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Statement submitted by Widows Rights 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.

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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

Recognising we live in a world where climate change affects everyday life across the planet, it is impossible to ignore this reality in regard to all other issues. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate change, yet they are uniquely situated to assist in effective responses. The many impacts on women and girls are well recorded. Yet the potential for women to participate in all areas of resilience, response and recovery is not fully utilised. We need to apply lessons learnt to the current themes of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Women are well networked and provide community-based insights and mobilisation. Their creativity and pragmatism provides solutions that benefit the whole community. It is vital that women are enabled to participate fully in leadership roles and that those developing policies and programmes engage women meaningfully in all areas of consultation. Widows, so often forgotten and denied their rights, when enabled, have proven to be powerful agents of positive change and must be highlighted as a demographic worthy of serious consideration. The voices of those who have been disadvantaged by the current order need to figure far more prominently in all decision-making processes.

Humanity benefits when women's leadership is embraced and promoted at every level of society. The pandemic proved that qualities of leadership typically associated with the masculine had less success than those associated with the feminine, such as inclusion, collaboration, a sense of selflessness and prioritising long-term interests. It is evident that by increasing women's participation in leadership roles, these qualities come to influence the culture of leadership.

It is vital that the lived experience of women needs to inform decision making. Institutional systems and processes of governance need to be changed to ensure fair and just relationships. It must be recognised that the expression of diverse views results in better outcomes. Diversity of thought, background, and approach are critical as it is through the interaction of varied perspectives and experiences that higher degrees of truth are found. When considering developments in information and communication technologies, the perspectives of widows of all ages, must be included.

Spaces historically dominated by men need to be transformed. We call on Member States to create inclusive environments where all feel empowered to engage: where consultation can take place motivated by a spirit of understanding.

Rather than setting up programmes with milestones and outcomes agreed at the outset, qualitative goals need to be first clarified, with collaboration and a spirit of learning being the operating model. When this notion of development is employed, the insights of women and girls are better included in relevant endeavours. The skills, programmes, policies and training necessary for goals to be reached will become apparent through this learning mode. Such a system creates a space for the voices of the usually unheard and heeded to be taken seriously - whether of widows, rural women and girls, indigenous populations or others.

Optimising technological development to ensure equality is achieved requires the application of existing knowledge plus the generation of new knowledge. Oftentimes, the lived experience of women and girls at the grass roots is undervalued. The insights acquired through experimentation at the local level are ignored. Yet over time patterns emerge that can be documented and analysed. This develops into a rich body of knowledge that can then be disseminated back to the grassroots to influence subsequent efforts. Learning about the best use of information and communication technologies is not therefore the property of "experts" alone. It is an endeavour that requires the contribution of all.

We call on Member States to seek opportunities within the UN system to explore such collaborative and process orientated development.

If technology is to be fully utilised for full equality of the sexes to be realised, building capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions to contribute effectively to transformational change is indispensable. For each individual woman, this means developing a range of interrelated capacities: technical, scientific, social, moral, and spiritual. She needs knowledge, an understanding of concepts, relevant skills plus attitudes and qualities required to ensure healthy and sustainable relationships – to work with others for positive change. For widows, who so often have been ostracised by their communities and denied their inheritance rights, this building of capacity is even more vital.

For local communities, capacity building means the ability to intelligently and consciously shape culture. An atmosphere needs to be created where individuals can manifest their full potential working with others in collective endeavour. Where widows' organisations have been successful, such as with Naserian in Tanzania and Sana Bank in India, they have developed the capacity of the individual widows and this has positively affected the community at large, consequently creating a more enabling environment for the widows.

Widows' organisations provide examples of communities actively working to put transcendent values into practice, for the betterment of all. Instead of such demographics being considered victims, they need to be recognised as a reservoir of experience worthy of serious consideration. Single Women's Human Rights, Guild of Service and Hope are examples of organisations in Nepal, India and Libya respectively who have assisted individual women and positively affected the local community through implementing trustworthiness and a sense of service. Much could be learned from a systematic inquiry into such communities and others that are learning to apply spiritual principles (such as selflessness, solidarity with others, and a long-term vision) to advance social progress.

We call on Member States to establish a focal point of learning about the practical application of moral and ethical principles within each United Nations agency.

We live in an age when the only constant is change. It is, however, in times of turbulence that opportunities become evident for us to question underlying assumptions and redefine collective values. The challenges technological change has given us can serve as a catalyst to find new approaches to inclusive forms of governance, collaborative working methods and creative solutions to monitoring technological developments. The whole area of information and communication technologies have advanced in an unplanned and adhoc way that has left humanity challenged by the ever-changing digital terrain. Within this space there are numerous examples of abuse of women and girls and ways in which they are left behind or passed by. Yet we are bemused by the manifold vistas of potential abundance.

The gap between the scale of action needed to fully utilise the possibilities of technology to assist the peoples of the world and to ensure the full equality of women and men, and the measures actually undertaken are often blamed on the absence of financial resources. The prudent use of resources to advance the common good, in line with need, is a fundamental responsibility of the State. It is also their responsibility to mobilize resources in a way that does not subsidise unsustainable or destructive endeavours.

We call on Member States to give due regard to the funding of technology to provide equal access to women and girls, especially rural women and those who suffer disadvantage such as widows. The funding of technological developments must be based on the well-being of the whole community and not be used for abuse such as on-line bullying or trafficking. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate views or systems that evidently fail to serve the common good.

One of the chief frustrations with the Commission on the Status of Women from delegations and Civil Society, is the gap between sincere intention and action. If the Commission is to fulfil its mandate with action taken to implement all the Agreed Conclusions, far stronger consensus and collective will among Member States is needed around the values demanded by the current stage of humanity's development.

We call on Member States to evince greater resolve in putting these values into practice, recommitting to what is beneficial to the common good and discarding whatever stands in the way of achieving full equality, recognising widows as a vital demographic who must be included in all consultations.

Organisations co-signing this statement include Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women, Dominican Leadership Conference, Graduate Women International, Global Fund for Widows, Guild of Service, International Alliance of Women, Kırmızı Biber Derneği, National Alliance of Women's Organizations, National Council of Women Canada, National Board of Catholic Women of England and Wales, Rozaria Memorial Trust, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Women's Federation for World Peace International, Womens Intercultural Network, UNA-UK