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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”**

Statement submitted by Canadian Labour Congress, 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

Canada has the means and institutional capacity to ensure that women and men live equal lives. Yet, the past five years have been marked by a slowdown in progress towards achieving the goals set forth in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Gender inequality has persisted or worsened in a number of the critical areas of concern, including violence against women, women's economic security and the human rights of aboriginal women and girls.

Current federal public policy is also hampered by a lack of systematic gender-based analysis and research on gender inequality, resulting in policies and programmes that fail to meet the specific needs of women.

Violence against women

Rates of sexual assault and intimate partner violence have remained persistently high in Canada, with 1.8 million Canadians reporting having experienced one of those forms of violence in the past five years.

Current federal policies to address violence against women are largely non-gender specific. They include the Family Violence Initiative, the Federal Victims Strategy and the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking. None of these policies address violence against women exclusively.

The federal Government does not have a stand-alone policy on intimate partner violence or sexual assault, nor does Canada have a national action plan to address violence against women.

The issue of violence is particularly acute with respect to aboriginal women and girls in Canada, who experience violence at rates that are three-times higher than for non-aboriginal women and girls.

Researchers and human rights bodies have consistently recorded the failure of the justice system in Canada to protect aboriginal women and girls from violence, to investigate promptly and thoroughly when they have gone missing or have been murdered, to exchange information effectively between federal, provincial and territorial policing agencies and to prosecute and punish perpetrators. Recent reports by both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have pointed to evidence of a systematic pattern of neglect and mishandling of these cases by police forces.

Canadian police forces do not uniformly track the aboriginal status of homicide victims. Aboriginal and human rights organizations have stepped in to track the numbers of aboriginal women and girls who have disappeared or been murdered over the past 30 years and have uncovered disproportionately high rates of homicide.

As a result of mounting public pressure, in 2013, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police initiated a study documenting 1,181 murders and disappearances of aboriginal women and girls between 1980 and 2012. Status of Women Canada recently released a plan to address family violence and violent crimes against aboriginal women and girls. This plan has been criticized for being inadequately resourced and failing to respond to calls for an inquiry.

Violence against aboriginal women and girls is the subject of an ongoing inquiry by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

initiated under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and requested by the Native Women's Association of Canada and the Feminist Alliance for International Action. However, the federal Government has consistently opposed the growing support for a national inquiry into the violence experienced by aboriginal women and girls.

Women and health

The past five years have seen extensive cuts to federal Government support for women's health research and programming. In 2012, funding was cut for health research and service programmes carried out by a number of organizations working with aboriginal communities. In 2013, Health Canada's Women's Health Contribution Programme, which provided federal funding to a number of women's health research and policy organizations, was also closed.

Women in Canada continue to face barriers to realizing their sexual and reproductive rights. While abortion is not criminalized, access to abortion services is uneven across the country and is a particular challenge for women living in rural or remote regions. The drug mifepristone (RU-486), which could increase access to medical abortion, is currently not approved for use in Canada.

The federal Government's international policy with respect to abortion is not consistent with its domestic policy or with international norms. While the Government has contributed over 1 billion dollars in funding to its international maternal and child health initiative, it specifically precludes any funding for abortion services.

Women and the economy

The past five years have seen little change with regard to women's poverty in Canada. While 13.3 per cent of women overall live in poverty, aboriginal women and single mothers experience even higher rates, at 30 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively. These groups also experience challenges associated with unsafe housing and food insecurity.

Over the past five years, women's participation in the labour force in Canada has been stagnant. Women's employment rates remain consistently lower than those of men. For immigrant women, aboriginal women and women with disabilities, the gap in employment is even larger.

The Canadian gender pay gap is the eighth largest among the countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Women working full-time and year-round still earn 20 per cent less than men. Visible minority women, first-generation immigrant women and aboriginal women all experience even larger wage gaps.

Two thirds of women with children under the age of 6 years engage in paid work. Women spend twice the number of hours on unpaid care work as compared with men. Canada also has one of the lowest rates of access to childcare among OECD member countries. In most provinces, childcare fees now amount to as much as 40 per cent of the median income of employed women. The exception is Quebec, where there is a publicly subsidized childcare programme.

Although Canada was among the OECD countries least affected by the 2008 global financial crisis, the federal Government has adopted a range of austerity measures, including cuts to public sector jobs and services. Current projections suggest a reduction in federal public sector jobs of 8 per cent by 2016. This will have a disproportionate impact on women because the public sector has higher rates of employment for women and narrower wage gaps. Women working in the public sector earn an average of 3 per cent more than their peers in the private sector.

In 2009, the federal Government passed the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act, which redefines sex-based pay inequality as a matter to be decided with respect to market forces. In 2012, the Government passed Bill C-38, which made parallel changes to the Federal Contractors Programme that left compliance with the Employment Equity Act by federal Government contractors to the discretion of federal cabinet ministers.

Institutional mechanisms

A 2009 report by the federal Auditor General found that the Government's central agencies could not provide proof that resource allocations and programming had been subject to any assessment of their impact on women. Those departments that had performed gender-based analysis had not tracked whether or not that analysis had informed decision-making.

There is little sign that the central agencies of the federal Government have engaged in systematic gender-based analysis of their programmes and policies since 2009.

Following the Auditor General's report, the Department of Finance, in its 2010 and 2011 annual reports, signalled its commitment to conduct gender-based analysis on all new spending and tax policy proposals it presented to the Minister of Finance, where appropriate and where data were available. There has been no mention of gender-based analysis in any subsequent reports. Gender-based analysis was not mentioned in any of the Treasury Board's annual performance reports from 2009 to 2013. There is no publicly available information about what analysis has been conducted and whether that analysis has led to changes in the design of fiscal and economic policies and programmes.

Conclusion

Women in Canada are actively seeking solutions to the barriers they face. The past five years have seen new grass-roots initiatives and emerging research offering new solutions to the challenges of gender inequality. These include proposals for more coordinated and comprehensive federal policies on poverty, food security and housing — policies that would address the specific needs of women living in low-income areas and women from diverse backgrounds, including aboriginal women, women of colour, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer women and women with disabilities. Aboriginal and non-governmental organizations have turned to multilateral human rights institutions to have them address the epidemic levels of violence experienced by aboriginal women and girls. There is broad support among aboriginal and civil society organizations for a national inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women and for a well-resourced national action plan on violence against women. Public policy researchers continue to outline alternative economic policies that would address the specific needs of women in the

workforce, especially the double burden of unpaid care work carried by Canadian women. Proposals for a publicly funded national childcare plan have widespread support.

The resilience of the struggle for gender equality in Canada is evident in a number of ongoing collaborations. This statement is itself an adaptation of a comprehensive shadow report produced by 35 contributors, from 30 civil society, academic, aboriginal and human rights organizations, representing over 3 million members from every region of the country. The full report is available at www.policyalternatives.ca/beijing20.
