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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 Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, Inc., 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, which was rebranded as Women First International Fund in 2019, invests in grassroots initiatives driven by women and girls in developing economies that sustainably advance their lives. Through a multi-stage growth partnership model, Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund partners long-term with women-led grassroots organizations to help them grow and deliver on their missions. We help organizations move from emerging to established, whose programs effectively deliver activities improving outcomes in the lives of women, girls and trans people, and ultimately contribute to lasting impact. Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund has invested over \$4 million in grants to almost 700 organizations impacting nearly half a million marginalized women and girls in developing countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a broken system, including a failure to ensure equitable access for women and girls to social protection systems, a safe home and virtual education and work environment, recognition of care provision, economic resources and opportunities to feed and educate their children while balancing their household responsibilities and income generating role. As 47 million women and girls are expected to be pushed into extreme poverty by 2021, now more than ever, in addition to restorative policies, it is important to effectively implement the policies already in place, and to honor the commitments made to women and girls to ensure their equitable access to education and family planning, fair and equal wages, and social transfers, regardless of their socio-economic status, race or caste.

ILO estimates that nearly 432 million women in developing countries work in the informal sector and that 42 percent of informal women workers are engaged in “nonessential” sectors. Women in the informal sector face more gender-specific vulnerabilities and the onset of COVID-19 has further exacerbated the already existing inequalities. The shock to their economic stability, while under lockdown, is forcing them to dip into their meagre personal savings to purchase essentials and to manage their micro and small enterprises. Therefore it is crucial to act now and to design and invest in recovery measures that can effectively address gender imbalances in unpaid work and child care, expand investments in micro, small and medium enterprises and to build the digital capabilities and skillsets of women in the informal sector that can boost their employment opportunities.

Inclusive governance systems where women are at the table when decisions are made about their lives, including health and livelihoods, is crucial to creating meaningful change. A recent study by BMJ Global Health shared that of 115 expert and decision-making COVID-19 task forces from 87 countries: 85.2 per cent of identified national task forces contain mostly men, only 11.4 per cent contain predominantly women and a mere 3.5 per cent exhibit gender parity. Governments must put in place measures to ensure women’s participation in decision making bodies and to encourage women to participate in elective positions. As an organization led by women for grassroots women, our belief and respect in the power of grassroots women to produce meaningful change within their own communities, as decision makers, primary caregivers and often income earners, is further strengthened by the feedback we are receiving from our grantees on how they are rising to the challenge in addressing the fallout from the pandemic.

The flexibility of our three-stage partnership model over six years, in which Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund funds women-led groups who have received little or no previous funding, enables us to invest heavily in the groups who will benefit most. Our funding provides stability for grantees as they increase their impact and develop the capacity and credibility to approach large funders. With a longer

commitment to grantees, we were positioned to regroup and direct emergency funding to meet the immediate and pressing challenges they faced. Our grantees immediately responded to the spike in gender-based violence caused by COVID-19 in their communities by incorporating Gender Based Violence information into their crisis response activities. While the challenges faced by our grantees are many, feedback from our grantees informed by beneficiary input, show that they reached individuals who would likely not have otherwise received aid. This feedback also speak to the resilience, strength, and capability of grassroots women's groups to build back and build forward. We take this opportunity to share examples of their effective responses:

While Kenya was one of the first countries in Africa to begin implementing relief activities, their response was mostly targeted towards traditional family structures where men are considered the head of the family and hence the recipient of relief services. Our grantee, Women Working with Women (3W), realized that these services might not reach the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer population they serve. This was especially distressing, since sexual minorities are much more likely to experience violence, arrest, and homelessness even without the pandemic. Women Working with Women's response (3W) specifically supported Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer women with humanitarian assistance and counselling.

As the pandemic started shutting down places of employment everywhere, India saw millions of migrant workers lose their income, homes, and even access to food and water. In the northeastern state of Manipur, where mountainous terrains already make distribution difficult, some of these migrants returned to find themselves stranded with no income or place to stay, and no indication of assistance on the way. Our grantee partner supported the local village authorities set up temporary camps for the returned migrants. They equipped these with food, sanitizers, hygiene products for women and girls, and face masks. Their efforts not only gave migrants a safe place to regroup, but also contributed to preventing the spread of COVID-19 in this remote region.

Our grantee organization Young Women Rise works in rural Malawi, where schools shutting down meant an uptick in school dropouts and early marriages for girls. While the government relief focused mainly on food and cash aid, with most of their community lacking access to remote learning options, Young Women Rise set up a small library, especially targeted towards encouraging girls to maintain an interest in education and access scholastic materials.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen an unprecedented rise in domestic violence. Global estimates are that domestic violence has increased by 20 percent during lockdown. Though several countries have hotlines that survivors could reach out to, many women who live with abusers are not able to access these. Equal Opportunities for Women and Children in Uganda, a grantee partner, has personal insight into the lives of the community members, and hence they can intervene in situations like these. Equal Opportunities for Women and Children in Uganda secured housing for women who were facing extreme violence and were able to successfully remove them from their abusive circumstances.

Therefore, on behalf of its grantees, Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund calls on CSW65 and all Member states to:

Guarantee universal access for all women to affordable and quality healthcare and childcare, regardless of their socio-economic or employment status, race or caste or whether they are in the formal or informal economy.

Reform social assistance schemes to extend beyond the poor to ensure that the "missing middle," which includes women working in the informal economy, will have access to them.

Develop measures to: address existing digital and financial inequalities; guarantee gender equity in access to digital infrastructure; provide digital and financial literacy training and; ensure consumer and data protection.

Ensure a gender lens is applied to all actions taken by creating gender-balanced COVID-19 national taskforces and working groups, and including representatives from grassroots women's groups.

Invest in efficient mechanisms to collect, analyze and track gender-disaggregated data, which is integral to ensure strong and timely responses to address the challenges faced by women and girls.

Ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment (No. 190) as well as the full implementation of the Convention 190 and its accompanying Recommendation 206 to ensure that migrant workers, domestic workers and informal workers are protected against discrimination, against abuse and have access to their rights.

To ensure that the economic fallout from the pandemic will not continue its regressive impact on gender equality, all mitigating efforts need to position women as equal partners and beneficiaries. This is the decade of action and acting together, we must build back, build forward and build better.
