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Civil Society Statement on the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls

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Thank you Madam Chair,

We would like to thank the CEDAW Committee for providing this opportunity to present the civil society statement in the opening of the 76th CEDAW Session. This statement is informed by the valuable contributions and inputs of 28 women's rights organisations from over 22 countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the shortcomings and systemic failures of many governments; questioned the efficiency of national institutions, including gender machineries, and the effectiveness of their plans and programmes; uncovered enormous inequalities and decades of misplaced priorities; and exacerbated persisting gender discrimination. As with other health crises, it has disproportionately affected women who are already marginalised, criminalised and living in financially precarious situations, often outside social and legal protection mechanisms. Numerous groups of women and girls are facing unique challenges during the crisis, due to intersecting discriminations; these include those who are marginalised due to factors including, but not limited to, race, caste, indigeneity, disability, age, gender identity and/or expression, sexual orientation, drug use, migration status, low-income work, sex work, and HIV status.

While the pandemic presents opportunities for fundamental change, it can also be used as a pretext to roll back on human rights and gender equality. Such rollbacks are taking place through state of emergency laws, austerity policies, border controls, legitimacy to corporations, deregulation of environmental protection, curtailment of civic space, and attacks on women's rights and bodily autonomy. As the crisis continues to spiral, with devastating economic and health impacts, women and vulnerable groups are already being treated as expendable in governments' responses.

Therefore, we would like to draw the Committee's attention to the following priority areas:

Gender-based violence

The pandemic significantly aggravated the risks of gender-based and sexual violence against women and girls, and disrupted their access to existing support services and justice, in some cases compounded by extreme poverty. Due to state of emergency and lockdowns, women were unable to escape perpetrators, and governments failed to adopt special measures to address increased need for shelters and crisis services. Crisis shelters in some countries were forbidden to accept new survivors and provided remote consultations only, which was not accessible for many women. Rapes were reported in quarantine centres established by governments to handle the pandemic. Closure of courts postponed or put on hold trials in sexual violence cases, delaying access to justice and increasing the likelihood that survivors may be threatened or pressured into dropping their cases. Incidents of caste-based violence against women and incidents of femicides by partners have been reported.

Health

Allocation of resources to COVID-19 response in some countries diverted funding and attention from other health issues, directly undermining women's health and wellbeing. An estimated 47 million women around the world were believed to be unable to access modern contraceptives as a result. Women's access to primary healthcare services was limited, with closures at village and district level in some countries. Some key challenges faced by women during the pandemic include difficulties in accessing routine medical check-ups for mothers, infants, people with special needs and LBT women; refusals of hospitalisation under the pretext of quarantine measures; restricted access to polyclinics due to difficulties in acquiring authorisation from gynaecologists; and increased infant and maternal mortality due to a lack of access to timely prenatal care in rural areas and on islands.

Employment

The COVID-19 crisis exposed inequalities in the employment sector and the wage and safety divide for women-dominated occupations. It intensified women's economic vulnerabilities; a significant population of women work in the informal sector and face income reduction and joblessness. Women are also impacted by an increased burden of unpaid care work; their predominant role in health sector operations; and their active participation in micro-scale, family, and sole entrepreneur-owned businesses. Government-initiated stimulus packages ignored women in informal employment, with complex application processes and inadequate information

and support to access job loss and hardship funds, especially in rural areas. During lockdowns, women farmers were unable to sell at local markets and had to either sell their produce at lower prices or lose the entire harvest.

Women Migrant Workers

The crisis further worsened conditions for women migrant workers in sectors such as hospitality, cleaning and domestic work. They lost their daily earnings, had no savings to survive on, and did not qualify for state economic support due to a lack of formal identification documents and residency registration. Migrant domestic workers face additional burdens and vulnerabilities, working even longer hours than usual since the onset of the crisis. The slowdown of the judicial process due to COVID-19 leaves migrant workers waiting longer for judgements, often without any support as most embassy shelters have closed. Migrant workers have been forced to remain in the cities where they work, with no money, food or transportation to return home due to lockdown orders, border controls and related mobility restrictions; and thousands have lost their jobs. This has left their families fighting for survival, with some women attempting suicide due to extreme poverty.

Frontline Workers

Women comprise 70% of healthcare workers globally, mostly doctors, nurses and cleaners. Their lives have been put at risk while caring for those infected by COVID-19. In one country, women doctors and nurses at an infectious disease hospital were forced to work for 45 days with no opportunity to return home or see their families and relatives, but were not compensated with an increased salary.

Sex Workers

Sex workers have experienced hardship, a total loss of income and increased discrimination and harassment. With limited access to government economic stimulus packages and social protection schemes, their safety, health and lives are at increased risk. Reports of punitive crackdowns against sex workers detail the raiding of homes, compulsory COVID-19 testing, arrest and threatened deportation of migrant sex workers.

Unpaid care work

Gender stereotypes in domestic roles, and multiple burdens due to additional tasks at home under quarantine conditions, have affected women's health considerably. In some cases, girls'

responsibilities for household chores have increased. Working from home is extremely difficult for many women, especially mothers, who are required to take care of housework, care for children and older relatives, and assist children with online classes.

