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entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by C-Fam, Inc., 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 a world facing a global pandemic as well as extreme environmental events such as hurricanes, wildfires, floods, and droughts, women and girls face particular challenges that must be taken into account in efforts to reduce risks and build societal resilience. However, women and girls cannot be regarded in isolation because they do not live in isolation, but as part of families and larger communities. Empowering women and girls, particularly in the context of crisis, requires building human resilience and reinforcing systems of mutual support. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states, “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” When considering the role of the United Nations system in supporting women and girls in crisis, it is essential that the family be supported as well; the empowerment of women and girls is not a zero-sum proposition.

In times of crisis, people may be displaced, supply chains disrupted, and the ability to earn income reduced or halted. Yet the essential work of caring for the young, the elderly, and those with special needs remains as urgent as ever. This care work, the largest share of which is done by women, must be supported and valued, all the more so when it occurs within families and is not reflected in the formal economy. Enabling families to continue the essential work of providing for the basic needs of all their members is fundamental to resilience in the face of disasters and crises, and the state and the international community should align its efforts toward helping families and communities continue to do what they do best: take care of each other, especially the most vulnerable among them.

Unfortunately, some elements and agencies within the UN system have moved far beyond the boundaries of global consensus and seek to impose controversial social policies in countries that have rejected them at the General Assembly and in their own governments. Such efforts, like the attempt to falsely insinuate an international human right to abortion, redefine gender beyond men and women in the context of society, and reconceptualize the family beyond the “natural and fundamental group unit of society” articulated in the UDHR, have never been accepted by the international community and are controversial at the national level as well. Recommendations pertaining to these issues in the Universal Periodic Review are issued by relatively few countries and significantly more likely to be rejected than recommendations on other topics.

These issues continue to polarize societies and divide the international community. In times of global pandemic and climate-related emergencies, what is needed is consensus and cooperation between diverse stakeholders, not increased discord and polarization. Nevertheless, some elements of the UN system have instead chosen to use the current crises to even more aggressively promote their controversial social agendas, from designating abortion as “essential” health care and urging the removal of safeguards around the distribution of abortion-inducing drugs to mischaracterizing international humanitarian law to equate the destruction of the unborn with binding the wounds of women harmed in conflict situations. Furthermore, policies and programs intended to elevate the status of women and girls are increasingly replacing the terms “women” and “girls” with more ambiguous gender terminology, diluting their impact and focus.

Despite this, the status of women has improved in many ways around the world in the past decades. Maternal mortality has fallen significantly, although gaps remain and more must be done to ensure that mothers giving life do not risk their own. More girls are completing both primary and secondary education, although this progress is threatened by the natural and manmade crises in many parts of the world. These gains

are the product of collective effort driven by global consensus and are a model for further progress going forward.

Nevertheless, care must be taken to ensure that the discourse around environmental protection does not regress toward rhetoric about population control as in the past, which led to coercive practices now rightly regarded as human rights violations, particularly toward women and girls. To this end, it is time to reconsider the metrics related to “unmet need” for family planning, which are frequently misconstrued as a lack of access to modern methods despite this being the cause in a very small fraction of cases. Setting policy targets to “meet the unmet need,” or some percentage of it, by increasing contraceptive use ignores the fact that most women are aware of methods, consider themselves able to access them, and are making their own decisions regarding their health and fertility, in the context of their families. The elimination of “unmet need” cannot be achieved without coercion, will inevitably involve an immense waste of resources and funding, and should not be the stated goal of any UN agency or fund.

There is much the global community can agree on to elevate the situation of women and girls around the world. This includes good quality health care and education, access to employment and financial services, equal protection under law, and opportunities to contribute at all levels of society. There are other areas on which we might agree, based on previously adopted texts within the UN system, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the outcomes of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women. Among those things agreed are the fact that abortion laws are to be determined at the national level, abortion is not an international human right, and that the family is entitled to support as the natural and fundamental group unit of society. These and other matters agreed by consensus among UN member states are articulated in the Geneva Consensus Declaration, published last year and signed by a growing number of countries.

Many people around the world, including women and girls, are suffering in the wake of environmental stresses, natural and manmade disasters, and the health and economic hardship imposed by the ongoing pandemic. We urge the Commission on the Status of Women to use its platform to call the global community to advance the interests of the world’s women and girls, which will in turn elevate the wellbeing of their families and communities, on the basis of consensus and in keeping with what has been agreed – though not yet entirely achieved – by the nations that make up the UN and other multilateral institutions.
