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### Statement submitted by Make Mothers Matter, 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

### **A critical Juncture: it is time to invest in Care and Education**

Make Mothers Matter (MMM) federates a network of over 40 grassroots organizations, working in some 30 countries around the world, to support and empower mothers and their families and to advance the human rights of women and children. On the occasion of the 65th Session of the United Nations Commission on Status of Women, MMM would like to draw attention to Care and Education as pivotal to bringing about systemic change in society and therefore improving and increasing women's full and effective participation in public life, the empowerment of all women and girls, and the elimination of violence towards them.

Twenty-five years after Beijing 95 – one of the more significant milestones from which to analyse women's progress in contemporary societies – there has been much progress worldwide. Women's participation has regularly increased in both the formal and informal sectors: from communities and grassroots, in economy and business, to parliaments and governments. We all have in mind innumerable women and mothers who have a mentor role and provide inspiring role models in all sectors therefore showing how vital women's full participation is, for the building of a more cohesive, resilient and equitable society. Just recently, witness the striking shift in governance and Coronavirus response triggered in the European Union by the imaginative leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, Christine Lagarde and Angela Merkel, or the exemplary ways President Tsai Ing-Wen and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern tackled the virus in Taiwan and New Zealand.

We all have in mind the innumerable examples of women as mothers, raising their voices for justice and change ranging from the Argentinian mothers of the plaza de Mayo, up to the current mobilisation of mothers of children with disabilities against corruption in Bulgaria. These countless examples as well as the current Covid-19 crisis, epitomize women's and mothers' abilities, resilience, and their central role as essential workers and stakeholders in the home, in the labour market, and in social and public life at all levels.

However, so much still needs to be done to improve the status of women and to leave no woman or girl behind. In many countries, rigid social norms and discriminatory laws preclude women's full participation and decision making in public life and the education of girls and women is not a priority. In the other countries, despite the legal recognition and implementation of women's rights, discrimination, violence against women and inequalities still prevail to a high extent.

The Coronavirus crisis is having a cruel worldwide loop effect on gender inequalities, violence against women and the discriminations they face, many of these stemming from the fact that most of them are also mothers. The collapse of the economy and the vulnerability of societies are also putting education at high risk, particularly the education of girls.

2020 United Nations statistics show that 130 million girls worldwide are not in school, 96,5 million girls globally are excluded to secondary school (Drive for 5). In many countries in the global south, boys' education is prioritized over girls. Other barriers such as economic issues, marriage and social norms also hold girls, women and mothers back. Countless girls around the world help their mothers at home rather than go to school. As the Secretary-General pointed out 'social and institutional barriers still discourage girls from taking up careers based on science, technology, engineering and mathematics.'

According to UNESCO, over 11 million girls around the world are in danger of not returning to school this year, due to the unprecedented disruption caused by

Covid-19. This staggering figure not only threatens decades of progress made towards gender equality, but also puts girls at risk. Indeed, for many girls, school is more than just a key to a better future. It's a lifeline. It is putting entire countries at risk. Educated girls, women and mothers are key to development, all studies point to their major role in enacting change in societies.

The current situation in Afghanistan illustrates how this key role can make a difference in a poignant way. Since 2004, a significant number of women have embraced education and access to job opportunities, which allow them to participate in public life and serve as mentors in their communities. And today, mothers, for the sake of their daughters and the future of their country are determined to fight for the rights of girls and women to education in Afghanistan and show great resilience despite the political complexities of the situation and the opacity of the negotiations underway with the Taliban.

All over the world, in both developed and developing countries, women also assume the majority of unpaid domestic and care work, often juggling paid work and family responsibilities, to the detriment of their personal aspirations, their economic independence, and even their health. The 2019 evaluation of SDG 5, Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, showed that in 90 countries for which data is available, women devote on average three times more hours a day to unpaid care and domestic work than men, which limits the time available for paid work, education and leisure. This inequitable distribution of unpaid family care work reinforces women's socioeconomic disadvantages, especially when it intersects with discriminations linked to race/ethnicity, age or migratory status. It remains one of the main obstacles to gender equality.

