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Statement submitted by Alliance Defending Freedom, Centro de Estudio y Formacion Integral de la Mujer, Misión Mujer, Mujer para la Mujer, Observatorio Regional para la Mujer de América Latina y el Caribe and Vida y Familia de Guadalajara, non-governmental organizations 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

Authentic Women's Empowerment and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The Alliance is a not-for-profit international legal alliance of more than 2,400 lawyers dedicated to the protection of fundamental human rights. It has been involved in over 500 cases before national and international forums, including the Supreme Courts of the United States, Argentina, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, India and the Inter American Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. It has accreditation with the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations, as well as the Organization of American States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Union (the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the European Parliament). This statement is endorsed by: Misión Mujer, Centro de Estudio y Formación Integral de la Mujer, Observatorio Regional para la Mujer de América Latina y el Caribe, Mujer para la Mujer, Red Mujeres, Justicia y Paz A.C., and Vida y Familia de Guadalajara.

We call on Member States to prioritize the immutable human rights of women in all areas of sustainable development. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we welcome the priority theme as an opportunity to hold Member States and civil society accountable to what it truly means to empower women in the context of this new development agenda. Empowering women is a crucial prerequisite for lasting development, and has multiplicative benefits for all of society.

We commend the role that the Commission on the Status of Women has played over the last sixty years in contributing to significant progress in the achievement of women's empowerment, but note with concern that the Commission increasingly has placed an inordinate emphasis on contentious issues, instead of focusing on a holistic understanding of women's empowerment. Such a reductionist approach to what women need brings to the fore issues that do not enjoy consensual support and have the potential to violate the cultural, religious and ethical values of Member States, in addition to their sovereign laws. Controversial agendas detrimentally impact the process, and take the focus away from the urgent objective of the Commission on the Status of Women — improving the lives of women around the world. We call on Member States to avoid advancing divisive references in the negotiation of the Agreed Conclusions, and to concentrate on the essential and universally-agreed prerequisites for women's empowerment.

First and foremost, women must have access to good nutrition, clean water and safe homes. Furthermore, women need high-quality and accessible education and healthcare, in addition to authentic economic and political equality. If these basic requirements are not met, empowerment remains an illusory goal. The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will only be possible if we turn our full attention to meeting all of these fundamental needs for every woman in the world. We would like to call attention to several serious obstacles to women's empowerment, including the persistent problem of high maternal mortality and the egregious human rights violation of sex-selective abortion.

Maternal mortality remains alarmingly high in many countries. Every mother's death is a tragedy. It devastates the woman's family, in particular the woman's

children, and affects the entire community socially and economically. A universal commitment to ending maternal deaths is imperative if we are to meet Target 3.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Almost all maternal deaths are preventable, particularly when skilled birth attendants are present to manage complications and the necessary medications are available. To improve maternal health, women must have access to high-quality medical care. This is a fundamental human right that warrants our urgent attention.

The high adolescent birth rate in many countries is a significant contributing factor to maternal deaths. Early sexual activity is a serious problem that leads to devastating health implications and severely undermines the well-being of youth. Education on responsible sexual behaviour in conjunction with parental guidance, in addition to guidance from community and religious leaders, is of vital importance. Moreover, governments must introduce measures to reduce recourse to abortion, in line with paragraph 8.25 of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action. Governments should focus their efforts on reducing the root causes that lead women to turn to abortion, namely poverty, domestic violence, early sexual activity, and lack of education and employment. Measures to reduce abortion require improving access to education, which directly empowers women, facilitates healthy decision-making, and ultimately leads to social and economic development.

We urge governments to resist calls to liberalize laws that protect life under the pretext that rendering abortion “safe” will improve the health of mothers. Abortion can never be safe because it takes the life of the unborn child, and harms the mother through the loss of her child. Abortion advocates claim that eliminating restrictions on abortion decreases the abortion rate and improves maternal health; however, a major study published by the British Medical Journal in 2015 has concluded that “less permissive” abortion laws result in “consistently lower maternal mortality rates.” Although the study explains these differences in terms of other independent factors rather than in terms of abortion legislation itself, it nevertheless concludes, “No statistically independent effect was observed for abortion legislation, constitutional amendment or other covariates.” The study demonstrates that abortion need not be legalized to improve maternal health. In accordance with international law, governments have the prerogative to maintain laws that protect human life, and have a corresponding obligation to focus on improving maternal health.

It must be recognized that women will only be able to partake in the enjoyment of their rights if they are first given the opportunity to enter this world. Sex-selective abortion is the epitome of violence against women, and there exists evidence that this discriminatory practice occurs worldwide. In several countries where abortion has been legalized, the practice of prenatal sex selection has resulted in a historically unprecedented and imbalanced ratio of men to women. We call on Member States at the 60th Session of the Commission to give increased attention to understanding and ending the problem of sex-selective abortions.

According to estimates by the United Nations, hundreds of millions of women and girls are demographically missing from certain countries. The selective destruction of girl children on this massive scale promulgates the notion that men are more valuable than women. Evidence shows that epidemic levels of sex-selective abortion lead to increased violence, especially against women. In areas

characterized by an artificially skewed sex ratio, sex trafficking is abnormally prevalent. Women in such regions face more physical abuse and a higher degree of control. Some scholars have even argued that the disproportionate ratio of men to women plays a crucial role in making violence more prevalent in society generally. Indeed, over the past few decades, as the ratio of male to female births has risen in some communities, the crime rate has almost doubled.

The practice of sex-selective abortion has troubling political and economic ramifications. When there are fewer women in society, there are necessarily fewer female voices to contribute to political deliberation. Artificially skewed sex ratios have the potential to contribute to long-term economic downturns, given that so many countries are facing troubling declines in birth rates — a trend that leads to aging populations and depleted work forces. We ask Member States to work with families, educators, and those in positions of cultural influence to develop initiatives for studying and altering the preference for male children. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, we call on Member States to enact laws that protect the fundamental right to life of the unborn. The idea of abortion as a development solution is antithetical to the global welfare of women and to authentic sustainable development.

We celebrate the progress that has been made over the last sixty years in securing the rights of women, and look forward to accelerated progress through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We call on Member States at the 60th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women to focus on combatting the myriad obstacles to women's empowerment, with a specific focus on ending maternal deaths and sex-selective abortion. We cannot meet the ambitious objectives outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals without ensuring the most fundamental rights of women.
