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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 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.



Statement

Feminist research challenges

For over 35 years, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women has been creating knowledge, nurturing feminist research and making its information accessible for public advocacy and education. This submission focuses on some of the feminist research challenges in addressing the theme of the session, “Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls”.

In its review of research data for its new fact sheet on violence against women in Canada, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women found that the most recent data, from the 2009 General Social Survey on Victimization¹, reveal that in the previous five years, approximately 6 per cent of women were victims of violence in a spousal relationship. Women experience spousal homicide at a rate three times higher than men. A rich source of data, issued in a report of the Native Women’s Association of Canada,² documented 582 cases of missing and murdered aboriginal women in Canada. Other studies have found that aboriginal women experienced more serious acts of violence and were more likely to be killed by their partner than non-aboriginal women. Women with disabilities also experience violence, and research has found that the violence they experience is substantively different from other forms of violence; it is most often perpetrated by someone responsible for their care and in a position of trust.

The most comprehensive Canadian survey to date on the subject of violence against women is still the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey. That study found that 51 per cent of Canadian women experienced at least one incident of sexual or physical assault after the age of 16. It is indicative of Canada’s failure to take violence against women seriously that it has neither provided the funds nor the skills to update this comprehensive national survey in the last 20 years.

In our research on violence against women for this submission, including a review of scholarly literature, human rights reports and research, and community-based findings and outcomes, we hoped to produce a clear and consistent understanding of how to prevent and eradicate all forms of violence against women. We examined these three different sources because we have found from our experience that the most thorough and effective knowledge, leading to improved policy and practice, comes from the combination of different sources of knowledge, using an intersectional framework and a holistic feminist analysis. We were surprised to find so little focus on elimination or eradication of violence against women as opposed to simply describing the phenomenon of violence against women. If we are to move beyond simply naming violence against women to actually preventing and eliminating it, as feminists we need to know how this important question being addressed by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2013 fell off the feminist agenda and what we need to do to reinstate it.

Both the academic and the public focus on violence against women in Canada is relatively recent, and it initially was denied as a subject of public concern. In the 1970s, when the women’s movement began to face violence against women as an

¹ Statistics Canada, Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, catalogue No. 85-224-X (Ottawa, Minister of Industry, January 2011).

² Voices of our Sisters in Spirit: A Report to Families and Communities, 2009.

immediate and inescapable problem, women tried to address it by providing shelters, rape crisis centres and sexual assault centres, at first informally and later in more professional and structured ways supported by the State. Unfortunately, this led to an approach aimed at getting money to and for these activities, and thus to “needs assessments” to “prove” that there really was a documented social problem that required significant funding support for the women in crisis. While this approach has led to more services being available for women in crisis, it has weakened the analysis so that it focuses simply on what is called “domestic violence”. This creates separations between women “victims” or “survivors” and other women, thus obscuring the fact that all women are subjected to systemic gender-based violence. It also limits and individualizes the “problem” of violence and distracts us from understanding the underlying structures, cultures and social mechanisms that normalize violence in the contemporary world. As long as we work and think on this important but partial level, we cannot truly aim at preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women.

In Canada we point to the killing of 14 engineering students in the so-called “Montreal Massacre” in 1989 because they were women, and to the numbers of missing and murdered aboriginal women both as avoidable tragedies and also as pointers to the structural nature of situations that call out for comparative holistic feminist research that includes social contexts, from global through local.

The process of continuing to define new types of violence against women is not yet complete in Canada. As the Canadian Federation of University Women’s submission to the Commission on the Status of Women in 2013 highlights, “non-State torture”, specifically sexualized non-State torture, inflicted in the private or domestic sphere against women and girls needs to be named and recognized as a Canadian problem in need of solution. As early as 1993, women were identified by reports as enduring non-State actor torture, including sexualized torture, as children. The children involved at that time are still not able to seek legal redress because there is still no law against this type of torture. even though Canadian officials do not deny its presence.

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women sees the three issues briefly described above as integrally connected. What the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women aims to do is to link these and many other issues in an overarching understanding of the sexist and patriarchal basis of all forms of violence against women. At that point, as a society, we will be able to develop and implement policies, practices and cultural awareness that actually prevent and eliminate violence and, crucially, destroy the patterns of thinking that make it possible.

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women is using its feminist intersectional analysis to emphasize the need to reverse the following three trends:

- The growing inequality of various kinds, including economic inequality, which increases disparities between women in vulnerable circumstances and other populations. At the same time, violence against women is also increasing, especially within marginalized groups, as are inequalities between money-driven research and research in the public interest and for the common good;

- The erosion of democracy, especially in developed countries like Canada, with its impact on women, particularly women in vulnerable circumstances, and the growing loss of political space;
- The absence of women's equality from national policy agendas in developed countries. In the last few years in Canada we have seen the abolition (without debate) of laws that have supported the advancement of women, the denial of funding to women's organizations for the purposes of research and "advocacy", and the dismantling of social protection infrastructures at a time of ever more severe austerity measures.

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, in common with other feminists and feminist organizations, highlights the fact that societies (including Canada) owe substantial debts to women for their sustaining of life and social relations without financial compensation. Commodification of women, of women's bodies and their sexuality, together with violations of women's bodily integrity and sex trafficking, are troubling.

Canada's deteriorating support of women and women's equality during initial efforts at restructuring around 1980 was accelerated in the mid-1990s, again in 2006, and further in 2011/12. The increasingly unequal, militarized, corporate-driven, anti-democratic, environmentally unsustainable, toxic environment is infecting the seeds of life itself on our planet. At the same time, resources are being withdrawn from women's organizations, contributing to the undermining of community and social vitality. The more intense and legitimized violence, bullying, greed and hierarchy that the world has been experiencing for over 30 years have helped to reveal the need for new paradigms and values that would recreate the ideals of equality, development and peace. Aboriginal women, with an alternative, holistic, grounded indigenous paradigm, are well placed to lead such a discussion.
