



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
22 November 2022

English only

Commission for Social Development

Sixty-first session

6–15 February 2023

**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
Priority Theme: Creating full and productive employment and decent work for all as a way of overcoming inequalities to accelerate the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

Statement submitted by Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 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

Mercy Sisters, Associates, and Partners around the world seek to create welcoming and inclusive societies that promote the wellbeing of people and planet and build a sustainable future for all.

Central to civil society's role during the pandemic and beyond is protecting and providing services and support to people in vulnerable situations; holding governments accountable for violations of human rights; and influencing governments and institutions to pursue responsive, inclusive, and equitable policy outcomes. Like our founder Catherine McAuley, we have been moved with compassion, challenged by inequalities, and called to act for people and Earth.

Stories and experiences of the pandemic have revealed widespread and deeply rooted injustice and inequalities highlighting systems of oppression, exclusion, and marginalization. While all these existed long before the pandemic, they have been further exacerbated, putting many at risk of being "left behind." The spread of COVID-19 and government policy responses completely altered our way of life, inflicted significant social, economic, and political harm, and changed how we relate to the environment. The pandemic has exposed gaps and weaknesses in public services and social protection and has underlined the need for universal and portable social protection systems that can deliver benefits efficiently and at scale and reach people who have lost their livelihoods.

As we emerge from this time of pandemic, we must work to build a new social contract that is more equitable and participatory and that protects the rights of all workers, including the rights to safe workplaces, occupational safety and health, social security, and freedom of expression and association. For many, decent work is still out of reach, especially for those in the informal sector.

Informally employed workers frequently lack access to social protection, income security, and basic rights at work. Informal work does not recognize or sufficiently protect workers under the relevant legal and regulatory frameworks. Therefore, informal workers are more vulnerable to external shocks and economic cycles, as revealed in the COVID-19 pandemic. With limited protections and few labor rights, informal work also leads to poor working conditions. Many informal workers also have higher exposure to health and safety risks and income insecurity, leading to extreme poverty.

Owing to entrenched gender stereotypes, women carry most of the burden of paid and unpaid domestic and care work. Migrant women are particularly impacted as they are likely to work in the informal economy, especially the domestic service and care sector, and be excluded from labor protections. Lack of assistance and protection mechanisms for migrant women domestic workers, along with social isolation due to language, cultural difference, and the limited availability of accurate information, heightened their vulnerabilities during the pandemic. The extra burden of unpaid care work on women must be addressed as part of a comprehensive response to the pandemic.

Mercy Sisters have seen many situations of labor exploitation for informal workers, for example, with the conditions that Mercy Sisters have witnessed in Peru for Venezuelan migrants and refugees. In some cases, employers have stopped hiring local people to give work to migrants instead, severely underpaying them or sometimes not paying them at all. Consequently, this practice increases the mistreatment of migrant populations and instances of human trafficking for sexual and labor exploitation. Therefore, for many migrants, these low-wage labor sectors perpetuate cycles of poverty and deprivation.

The Mercy World has witnessed the worst violations of human and labor rights that have resulted from a lack of decent work. Common stories of trafficking include victims being lured using false promises of engaging in decent work in a faraway city or foreign land only to be coerced into forced labor, sexual exploitation, or both. Many trafficked people report having to repay hugely inflated 'debts' for expenses such as transport, accommodation and food. This practice is described as 'debt bondage' and a breach of human rights. Victims also face other deprivations that prevent them from participating fully and equally in society, including violations of their rights to liberty, security, and freedom of movement.

These violations are often on a continuum of marginalization and inequalities that begin in early childhood, rendering people vulnerable to exploitation. For example, a girl who does not have access to free, quality primary education is less well-equipped and able to secure decent work. Likewise, rural isolation, community violence, insecure housing, dysfunctional family dynamics, and extreme poverty contribute to increased vulnerability. We know that trafficking is not a random act of victimization but rather a sinister, systemic and deliberate violation of rights in which perpetrators prey on the most vulnerable.

Recognizing these challenges, Mercy Sisters and partners worldwide provide essential services to reduce vulnerabilities and support people as they seek decent employment opportunities. Accompanying people as they develop skills and agency is a key step toward building more equitable labor markets and inclusive societies.

In Australia, McAuley Community Services for Women, founded by the Sisters of Mercy, supports creating full and productive employment and decent work through their program McAuley Works. The program provides specialist support for women who have experienced family violence or homelessness to become financially independent through meaningful, long-term employment. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated family violence and homelessness rates, making this service increasingly important.

Also in Australia, Mercy Connect assists migrants in finding decent work. Mercy Connect provides language learning classes for newly arrived migrants to help them navigate the difficult Australian job market. For people with limited English, finding decent work in Australia is incredibly difficult due to the process of applying for roles with résumés, cover letters, and interviews. Therefore, ensuring that migrants and refugees have support for language learning and training is essential to help them to realize their economic potential.

In Ireland, Blayney Blades, supported by the Sisters of Mercy, accompanies and encourages women to realize their strengths and talents and overcome barriers to employment. Through education, skills-based training, mentorship, and career counseling, women of all ages are empowered to improve the quality of their lives and engage meaningfully in society. In addition, Blayney Blades has worked with governments at local and national levels to influence policy change for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, in line with Target 5.C of the 2030 Agenda. Blayney Blades also addresses Target 5.4 and recognizes that to educate mothers successfully, we must also provide support for their children. Today, Blayney Blades is home to one of the largest childcare facilities in Ireland.

In Kenya, the Sisters of Mercy run the Mukuru Promotion Centre, which provides social rehabilitation, education, and skill-based training to those excluded from mainstream society and living in extreme poverty. The Centre recognizes that essential services must be met to reach full and productive employment and decent work, contributing to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Recovery from the pandemic provides an opportunity to redesign policies that address the root causes of inequalities and vulnerabilities aligned with the 2030 Agenda. To achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, governments must work closely with all stakeholders to implement comprehensive, people-centered, inclusive, and resilient policies that support those most marginalized.

To successfully implement these policies, we call on governments to:

- Address the systemic root causes that increase vulnerability throughout the life course, including recognizing the unique needs of children and upholding their rights to health, education, and safety; and accelerating action to end poverty in all its forms to ensure an adequate standard of living for all
- Implement and strengthen inclusive social protection systems, including floors, that reach people in vulnerable situations, people living in poverty, people on the move, women, children, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples
- Safeguard access to justice, counseling, and safe shelters for victims of gender-based violence, domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking by ensuring these are considered essential services
- Eliminate harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuate gender-based violence, domestic abuse, human trafficking, and the unequal burden of unpaid domestic and care work
- Implement policies that address the pay gap and promote opportunities to upskill
- Ensure labor protections which include access to decent work and safe working environments, especially for migrant workers and those in the informal sector
- Create policies that honor and value essential workers, those in healthcare, food production and distribution, and unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.