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Statement submitted by Franciscans International, 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

Franciscans International welcomes the opportunity to submit this statement to the Commission on the Status of Women on the topic of “Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective.”

Our statement uses examples from the Solomon Islands and West Papua, Indonesia where our partners have reported violations of the human rights of women and girls, often tied to the patriarchal nature of traditional society. While these two contexts diverge greatly in many ways, they share similar patterns of exclusion. Indeed, we note that partner organizations worldwide have underscored similar patterns of exclusion of women from public life, with severe consequences on their economic rights.

Gender Equality

According to the United Nations, women represent two-thirds of people with low incomes in Asia. This is partly due to the enforcement of traditional gender norms, under which women’s access to economic opportunities is often hindered.

For example, gender conception in Papuan society traditionally places women in a position where they play a limited role in decision-making processes in both public and private spaces. Generally, the household, tribal and community leadership bodies, churches and faith groups are predominantly led by men. Women are often expected to assume the traditional roles in the family, including managing the households, raising children, maintaining gardens, harvesting the crops, and collecting firewood. Although women have far-reaching responsibilities in the private sphere, their right to own land and resources is widely unrecognized in traditional land tenure rights.

In the Solomon Islands, where men and women have equal opportunity to acquire land under State law, the majority of land in the country is still held in accordance with customary land (kastom), where the decisions regarding land matters are made through a consultative group composed of male chiefs and elders. Women do not have a significant role in land or resource-related decision-making, such as in logging or mining activities, even in matrilineal parts of the Solomon Islands. Men are almost always the heads of both matrilineal and patrilineal clans and are usually the signatories to land agreements and beneficiaries of royalty payments. They may choose not to share the money received with women or younger men within their families and communities.

Underrepresentation in Leadership

Women are also underrepresented in leadership positions in these two contexts. A study published in 2021 among 30 organizations, comprising 20 private sector organizations, 9 State-owned enterprises, and an industry association, found that only 11 per cent of those in board director positions were women in the Solomon Islands. No women held the position of board chair within the sample, and only two boards had a woman deputy chair. According to a report by United Nations Women, in 2021, women were most highly represented on the boards of organizations in the media and communications sector (21 per cent), followed by the utilities sector (18 per cent) and the agriculture and fisheries sector (18 per cent); 11 per cent of the directors on the boards of state-owned enterprises were women.

The exclusion and underrepresentation of women in political life is a common theme globally. In the Provinces of Papua and Papua Barat, Indonesia, the participation of women is still below the statutory quota of 30 per cent. In Papua Barat Province, from the total number of 45 elected members for the period of 2019-2024, there are only seven women, approximately 15.5 per cent of the total. Among those, indigenous Papuan women are further underrepresented. Three out of seven women are indigenous Papuan women- 4.4 per cent of the total number of elected parliamentarians. In the previous period of 2014-2019, there were only two women in the provincial parliament of Papua Barat Province. For Papua Province, the 2019-2024 Provincial parliament has only eight women out of 49 elected members, or 16 per cent. Of the eight women, five or 10 per cent are indigenous Papuan women. At the regency level in Papua Province, there is no woman leadership at all. This situation is the same in Papua Barat Province, where there is no woman leader in any regency. Without women's leadership in politics or administration, promoting women's economic rights is nearly impossible.

Impact

The lack of representation of women, especially indigenous women, and gender inequality more generally has dire consequences on women and girls, and indeed on the broader context of each country.

In the Solomon Islands, where logging operations are conducted without consent from local communities, women and girls were disproportionately affected by government authorities' lack of monitoring and enforcement of laws. Receiving the least benefits from the extractive industries, they are marginalized at all stages of the decision-making process, from the Timber Rights Hearings to Environmental-Social Impacts Assessments and benefit-sharing negotiations between landowners and companies.

The unequal distribution of profit from the logging industries not only benefits men more, it also drives women further into poverty and exposes them to violence. Our partners were informed that girls as young as 13 or 14 years old have been married off to much older men in the logging camp sites in exchange for financial promises to their families, such as repairing the roofs of their houses. Franciscans International also received information from the communities in Kolombangara Island, where several local girls were allegedly "sold" by their parents as sexual workers to logging workers.

In West Papua, Indonesia, the gap in economic opportunities is most visible between indigenous Papuan women and migrants. Papuan women tend to have less financial capital to conduct business. The migrant traders, who often have more business capital or access to bank loans, can rent superior stalls and stores in and around the market, with better assortments of goods for clients. Papuan women often have to borrow money from private loan sharks who have much higher interests than those of banks. Consequently, Papuan women are in a weaker position to compete with migrants economically. This gap is also caused by uneven assistance from the government, which provides less capital and training to Papuan women traders.

Poverty is also an obstacle to the work of human rights defenders promoting gender equality. In West Papua, they often struggle with a lack of funds for their work – many defenders work independently and do not have social security coverage or a stable income through an employing organization.

Government Response

Women's lack of access to economic opportunities has been recognized as a critical development issue by governments in the Asia-Pacific. Both Solomon Islands'

National Development Strategy of 2016-2025 and Indonesia's National Medium-term Development Plan 2020-2024 aim to improve the social and economic lives of all citizens, including by improving gender equality through actions such as community engagement programmes and establishing targets for the representation of women in Parliament, ministries, and local government.

There have been successful initiatives to prevent women's poverty and improve their access to economic resources across the region. In the Pacific, where 75 to 90 per cent of street vendors are women, markets are a critical area for improving the socio-economic security of women. For example, in Jayapura, Papua Province, the local authorities provided a specific market for indigenous Papuan women called "Pasar Mama-mama." The market was a response to a long call by Papuan women to have their own marketplace, in order to protect their social and economic livelihoods. However, calls to create "Pasar Mama-mama" in other main cities, such as Sorong and Manokwari in Papua Barat Province, have gone unheeded. Similar initiatives have been taken in the Solomon Islands, with the same struggle to develop at a larger scale.

The empowerment of all women and girls can only be achieved by ensuring that women have central roles in decision-making processes in the public sphere. In order to achieve this, States should take measures to ensure women's participation, including by considering the institution of quotas in legislative and other State bodies. Forward facing measures to achieve gender equality, in law and in practice, should also include policies to lift the economic conditions of women and girls and address structural obstacles that lead to and often keep women in poverty.
