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Statement submitted by International Federation of Business and Professional Women, 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

Education for girls and women

Women's empowerment and full participation and decision-making in public life as well as gender equality can only be achieved through education. Girls' education is a critical pathway to achieving gender equality. Barriers to girls' education are also barriers to gender equality.

Education transforms lives. Equitable education's unique power has been recognized as a catalyst for wider development goals. Education is a development multiplier but the world still has 132 million girls out of school.

Even in classrooms, many girls face discrimination and violence. Textbooks, teaching methods and school curricula can reflect deep-rooted biases, particularly regarding science and technology. Young girls must be taught that they can become tomorrow's programmers, engineers and leaders in a world deeply transformed by the digital revolution. With the COVID19 pandemic, technology is key and girls and women must be digitally empowered with the relevant skills to become full digital citizens, participate fully in public life and make decisions.

Education empowers girls and women to overcome discrimination and stereotypes. Educated girls and young women have a greater awareness of their rights, and greater confidence and freedom to make life-affirming decisions, improve their own and their children's health and survival, and enhance work prospects.

Education enhances job opportunities. By benefiting women specifically, education and lifelong learning can narrow gender gaps in work opportunities and pay.

Women in politics

Female leadership has been most successful in limiting the number of cases of COVID19 as demonstrated by President Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand and Prime Minister Sanna Marin in Finland. The ability to listen to different perspectives, excellent communication skills, a participatory, collaborative style of leadership and empirical decision-making are hallmarks of female leadership. Yet out of 194 countries only 10 per cent are led by women. Women's leadership is also particularly important in solving crises such as pandemics and climate change which cause disruption in social protection such as in health, education, food, water, housing and immigration, issues that women experience in their communities.

To increase women's participation in government there needs to be outreach and training offered to grassroots women by women leaders to encourage them to run for office. An effective example of this was in the US 2018 election for the House of Representatives. Women's organizations recruited and trained younger women to stand for election. Similarly, in Switzerland in 2018 when the female umbrella organization «Alliance F» started to collaborate with the female groups of the parties and encouraged women with the slogan "Helvetia calls" to run for office. Over 500 women participated in Congress elections in 2019, most of them had never been party members. Today, the House of Representatives has 42 per cent women. The alliance continues with its efforts in cantonal parliament and government elections. These efforts were enhanced by a peaceful women's strike on June 14, 2019, in which over 500,000 women participated.

Women in management

Before the pandemic, globally, the share of women in senior management was improving. According to Catalyst, in 2019, the proportion of women in senior management roles globally increased to 29 per cent, the highest number ever recorded. 87 per cent of global mid-market companies have at least one woman in a senior management role in 2020. However, there are still fewer women higher up the corporate ladder. A 2020 Mercer study shows a leaky pipeline for women in leadership: Executives: 23 per cent; Senior managers: 29 per cent; Managers: 37 per cent; Professionals: 42 per cent; and Support staff: 47 per cent. Women currently hold 32 (6.4 per cent) of CEO positions at S&P 500 companies. However, COVID19 has disproportionately negatively affected women, particularly working mothers as school and childcare support have been upended. A leading consulting firm, McKinsey finds that six years of progress could be erased.

Women play a huge role in leadership of the arts, as heads of our cultural organizations and museums – i.e., as directors and executive directors as well as board chairs of these organizations, across all sectors – performing arts organizations, museums, universities, non-profits focused on the arts, etc. Over the last several decades, but especially in the last twenty years, women in the arts world have been preparing to lead our institutions into new directions through collaboration, innovative thinking, cultural diplomacy, active listening, stewardship and understanding of our global interdependence.

In the past, women and men left their companies at comparable rates. Due to care-giving challenges of COVID19, more women than men are considering leaving the workforce. If so, there will be fewer women in the pipeline for leadership with profound effects. Corporate performance can be approximately 50 percent higher when women are well represented at the top. Senior women positively impact a company's culture as they embrace employee-friendly policies and champion diversity and inclusion. The choices companies and governments make now will impact on gender equality for decades to come.

Women on Boards

Good boards and governance lead to optimised financial returns and long-term value. And, a key component of board quality is diversity, including ethnicity and diversity of business/life experiences.

However, regarding gender diversity, 2018 data from Corporate Women Directors International shows that women hold just 16.7 per cent of public company board seats globally. Northern and Western Europe are leading, with averages of 36.3 per cent and 26.7 per cent respectively, followed by the US and Canada with 20.9 per cent and Eastern Europe with 15.5 per cent. These are followed by Africa at 14.4 per cent, Asia Pacific at 12.8 per cent, Latin America at 7.4 per cent, and the Middle East at 0.9 per cent. These variances are largely the result of quotas established by some countries in recent years. Countries without quotas (including the US) generally fall to the bottom of the rankings.

