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Statement submitted by International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific, 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

International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific is a feminist organization committed to the full realization of women's human rights through the pursuit of equality. We act to disrupt structures, systems, and institutions that violate women's human rights, and we engage in movement building that amplifies women's voices and activism to create alternative political narratives and spaces.

The current global political context is one of crisis. We observe variations on the same struggles taking place around the world – crosscutting geographical, cultural, religious, and other contextual differences – to combat cycles of tacit and explicit threats to civil society and to the women's movement especially. More and more right-wing populist governments are being elected into office. Religious extremism persists, frequently backed by state power. The concept of “state sovereignty” is being used to undermine international scrutiny of state violations of human rights and tighten national borders, while millions of people are displaced as a consequence of conflict, development, and climate change. Transnational corporations are becoming stronger, pushing workers into precarious jobs and demanding tax cuts that reduce state revenues for social protection for the most vulnerable. The diminishing commitments of national governments to fund human rights mechanisms are being replaced by global instruments that are voluntary and are neither rights-based nor rooted in international law. The United Nations treaty body system is itself under-resourced, underscoring the notion that human rights are optional.

At the same time, gains ostensibly made for gender equality too often reflect carceral and capitalist approaches, which prioritize those already occupying positions of (relative) privilege and lack an intersectional analysis. We see examples of this in laws against trafficking, sex work, and surrogacy that predominantly target and punish those living in poverty; in an inability to envision greater forms of justice than the brutality of the prison system; and in companies' selective support for gender equality and progressive norms, while profiting from exploitative labour practices. There is also evidence of pushback on what has already been achieved: the false narrative of “gender ideology”; the manufactured panic over trans people's access to bathrooms; legislative attacks on abortion rights; and the increasing demonization of non-citizens.

This is the backdrop against which we revisit the commitments and demands made 25 years ago in Beijing. We have identified five key areas in our present political landscape which must be prioritized moving forward.

Human rights regression and United Nations capture

There is a critical need to make the multilateral system for human rights more accountable and more responsive to the needs of women and girls, while creating the drivers and environment for progressive political and societal change on gender equality. As it stands, the power and influence of corporate interests and other unelected undemocratic bodies constitute a key threat to the realization of women's human rights globally. Regressive and conservative forces are seizing opportunities to frame narratives and agendas around their own interests and in opposition to human rights.

Moving forward, states and civil society, including women's rights organizations, must tackle the issue of regression of human rights norms and capture of human rights institutions, defending the defenders of human rights and challenging depoliticization of the gender equality agenda. We must utilize intersectional feminist analysis to address structural and individual power, privilege, and inequality and to

respond to the rise of populism, democratic deficits, corporate capture, and the impact of the capitalist economic order on the human rights system, institutional weaknesses, and normative gaps around rights.

Borders

Accountability for women's rights violations must be demanded through developing avenues for the meaningful participation of women marginalized by borders. These women include migrants, refugees, and stateless populations, as well as those with restricted access to high-level spaces, particularly United Nations institutions situated in the global North, due to excessively demanding visa application processes or other inequalities based on their documentation.

States have an obligation to remove the limitations on rights of migrant women, and civil society needs to apply a feminist analysis to issues of trafficking in the context of migration and challenge the acceptability of immigration detention and forced deportations. Constituencies in the women's rights, labour rights, and migrant rights movements need to be supported at the national, regional, and international levels to be policy advocates and to strengthen collaborations, deepen networks, and build alliances.

Environmental justice

State responses to the climate crisis must be critically analysed and climate justice repoliticized as a feminist issue through challenging the ahistorical, market-based, and neoliberal "solutions" to environmental degradation that replicate power inequalities for women and marginalized groups in the global South. We must interrogate workings of power at multiple levels, acknowledging the intersections of gender with other identities and recognizing that these have implications for the use of resources and capacity to adapt to disasters for women and marginalized communities. We must explore how human rights standards, such as those under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, can plug the current framework gaps from a rights-affirming and feminist perspective. And we must build on the achievements of the women's and environmental justice movement in extensively documenting the differentiated impact on women and girls of environmental degradation and climate change, and advocating for greater participation of women in decision-making spaces.

Above all, we must work in solidarity with women who are most affected by environmental degradation and climate change, amplifying their voices every step of the way.

Work

The global macroeconomic system and local realities of "captured states" limit avenues for accountability. In the changing world of work, multinational corporations typically want open borders and deregulations which afford them the freedom to move without restrictions, while the workers they employ are subjected to considerably more repressive border architecture and the attendant limitations on their rights as individuals. The concepts of "state obligation" and "decent work", as premised in the human rights frameworks and the International Labour Organization conventions, need to be redefined in the changing context of the gig economy, labour flexibilization, technological advancement, large-scale labour migration, and extraterritorial business violations of human rights. Further, women's contribution to the care economy is overlooked and devalued. The prevalent rhetoric surrounding women's "participation" in economic activities fails to understand the underlying root

causes of gender inequality in the world of work and pays insufficient attention to women's "agency". Such approaches can lead to women being trapped in inherently exploitative structures and in survival livelihoods that do not enable them to escape the poverty trap. Being included in the current patriarchal capitalist systems without any form of protection or mechanisms for accelerating their equality and status in society, is counterintuitive to achieving women's human rights.

Women workers employed in the formal and informal sectors, including domestic workers, migrant workers, factory workers, sex workers, agricultural workers, self-employed workers, and home-based workers must enjoy full rights as workers and as women. We must strive for a stronger institutional response and commitment for the formulation and implementation of human rights-compliant recommendations at local, national, and international levels.

Economics and development

States signing up to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were deeply convinced that "economic development, social development, and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development, which is the framework for our efforts to achieve a higher quality of life for all people". Today, we observe the threat to human rights posed by macroeconomic policies and institutions, together with a development agenda that is incompatible with the needs of the planet.

The women's rights movement's response must be enhanced to ensure that economic growth and development agendas coexist with environmental sustainability, democratic governance is strengthened, and processes for holding states accountable to their human rights obligations are not undermined. Structural change around gender equality is needed at the policy level. We observe critical gaps in accountability in the multilateral (United Nations) system, in particular the sustainable development agenda, as well as the international macroeconomic and financial policy-making institutions.

Conclusion

We must avoid wishful thinking that the threats and challenges listed above will go away quietly, and we cannot wait for them to do so. Now is not the time for mere lip service or a selective approach. Half-measures typically abandon the most vulnerable sectors of the population and leave them behind. We call for an action-oriented agenda that is serious about tackling inequality and dismantling the forces that perpetuate it. This responsibility must be shared and recognized across civil society, states, and the United Nations itself.