The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated this situation. In families with children, mothers, much more than fathers, have seen the time they devote to childcare increase during the lockdown. In addition to their usual domestic, care and educational responsibilities, they have had to supplement schools and nurseries, and more generally the educational communities that are active with children in normal times – all while trying, as far as possible, to continue working to provide an income. And on the employment front, the crisis has hit women particularly hard, especially if they are mothers – again largely because of the increase in their unpaid care work.

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted how central care and care workers are to human and social well-being, as well as economic development. The pandemic also highlights the fact that this essential work, mostly performed by women and mothers, is undervalued or taken for granted, underpaid or not paid at all. Indeed, the pandemic emphasizes the importance of the role of mothers: never before has the word 'mother' been so widely used in the media.

The pandemic therefore, starkly challenges the choices that societies will have to make to build back better or to build forward better and how this can be achieved. In this particular context, women's and mothers' activism and advocacy, their fight for their rights, for education, social sustainability, climate justice, and peace, for better economic opportunities and empowerment is indeed a daunting challenge and calls for a systemic change.

MMM firmly believes that this crisis represents an opportunity for systemic change, especially with regards to the purpose and functioning of our economies. The crisis clearly shows the limits of our current economic system, which is based on endless GDP growth and prioritizes profits over life. Our current system completely ignores the essential value of unpaid care work as well as that of our natural environment, both of which subsidize the monetized economy as they are currently considered endless and free resources – a fact that feminist economists have long highlighted. Indeed, the 2020 Oxfam report "It is time to care" asserts that the

monetary value of unpaid care work globally for women aged 15 and over is at least \$10.8 trillion annually –three times the size of the world’s tech industry. Another staggering figure to act upon.

Therefore, MMM calls on governments and stakeholders to:

Take action: Covid-19 and its economic devastation offers a unique opportunity to move beyond GDP and prioritize care for well-being, sustainability and equity in our economy and the education of girls as a capital investment for development.

Create policies promoting education and care which must not be considered as expenses but high return investments. Scientific evidence for example now points to how early childhood development, epitomizing the basic and essential needs that all human beings should receive to thrive, would enable in return a healthier and more stable society.

Mainstream care into all policy-making, not only by enabling quality care services but by supporting parents in their caring responsibilities: maternity leave benefits, and then, parental leaves, shared parental leaves, flexible work conditions, and the expansion of a family friendly labour market. Investing in care for a sustainable economic and social environment will generate jobs and reduce the gender employment gap.

Implement policies targeting men and encouraging them to take their share in care work. It is also proven that when men commit to their caring responsibilities in the family, violence towards women and children diminish in significant proportions. Promundo MenCare programs targeting young fathers in some African countries illustrate this fact. It also leads to a shift in mentalities when men themselves become concerned about these issues.

Address therefore the issue of unpaid care and domestic work globally, which is essential to achieve sustainable and consistent Gender equality.

Provide quality education for all. The importance of education underpins all human achievements, including care work. Education policies correlate with care policies. Educated mothers and fathers, produce better educated and healthier children. So likewise, parental education benefits not only families and children, but society and countries as a whole.

Make Education an absolute priority for girls: It is only through education that women and girls can be empowered and access to equal opportunities. Without education for all, the prospects for the development of an inclusive, just and peaceful society collapse. Only educated women can fully participate, access government, lead communities, and contribute to realizing the goals of the Sustainable Development Agenda.

Care and education are two major leverages to go towards a more inclusive, gender balanced, peaceful and sustainable society. The empowerment of women and their full participation in all sectors, since they represent half of humanity, are crucial to the implementation of the SDGs.

Moreover, the severity of the undergoing Corona crisis calls for a paradigm shift in the way we run our economies and what we prioritize through our economic system. It has never worked well for women who keep things running whilst being underrepresented in decision making. With Care and Education as major tools, it is time that we move beyond GDP growth and profit making as the main drivers of our economies. Instead, the wellbeing of both people and the planet must be the core objectives of our economies, and new indicators must be used that integrate and support these wellbeing objectives to guide government budgeting and policymaking – with women adequately represented in decision making.