



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Sixty-first session

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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 Salesian Missions, 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**

As international faith-based organizations of the Christian tradition, we consider gender equality a necessary and central component of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We are especially concerned with refugee girls and women. We commend the inclusion of refugee girls and women in the Commission on the Status of Women's contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and support the continued strengthening of the world community's efforts to ensure the safety and dignity of girls and women, as well as the empowerment of women regardless of their location. We support the continued efforts of the world community to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals — notably 5, 8, and 16 — pertaining to the elimination of violence against women; the eradication of forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking; economic empowerment and equality; and the ending of all forms of violence against children. All efforts must be rooted in the universal right to life, liberty and security of person, as well as international cooperation, systemic change in cultural practices and the implementation of enforceable legislation.

While the initial refugee flows stemming from conflict in the Middle East and parts of Africa were predominately men and boys they have increasingly been populated by women and children. An increasing number of women and children have risked death and injury during the perilous migration on both land and sea. Research has shown that they are especially susceptible to sexual and gender-based violence both during migration and upon reaching their destinations. Women, many of whom have children and are fleeing violence to reunite with spouses or relatives abroad, have reported sexual and gender-based violence as a consequence of harassment, exploitation, trafficking and a pervasive lawlessness on route or in refugee camps. To prevent refugee girls and women from becoming even more disproportionately vulnerable and exploited, the root causes of the current refugee crisis must be addressed.

We reaffirm our common interest in the safety and dignity of refugee girls and women and the importance of their freedom to migrate in search of life free from violence, whether sexual or gender-based. We insist that a sustainable solution to preventing sexual and gender-based violence — along with most other forms of exploitation — is by empowering women and girls through education and employment. It is the responsibility of the world community to invest in the dignity and humanity of refugee girls and women by empowering them with agency over their own futures. Providing fair and decent work for girls and women, either within the refugee camps or the local community, is one way to help prevent sexual violence and ensure safe migration.

### **Assessing the Need of Safety and Dignity of Refugee Girls and Women**

Investing in the protection and empowerment of refugee girls and women is a critical and timely humanitarian issue and could lead to substantial and long-term economic and structural growth of communities.

Research and data related to the sexual and gender-based violence which refugee girls and women are subjugated to and the sustainability benefits of safe and healthy female populations have been noted:

- The World Bank's World Development Report notes that increasing the share of household income controlled by women, either through their own earnings or cash transfers, changes spending in ways that benefit children;
- The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data shows that an increase in female labour force participation results in faster economic growth;
- The OECD found that increasing girls and women's education contributes to higher economic growth;
- A study from the University of Washington (2010) reported that for every additional year of education for women of reproductive age, child mortality decreased by 9.5%;
- Data from the Office of the Secretary-General estimates that nearly 90% of war casualties are civilians, the majority of whom are women and children, compared to a century ago when 90% of those who lost their lives were military personnel;
- A joint field assessment by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Population Fund, and Women's Refugee Commission (2015) found that women were among those particularly at risk to be victims of sexual or physical violence during their migration to and in Europe and required strengthened protection measures. Additionally, there was evidence that women and girls had already been exposed to various forms of sexual and gender-based violence in their country of origin or first asylum;
- The same field assessment found that many women were forced to engage in transactional sex to procure travel documents for their journey. Some women and girls refused to report sexual and gender-based violent crimes or seek medical attention for fear of delaying their pursuit of asylum;
- Data from the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2015) indicates that women living in protracted displacement slightly outnumber men and their hardships worsen over time;
- A Commission on the Status of Women report on gender equality and the empowerment of women in natural disasters (2014) estimates that one in five refugees or displaced women have experienced sexual violence;
- The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2016) reported that refugee girls were prostituted while in Libya. Some of these rape victims were found to be pregnant when they arrived in Europe.
- The International Labour Organization reports (2015) that migrant women have higher forced labour participation rates (72.7%) than non-migrants (63.9%). Almost every sixth domestic worker is an international migrant, and 73.4% are women;
- The majority of refugees from the Middle East are women and children. However, data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2014) indicates that only 4% of projects in United Nations inter-agency appeals targeted women and girls. Only 0.4% of funding

to fragile states went to women's groups or women's ministries from 2012-2013.

As a community of faith, we condemn any and all acts of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly that make it dangerous for refugee girls and women to migrate safely.

Sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls harms them psychologically and stigmatizes them socially, posing long-term threats to communities that would benefit from their economic empowerment. Investing time and resources to ensure refugee girls and women are able to migrate safely and are offered fair and decent work creates stronger, more sustainable, safer, and healthier communities for all.

### **Recommendations**

The prevention of sexual and gender-based violence is guaranteed by international cooperation, legislative directives, and an updated cultural understanding of refugees. Recognizing our common but differentiated responsibilities, we recommend that Member States and Civil Society partner to:

- Include language in legislative and reporting documents that indicate girls and women as an especially vulnerable and therefore protected class on issues of sexual and gender-based violence;
- Open and secure accessible routes that allow women and children to migrate safely, reducing dependency on human smugglers;
- Simplify bureaucratic migration and border enforcement protocols, particularly those inhibiting the hearing of cases and granting of asylum, preventing women and children from spending extended periods of time in camps where they could be subjected to sexual and gender-based violence;
- Educate girls and women currently in refugee camps about the dangers of being trafficked or recruited for prostitution;
- Provide skills training and education in refugee camps for girls and women to prepare themselves for the world of work;
- Assist refugee women with child care so that they will be free to work without fear of their children suffering from neglect or abuse;
- Seek out public/private partnerships with local businesses to offer work for refugee women;
- Analyse the skill sets of refugee women to determine jobs for which they would potentially be suited in the local community;
- Ensure that women have safe and reliable economic opportunity after migrating;
- Eliminate all forms of violence and intimidation against women and girls in society and in the home;
- Ensure refugee access to all necessary medical services, understanding the unique healthcare needs of girls and women;
- Expand public and private organizational support to refugee girls and women;

- Ensure that responsibility for providing for the care and protection of refugee girls and women is more equitably distributed among member states;
  - Work for peace in areas of conflict to prevent the further proliferation of refugees, and reallocate military spending to support social development programs.
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