Therefore, there is some distance to go to get parity in this arena. Statements that there are not enough qualified women to fill the seats are certainly not true. We need only take up the mantle to look, and to continue to provide leadership opportunities to women in the pipeline. There are several organizations working to achieve this result but without quotas. The driving force will be the commitment from the currently incumbent Chairpersons/CEO, and board members.

Migrant Women

Female Migrants, Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Climate Refugees (migrants) carry a disproportionate level of stigma, facing worse challenges than their male counterparts. Those fleeing from violence, slavery, or loss of social acceptance through abandonment, rejection or widowhood (especially resulting from COVID19) often do not have the education and language skills needed to complete paperwork and interviews required for initial entry into a destination country. In addition to barriers from bureaucracy, they are expected to endure violence, physical attacks and short rations when accepted into camps. Camp settlements are not built to protect lone women from physical attacks by other camp members. Separate stakeholder engagement activities are critical for women of all ages, whether alone or part of a group or family, so that each one can have a voice.

Women and Violence

Sexual violence, anti-Black violence, race-based violence, anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ+ violence – in women's homes, schools, institutions, workplaces and communities have increased during this pandemic. The worse the economic situation, the worse the violence, with little social protection.

The new ILO Convention 190 will protect all women, migrant, domestic or workers in the informal economy against violence and harassment at the workplace.

Women in Conflict Resolution

Women leaders must play a key role in promoting human rights in conflict resolution. Peace negotiations should include the voices of women on both sides to ensure that all agreements include the necessary protections for women. The current outstanding example is Afghanistan. Will the improved access women have gained to education and the labour force be eroded by the Taliban? It is essential that women are guaranteed seats at the table and are heard. Women's equal rights must be enshrined in peace agreements and subsequent legal arrangements. Most importantly, these guarantees must be monitored to ensure that all protection mechanisms are implemented.

Women have been crucially involved in achieving peace in conflicts as remote from one another as Northern Ireland, the Balkans and the Middle East. Their ability to reach across borders and achieve consensus with women on the opposite side is an element of peace-making not to be disregarded. They often play a crucial role in Track II diplomacy, creating opportunities for frank and open discussion that leads to solutions. Although India and Pakistan are often engaged in disputes, women activists from both countries have quietly worked together to promote women's health and protection against violence.

Efforts must be made to ensure that women decision-makers have leadership roles in government, politics, bureaucracy, private sector, law, academia, media and the arts. Women politicians like Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir and Benazir Bhutto inspired women around the world, especially in countries struggling with the threat of war or economic challenges, to seek leadership positions. Perhaps the most powerful woman in the world today is Angela Merkel who has steadfastly upheld one of the most important human rights – the protection of refugees.

At a time when ultra-nationalism has gripped some countries, we must look to women to overcome narrow identity politics and lead the way to the fulfilment of the human rights enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

Recommendations

Ensure that education policies prioritize gender equality, eliminate all barriers to girls' completion of 12 years of free, publicly funded, quality compulsory education, and encourage their participation in Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

Women's organizations and grassroots movements should train and support women to run for political offices, ensuring equal numbers of male and female candidates.

This crisis should be viewed as an opportunity to accelerate investment and policies to support building a more flexible, empathetic workplace.

To help increase the percentage of women on boards; the quota system gives a boost to gender diversity. Government procurement laws which give women-led businesses a certain quota (s. Kenya 30 per cent, South-Africa 40 per cent) or require companies receiving state contracts to have gender parity in management and on the board, support women in decision-making.

One way of monitoring women's progress is to ensure women hold relevant positions in international organizations and are involved in shaping and disseminating appropriate messages, ensuring that women of relevant background and authority are prominent when new messages are formulated and delivered.

Women migrants must be afforded the ability to speak and to manage their immediate lives in a dignified and safe manner. Their voices can impact on changing the current dynamic in camps, settlements, and upon application for status at the destination. Special attention is also needed to assist migrant labour whose jobs have been terminated as a result of COVID19, and who now cannot return home, or can return but without remittance payments.

We urge Member States to ratify the ILO Convention 190 and the Recommendation 206 to protect women at the workplace.

We urge all states in conflict situations and peace negotiations to follow resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council and implement gender parity in peace negotiations.

This statement is supported by:

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International Network of Women Engineers and Scientists

Passionists International

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