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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 American Association of University 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 American Association of University Women supports the sixty-eighth session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women; priority theme: Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective; review theme: Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (agreed conclusions of the sixty-third session).

The Association, a nonpartisan, non-profit organization is a leader in advancing gender equity for women and girls through research, education, and advocacy. With more than 170,000 global members and supporters, as well as 1,000 branches and 800 college and university partners, for more than 140 years the Association has promoted the economic, social, and physical well-being of all persons. Basic to all of its public policy efforts is the understanding that true equity requires a balance between the rights of the individual and the needs of the community. The Association opposes all forms of discrimination and supports constitutional protection for the civil rights of all individuals.

The Association believes that global interdependence requires national and international policies against human trafficking and that promote peace, justice, human rights, sustainable development, and mutual security for all people. We support the civil and human rights of all immigrants, including a fair and just path to legal status. We support a strengthened United Nations and its affiliated agencies. We advocate implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action from the 4th World Conference on Women and subsequent declarations and affirm our active participation for the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

The Association supports implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and works in particular to advance Sustainable Development Goal 4 to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” including to “eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education”; Sustainable Development Goal 5 to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”; Sustainable Development Goal 8 to “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”; and Sustainable Development Goal 10 to “Reduce inequality within and among countries.” Target 10.4 in particular calls on Member States to “adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.”

The United Nations Economist Network (UNEN) defines social protections as “the set of policies and programs aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout their life cycles” (UNEN 2021) – including fair and equitable wages; health care; child and elder care; social security; retirement, unemployment, and disability benefits; and more. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), only 47 per cent of the world’s population “are effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit” (ILO 2021) – leaving over 4 billion people unprotected.

The global COVID-19 pandemic shed light on both the critical importance of social protection systems and the deepening inequities that inhibit access to these benefits. Women suffered staggering employment and wage losses during the pandemic, yet were less likely than men to receive cash relief and social protections from governments’ pandemic responses (UN Women 2021). On a global scale, women were more likely than men to report losing their jobs or having reduced working hours

between April 2020–March 2021, and over 60 per cent of women reported lost earnings (UN Women 2021). Global social security coverage remains 8 per cent lower for working-age women than men (ILO 2021).

Women around the world continue to face stark inequities in wages, wealth, and retirement benefits compared to men. Globally, women earn on average only 80 per cent of what men earn (ILO 2022) – and pay gaps in the United States, for example, remain much larger for many women of color, including Black, Latina, Native American, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women. Gender and racial pay gaps make it more difficult for women to accumulate wealth and contribute to savings, including retirement and pension benefits. Only about a quarter (26.3 per cent) of women are covered under a pension scheme globally, and in many countries women are less likely than men to contribute to a pension scheme or receive a pension at all (ILO 2021).

Furthermore, women and girls continue to bear the majority of unpaid caregiving responsibilities, performing over two-thirds of all unpaid care work in the world (Oxfam International 2023). Caregiving responsibilities can pull or keep women out of education and the workforce – with lasting harm to their economic security – especially where they lack access to critical benefits like affordable child care, health care, and paid family, medical, and sick leave. The United States, for example, does not guarantee paid annual leave, paid time off for illness or family care, or paid parental leave, unlike the majority of developed countries worldwide. The compounding impacts of life-long pay inequities, unpaid caregiving responsibilities, and a lack of social protections mean that women may be forced to choose between their livelihoods and their health, and that of their families.

The Association believes that essential to the well-being of women and all persons are an economy that provides equitable employment opportunities; reduction of poverty; a living wage; quality, affordable dependent care; paid family and medical leave; safe, liveable, and affordable housing; quality, affordable, and accessible health care for all, including reproductive health care; and a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

The Association engages in policy and legislative advocacy from the local to global level through grassroots actions, outreach and lobbying to the United States Congress, and engagement with the United Nations. To enhance social protections and achieve economic security for all women and families, the Association advocates for:

- Pay equity and fairness in compensation and benefits for all workers, in every industry;
- Equitable access and advancement in employment, including vigorous enforcement of anti-discrimination and civil rights statutes;
- Greater availability of and equitable access to benefits and policies that support the health and economic security of workers and their families, including paid leave, paid sick days, and high-quality, affordable child care;
- Increased and more equitable access to higher education that is affordable and yields high-quality credentials or degrees;
- Programs that provide women with education, training, and support for success in the workforce, including non-traditional occupations and women’s leadership and entrepreneurship;
- And strengthened retirement benefits and programs, including pension improvements and protecting Social Security from privatization.

Alongside our policy advocacy, the Association works to empower women through education to negotiate their own financial futures by providing training through our Work Smart and Start Smart salary negotiation programs – which have trained over 190,000 women to negotiate their salaries and benefits to date. While women cannot negotiate their way around discrimination, stereotypes and bias, having the expertise to negotiate a higher salary can help ensure women received the pay and benefits they deserve. All of these efforts are critical to closing the gender pay gap and advancing women’s economic security.

As the world continues to recover from dual public health and economic crises, Member States and the United Nations must center women and families in inclusive approaches to eliminate social protection coverage gaps and systemic inequalities. Strong, equitable social protection systems are key to bolstering the health and economic security of women, families, and societies as a whole. The American Association of University Women urges Member States to enact bold legislation and investments to strengthen social protection systems and ensure equitable access for all, particularly women and girls of color, low-wage workers, and under resourced communities. The Association believes that working together, nations can reach true gender equality in education, economic security, and leadership to achieve equity for all.
