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Statement submitted by Settlement Services International Incorporated, 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

This statement has been prepared by the Settlement Services International, a non-governmental organisation with ECOSOC special consultative status since 2017. Settlement Services International has been a close ally of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) and Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), supporting the work of grass roots refugee women across the Asia Pacific region to amplify the voices of refugee women in decision-making processes, for many years.

Since its establishment, Settlement Services International has demonstrated its firm commitment to advancing gender equality, the empowerment of refugee women and girls, and the promotion and protection of their human rights. The organisation is committed to four priority pillars to guide its work on advancing gender equality and women and girls' empowerment at a local, national and international level. By (1) Strengthening women and girls' leadership and participation in decision-making and peace-building; (2) Advancing women's economic empowerment; (3) Improving advocacy and diplomacy; and (4) Promoting the health, wellbeing and safety of refugee women and girls. Noting that the Chief Executive Officer is woman, 65 per cent of leadership team are women, 57 per cent of the board are women including the Chair. Settlement Services International seeks to demonstrate how meaningful participation and women's leadership and empowerment can be realised through collaborative relationships.

The Settlement Services International warmly welcomes the Commission's focus on the full and effective participation of women and girls in decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence; both areas that are of central importance for the nearly 4 million forcibly displaced women and girls (refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced and stateless) in the Asia Pacific region who experience compounding marginalisation due to persistent gender inequalities and the limited access to rights and protection for forcibly displaced populations across this region.

The full and active participation of refugee women and girls

Refugee women and girls are under-represented in positions of leadership and their participation in public life at local, national and global levels continues to be limited and not well documented. For example, women are still too often excluded from peace negotiations, peace-building or conflict resolution discussions. Most often refugee women's voices and influence are constrained as a result of discriminatory social structures (patriarchy and gender hierarchies) that begin at a household level and flow on to how women and girls are able to fully and actively organise, engage and speak out in public life.

The Settlement Services International experience is that refugee women and girls are less likely to have opportunities for career progression and mostly remain under-represented in organisations that do not focus on women and gender issues. Refugee women are also disadvantaged by unequal access to the resources needed to become effective leaders. Young refugee women, women with a disability, and those who identify as LGBTQI, face additional barriers to participation and have even fewer opportunities to participate in decision-making and advocacy processes about issues that affect their lives.

In order to promote the full and active participation of refugee women and girls in all their diversity, greater support must be given to refugee women's leadership opportunities to enhance their representation in decision-making at all levels and to actively break down barriers to participation. This requires investing resources in education, skills development and mentorship of refugee women and girls to realise

their full potential as leaders. It also requires the supported inclusion of refugee women and girls in the planning, design and implementation of programs and policy. This includes actively increasing and investing in women's participation in conflict prevention, peace-building, and conflict resolution processes such as outlined in the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Access to decision-making in public life

For a very long time, refugee women have been marginalised and excluded from diplomacy and have been absent too often from policy discussions and decision-making tables. To systematically redress this, Settlement Services International and many other organisations have responded to the initiative of the Global Refugee-led Network, to endorse the "Refugee Participation Pledge". This pledge calls on signatories to actively and accountably support the participation of refugees in decisions that affect their lives, while taking into consideration the diversity within communities (age, gender, disability, etc.).

We call on all those in public life whose decisions have an impact on the lives of refugees – including states, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations – to endorse the Refugee Participation Pledge and to commit to the meaningful participation of refugees, and particularly refugee women, in all levels of decision-making.

We also note that access to decision-making processes does not equal effectiveness, and it is pivotal that refugee women and girls can access professional development and capacity building opportunities to ensure that advocates have the tools needed to participate effectively within institutions, and for their perspectives and ideas to be heard in discussions at decision-making tables. In other words, access to decision-making processes without empowerment is meaningless.

Elimination of violence

As the Commission is well aware, the fact that violence against women persists in all countries and among all population groups shows the need to continue to address violence against women as a public health issue. Refugee women can face distinct and complex challenges due to the precarity of displacement and require protection from sexual and gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, female genital mutilation, early marriage, exploitation, abuse, and involuntary or unwanted sterilization. Recently in refugee camps in Bangladesh, for example, Rohingya refugee community leaders have been raising concerns about increasing numbers of forced and early marriage that can in large be linked to the increasing vulnerabilities facing this community and the gross inadequacy of international support for Rohingya refugees. In this example, one among too many others, violence against refugee women and girls increases as refugee protection spaces shrink. Eliminating violence against refugee women and girls will only be likely in circumstances where adequate international protection and support is available to refugee communities more broadly.

The particular vulnerabilities of refugee women and girls and how this relates to experiences of violence requires leadership in integrated health promotion, research, advocacy, family violence prevention, community engagement, service support and capacity building of the justice system/s across the region – including the police, courts and informal structures – to respond effectively to violence against refugee women and girls. While prioritising interventions to eliminate violence against women, focus should also be maintained on increasing refugee women's access to support services including psychological support, accommodation, legal and practical support for those subjected to violence. These services and supports are

fundamental to women's rights and refugee women should not be excluded from accessing support due to their legal status in any country.

Refugee women's economic empowerment

The Settlement Services International strongly endorses the paramount view of women's economic participation and empowerment – their capacity to bring about economic change for themselves – is a contributing factor to reducing poverty and achieving equality between women and men. Investing in women's economic empowerment has been shown to lead to greater sustained poverty reduction. Employment is a key enabler for the wellbeing of women as it encourages independent decision making and action. Across the Asia Pacific region, refugee women and girls are frequently excluded from employment due to factors such as their legal status denying them work rights, xenophobia and discrimination, lack of access to childcare or social support structures in displacement contexts, and so on. In order to survive, refugee women and girls are too often forced to work in informal, low-wage jobs with exploitative and unequal working conditions and have restricted access to affordable, quality financial products and services, such as savings accounts or loans that would enable them to establish their own businesses.

In this context, we strongly encourage the international community to engage the private sector and harness commitments to support refugee women's businesses, to increase access to financial resources and to genuinely empower women and their families.