Education

Girls have often been absent from online lessons, their time for education disrupted by responsibilities for household chores. Many children do not have the necessary equipment and good internet connection required to access online education, which additionally increases the burden of mothers and guardians.

Afro-descendant and indigenous populations

The crisis highlights the structural and institutional racism which Afro-descendant and indigenous populations, particularly women and girls, have historically suffered in many countries. One of the most aggravating factors is the lack of official data and records on the current conditions of the Afro-descendant population, which hinders the establishment of public policies and sustainable development projects in the recovery phase in areas with Afro-descendant populations.

Women and Girls with Disabilities

Most responses to the pandemic lacked adequate gender perspective and disability inclusion, creating new barriers. Gender-based violence support hotlines and services during lockdown in some countries became even less accessible for women and girls with disabilities. The crisis also decreased access to formal and informal disability-related support services, leaving women and girls with disabilities more vulnerable, their basic needs unmet.

Trans and Gender-Diverse Communities

Requirements for legal identification documents at healthcare facilities overlook the health needs of trans and gender-diverse people. Further, healthcare providers' discriminatory attitudes deterred trans and gender-diverse people from seeking timely COVID-19 treatment and care, compounding their health risks. Police and military checkpoints in areas under lockdown put trans and gender-diverse people at risk of harassment and violence.

Women in Prisons

Although some governments have agreed to the early or temporary release of some people from overcrowded prisons, people incarcerated for drug offences are in some cases excluded, and it is unclear the extent to which women in prison have benefited. Women in drug rehabilitation centres and prisons, especially women in pre-trial detention, pregnant women, women with children and women with underlying health conditions, are particularly vulnerable and must be released to avoid the risks of COVID-19.

Women Human Rights Defenders

Women human rights defenders in some countries in the Middle East have been increasingly targeted since the crisis began. Those who criticise their government, for reasons such as its lack of transparency in containing the pandemic, are summoned, interrogated, and threatened. Their work has been restricted under the guise of health concerns and they have faced much difficulty in documenting human rights violations. Some governments have also adopted fear tactics, spreading misinformation and propaganda to silence and denounce them, claiming that they are infected and are spreading the virus, as a way to hinder their advocacy and awareness efforts.

Women in conflict contexts

The pandemic has impacted peacebuilding efforts because of increased violations of human rights, including suppression of freedom of speech and of the press, attacks on women human rights defenders, increased government surveillance, and heavily militarised responses to the crisis. Implementation of peace agreements has been delayed, and communal violence has spiked in some regions. The crisis has also increased violence and security risks to women peacebuilders and has further restricted women's access to already limited economic and education opportunities.

Economic relief programmes

Micro-entities, small shop owners and traders reported a decline in revenues, while no special support was offered to women entrepreneurs. In a few countries, self-employed women were offered small reductions from social taxes, but all other heavy taxes remained in force with deferrals, which does not solve their financial problems. Some governments distributed food supplies based on family card information, which commonly registers husbands as head of household. As a result, women, including single and elderly women who live alone in poverty,

had no access to government food support. NGOs in some countries were denied official permission to distribute aid and deliver assistance to the most needy. The committees and commissions established by many governments as an emergency response to tackle COVID-19 saw very low or no involvement of women.

Nationality

With borders closing, many families affected by gender-discriminatory nationality laws face separation or the inability to return home. Women married to non-citizens have suffered from severe financial distress due to their husbands' unemployment or layoffs from work, losing sponsorship and legal residency for husbands and children. Ongoing psychological anxiety has additionally worsened over fears around the children's fate should mothers die due to the virus.

Recommendations

The ongoing crisis urgently requires State Parties to put in place effective legal frameworks and policy measures with a strong political will for their proper implementation in order to protect and fulfill women's human rights and ensure their access to justice. *'Building back better and for all'* can only happen if States abandon neoliberal policies, protect economic and social rights, and divest from militarism and other industries that destroy the environment. All such reforms and responses must be protected from corporate capture, be gender responsive, and put at their centre the needs of the most marginalised in our societies.

The CEDAW Committee should call on all States Parties to:

- apply gender-based analysis to all economic stimulus and recovery policies and packages, and prioritise the needs and rights of marginalised and vulnerable groups;
- allocate adequate resources to strengthen the public health system, and shift money from military expenditure to healthcare, social protection and economic recovery;
- ensure provision of all healthcare services related to COVID-19 without stigma or discrimination of any kind, including on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression;

- enact national reforms that ensure a progressive tax system with redistributive capacity and affirmative action measures, which preserve, and progressively increase, the income of poorer households and assist the marginalised groups;
- maintain access to services for women and girls affected by violence, as well as sexual and reproductive health services, including safe abortion;
- ensure that information provided to the public regarding COVID-19 is accurate, unbiased, timely, and consistent with human rights principles, and is accessible and available in multiple local languages, including for those with low or no literacy, or people with visual and hearing disabilities;
- use a human-rights-based approach in the implementation of any response to, and protective measures against, COVID-19, including broad lockdowns, and encourage law enforcement officers to focus on increasing safety rather than arrests, violence, surveillance, or other coercive measures; and
- establish adequate and appropriate support services for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, such as hotline services for remote assistance and functional safe shelters.

Thank you.