



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
15 November 2020

Original: English

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### Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fifth session

15–26 March 2021

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

### Statement submitted by All India Women’s Education Fund Association (AIWEFA), 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

The All India Women's Education Fund Association (AIWEFA) was founded in 1929 for the empowerment of women. Education was recognized as the catalyst for change, and the organization founded the home science college, Lady Irwin College, in 1932 to impart a scientific temper to women's education.

In 1995, after representing at the historic United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, where 189 countries signed onto the Beijing Platform for Action, the organization recognized that greater gender equality in the political sphere could drive higher investments in women's economic empowerment.

In 1996, in accordance with the 73rd and 74th. Constitutional Amendment Act which envisaged one-third of the total elected seats and positions in rural and urban local elected bodies be reserved for women, the organization held 'Women in Rural Leadership' training and seminars in the North India states for elected women representatives. At that time about one million women in rural areas alone were estimated to emerge as leaders at grassroots levels. The objective of the programme was to explore the role of women in local administration and develop an understanding of the social, economic and political processes which foster women's participation in local government.

This was followed in 1998 with the 'Women on the March' conclave where South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) representatives sought to integrate best practices in the region for the empowerment of women.

Recent data from the Economic Survey, states that today there are over 1.3 million elected women representatives. They constitute 44.2 per cent of the total elected representatives and women head 43 per cent of the governance bodies across the country. It is expected that these elected women representatives would be the key agents for transformational economic, environmental and social change in India. They would bring their experience in the governance of civil society to make the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice, and thus influence the decision-making process, planning, implementation and evaluation of various developmental programmes at the local level.

Although local governance mechanisms have provided a much-needed opportunity to women, by and large, today, as twenty five years ago, the colloquially known Sarpanch Pati or Head Husband is a fact of life, and real power is usurped by these husbands of elected women representatives, depriving women of any meaningful gains. Without a strong political background, it has become difficult for a woman to climb the ladder in the face of an entrenched patriarchal system alongwith, prevailing cultural attitudes and other factors such as domestic responsibilities, unpaid care work and others.

Change, though slow, is taking place, and the need of the hour is to make these women aware of their rights to better exercise their powers.

When Sumitra, a farm woman from village Tirpadi, or Dayawati of village Daboda in the Farrukhnagar district of Haryana state, India, installed nethouses for early cropping of nursery-grown vegetables, used improved quality seeds for profuse flowering, adopted efficient sowing methods to conserve water and energy, used innovative technology like the hand-held wheel hoe to reduce drudgery, added value to raw cowdung fuel by converting it into chemical-free manure through vermin compost pits, introduced hardy, high-yielding and more nutritive fodder seeds and increased awareness for energy resource management by spreading awareness for biogas plants – they became the path-breaking leaders of the 100–125 women in their

own and surrounding villages of Daboda, Tirpadi, Basunda, Kheda and Khurrampur adopted by the organisation.

At successive sessions of the Commission of Status on Women, the organization has documented that women from South America to Africa and Asia, have voiced the need for sustainable livelihood opportunities near their homes, easy access to finances to set up small enterprises, easy forward and backward linkages to sustain their business initiatives, as they were not getting fulfilled to the required extent with the value change approach.

Keeping in mind this ‘vocal for local’ call for off-farm employment, the organization identified and created awareness of a low capita investment, sustainable entrepreneurship template that touches the lives of nearly one million people and households in India and has the potential to accelerate the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Development.

Women comprise 64.9 per cent of this cottage industry, as they spin and weave the zero carbon footprint, low water consuming, climate friendly khadi cloth in the environs of their own homes or in well ventilated sheds of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission. The needs of the vast rural sector are met through this sustainable employment, and the organization has taken this home grown, off farm, cottage industry to the world stage, through fashion shows, discussions and exhibitions.

The organization has already created a “Sustainable Development Goals engagement” template which directly impacts eight Goals and has a spillover effect on others. These have been identified as important themes for the industry and its sphere of influence. The “Goals Readiness Snapshot” for the khadi fabric retail and apparel industry provides a template for development. It takes into consideration an overview of the State’s political will to enable gender-sensitive social protection systems that not only safeguard human rights but also standardize the quality of and access to goods and services and sustainable infrastructure. This in turn, ensures a dignified standard of living, and lays the foundation for the empowerment of women and girls. Economic empowerment has also been found to be a safeguard in the fight against violence.

The Khadi and Village Industries Commission provides for a well designed social protection system and quality public services, natural and economic resources that are universally available, affordable and accessible to all women and girls in all contexts, regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, age, gender, marital, employment or migration status. It has inbuilt provisions for life-long learning, skill enhancement and leadership development.

The Goals reviewed at the target and indicator level identify their direct impact on the commercial, shared value and corporate responsibility activities and strategies in the khadi sector. The priorities of the Eight Goals are directly relevant to the khadi operations, business and supply chain. Climate change is recognized as a cross cutting issue, contributing to both the environmental and social impacts across supply chains.

Health, gender, inclusive growth, transport, utilities, enterprise sustainability, food and energy security, technical infrastructure, labour markets, innovation, research development, entrepreneurship, public administration, business relations, safety nets are just some of the areas taken into consideration in this khadi industry entrepreneurship model.

The khadi fabric has completed a century of its existence in India, and the Khadi Village and Industries Commission was founded in 1957. This low cost sustainable entrepreneurship model that women could follow in the global south nations is time tested and relevant today as it was so many years ago. It is a best practice that nations

could follow to meet the accelerated decade of growth required to meet the 2030 Agenda for Development.

As the COVID-19 pandemic requires social distancing and working from home, the khadi entrepreneurs already work from homes and raw material and marketing linkages are provided. Awareness of the Khadi Model in India and the United Nations has mobilized leading fashion designers adopt clusters to revive traditional crafts and motifs and support the women weavers and spinners.

Combining academic strength through conferences, seminars, workshops and publications with sound implementation strategies, the organization has adopted a holistic, silo-free Sustainable Development Goals framework while maintaining open communication channels between academic institutions and field programmes.

Conferences like the United Nations collaborative “Transformation of women from education to full employment”, the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises “Khadi Goes Global” initiative or global south campaigns like “A world we women want” have all raised awareness on the need to promote an enabling environment to foster an entrepreneurial spirit and facilitate women’s access to finance and credit, information and resources, collection and consolidation of data on gender outcomes of microcredit and other programmes. ‘Khadi Goes Global’ could spearhead National Policy and Plan of Action to address women’s unpaid and care work and ensure universal and equitable right to public services and amenities. The organization works to strengthen gender equality outcomes within existing flagship programmes on livelihoods, employment and social protection. Entrepreneurship development and training through ‘Khadi Goes Global’ could accelerate the 2030 Agenda for Development that include the Beijing Platform for Action core principles of gender equality, development and peace.

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