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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, and Center for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance, 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

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development is a regional feminist organization with 248 members in 27 countries. In this submission, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development wishes to highlight the critical need for accountability of governments and other relevant actors if the effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is to be achieved, as well as the commitments of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security. The submission also brings focus on emerging issues that this process should address and recommendations for the reform of the Commission on the Status of Women methods of work.

Accountability is critical when governments are responding to an imperative that is deemed more powerful than their international commitments, namely the imperative of neoliberal, market-driven development. We ask that Member States pursue a more just and equitable form of development, and demand development justice to reduce inequalities of wealth, power, and opportunities between countries, between rich and poor, and between men and women.

Since the review of the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 2015, several issues have come to the forefront globally or worsened. These issues are particularly reflected in Asia and the Pacific, which hosts more than half of the world's population, the largest number of people living in poverty, and many displaced and stateless persons.

Trade agreements and neoliberal, pro-austerity, and pro-privatization policies pushed forward by international finance institutions limit the capacity of States, particularly in the Global South, to ensure women's access to resources, public goods and services. Private finance and public-private partnerships have detrimentally affected women, with reductions in social-protection coverage and privatization of public services and of the commons. Privatization puts profits over social goals, and this fundamentally in contradiction with state human rights obligations.

In addition, the region is marked with increased use of military forces to oppress peoples' freedoms, encourage impunity, and intensify political persecutions of environmental and women's human rights defenders. It also produced the first-ever climate refugees due to rising sea levels, which may be a common reality of many in Pacific Small Island countries. Therefore, the outcome document of the twenty fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action review must reflect these issues and address dismantling the structural systems that allow these violations:

1. Rising inequality

With more than half of the world's wealth in the hands of a few individuals, the neoliberal economic order has delivered a more unequal and unjust world. The unrestricted power of corporations with absent regulatory framework or government capacity poses a direct threat to multilateralism and peoples' sovereignty. This is a direct challenge to realizing the recommendations of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Much of this unequal distribution of wealth is relying on women's contributions through underpaid and unpaid labour, and their vulnerabilities across the supply chain in contexts where labour protections are weak.

2. State of conflict

With the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 coinciding with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing

Declaration and Platform for Action, it must be acknowledged that there are more unstable States, States undergoing civilian conflict and occupation, which impacts women, girls, and non-binary persons, and challenges the realization of recommendations from the critical area of concern on women and armed conflict.

3. Oppression, attacks on participatory democracy, and freedom of association

The rise of autocratic governments worldwide, increasing encroachment of corporations and business into policy spaces and peoples' territories, oppression on people's right to freedom of association, and attacks on environmental and women's human rights defenders are manifestations of the crisis of democracy. 2018 was identified as the deadliest year to defend one's community, land, and environment, and Philippines was identified as the deadliest country for environmental defenders, which links to the final issue of the climate emergency.

4. Climate crisis and emergency

The twenty fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action process should recognize that the warnings on environmental degradation, global warming, and impact on oceans from the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action critical area of concern on women and the environment have been vastly ignored. The seriousness of the climate crisis must be recognized in the outcome document, as the entire world population's ways of life and very existence are at risk. This climate breakdown is driving migration, destroying traditional livelihoods, creating new public health problems, and upending the ecosystem of the region and the world. The fact that the climate crisis is generated by neoliberal capitalism, extractive development model and fossil fuel dependence must be recognized, and subsequent concrete actions must be centred on the principle of common but differentiated responsibility.

5. Reform of the Commission on the Status of Women's methods of work

Historically, the Commission on the Status of Women was a progressive space for civil society. It was where women's rights advocates helped shape the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and called for a global-level thematic mandate on violence against women and on discrimination against women in law and in practice. These are the only two women's rights-focused mandates out of 43 thematic mandates of the United Nations' special procedures. In the last few years, the Commission on the Status of Women has not been that space to have dialogues on advancing women's human rights. Instead it has become an exercise in defending the achievements of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

This year, prior to the next resolution on the methods of work and the establishing of the next themes of Commission on the Status of Women, we register the following recommendations:

- At a minimum, return observer status for civil society at the Commission on the Status of Women negotiations; this existed previously and it was a step backward to exclude civil society from the room, leaving us to wait in corridors for news of compromises on women's fundamental human rights that affect the lives of women, girls, and non-binary persons across the world.
- Reform the Commission on the Status of Women to give non-governmental organizations a recognized official space within the Commission, including a seat on the Bureau of the Commission: civil society including feminist organizations are important stakeholders who bring valuable expertise. Twenty-five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, we should recognize

that intergovernmental spaces, such as United Nations commissions need to have civil society in the room to take real steps forward.

- Consider rotating or moving the venue of the Commission on the Status of Women to other regions. The Commission on the Status of Women is the biggest United Nations meeting based on the numbers of participants coming to New York. Since 2016, the United States has followed a regressive visa policy, and women's groups have documented hundreds of visa refusals for participants even when submitting accreditation from the United Nations. While the United Nations has persistently not taken responsibility for this, this is an unfair and costly aspect of engaging in the largest global policy-setting space for women's human rights. If neither the United Nations nor the United States undertakes to implement the commitments under the Headquarters Agreement, then the United Nations and UN-Women should move the Commission on the Status of Women to a location that is accessible to women around the world.
- Increase resources for the Commission on the Status of Women and provide institutionalized support and space for regional (and even national) processes. The regional outcomes must ensure democratic and meaningful participation of civil society, particularly women's rights organizations, and inform the final agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women sessions.
- Provide the official documents in translation during the negotiations (zero draft, compilation text, and revisions) at the very least in United Nations official languages.
- Include civil-society speakers in panels and dialogues, and encourage regional diversity and youth representation.
- Noting the cyber bullying carried out by right-wing groups at the sixty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women, and problematic statements that contradict international human rights commitments: Consider removing or not renewing Economic and Social Council status for recognized hate groups and organizations that do not support women's fundamental human rights, freedoms, or gender justice.

This statement is also supported by the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance.
