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## Commission on the Status of Women

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### 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Across societies the impacts of climate change affect women and men differently. Women constitute the majority of people experiencing poverty, and are often more dependent for their livelihoods on natural resources that are threatened by climate change. Furthermore, restricted land and water rights, lack of access to financial resources, training and technology, and limited access to political decision-making spheres often prevent women and girls from playing a full role in tackling climate change and other environmental challenges.

Despite women being disproportionately affected by climate change, they play a crucial role in climate action. It is the experience of Mercy International Association that around the world, women and girls are effective actors of change. From the Americas to Asia Pacific, women have a strong body of knowledge and expertise that can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction and adaptation strategies. Women's responsibilities in households and communities as stewards of natural and household resources, position them well to contribute to livelihood strategies adapted to changing environmental realities. This is particularly evident in women's relationship with water.

In many parts of the world, women and girls bear the primary responsibility for domestic tasks, including water collection, often at the expense of education, income-generating activities, cultural and political involvement, rest and recreation. Women and girls are also predominantly tasked with caring for family members who have become ill due to unsafe water and sanitation. There is little recognition of the burden women bear as water managers and caretakers, and this gendered work is unremunerated. Climate change has significant impacts on freshwater sources, affecting the availability of water used for domestic and productive tasks. The consequences of the increased frequency in floods and droughts are far reaching, particularly for women and girls who are responsible for water management at the household level.

Women's limited access to water can be partially attributed to discriminatory land ownership. Even where women do have a legal right to land, customs often prevent them from taking de-facto control of land and water resources. There is a lack of recognition of women as irrigators and water users, despite playing an increasingly large role in agriculture, especially subsistence farming. Women's lack of power and ownership not only restricts their economic and financial potential but also limits their valuable input in relation to sustainable farming. Harvest failures caused by extreme droughts further impact the livelihoods of women farmers, and have negative consequences for food and nutritional security. In Ethiopia, a project between the Sisters of Mercy, the Government of Ireland, and other partners, works with communities particularly vulnerable to droughts and famine to build resilience, improve water and food security, and empower local people to promote sustainable systems to further counteract increasing environmental challenges.

Extractive industries and infrastructure megaprojects also have negative economic effects, as women are often not consulted when companies negotiate access to land, compensation or benefits. A Sister of Mercy and climate activist from Argentina has shared that in Latin America, the interests of mining and other extractive projects, based in neoliberal capitalism and colonialism, supersede the protections of people, forests and water. She notes that there is a connection between the degradation of Earth and gender-based violence – market systems and patriarchy perpetuate exploitation, abuse and violence against both Earth and women.

Women's role in water management decision-making is threatened by policies determined by international financial and trade institutions, including privatization.

When markets determine the price of water, women, especially those with limited economic and financial power, are significantly affected. The value of water cannot be determined by market forces. Across human cultures and spiritual traditions throughout human history, water continues to hold value as a symbol of creation, purification, rebirth and death, among many others, and this spiritual connection is unique for women as mothers, healers and spiritual leaders.

Water is also vital to physical health and well-being. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by water that has been rendered non-potable due to climate crises and waste created from human activity, including from nuclear energy and extractive industries. Contaminated water and water-borne illnesses have serious health impacts on women and children, especially pregnant women and their unborn or young children, and further increases women's gendered care work. A Sister of Mercy and pediatrician who travels regularly to Haiti, Guyana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Peru to care for rural children who have no access to a physician shares that in her work, water sometimes becomes the enemy. Children who drink contaminated water experience debilitating abdominal pain, diarrhea, vomiting, dehydration, and weight loss. In addition to the cholera epidemic in Haiti, she describes the health impacts of repeated hurricanes and floods – people suffer fractures and abrasions when rushing water knocks them down, drags, and pummels them with stones and debris, and they contract diarrhea when the river had been the source of water became contaminated.

Gendered division of labor, along with limited access to water, result in increased risks of gender-based violence. Women and girls face increased risk of physical and sexual violence and harassment when collecting water from long distances in many parts of the world. Water inaccessibility may facilitate domestic violence, as women have reported being subject to beatings if they take too long to gather water or request their husbands to help with water collection. In Papua New Guinea, amidst a context of endemic domestic and sexual violence and accelerating environmental degradation, Sisters of Mercy work to empower women to exercise their rights and freedoms to participate fully in community and family decisions, and to take on leadership positions in the care of the environment.

Women human and environmental rights defenders, including those who defend and fight for the right to water, often face gender-based violence as a direct result of their activism. In addition to facing threats of physical violence, and unfair trials, women activists are particularly confronted with sexual violence, harassment, and domestic violence. Women's families have also been targeted in an attempt to intimidate women human rights defenders.

Efforts geared towards improving the management of the world's finite water resources often overlook the central role of women in water sustainability. Even when women carry out most of the water-related tasks, play a key role in food production, and perform most of the unpaid care work, structures of governance and leadership exclude women from policymaking. Women and girls, especially rural and indigenous women, have knowledge and experience that is critical for urgent climate action and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, and as such need to play a central role in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water. The design, implementation and evaluation of water and climate policies must consider and value the specific needs and contributions of women and girls, and expand and strengthen protection mechanisms for women human rights defenders and all women and girls who experience violence. Governments and all stakeholders must urgently work to ensure the meaningful participation and leadership of women in decision-making processes about water and climate action, for a more sustainable and equitable future.