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peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by International Women’s Year Liaison Group, 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

Many countries suffer from gender wage gaps and chains of poverty are often transgenerational. Japan is no exception. Unfortunately, it is our social security system that is hurting rather than helping women in poverty. The basic unit of this system is not an individual but a household, and the system expects everyone to follow an identical life pattern. Older women, workers with (part-time and other) irregular jobs and single parents most often do not fit into that pattern, and they are more likely to bear the brunt of adverse effects and unreasonable burdens, even when situations were not of their own choice.

The Social Security System, funded by tax, provides decent living pensions to a married couple in their old age. In order to attain this, it expects a breadwinner to work as a fully and decently paid employee for at least forty years, and to contribute to pension funds as the breadwinner. Without contributing to pension funds, his/her dependent spouse will be entitled to receive full pension for a spouse. If the breadwinner had worked only for a short period of time, not fully or decently paid, for whatever reason, neither the breadwinner nor the dependent spouse will enjoy decent living even when their ages entitle them to be pensioners. The system also requires employing companies to contribute to pension funds. For the self-employed, there will be no employing company to contribute to pension funds, so pensions for a self-employed will be limited by the amount that he/she have contributed.

Until mid-1980's, the opportunity for women to be employed as fully and decently paid workers was extremely limited in Japan. Most women born before 1970's were recipients of social security benefits, not as former workers but as spouses to employees who had contributed to pension funds. This allows widows, regardless of their age, to receive widows' benefits, but not widowers. It also meant, in the past, that if one no longer qualifies as a dependent spouse, he/she will be without his/her own pension and most likely to face destitute. The surviving spouses were cared for from the beginning, but things have turned a little better for divorcees lately only if they could agree to split couples' pensions at the time of divorce. Dependent spouses often cling to marriage at any cost because of this financial (dis)incentive. If a husband did not qualify as full-time worker, the wife would not be entitled to a decent pension. This is the story of many older women in an aged society.

If all women born after 1970's have sufficient opportunities to be breadwinners with fully and decently paid jobs, there would be no problem even when their spouses do not contribute sufficiently to pension funds because they themselves need not depend on someone to support them. But to most working women, that was never the case. Japan has been suffering economic stagnation since early 1990's and businesses have been using female workers as adjusting valves: both the number and percentage of women among labour force saw increase but the number of women employed in fully and decently paid jobs did not change. More often, they are offered part-time jobs with no security. Their financial condition is far from stable when working and more so when they retire. We submit our modest proposal to introduce individually based basic income by government to correct the present situation. We firmly believe that a comprehensive income tax system making no exception to interest and dividends will provide sufficient fiscal basis.

Single parents face daunting task of double shifts, combining the roles of the bread winner and the home caretaker under the system which assumes different individuals to bear different responsibilities. Not only is this the defect of "one-size fits all" system, it also is the basis for social stigma for those who appears to defy legal marriage. There appears to be a strong social prejudice against single parents, particularly against mothers to be breadwinners: refusing full-time, decent paying

jobs to single mothers are justifiable as their role as caretakers should take priority. Yet more than 70 per cent of “the other parent” are said to be unwilling to pay child support voluntarily, and it is not easy to use the existing mechanism to gather delayed payments nor is it effective against foot-dragging, and sometimes revengeful, ex-partners. Unfortunately, public policies to help socially stigmatized and isolated minorities are never popular and difficult to implement. Many statistics indicate that poverty at childhood limits job opportunities at adulthood and create an impoverished next generation. This issue matters now as well as in the future and should be treated urgently.

When it comes to matters of children, each child is different and society should honour that difference. When society is concerned about declining birth-rate and wish to show that we treasure children as gift from society, categorical treatments and “one-size fits all” policies are not appropriate. We expect community-based child support systems will suitably reflect different characteristics of the area and hope that communities are encouraged to develop, publicize and encourage others to emulate various good practices. If more people, who are now concerned only with their own children, or who are reluctant to have children of their own for various reasons, become involved in children’s welfare locally, these positive images of raising children with warm support from communities might encourage more people to have children. This might be one possible solution to alleviate difficult situations that single parents face as well as to the larger problem of declining birth-rate in general.

The fundamental problem is the fact that incumbent decision-makers are likely to invite those who think and act like themselves to opportunities for thinking and planning new systems or making policies. For example, although there is no logical causation between legal marriage and birth-rates, providing opportunities for arranged marriages appears to be the most popular locally implemented policy for the prevention of further birth-rate decline. People of child-bearing age are more down to earth and has been answering “it is the economy.” This shows the importance of actively including various ‘minorities’ to policy-making and decision-making process in significant numbers, of the responsibility of majority not to ignore those different voices just because they appear to be in the minority. An appropriate step was taken in 2018 when the Diet legislated the Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field (Law No. 28 of 2018). Unfortunately, the ruling political parties have not shown any effort to live up to the provision hoping political parties to introduce parity, that is, recommending or registering equal numbers of male and female candidates for each and every election. We sincerely hope these powerful organs take the legislation they passed more seriously.