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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Women in Europe for a Common Future, 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.



Statement

The priority theme for the session in 2013 will be “The elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls”.

In the report of the Expert Group Meeting on Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls held on September 2012, experts noted evidence that violence against women and girls had intensified and become exacerbated in situations of socioeconomic stress, conflict and other crisis situations. In addition, they noted that the impact of economic crises, global warming and associated rising sea levels and severe weather events, as well as environmental degradation and resource depletion, could all contribute to conditions of social and economic vulnerability, including homelessness and mass migrations. They could also lead to disaster or crisis situations in which violence against women and girls was known to increase.

The argument of violence against women and girls being exacerbated and intensified by inequitable and unsustainable economic activities is commonly known; however, Women in Europe for a Common Future wants to highlight the fact that environmental degradation itself can amount to violence against women and girls as it can have extreme impacts on their living conditions, destroy the basis of their livelihoods and lead to irreversible damage to their health.

The issues set out below are of concern.

Mining

Mining and most other extractive industry activities destroy livelihoods and the environment. In particular, uranium mining has brought great injustice to indigenous peoples on whose territories the uranium is mostly mined and whose lands have become uninhabitable because of long-term radioactive pollution. Asbestos mining brings deadly diseases not only to workers but to their entire families. Uranium, mercury, gold and copper mining have polluted drinking water with radioactive and toxic pollutants and irreversibly destroyed forest and pastures, leading to devastating effects on people’s livelihoods and health. In most communities that suffer the negative effects of mining, women carry the burden of looking after the family members and children who are ill or who are born with birth defects due to the mining activities. Another well-researched phenomenon of mining activities is that mines promote prostitution. There are a great number of cases of violence against women, including death, as a result of extractive industries.

Women in Europe for a Common Future therefore calls upon Governments to:

Develop a United Nations framework for sustainable mining, which should include high standards as well as an international compliance tribunal/ mechanism that requires mining companies to take full responsibility for environmental liabilities (including the waste) and the health of workers and the neighbouring communities both during and after mining activities, including specific gender-sensitive measures. The existing contracts that mining companies have with countries and that are based on abusive practices should become invalid. Extractive industry taxes of at least 50 per cent should be set as a norm for already operating mining activities and new mining investments and a share should go into a global

fund for clean-up of the destruction caused by already abandoned and closed mining sites.

Chemicals

Women's health is affected differently by harmful chemicals. For example, specific hormone-disrupting chemicals are related to increased breast cancer risk and exposure to asbestos is related to increased risk of ovary cancer. Harmful chemicals and nano-materials not only affect women but also affect the developing child during pregnancy or breastfeeding.

We call upon Governments to apply the precautionary principle in chemical policies, when there is uncertainty about possible harm, and in order to ensure that women and children are protected, by reversing the burden of proof and applying the "no data, no market", the "right to know" and the "polluter pays" principles.

It is unacceptable that the worst pesticides, which have long been forbidden for use in North America and Europe, continue to be exported to countries in the South, where often women are employed as pesticide sprayers.

The United Nations Environment Programme publication, *Global Chemicals Outlook: Towards Sound Management of Chemicals*, issued in September 2012, estimated that 900,000 people die annually from the immediate results of exposure to harmful pesticides and chemicals, and that 2 million people fall ill each year.

Women in Europe for a Common Future calls upon Governments to:

(a) Ban, financed by a global tax of 0.1 per cent on the turnover of the global chemical industry, worst pesticides globally and immediately give support to women victims of exposure to hazardous chemicals;

(b) Promote global application of the precautionary principle in chemicals policy, by safely substituting and phasing out substances of very high concern that should no longer be allowed for widespread use in consumer products or as pesticides until their safety has been proven and global guidelines and regulations established. This applies particularly to substances suspected to be:

- (i) Disruptive to hormones;
- (ii) Reprotoxic, mutagenic or carcinogenic;
- (iii) Bio-accumulative and persistent;
- (iv) Highly bio-accumulative and persistent;
- (v) Neurotoxic or allergenic;

(c) Promote awareness-raising and support for women in the global South regarding the link between exposure to harmful chemicals and negative health effects on women; means for reducing exposure; information for women about labour rights on protection from such chemicals; and juridical support for women to enable them to protect and claim their rights.

Climate change

Natural disasters, such as floods, can destroy established water systems. In particular for communities relying on unimproved water and sanitation sources,

climate change leads to water contamination which often results in the spread of water-related illnesses, such as diarrhea-related illnesses. In addition, water scarcity can cause severe illnesses, including malnutrition. This puts women's health at risk, in particular pregnant women and girls, and puts more stress on women as caretakers since the lack of water has an effect on the ability to secure livelihoods, including food security. For women, in particular rural women, who are more dependent on natural resources, these effects are more detrimental. The effects have a particular impact on the growing number of female-headed households. Unequal access to resources and to decision-making processes can even magnify these adverse effects.

Women in Europe for a Common Future therefore calls upon Governments to:

- (a) Work towards a fair climate agreement at the United Nations that incorporates gender concerns;
- (b) Improve the understanding of gender and climate change and raise awareness of these issues;
- (c) Empower women economically, building their capacity for income-generation in the area of renewable energy supplies and climate resilience activities (including agriculture and wetlands);
- (d) Promote the rights of women to access resources, land and services;
- (e) Implement the right to access information, public participation in decision-making processes and justice for women;
- (f) Guarantee girls' and women's rights to climate change education and training.
