



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
31 December 2014

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-ninth session

9-20 March 2015

**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”**

Statement submitted by Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, 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

The Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund supports women-led grassroots projects around the world. These projects help improve the lives of women and girls by placing resources in the hands of local women leaders. Our funding model is based on the understanding that these leaders have the expertise to identify priority issues and create lasting solutions to important problems. Over the past 45 years, this model has proven its capacity and impact. Over 90 per cent of our 475 funded projects have made significant progress towards improved outcomes for women and girls in their communities, reaching more than 215,000 women and girls and over 324,000 people overall.

The perspectives of grassroots women leaders are critical to the establishment and implementation of sustainable development goals and deliverables for achieving global gender equality, yet these voices are rarely heard at the United Nations. To serve as a conduit for these voices, we have conducted a survey among nearly 40 of our Project Directors across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the Pacific and Latin America. As a non-governmental organization with special consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council, the Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund submits these urgent recommendations and priorities on behalf of these women through this statement to the 59th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Through the survey, local women leaders have identified three main issues, out of the twelve critical areas of concern from the Beijing Platform for Action, which in their opinions as women leaders working for and with women and girls, are essential to address in order for the global community to make significant progress on gender equality. All the quotes in this document are verbatim from local women leaders. Below are strategic recommendations, urged by local women leaders through the Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund.

Women and poverty

The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women and girls was identified as the most critical area for improvement by a majority of Project Directors surveyed. Women leaders insist that “women’s work is critical to the survival and security of poor households and form an important route through which households escape poverty. Moreover, paid employment is critical to women’s empowerment. In settings where women’s mobility is restricted, increased employment opportunities can improve women’s mobility and enable women to seek and access reproductive health care.” They stress that change in this area requires the following:

- The creation of “policy and program actions that will improve women’s access to secure livelihoods and economic resources.”
- The “adoption of appropriate measures to improve women’s ability to earn income beyond traditional occupations, achieve economic self-reliance, and ensure women’s equal access to the labour market and social security systems.”

- “Women, especially rural women and girls, need to be assisted to position themselves around emerging opportunities for economic empowerment. This can be done through capacity building and empowerment, especially around their daily livelihoods.”

Education and training of women

Inequalities, inadequacies and unequal access to education and training was the second most critical area of concern for women working at the community level. Respondents agreed that, “Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate in the development process.” In order to reach this goal, local, national and international leaders must:

- Establish “mechanisms and strategies to empower women and girls through education and training, which will put them in a better position, and power to participate in advocacy and decision making in their society, thereby influencing policies and laws that affect their health, economy and environment.”
- “Support training and capacity building for women through women’s rights organizations to enhance their understanding of policy issues at local, national, and international levels.”
- “Support initiatives to create a safe and enabling environment for the girl child to realize her rights to education.”

Women in power and decision-making

Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels was identified as the third most important topic area to the local women leaders we consulted. It is imperative to focus on “strengthening women’s institutions to participate in decision-making processes that influence resource allocation and utilization of resources in their respective nations.” Women must be provided with opportunities, skill and capacity building training to influence the decisions of authorities as well as to access positions with decision-making power. Stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, and international organizations, “need to advocate for policies that provide for women’s participation, cooperation, and decision-making in various development sectors.” Women and girls are to be considered “instrumental in the development process” and must be “involved in all development programs being designed.”

In addition to the above recommendations, the Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund’s grantees are also insisting that the United Nations put more emphasis on supporting programs that are designed and implemented by women at the grassroots level, especially women-led organizations and associations. These local women leaders are the most aware of women’s and girls’ issues and can uniquely catalyse and motivate local women and girls around the world to improve their own lives.

In the words of a grassroots woman leader, unless women are given equal opportunities and resources, “peace will continue to be far away from our world. Our world will be like a head without a neck and backbone to carry it.”

Local women’s voices are usually absent at high level meetings, however the issues need to be addressed by the women most affected by them in their daily lives. As the review of the Beijing Platform for Action’s critical areas of concern take place at the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, we call on all Member States to ensure that these three issues, brought forth from our grantees, be brought to the conversation in order to develop a Post-2015 development agenda that creates meaningful change, through full gender equality and women’s empowerment.
