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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 International Council of Women, 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 of Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, has been committed to advancing equal rights and the empowerment of women since its establishment in 1888. We strongly hold that the attainment of gender equality is critical to implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and reaching sustainable development for the world.

The International Council of Women commends the United Nations and its Member States for their efforts in undertaking national and regional reviews of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as assessing how further progress can be made for the achievement of gender equality, women's and girls' empowerment and the global Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

In 2020, the world will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, the 40th anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the 10th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations entity for Gender Equality (UN-Women) and five years since the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals. These human rights institutions, instruments and monitoring mechanisms are more important now than ever, yet they face increasing threats from waning international support and a backlash against women's movements. In the midst of intensifying global austerity measures, it is imperative that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and its human rights mechanisms such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Special Rapporteurs are adequately supported and funded to enable them to fulfil their important mandates.

Despite the advancements in women's human rights over the past 25 years, the status of women and girls around the world has fallen woefully short of the progress envisioned by those at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Women are still more likely than men to live in poverty. According to the 2018 Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum, the largest gender gap is in political empowerment, followed by economic participation and opportunity. Just 17 out of the 149 countries surveyed have women heads of state. Women make up only 18 per cent of ministers and 24 per cent of parliamentarians globally. On average women hold 34 per cent of managerial positions in countries where data is available, and women have access to land ownership in only 42 per cent of the countries surveyed. Although the gender gap for educational attainment has narrowed to 4.4 per cent globally, 20 per cent of girls remain illiterate in 44 of the countries surveyed. Based on United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization studies, 130 million girls between the ages of 6 to 17 do not attend schools. Furthermore, UN-Women estimates that one out of every three women has experienced some form of violence; and about 50 per cent of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16 years of age. Systemic poverty, gender discrimination, and violence against women and girls remain some of the greatest challenges to the achievement of gender equality in the twenty first century.

Women in poverty experience particular oppressions at the intersection of class and gender. They often face gender discrimination, the devaluing of their domestic work, violence and harassment in the workplace, the absence of economic opportunities, a lack of access to education and support services and insufficient

representation in key areas of decision-making. These challenges can also be exacerbated by their marital or widowed status, age, race, ethnicity, ability, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity or religion.

Ending poverty requires the equal participation of women in the economic, social and political life of their communities. The International Council of Women urges the Member States to promote the economic empowerment of women through the adoption of laws, policies and measures to ensure that women have access to equal and quality education, ownership rights of economic resources, receive equal pay, enjoy equal work conditions, and have access to higher paying jobs. Such policies and measures should be designed to reduce restrictions on women's work, provide adequate child care assistance and facilities, encourage sharing of domestic chores between spouses, eliminate structural penalties for maternity leave, provide retraining for female employees returning to work, remove social barriers faced by women engaged in commerce, provide tax incentives for women in business or employment, promote gender-balanced investment, improve women's access to financial resources and protect women from violence and harassment in the workplace. To achieve this last point, the International Council of Women calls upon all Member States to ratify and implement the Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, recently adopted by the International Labour Organization in June 2019.

Women encounter significant gender discrimination in politics. This gender gap must be fully addressed in order for women to sufficiently participate in political and economic decision-making. Women have the right to make their voices heard and affect laws and policies to enable progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment. We call on Member States to adopt laws and policies which increase the participation of women in all sectors of society. Such measures include gender quotas, capacity building programs, higher education and other incentives to increase women's representation in all government institutions, economic enterprises, boardrooms and social organizations. We also urge political parties to encourage more female candidates to run in elections, implement quotas for women candidates in elections and to establish training programs on election campaigns for first time female candidates.

Lastly, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls cannot be achieved without eliminating violence against women and girls. Not only is it a human rights violation, but it adversely impacts the physical, mental and reproductive health of millions of women and girls around the world and is also a major cause for poverty and lack of education. Violence against women and girls is exacerbated by situations of conflict and crisis. Women and girls living in conflict and war-torn areas, particularly those who are poor and/or widowed, are at a higher risk of sexual assault and exploitation. The International Council of Women calls on the Member States of the United Nations to actively implement Security Council Resolution 1325 and engage women's active participation in conflict prevention, peace negotiation and post-conflict peace-building processes so that these issues of violence can be addressed and prevented.

The elimination of gender discrimination goes hand in hand with the achievement of gender equality, women's empowerment and sustainable development. The International Council of Women affirms the importance of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Agenda for Sustainable Development to eliminate gender discrimination, to empower women and to achieve gender equality. Through these international, regional and national institutions, instruments and mechanisms, we will continue to work towards a better future for all our children — a world where women can participate and share responsibility equally with men in all aspects of life and work together for sustainable progress and peace in the world.