insecurity has

led to an increase in school dropouts, child labor and child marriage. This strips them of their childhood and rights to health, education and freedom. Independent UN Human Rights experts have called on States to safeguard the well-being of children and increase child protection measures during the pandemic. There is no doubt the pandemic has made existing gender inequalities worse and risks reversing hard-won progress made over the last few decades. We cannot, and must not, let things regress even further.

Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners continue to raise awareness of issues of violence, abuse, gender-based violence and human trafficking especially during the pandemic. We strive to eliminate these issues by addressing the lack of prevention, access to essential services and other social protections. We seek to empower women and girls and to strengthen their capacities to claim their rights. Girls must have a seat at any decision-making table that involves their rights so they can design the future they choose. Through individual, local, national and global mobilization, we can challenge harmful gender narratives that justify violence against women and stigmatize survivors. Like Catherine McAuley, we will continue to work with women and girls to form a just and inclusive world.
