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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 Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 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

The Saskatchewan First Nations Women's Commission is comprised of First Nations women elected as Chief or as a Councillor of one of the 74 First Nations in Saskatchewan, Canada. These Chiefs also sit as members of the Legislative Assembly of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations Chiefs. The Women's Commission is recognized by all Chiefs in Saskatchewan as the political voice for the advancement of the rights of First Nations women and children and is committed to improving quality of life for First Nations women, children and families.

The intent of the present statement is to bring forth the tragedy of colonization, oppression, assimilation and dislocation of First Nations women and girls and illustrate the need for immediate action by the Government of Canada, First Nations governments and the United Nations. The terms "First Nations" and "indigenous" are used interchangeably in the present statement when referring to the first peoples of North America. The term "aboriginal" is used when statistical and other studies refer to First Nations, Metis and Inuit women and children.

Historically, First Nations women have held very influential positions of authority and have been actively involved in matters of governance, land and property. First Nations women held unique roles and responsibilities within their Nations and to the Creator. These roles and responsibilities varied among the diverse Nations but there was a common thread throughout — women were respected, valued and honoured and were viewed as sacred human beings.

Colonization in Canada created cultural, social, economic and political dislocation of the First Nations. The role of women changed dramatically with the introduction of the Indian Act, a piece of federal Government legislation that is recognized as assimilationist, racist and genocidal. For over a century, the Indian Act included discriminatory membership rules, excluded women from the governing process, as only males were allowed to vote or become elected leaders, outlawed First Nations ceremonies and resulted in the imposition of residential schools throughout Canada. Residential schools shattered families and traditional parenting roles were drastically diminished. Indian Agents were dispatched to First Nations communities and wielded absolute authority over all aspects of life on reserves for decades. The oppressive Indian Act enforced by Indian Agents, combined with widespread abuse of children in residential schools, led to social, political and economic deterioration in First Nations communities. The social breakdown has led to destruction of families through outright violence, including lateral violence. The most obvious indicators of the impact of colonization, oppression and assimilation are seen in the significant number of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada, along with the disproportionate number of children in care and women in the sex trade and in correctional facilities.

Current socioeconomic conditions present a grave picture with startling outcomes, including an ongoing struggle faced by women and children as illustrated below:

- Victimization of aboriginal women is close to triple that of non-aboriginal women. Statistics Canada released a report in 2011 on victimization of aboriginal women in Canada, which found that in 2009 close to 67,000, or 13 per cent of all women aged 15 years and older stated that they had been violently victimized. Aboriginal women were almost three times more likely

than non-aboriginal women to report having been a victim of a violent crime. This was true regardless of whether the violence occurred between strangers or acquaintances, or within a spousal relationship.

- The majority of aboriginal female victims are under the age of 35. The 2009 Statistics Canada study indicates that many aboriginal female victims of crime are relatively young. Women between 15 and 34 years old represented close to two thirds (63 per cent) of female aboriginal victims, while they accounted for just under half (47 per cent) of the female aboriginal population aged 15 years or older. Similarly, the Native Women's Association of Canada reports that 77 per cent of missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls in Saskatchewan are under the age of 31, compared with 55 per cent nationally.
- A high percentage of women and girls are missing in Saskatchewan. In 2010, the Native Women's Association of Canada was able to identify through their Sisters in Spirit database 61 missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls in Saskatchewan, which accounted for just over 10 per cent of cases nationally.
- In Saskatchewan 96 per cent of missing and murdered women are mothers. Information on missing and murdered women compiled by the Native Women's Association of Canada indicates that almost all — 96 per cent — of the missing and murdered women in Saskatchewan are mothers.
- A disproportionate number of First Nations children are in care. Approximately 16,675 First Nations children in Saskatchewan live in poverty, representing 40 per cent of all First Nations children in the province. The Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth also reported that 63 per cent of children in care, within the Saskatoon Service Canada Centre alone, are First Nations children.
- Exploitation of aboriginal women leads to violence. Data gathered by the Native Women's Association of Canada in Saskatchewan indicate that the percentage of women and girls killed by a "John" or someone with whom they were in a criminal relationship is four times higher than the national average (8 per cent compared with 2 per cent). In presenting this data, the Native Women's Association of Canada clearly stated that women involved in prostitution were extremely vulnerable and experienced high levels of violence; the study emphasized that prostitution was not a cause of violence; rather many women were forced into prostitution in the context of limited options and after experiencing multiple forms of trauma and violence.

The crisis of missing and murdered women in Canada has garnered significant media attention due, in large part, to activism by grass-roots movements with leadership from the Native Women's Association of Canada, support from various organizations across the country and the First Nations Women's Commission in Saskatchewan. There is no doubt that this issue has had devastating effects on women, children, families and entire communities. It demonstrates one of the most extreme effects of colonization, oppression and assimilation efforts. Canada must acknowledge the systemic violence and human rights abuses that successive Governments have perpetrated against First Nations people and must understand and acknowledge its current responsibilities and the impact that policies and actions continue to have on First Nations people, in particular women and children.

Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.

The Government of Canada continues to impose legislative and policy changes on First Nations people in direct contravention of article 19 of the Declaration, including Bill S-2, Family Homes on Reserves and Matrimonial Interests or Rights Act, and the Indian status provisions of the Indian Act. The Government of Canada continues to impose a legal definition of an “Indian” on all First Nations people, as has been the case since the 1850s and as recently as 2011. Because of the Indian status provisions in the Indian Act, the federal Government requires disclosure of the status of both parents. Only in Canada is identification of paternity needed to ensure that the rights of the child are honoured. Forcing women to identify the father of their child and have him present to sign birth documents in order to maintain the “Indian” status of the child perpetuates violence against women, especially given the high incidence of spousal violence against First Nations women. The rights of many of our First Nations children with single mothers are in jeopardy because of these provisions in the legislation. The Government of Canada has a duty to right the wrongs that have occurred because of social engineering and damaging legislation, not perpetuate them.

In conclusion, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations wishes to submit the following recommendations on behalf of the Saskatchewan First Nations Women’s Commission with regard to violence against women and girls:

1. That the Government of Canada provide resources to First Nations governments and representative organizations to engage their respective communities and peoples for the purpose of developing a First Nations Citizenship Act that would meet the needs of First Nations to control their own citizenship as an inherent right to self-determination.
2. That the Government of Canada provide resources to First Nations governments and representative organizations to enable them to develop comprehensive strategies and action plans aimed at preventing violence against women and girls in First Nations communities and urban areas.
3. Furthermore, that any actions taken by the Government of Canada with respect to membership, citizenship and ending violence against First Nations women and girls be undertaken within the parameters of article 19 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
4. That an inquiry be conducted under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women into violence against indigenous women and girls in Canada, as very serious violations have occurred and continue to occur.