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Statement submitted by Ilitha Labantu, 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

“As long as women are bound by poverty and as long as they are looked down upon, human rights will lack substance. As long as outmoded ways of thinking prevent women from making a meaningful contribution to society, progress will be slow. As long as the nation refuses to acknowledge the equal role of more than half of itself, it is doomed to failure.” Nelson Mandela

Ilitha Labantu joins the concerned voices regarding the lack of commitment and involvement of women and women organizations in the agreement and commitments of the sustainable goals; as well as the time line for the global goal 5 to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. Ilitha Labantu believes that if the Post-2015 Development Agenda is to be truly transformative, it must transform the lives of women and girls as well as the structures that perpetuate gender based discrimination, and enable them to reach their full potential, particularly those living under the poverty line. In order to fully achieve gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls and the fulfilment of their human rights, we must engage all, including men and boys, to end discrimination, violence and stereotypes, and eliminate injustices as well as ensure that all legal, social and economic barriers to women and girls’ empowerment be removed.

Since 1995 and the adoption of gender mainstreaming as a critical strategy for achieving gender equality, intergovernmental bodies — such as the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Commission on the Status of Women — have worked to mainstream gender perspectives as an integral part of all policy areas. It is increasingly recognized at policy level that achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women is critical for the achievement of all other development goals, and thus cuts across, or is essential for, progress on all other issues and sectors. The establishment of gender mainstreaming as a critical strategy in the Platform for Action in 1995 was an important breakthrough as it required attention to gender equality and empowerment of women in all sectors.

Goal 5 has a strong potential to transform unequal power relations between women and men and address structural barriers impeding progress in this area. It can only do this if it is successfully and fully implemented. This is one of the issues that hindered the impact of the Millennium Development Goals and therefore, the United Nations should be focused on ensuring successful implementation for the Sustainable Development Goals across the board, and we are pleased that the agency recognized the importance of this, clearly reflected in Goal 17, which is devoted explicitly to strengthening implementation to achieve the goals.

South Africa is amongst the United Nations States that did not achieve these goals within the timeframe established in 2000; and what is more grievous is that South Africa has rated worst when coming to other developing states in Africa. We feel that lack of coordinated response delayed and hampered full implementation of strategies, mechanism and policies to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Ilitha Labantu recognizes the fact that gender bias and discrimination against women is still a powerful negative force in significant percentages in South Africa and the world over. South Africa, along with many other countries, has made substantial strides in gender equity, but the battle for empowering women continues, particularly because violence against women is a daily occurrence, despite the fact

that female influence, hard work and perseverance provide the bedrocks of family structure and success.

Ilitha Labantu believes that the issues of maternal health is severe and needs urgent attention. There is less mention of sexual health and reproductive health rights in the sustainable development goals; and thus leading to seldom attention to ensure women access rights to choosing their sexual health and reproduction. This then increases women's chances of contracting terminal illness and increases high rates of HIV and AIDS; as well as unwanted and unplanned pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy needs attention, as it hampers chances for girl's empowerment and leads to early pregnancies with a high risk of complications — and deaths; and increases rates of maternal health and child mortality.

Young people all over the world, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-persons and persons with disabilities, need comprehensive education to learn about their own sexuality. We need to address the increase of corrective rape and femicide that are influenced by misunderstandings of sexuality and gender. We also need to start having conversations and debates about the right to terminate unwanted pregnancy; and address the stereotypes that increases illegal and unsafe abortions.

Ilitha Labantu warns the exclusion of women and violence against women as priority goals and target indicator- will hamper the achievement for sustainable development. We greatly emphasise that Women and girls in South Africa and all over the world suffer from prevalent and serious human rights violations; particularly with an increase of violation on women and children's rights. Women continue to be under-represented and discriminated against mainly in the economic and political spheres. It is more important than ever to stand fully behind the principle of universal human rights. We call upon all states and leaderships to speak up for girls' and women's human rights every day, to fully contribute towards women's empowerment initiatives and programs.

We feel that neither religion — nor cultural traditions — should be used as excuses for denying girls and women their empowerment and development. We feel that Violence against women and girls is a global challenge, and that exposure to domestic and sexual violence hampers and narrows chances for women empowerment and development.

To stop violence against women and girls means ending harmful traditional practices, such as early and forced marriages, financial and assets control by males, demolition of land ownership laws promoted by cultural customs, prevention of widows to participate in society activities after the death of their husband and many other related practices that favour male empowerment at the expense of women.

To ensure that women and girls are protected from all forms of discrimination and have full access to opportunities for economic empowerment, South Africa must: “In the words of our Struggle Hero OR Tambo Women's Transformation should be everyone's business”

- Review policies and legislations to enhance the promotion of women's rights and make space for ensuring women's full participation in the implementation of the sustainable development agenda

- Guarantee that violence against women and girls in all its forms, including intimate partner violence, traditional and cultural harmful practices, sexual violence, early child forced marriages, rape, gang rape, femicide and gender violence as a control mechanism are addressed in a nationally coordinated manner that promotes constant documentation, prevention and ultimately ending of these ills
- Ensure full access to quality education for women and girls; and ensure that mechanisms for retention of girls in high school and tertiary levels are put in place
- Promote and provide direct and long- term access to funding to community women organizations and civil society organizations to enhance support for women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development
- Ensure women's equal access to full and productive employment and decent work, and equal pay for work of equal value that will lead to changing the workplace culture that is still predominantly male-centric, with total wage distribution still heavily skewed in favour of men.
- Identify and adopt mechanisms to empower women in addressing challenges faced when establishing, strengthening and sustaining their enterprises through the use of enabling technologies and Information and communications technology to promote women's empowerment
- Ensure women's equal rights to economic resources and health services, as well as access to ownership and control over land; and ensure gender disaggregated data is available and gender responsive budgeting is in place.

Ilitha Labantu is a Non-Profit Organization social service organization that was granted an Economic and Social Council Status. The organization has been providing services and assistance to women and children for the past 26 years, the organization was established in 1989 during the apartheid era, and to date Ilitha Labantu continues to provide professional counselling support and legal services to women in disadvantaged townships in a language that they understand. Ilitha Labantu has four departments: Clinical Department; Policy, Lobbying and Advocacy Department; Community Outreach, Education and Training Department; Building Bridges and the Comprehensive Food Security and Nutrition Program.