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Statement submitted by Franciscans 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

Franciscans International welcomes the opportunity to submit this statement to the 69th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly.

Environment, Extractive Industries, and Women

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action dedicates a subsection to Women and Environment, where it underscores, in part, the impact of natural resource exploitation and related environmental degradation on the population at-large, and women and girls more specifically. It also notes that where women manage the use of natural resources, “women provide sustenance to their families and communities.” However, women are often absent from decision-making in regard to resource and environmental management.

Since the Declaration and Platform for Action, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment was recognized by the UN General Assembly in July 2022. The resolution recognized that the consequences of environmental damage are “felt most acutely by women and girls and those segments of the population that are already in vulnerable situations, including indigenous peoples, children, older persons and persons with disabilities” and the “importance of gender equality, gender-responsive action to address climate change and environmental degradation, the empowerment, leadership, decision-making and full, equal and meaningful participation of women and girls, and the role that

women play as managers, leaders and defenders of natural resources and agents of change in safeguarding the environment.”

In the years not only since the 2022 recognition, but also since the Declaration, we continue to see adverse impacts on women and girls as a result of environmental degradation. While this has been highlighted to us by partners in various countries throughout the world, we note two examples from the Asia-Pacific region.

The economy of the Solomon Islands is heavily dependent on its logging industry, which has been acknowledged by the Government as currently being practiced at an unsustainable rate and will have a “hindering effect on the country’s sustainable future.” In February 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reasserted not only the importance of protecting the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, but also the need for the State to ensure that logging activities “do not adversely affect the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights of local communities,” and for the provision of “effective remedies against such abuses.” These and other impacts are in part due to a lack of respect for the meaningful participation and consent of local communities regarding logging plans and operations, as well as a lack of monitoring and enforcement of laws by government authorities.

Although the negative impacts of logging on the enjoyment of human rights are felt by both men and women in Solomon Islands, women and girls are disproportionately affected, while receiving the least benefits. Women are marginalized at all stages of the decision-making process, from the Timber Rights Hearings to Environmental-Social Impacts Assessments, as well as benefit-sharing negotiations between landowners and companies.

Logging activities have other broad impacts on women's lives and reinforce gender inequity in rural areas. A report by the World Bank found that women are disproportionately affected by logging and mining activities, in particular where women have a limited role in negotiations on land. Land deals "rarely reflect women's land use, including for livelihoods and for child nutrition," and land disputes lead to increased conflict and other negative impacts borne disproportionately by women.

In West Papua, palm oil plantations have expanded at the fastest rate in Indonesia, the world's largest palm oil producer, with an estimated worth of USD 1.9 billion per year.²³ As a result of this industry, mining and large-scale food estate projects, the deforestation rate in West Papua has been higher (1.4 million hectare) than the national rate (around 325 thousand hectare).²⁴ Such activities not only disregard the principle of free, prior and informed consent, but also in many instances are carried out either by manipulation or by intimidation or violence against the local indigenous people. The deforestation has had a direct impact on indigenous Papuan women, who have had far-reaching responsibilities in the maintenance of gardens, planting and harvesting, sago trees (a main staple food), hunting animals for food and collecting herbs in their customary forests.

States should recognize and implement the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in their national legal systems, as well as policies and plans related to climate change as underscored in General Recommendation no. 37 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). We reiterate and note the call by the CEDAW in its General Recommendation no. 39 for States to "Respect, protect and

expand the rights of Indigenous Peoples to land, territories, resources and a safe, clean, sustainable and healthy environment as a precondition for preserving the culture of Indigenous women and girls.”

As underscored by the examples of the Solomon Islands and West Papua, business operations and activities may have adverse impacts on human rights and may disproportionately impact women and girls. States must fulfill their obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights, including by ensuring that businesses operating or domiciled in their jurisdiction respect human rights in their activities and operations, including their supply chains. States should accordingly ensure that businesses implement human rights and environmental due diligence processes, and that special attention is given to marginalized and vulnerable groups in these processes, including women and girls.

Violence against Women

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action also details the scope and impacts of violence against women. While these issues persist, we call attention again to the worldwide spike in violence during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the UN Secretary-General’s call for a domestic violence ‘ceasefire.’ Although the pandemic was an extraordinary period in world history, the rise in violence against women highlighted that underlying conditions to women’s inequality – that manifest in violence and other impacts – are ever present. Indeed, our partners continue to document various forms of violence and abuse against women in diverse contexts.

We also note violence against and abuse of women linked to business activities. In a field mission to the Solomon Islands, Franciscans International was informed of allegations of sexual exploitation occurring in areas of logging concessions, as a result of encounters between men working in the logging areas and local women and girls. In addition, the presence of logging activities has created a situation where the sudden increase of salaries of local men involved in the logging industry resulted in the increased consumption of alcohol, which fuels patriarchal acts of violence against women, including domestic violence.

Several women informed us that girls as young as 13 or 14 years old are married off to much older men in the logging camp sites in exchange for financial promises to their families, such as repairing the roofs of their houses. As many of these girls are underage, these relationships may constitute sexual abuse. Many girls impregnated by the loggers are later left as single mothers and do not receive any paternity support, especially once the loggers leave the area. Many girls are also given away as “house girls”; this is an ambiguous term as the actual services given to the loggers is unclear and the girls are more vulnerable to sexual abuse or to working long hours without pay.

A report on the gendered effects of corporate logging in Malaita Island found that women in the region experienced sexual exploitation. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women reported that the increased number of men working for logging companies in Solomon Islands had created a “market” for sexual services and had also resulted in cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. The UN Special Rapporteur stated that the problem is also prompted by poverty and “is rendered possible due to a lack of awareness

regarding commercial and sexual exploitation among the communities and the lack of monitoring of these camp sites by labor and environmental authorities.”

We also received information from the communities in Kolombangara Island, where several local girls were allegedly “sold” by their parents as sexual workers to logging workers, resulting in several pregnancies. FI was told by one mother of her concern over her daughter’s well-being, “there is security on the log pond, but they don’t pay attention to the girls who are roaming around or walking to the logging camp. They are paid to protect the machines, so that is what they do, but nobody protects our girls.”

Women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence in Solomon Islands still face challenges in pursuing justice. Efforts are needed to enable women to access the formal justice system and to support survivors of violence. This is especially the case in rural areas where logging operations take place; since there are less trained care providers (social workers), police are less likely to be trained to handle abuse cases, and there are few formal justice options.

The issue of access to justice for victims of violence and abuse has also been raised by partners in Uganda, where a UN Women 2020 survey found that 95% of women and girls have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. This reality exists even though the State has an extensive legal framework aimed at preventing and combatting violence against women. This includes the Domestic Violence Act, which provides for the protection and relief of victims of domestic violence. The law establishes criminal sanctions for perpetrators and sets up procedures and guidelines to be followed by the court regarding the prosecution of perpetrators and the compensation of victims. Our partners have underscored the

limitations of the Act, including that victims of domestic violence are still confronted with various obstacles in their access to justice, such as court fees and other related costs that they may incur. Partners have also emphasized the absence of accountability as a result of a lack of systematic prosecution of accused perpetrators. The persistence of patriarchal social and cultural norms often prevent women from reporting any abuse to the police, and they are often instead blamed for the violence they face. There is also a lack of awareness of law enforcement on existing legal provisions.

We again underscore the need for national legislation in regard to women's equality and issues related to the protection of women, and access to justice in cases of violence and abuse. This includes States fulfilling their obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and other instruments.