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to the special session of the General Assembly entitled**

**“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for
the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by International Council on Social Welfare, 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 International Council on Social Welfare, one of the oldest non-governmental organizations with a global reach, promotes social development, social welfare and social justice worldwide. Promotion of gender equality for girls and women of all ages is one of our priorities. Given that older women remain particularly disadvantaged and excluded in many societies, we believe that the international community should not overlook such an important aspect as social protection of older women when undertaking the review of Beijing Platform of Action, and even more when the post-2015 development framework is discussed. Twenty years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action the international community still has to address specific needs of older women in society and address the existing gaps. The adoption of a life course approach in development strategies together with well-conceived anti-poverty measures and other social protection schemes helps to promote gender equality and social inclusion. The International Council on Social Welfare considers it crucial to address the following policy concerns in future deliberations at the international level:

Population Ageing: The world-wide demographic revolution in longevity continues into the 21st century against a backdrop of lower birth rates in many countries, with the projection that by 2050 the number of the world's citizens 15 years and younger will equal those age 60 years and older for the first time in history. Developing countries are experiencing a demographic transition even more dramatically than developed countries with developed social protection schemes available for the old and disabled. Today two in three people age 60 years and above live in developing countries and by 2050, almost 4 in 5 will live in the developing world. How to protect the vulnerable in a rapidly ageing world is a crucial question for policymakers.

Gender Disparities: Gender differences and disparities remain marked for older adults in all countries of the world. Starting from birth, females in many societies have less status, less access to education, less choice in marriage and childbearing, less access to paid work and employment in the formal economy compared to men. They are less likely to inherit property, more likely to be widowed, and more apt to be disadvantaged by harmful traditional practices. Women are more likely than men to be unpaid caregivers of children and grandchildren, spouses and other relatives, and in turn less likely to be able to count on their spouses for care in old age. Women in older age are more likely than men to experience both absolute and relative poverty, and social exclusion. Social exclusion of women in society is related to a multitude of factors including marital, health and employment status.

Growing Inequality and persisting income insecurity: Growing inequality within and between nations plagues societies in a number of ways. For older people in both developed and developing countries increasing levels of poverty and income inequality, declining health and pervasive discrimination based on age serve as barriers to the full enjoyment of their human rights. Older women are particularly vulnerable to poverty and social insecurity. Due to changing family structures, older people's lives become less socially secure. They are being housed and cared for less frequently by younger family members than before. Due to gendered income discrimination patterns throughout their lives, women accumulate less individual wealth and individual rights to income security transfers (such as pension

entitlements) and hence remain much more vulnerable in old age. As a result, older women face multiple disadvantages related to both gender and age.

Gender Differences in Employment and Poverty: The impact of gender differences and inequalities in education and employment opportunities increases through every stage of an individual's life accumulating and hitting hardest in old age, and as a result women are more likely to be poor in old age in both developed and developing countries. Older women and poverty are connected for many structural reasons and also are affected in different ways related to marital status, age in life course, race, ethnicity, linguistic background, ability, sexual orientation, citizenship, caste and class. Women who live alone are more likely to be in poverty than women who are married or live with extended families. Women are also more likely than men to have gaps in their employment histories due to child birth and child care as well as caregiving for older relatives and for spouses as they age. This translates into disadvantages in retirement income that can be exacerbated by the death of a (male) spouse and loss of retirement income in his name.

Women are paid low wages for “women's work”, and by and large they are expected to do for free such work as caring for and teaching children, nursing the sick, preparing food, cleaning, and serving others. Women in developing countries who migrate to other countries to work in the informal economy, for example, as domestic workers, can find themselves without access to pensions or work as they age. No society so far has found a fair means to compensate women for their reproductive work that is of pivotal importance for the continued existence of any society.

Gendered Social Protection Schemes: While many older adults in both developed and developing countries remain in the paid workforce, eventually the demands of the jobs they perform may exceed their ability to perform needed tasks. In developed countries social security and pension schemes along with savings replace earned income for many older workers and in both developed and developing countries families may provide needed economic support for older members. While women are entering the labour force in greater numbers and staying longer over their life course, gender differences still persist in labour force participation, distribution of paid and unpaid work between genders, employment conditions and earnings. Especially in developing countries, women more often than men work in poorly paid jobs that lack social protection and are often found in the informal sector. In developing countries informal employment makes up over half of total non-agricultural employment. Informal employment usually means that there are no or only low pension entitlements unless there are non-contributory systems of significant reach.

Gender and Family Caregiving: Unpaid work burden can negatively affect older women in both developed and developing countries. While the majority of caregiving is provided by women to family members, the long term care system both mitigates the burden on women family caregivers and also provides needed in-home care to care dependent older adults who live alone. Women are also more likely than men to be unpaid caregivers of children and grandchildren, spouses and other relatives, and in turn less likely to be able to count on their spouses for care in old age.

There are increasing numbers of skipped generation households with older people and dependent children, the result of HIV and AIDS and the rural to urban migration of working age adults. In countries where HIV and AIDS has decimated

the working age population, grandparents are left with no adult children to care for them in old age, and instead are providing caregiving to orphaned grandchildren and other dependent relatives. The impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on older women in Africa include greater care responsibilities, violation of housing and property rights, increased exposure to violence, and increased vulnerability to poverty.

In some parts of the world older women are the targets of community vengeance through accusations of practicing witchcraft, and disadvantaged by inheritance laws that prevent them from remaining in their homes if divorced or widowed. The cumulative effects of such practices are poverty and social exclusion.

The International Council on Social Welfare considers social protection of all people as a crucial step in creating a “society for all” identified as one of the core objectives by the World Summit for Social Development convened in Copenhagen twenty years ago. The new impetus to the efforts aimed at promoting social protection worldwide was provided when Recommendation 202 on national floors of social protection was unanimously adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 101st session in 2012. There is increasing recognition of the fact that the implementation of nationally defined social protection floors may be regarded as an important tool in the fight against poverty and inequality of all people, including older women. The social protection floors is essential for preventing marginalization of older women in society and securing their rights. A rights-based approach aimed at protecting women, men and children from risks and vulnerabilities helps to sustain their well-being throughout the lifecycle, guaranteeing access to health care and other basic services, as well as at least a basic level of income security. The International Council on Social Welfare has supported that initiative since its inception by the United Nation in 2009. Joining forces with more than 80 other Non-Governmental Organizations, the International Council on Social Welfare formed a Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors, which has an increasingly important role to play in shaping the debate, raising awareness, achieving a national consensus on Social Protection Floors and making economic order world over more people-oriented and humane.

We strongly agree that “no one should be left behind” and urge the Commission to consider the following recommendations:

- The “Data revolution” advocated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations should be extended to detailed poverty data (including localized data gathering) and disaggregation by age and gender for all Member States of the United Nations;
- Anti-poverty measures for older women should begin with girls and continue throughout the life course, ensuring adequate nutrition and health care including reproductive health and violence prevention, education, elimination of discrimination in access to employment opportunities, social protection schemes across the life course, and a fair recognition for unpaid work including caregiving;
- Governments should consistently work to reduce inequality in income, and improve opportunities for girls and women of all ages;
- Social Protection Floors initiative should be embraced by all countries, adapted to specific national circumstances and consistently implemented at the national level.