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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 Canadian Federation of University Women and International Federation of University Women, non-governmental organizations 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

Canadian Federation of University Women joins the voices rising worldwide on the occasion of the 20 year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to highlight the ongoing barriers impairing its full implementation, particularly in the critical areas of violence against women and girls and poverty, and their impacts on education and training.

We know that the education of women and girls is essential to the development of society; “education is a human right ... an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace” and “equality of access ... is necessary if more women are to become agents of change” (Beijing Platform for Action B.69).

We know that violence against women and girls exists on a continuum and that it directly impacts the health, education, economic security and overall well-being of women and girls.

Today, there continues to be far too many examples of discrimination and violence that negatively affect women and girls’ education, including the lack of finances for girls’ education, early and forced marriage, child labour, poverty, lack of proper sanitation, sexual violence and harassment inside and outside the school, including rape as a weapon of war, as well as abductions and attempted assassinations conducted by terrorist groups.

As expressed so profoundly in the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, to address these issues, member states must work towards a culture of respect, equity, equality and inclusion for women and girls in the education process and in societies as a whole.

Since the last review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the global community has witnessed deplorable acts of violence explicitly meant to disrupt girls’ education, including the attempted assassination of Malala Yousafzai, and the mass kidnappings of schoolgirls in Nigeria. The hate and violence unleashed against the school girls in Nigeria, Malaya Yousafzai in Pakistan and women and girls in Afghanistan can only exist in an enabling environment of violence where the population is afraid to act, is unaware of the threat, or is made to accept an unacceptable course of action as a norm. Ultimately, they are expressions of deep-seated gender inequality that must be addressed.

Violence does not have to be so intense or extreme to affect women and girls’ potential. Acts of violence can be seen in schools and classrooms around the world — bullying, sexual harassment including demand for sexual favours (especially in countries where schools are fee-based), coercion and out right discrimination are all commonplace.

Intimate partner and family violence in the private sphere can also have spillover effects on women and girls’ education. For instance, researchers have found that violence within teen-age couples can affect self-esteem, educational attainment, and later future earnings. The mental and physical effects of experiencing or witnessing acts of violence can also have a dramatic impact on children’s learning. Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to score lower on assessments of verbal, motor, and cognitive skills.

Poverty also affects women and girls' learning and educational attainment, either due to lack of funds for school fees and uniforms, or the need for her labour at home or in the workplace. According to the latest information concerning the Millennium Development Goals, while the world has almost achieved equality in primary education, poverty is a major barrier of secondary education, especially among older girls, and violence against women continues to undermine efforts to reach all goals, including education. When young women fail to finish secondary school, they are more likely to continue in the cycle of poverty.

At the same time, the poor health associated with poverty can also lead to lower cognitive ability and to subsequent school achievement, increased rates of learning disabilities, grade retention, and school dropout in older children and youth as well as lower IQ, verbal ability, and achievement.

In a country as wealthy as Canada, poverty, lack of resources and violence against women and girls can also affect educational attainment. For instance, indigenous women and girls experience disproportionately high levels of poverty and gender-based violence, while at the same time facing lower levels of educational attainment and literacy. In 2006, 37 per cent of indigenous women in Canada had not completed secondary school. Since then, this statistic has changed little; according to Canada's latest census Inuit women have the lowest levels of educational attainment, with 47 per cent of women between 25 and 64 without a certificate, diploma, or degree, followed by First Nations women, of whom 30.1 per cent have no certificate, diploma or degree. Overall Métis women have better educational outcomes, but still lag behind the general population in Canada.

To ensure that women and girls have access to all levels of education, and to diminish the impact that violence and poverty have on attainment, all member states must:

- Foster a continuing awareness that women's rights are human rights, that 50 per cent of the world's population deserves respect, and the opportunity to develop to the height of their abilities;
- Ensure that all women and girls have safe learning environments and homes that are free from violence, discrimination, and systemic poverty;
- Guarantee that violence against women and girls in all of its forms, including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, non-state torture, early and forced marriages, genital mutilation, rape and gender violence as a weapon of war, are consistently acknowledged, documented, prevented, and ultimately stopped;
- Promote the meaningful participation of women and girls in the policies, programmes and decisions that affect their lives, and particularly their experiences in educational institutions;
- Ensure access to quality public education at all levels, including primary, secondary, and tertiary education, as well as affordable, flexible and quality child care services to enable women to access education opportunities, training and employment;
- Implement fully the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including allocation of equitable funding for indigenous women and girls' education;

- Disperse equitable education funding to attract and retain women and girls in the sciences and technology fields and the skilled trades;
- Promote continuing education and job training initiatives for parents with low literacy and numeracy skills. They in turn will promote the value of lifelong learning with their children;
- Promote parent engagement in institutions of education attended by their children; and
- Provide direct, long term and core funding to grass-roots and national women's organizations to speed the advancement of women's rights agendas and movement building at all levels;

The Canadian Federation of University Women believes wilful denial of access to education is an act of violence toward women and girls and a barrier to women's social, economic and political empowerment. Continued focus on safe access to quality education, freedom from violence, and member states' commitment to the provision of resources to this end will help secure gender equality globally and align with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 20 years after its adoption at the World Conference on Women in 1995.

As the review of the Beijing Platform for Action's critical areas of concern take place at the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, we call on delegations to ensure that these issues are brought to the attention of decision making bodies and implemented at the country level.

Canadian Federation of University Women is a non-partisan, voluntary, self-funded organization with over 100 Canadian Federation of University Women Clubs, located in every province across Canada. Since its founding in 1919, Canadian Federation of University Women has been working to improve the status of women, and to promote human rights, public education, social justice, and peace. It holds special consultative status with the United Nations and belongs to the Education Committee of the Canadian Sub-Commission to UNESCO. Canadian Federation of University Women is the largest affiliate of the International Federation of University Women, which represents women worldwide.
