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Statement submitted by the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, 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

The empowerment of Bedouin women from the Naqab by raising awareness, developing their knowledge of their human rights, and providing skills training used in engagement actions carried out by the women, contributes significantly to the participating women playing a leading role in the development of their communities and creates a strong base for their meaningful participation at a local and regional levels.

The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality presents the following written statement to the sixty fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women addressing “Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls”.

The rate of progress towards implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, agreed upon by 189 Member States in 1995 to “take all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the girl child ” is advancing significantly slower than anticipated.

The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality has been advocating for Arab Bedouin women’s and girls’ rights to education, employment, and participation in all social and civil arenas in the Naqab for more two decades, in collaboration with non-government organizations and local stakeholders. Nevertheless, women and girls of all ages continue to face unprecedented challenges to education, health, employment, and effective social and civil participation.

The Bedouin residents of the Negev/Naqab are an indigenous minority with a distinct way of life and other special characteristics. Members of the Bedouin community in the Negev/Naqab are also an integral part of the Arab Palestinian minority, as well as citizens of the State of Israel. The Negev/Naqab's Bedouin consists of 270,000 citizens, residing in three forms of settlements: seven government-planned townships, eleven villages recognized by the State, and 35 villages that the State refuses to recognize. All Bedouin residents suffer from wide-spread discrimination and violations of their human rights and are, in fact, marginalized from mainstream Israeli society.

According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, by 2030, the Bedouin population in the Negev/Naqab is expected to number about 400,000. As of 2018, more than 28% of the Bedouin population (around 86,000 people) live in unrecognized villages, although civil society organizations estimate that the number is closer to 100,000 people. These villages do not appear on any official maps and the State of Israel does not provide most of them with basic services such as healthcare and educational facilities. All the unrecognized villages lack infrastructure including connection to the national electricity grid, running water, paved roads and sewage disposal systems. Their residents have no representation in the various local governmental bodies, and some are not eligible to register to participate in municipal elections. Furthermore, because of non-recognition, the building of permanent structures in these villages is illegal and can lead to heavy fines and demolitions.

Unemployment in Bedouin communities is high, and the employment rate for Bedouin women is approximately 22% as of 2015 data (10% lower than all Arab women in Israel). Moreover, a five year governmental program to increase employment among Bedouin women

in the Naqab excludes nearly all citizens living in the unrecognized Bedouin villages, especially women. These women are regularly denied access to basic State services, which makes it almost impossible for them to take significant part in the labour force. The short supply of job opportunities in Bedouin communities, the severe shortage of local commerce, craft and industrial parks, low quality education and dropout rates, and lack of daycare facilities are all major barriers to the integration of Bedouin women in the labour market.

In this challenging context, Bedouin women are further restrained by patriarchal social norms within their own community. As of 2015 data, only 22% of Bedouin women have completed high school, 84% are unemployed, while 18.5% live in polygamous marriages. In such an oppressive situation it is not surprising that the representation of Bedouin women in public life, even within their own community is minimal at best. To build independent lives, Bedouin women must overcome obstacles including gender-based prejudice and discrimination from within their communities.

Although 80% of Arab Bedouin women who complete a degree in higher education are successful in the job market, dimensional gaps are defined by the scarcity of wholly educational opportunities. This manifests in an absence of women in political positions and decision-making bodies at the local and national levels, acute disparity in public budget allocations and blatant gender-based discrimination in the legal system. The lack of equal participation in political life and decision making of Bedouin women constitutes a real and immediate threat to their personal status and security and prevents genuine democratic processes to settle. Owing to a combination of state discrimination and negligence and

ingrained patriarchal mores within their own society, Bedouin women are the most vulnerable and marginalized group in Israeli society.

As for Arab Bedouin citizens living in the Naqab area, inaccessibility of polling stations has had a decisive impact on the relatively low voter turnout among Bedouin citizens, in particular Bedouin women. Bedouin who live in unrecognized villages are categorized by state authorities according to their tribal affiliation. This means that they may not be able to vote in the nearest polling station, but rather must travel between 5-50 km to the Bedouin townships to participate in the election process. Sidreh Association, advocating for political awareness among Bedouin women in the Naqab, initiated a project aimed at mobilizing Bedouin citizens to the polling stations so they can exercise their basic right to vote, especially women living in unrecognized villages. The project resulted in a 20% increase in voting for women from unrecognized villages – a significant achievement in promoting women’s rights and the community.

Successful experiences of participatory processes, led by the aforementioned Sidreh organization, have built leadership and engagement, enabling local women to advocate and raise awareness of women’s rights to ensure equality in the community, achieve access to political participation at the local level, and push for gender mainstreaming in community decision-making. As a result of these actions, the female Bedouin participants themselves became agents of change for the community, building their sense of empowerment and the impact of change for other local women. To ensure as a wide a spread as possible of this impact, Bedouin women and men were involved in the planning of various activities.

Through Women Led Community Centers and the Assembly of Bedouin Women, created as a result of the project's activities, many of the participating women are leading their own initiatives in support of increased participation in public life. Through this work, the message that the women are spreading reaches beyond the communities and decision makers targeted in the project and has the potential to significantly enhance the situation of Bedouin women in the Negev.

The project demonstrated that Bedouin women have potential to be agents for social change with in their community, with 230 women gaining agency and rights-awareness, and 100 female leaders further developing their leadership skills and gaining a platform to participate in public life.

The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality calls on the State of Israel in particular and governments in general to take collective responsibility to:

- Facilitate indigenous women's democratic inclusion by addressing the significant barriers that hinder their participation and provide them with tools and support that will encourage inclusion.

- Integrate the voices, perspectives, needs and rights of indigenous women in public discourse on the local, regional and national levels.

- Promote policies that increase indigenous women's inclusion in democratic processes and that increase their safety to act independently in public life, including greater enforcement of established laws to protect women from violence and prevent oppression.

- Invest in positions of the local Authorities for the Advancement of the Status of the Indigenous Woman, to promote programs and training for the advancement of women

- Invest in financial literacy training for women at a young age.
- Collaborate with all stakeholders and contribute their full support for a more significant impact toward eliminating gender-based violence.
- Challenge established barriers to women's economic empowerment and participation in positions of leadership and decision-making

The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality is committed to the success of the Sustainable Development Goals and implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in collaboration with all stakeholders, governments, academia, and non-government organizations.