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Statement submitted by Canadian Network for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health/Réseau Canadien sur la Santé des Mères, des Nouveau-Nés et des Enfants, 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

In 2020, we mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 20th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security – two visionary global agendas for achieving women’s equal participation in all aspects of life. During this landmark year, the world grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge we have collectively faced since World War II. Women and girls have disproportionately borne the brunt of the pandemic’s devastating impacts, and COVID-19 responses will continue to be less effective at meeting the needs of women and girls – and the economy – without women and girls’ equal leadership and participation in decision-making spaces. Despite only accounting for 25 per cent of all elected politicians worldwide (the Lancet), evidence has shown that female-led governments have been able to flatten the pandemic’s curve more effectively and rapidly. Countries with women in leadership have suffered six times fewer confirmed deaths from COVID-19 than countries led by men (SocialEurope). This is attributed in part to decisions rooted in evidence and the prioritization of issues of social equality, sustainability and innovation, thereby resulting in more resilient societies.

COVID-19 has further highlighted how the journey to social, political, and economic empowerment is closely tied to the right to good health. With health systems stretched, it is estimated that COVID-19 will push 71 million people into extreme poverty (WorldBank) and 265 million into acute food insecurity (World Food Programme); and it will result in 117 million missed child vaccinations (World Health Organization) and 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence (United Nations Population Fund). Furthermore, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services is expected to result in the deaths of an additional 253,500 children and 12,200 women by the end of 2020 – and that’s under the least severe scenario projections (the Lancet).

As the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women is launched, governments from across the globe convene to reinforce their commitments to agenda 2030, and safeguard the hard-fought gains made over the past 25 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted (McKinsey). Governments must recognize and address the underlying barriers to women’s political participation in order to ensure that decision-making bodies are not only gender-balanced but gender responsive.

As one of only five nations with a feminist international assistance policy, and with its adoption of a gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) mechanism across government for the development of all public policies and programs, Canada has emerged as both a global health leader and champion for the empowerment of all women and girls. On June 4, 2019, Canada made a historic commitment of \$1.4 billion annually by 2023, to advance the health and rights of women and girls around the world, and in 2018, Canada passed a historic proactive pay equity and gender budgeting act to ensure rigorous gender budgeting as a means to achieve greater equality and inclusion. In the September 2020 Speech from the Throne, delivered by Governor General Julie Payette, the Government of Canada committed to creating an Action Plan for Women in the Economy to help more women get back into the workforce and to ensure a feminist, intersectional response to the pandemic and recovery. It also committed to investing in more accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high quality childcare through subsidized school programs, providing caregivers (particularly women) with more options and opportunities to participate in the workforce.

COVID-19 has unequivocally presented new challenges and barriers to human rights, global health and socio-economic development. The pandemic has exacerbated prevailing inequities and barriers, putting any gains made in gender equality and the rights of women and girls at great risk and threatening to undo the advancements of the past 25 years. Building on its feminist, rights-based, intersectional, and integrated approach, Canada has pivoted to respond to the pandemic, ensuring women's participation in decision-making processes while investing in gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at home and abroad.

To quote the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception."

In this spirit, the Canadian Network for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (operating as the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health) respectfully submits the following recommendations for consideration by the members and observers of the 65th Commission on the Status of Women, and calls upon Member States to:

Adopt a gender responsive and feminist approach to the COVID-19 pandemic: a gender responsive and transformative approach ensures that the most vulnerable populations, especially women, adolescents and children are reached. It promotes human rights in order to build a more peaceful, more inclusive and more prosperous world.

Invest in health systems strengthening: strong health systems are the backbone of resilient communities. This includes safeguarding the hard-fought gains we have made together in crucial areas, including gender equality, nutrition, food security, and in curbing preventable diseases such as polio through robust vaccination programs. As part of these efforts, we urge member states to increase access to critical and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights services, in order for women and girls to fully realize their right to health and expand their opportunities to reach their fullest potential.

Transform the unequal distribution of work and unpaid care: women and girls are often the primary caregivers of their families and make up the vast majority of frontline and community healthcare workers. Unpaid care work is both an important aspect of economic activity and key factor to the well-being of individuals, their families and societies. In order to transform the double burden of care, governments must expand and provide inclusive social protection and financial assistance for caregivers to mitigate the effects of the overload of unpaid care work. This includes investing in childcare support.

Promote women's equal and effective participation in decision-making spaces: evidence across sectors, including economic planning and emergency response, demonstrates that policies that do not consult women nor include them in decision-making are simply less effective, and can even do harm (UN Women). We urge governments to address misconceptions, attitudes, practices and barriers that hold women back from participating in decision making spaces, and to invest in policies and opportunities that amplify the voices of women and girls.

We commend Canada on its commitment to an international assistance policy that is, feminist, rights-based, intersectional, and integrated. We urge member states to join Canada in ensuring women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as to work towards the elimination of violence, achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.