



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by Mother’s Union, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

It is important to link the empowerment of women to the new sustainable development agenda more comprehensively than it was to the Millennium Development Goals. However, the new agenda does little to challenge the structural causes of inequality; but rather stays broadly within the boundaries of the current global hegemony. The Sustainable Development Goals should be treated as one framework amongst a number that address gender equality, otherwise there is a danger of settling for an unambitious agenda for change.

Mothers' Union is a Christian, grassroots non-governmental organisation working through four million members in 83 countries to support family life and promote flourishing relationships. Mothers' Union members across the world have identified the key barriers to women's empowerment in their communities as: (1) inequality of power between women and men, and women's lack of agency; (2) all forms of violence and abuse against women and girls; and (3) the unequal innate, social and economic value given to women and girls and the roles they typically carry out, especially unpaid caring and domestic responsibilities.

While women and girls in different nations experience these issues at different levels, our members in the Global North and in the Global South encounter all of these issues to varying degrees in their communities. In order to change these outcomes, all governments need to commit to a number of actions.

First, governments should end discrimination against women and girls within legal systems, including customary law. Without equality under law, there can be no genuine empowerment of women. Governments should ensure that national laws confer upon women, without reservation, the equal right of access to:

- (a) Freedom
- (b) Economic resources such as land, property ownership, inheritance and pay
- (c) Suffrage and other political participation
- (d) Justice

As well as providing protection of these rights, governments should also work with a wide range of stakeholders to proactively ensure women can access these rights in practice; and continually work to remove barriers to accessing these fundamental rights.

Second, governments should work to prevent and end all forms of violence against women and girls. This should include:

- (a) The rejection of norms, attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender-based violence and gender inequality, through awareness-raising and education of girls and boys, women and men; particularly focussing on the importance of developing mutually respectful relationships.
- (b) Provision for victims and survivors of gender-based violence; including the provision and/or funding of support and assistance programmes; provision of information on accessing support and justice; and sensitisation and training on gender-based violence for all involved in law enforcement and justice.

(c) Enforceable legal frameworks; including legislation outlawing all forms of violence against women and girls in the private and public spheres, including harmful traditional and customary practices; punishment and rehabilitation of perpetrators; and safe and fair access to justice.

Third, governments should implement policies that support families in providing unpaid care and nurture, for children, those with disabilities and older people. Mechanisms such as parental leave and pay, flexible working, equal pay and various forms of social protection can help facilitate the equal sharing of care responsibilities; however governments should also work with civil society to raise the esteem of unpaid care so that it is valued not only in economic terms but also in social terms.

As a global framework and motivating force, the new sustainable development agenda offers the opportunity to address some of these recommendations. Mothers' Union welcomes the standalone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as the mainstreaming of gender equality targets throughout the Sustainable Development Goals.

However, the indicators of success on unpaid and domestic work (5.4) and access to economic resources (5.a) are lacking, given their caveats "as nationally appropriate" and "in accordance with national laws", respectively. These are the only indicators across the Sustainable Development Goals using such language, which demonstrates a lack of political will to seriously challenge national laws, and by association norms and customs, that perpetuate gender inequalities. These indicators also contradict indicators 5.1, to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere, and 5.c, to enforce legislation for the promotion of gender equality. Altogether, this undermines the earlier commitment of the post-2015 development process to "leave no one behind".

On the whole, the new development agenda fails to tackle structural inequalities, neither tackling a global economic system that continually fails to alleviate absolute poverty, or, specifically relating to women and girls, tackling the way in which gender equality and women's empowerment is treated as a risk management issue. For instance, the well-intentioned indicators of providing women access to safe transport (11.2) and safe public spaces (11.7) fail to address the underpinning cause of unsafe environments — largely the threat of gender-based violence. Instead, this goal needs to challenge the roots of gender-based violence i.e. social norms rather than accepting it as inevitable and solely making provision for dealing with the consequences.

However, there is much worthwhile work to be achieved through the Sustainable Development Goals; and in order to ensure they are successful in furthering sustainable development as well as the empowerment of women, governments, international institutions, civil society, non-governmental organisations, faith groups, the private sector and others should work to:

(a) Accept the agenda as a truly global one and acknowledge structural inequalities between the Global North and Global South that need to be addressed.

(b) Mainstream the Sustainable Development Goals into national policies and law and secure political commitment.

(c) Raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals through formal and informal education, the media, community-based activities and other available avenues.

(d) Encourage and create opportunities for active consultation on and participation in the agenda, at the local, national and global levels.

(e) Create and maintain a transparent system of mapping issues, setting national targets, funding and monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ultimately, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires a global shift in norms and steadfast commitment to ending inequalities, even where that requires sacrifices. As one Mothers' Union Community Development Coordinator commented, "You can give people as much information as you like but something inside 'the body' needs to stir in order to mobilise people to make a difference".

Finally, Mothers' Union urges caution in overemphasising the role of the Sustainable Development Goals in furthering the empowerment of women and girls, given the aforementioned limitations. There are other, more robust international agreements on gender equality covering a more comprehensive agenda, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action; but which have not yet been fully implemented across the world.

The Sustainable Development Goals should be treated as one instrument amongst several in furthering gender equality and the empowerment of women; but must not by any means supersede the others — otherwise there is a risk of regressing on progress that has been made thus far.

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