



## 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 Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, 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

The Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, (now known as Women First International Fund) invests in grassroots initiatives driven by women, girls, and trans people in developing economies that sustainably advance their lives. Through a multi-stage growth partnership model, Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund partners long-term with women and trans-led grassroots organizations to help them grow and deliver on their missions to improve 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, girls, and trans people globally.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic slowdown threatens to stall the global commitments made to address the climate crisis. As recent studies show that environmental and climate factors played a key role in the spread of the COVID-19 virus, it is important to closely examine the interlinkages between pandemics such as COVID-19 and climate change and its spillover effects that threaten poverty reduction, economic empowerment of women and girls and achieving the sustainable development goals. The lives and livelihoods of millions of women and girls, especially those in poor and marginalized communities, are adversely impacted as they face disproportionate care burdens, exploitation, gender-based-violence, job losses, disruptions in education, financial and digital exclusion, poor nutrition, lack of access to raw materials for their products, and added health challenges due to absence of clean fuel and indoor air pollution. Tackling the drivers of climate change presents us with one of the biggest opportunities to guarantee the economic empowerment of women and girls globally and to build a more resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world.

Women make up 39 per cent of the global labour force, but account for 54 per cent of overall job losses and are 4 per cent more likely than men to live in extreme poverty; 4.5 million girls are at risk of not completing their education due to the pandemic, and studies report that gender and sexual minorities are rarely given a priority in discussions about vulnerable populations. Such statistics and information stress the urgency to act and to ensure that all pandemic- and climate crisis-related responses keep women, girls, and trans people at the centre of the recovery efforts as they are the most impacted by climate change and natural disasters. Our more than fifty years of grant-making experience shows us that community-based organizations are well-positioned to assist their stakeholders in navigating the challenges and can play a key role in the efforts to rebuild a shared resilience and capacity. They are informed by the very women, girls, and trans people they serve and are equipped with the knowledge and skillsets necessary to provide resources and training to improve their communities' disaster preparedness and implement disaster risk reduction policies and programs.

Our long-time partner Awake Foundation for Women and Girls have long integrated environmental preservation and disaster risk management into their economic empowerment program. They are in an extraordinarily remote and hard-to-access location, the Rwenzori mountains in Uganda, where the occurrence of natural disasters like floods is increasing at an alarming rate, and government aid is hard to come by. Being a community organization informed by the women and girls they serve, they are able to gather data that shows the impact of these disasters - especially now with the concurrent pandemic crisis - which reveals a variety of issues like health implications, food insecurity, total loss of income, a steep increase in gender-based violence and intimate partner violence, young girls having to resort to sex work, and so forth. Our funding has allowed them to design disaster risk-reduction and

management that specifically address the aforementioned issues while also increasing overall community resilience and environmental preservation.

The 2021 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirms that without immediate action, the climate crisis will continue to escalate and disproportionately impact marginalized communities. Indigenous women can play a crucial role in conserving the environment and recommending nature-based solutions as they have the knowledge and unique experience from facing the impacts of climate change over generations. These insights can contribute greatly to adaptation and mitigation efforts by their communities. It is important to recognize indigenous women's leadership capacity in these efforts and the need to mainstream community responses led by indigenous women's groups against capitalist depredation and to bolster their stewardship over natural resources as means of environmental conservation.

Our partner located in Manipur, India – Rural Women Upliftment Society – was founded 30 years ago by indigenous women fighting on the frontlines of the climate crisis and systemic marginalization of women by military, patriarchal, and political forces. Their basic human rights and the struggle to preserve their traditional way of living are inseparable from their fight against exploitation and over-industrialization of the Himalayan region. Their economic empowerment program funded by us acts as the first step in emboldening the women of their community, preparing them for positions of leadership and decision making where they can enact changes that protect their land and their people.

Indigenous women globally face the most severe erosion of human and civil rights. In several countries, the lack of legal recognition of their identity as a distinct community, with distinct culture and way of life, impedes their land rights and excludes them from national statistics and social services. Therefore, it is imperative for women's rights organizations and those engaged in climate justice efforts to throw their weight behind community groups formed by indigenous women in their regions.

Women's access to green jobs and climate-resilient livelihoods will be a key steppingstone to help economies bounce back. But to do this, economic recovery packages must include funds allocated for addressing climate change. While shifting to a low-carbon economy could potentially create a \$26 trillion economic opportunity and 65 million new jobs by 2030, many women face the risk of not being able to take advantage of these jobs, as much of the growth is predicted for male-dominated sectors such as construction, energy, infrastructure, and mining. In this light, there is a clear need for targeted investments to build women's capacity and skillsets and girls' education to step into these roles when the opportunity arises. Additionally, if women have to transition effectively into these roles, it is important to address systemic issues such as gender-based job segmentation, gender pay gaps, poor representation of women at the decision-making tables, as well as ensuring a safe and healthy work environment free from violence and harassment.

We share the following key recommendations:

- Include community-based organizations in all efforts to address the impact of the pandemic and climate change on the lives and livelihood of women and girls and trans people.
- Expand investments in community-based women's organizations.
- Invest in digital identity programs and interoperable payment systems to ensure relief measures reach all women, girls, and trans people in marginalized communities in an effective, equitable and timely manner.

- Invest in education and training programs for women and girls that would allow them to easily transition into green jobs.
- Ensure land and ownership rights and access to markets, education training and skills upgrading to improve their lives and livelihoods.
- Divest from all fossil fuel investments and end fossil fuel subsidies. These funds should be diverted to climate finance, targeting Nature-based Solutions to deliver on both the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.
- Ensure women, girls, and indigenous women workers, whose jobs are dependent upon a healthy planet are agents of change, are part of every decision-making that affects their rights and dignity.
- All countries must ratify ILO Convention 190 to end violence and harassment in the world of work.

Gender equality cannot be achieved unless all women, girls, and trans people achieve equal rights and are assured a just transition where new jobs are green and decent, and all communities are thriving and resilient. Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund joins its grantee partners and calls on UNCSW 66 and all Member States to ensure that:

- Economic recovery packages also include climate change mitigation and adaptation resource allocations;
- Priority is given to economic empowerment of women, girls, and trans people in all post-pandemic and climate change-related efforts and;
- Net-zero greenhouse gas emissions are met by the second half of this century, as the Paris Agreement envisions, by taking concerted measures for technological, social, and economic transformations and guaranteeing equitable, inclusive, and sustainable recovery for all.

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