



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-ninth session

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the special session of the General Assembly entitled**

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

### **Statement submitted by Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute and Family Research Council, non-governmental organizations 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

As the United Nations system readies itself to launch a new development agenda it is essential to take stock of previous agreements that have promoted the equal dignity and rights of women and men, in particular the outcome of the 1995 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing. This session of the Commission on the Status of Women is an opportunity to assess the Beijing Conference outcome, its successes and shortcomings.

Laws and policies that recognize the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings are essential to safeguarding the human rights of all. Women are endowed with all human rights and fundamental freedoms recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But all too often, throughout history and to this day, the rights of women have been trampled upon, curtailed, and violated. For much of history, all around the world, women have been marginalized and subjugated by laws and policies that failed to recognize the vital contribution of women to families and society at large, and denied women the ability to be fully integrated into social, political, and economic life.

The Platform for Action adopted by the General Assembly following the Beijing conference captured many positive elements of the movement for women's equality that developed over much of the 20th century, with roots in the 19th century, and sought to contribute to the reversal of this historical trend of marginalization and subjugation of women. Chief among these are the recognition that women must be free from every form of exploitation and domination, and that they must be fully integrated into social, political, and economic life.

The Platform for Action has been instrumental in promoting the awareness of the equal dignity and rights of women and men, issues affecting women in poverty, their literacy and education, ending violence against women, women's contribution to building a culture of peace, their access to employment, land, capital, and technology. Perhaps most importantly, the Platform for Action highlighted the essential contribution of women to development.

Societies that do not recognize the inherent, and indeed inalienable dignity of women simply cannot prosper. Laws and policies that enshrine equal rights for women and men are an essential element to achieving sustainable development. Today more than ever the realization that development and progress cannot take place if women are relegated to the margins of society or reduced to servitude has gained universal consensus. Unless women have equitable access to education, health care, and economic opportunities, societies fail to develop and progress. This awareness carried into the Millennium Development Goals, and will carry forward into the post-2015 development agenda.

We have come a long way since 1995 by way of safeguarding women's rights and especially integrating women into all sectors of public life. But much more needs to be done.

Many abuses of women's rights recognized in the Platform for Action twenty years ago are still perpetrated with impunity by governments and powerful organizations, often under the guise of providing women or society at large with assistance. These abuses disproportionately affect poor women. In particular forced

sterilization, forced abortion, sex-selective abortion and coercive and discriminatory family planning policies all over the world.

Abortion, an unspeakable and heinous evil that plagues our era, continues to claim girl victims, and disproportionately so due to sex-selection. In regions of the world where male preference is cultivated, girls are aborted before they even have a chance to take their first breath. Technology has contributed to making prenatal sex-selection a lethal killer of unborn girls. But, the rights of unborn girls are not the only ones threatened by this heinous practice. The girls who survive son preference in these regions face increased risk of violence due to the unnaturally skewed sex ratio resulting from prenatal sex-selection. Regions where men disproportionately outnumber women are witnessing an increase in human trafficking.

Coercive family planning policies, especially in Africa, are part of programs funded by wealthy governments, international organizations, and famous philanthropists guided by an overall concern of reducing fertility. These programs are almost exclusively focused on providing family planning options that are harmful and have been rejected by women in the developed world for other safer alternatives. African women are also not being informed of the risks associated with high hormonal dose injectable contraceptives like Depo Provera, as well as other harmful contraceptives. Some of these contraceptives are banned in developed countries, or accompanied by severe health warnings. Women who use these drugs are exposed to debilitating osteoporosis, a higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, and certain types of cancer, to name only a few health hazards.

There are areas of the Platform for Action that remain neglected. In particular some of the unique aspirations of women like maternity, and their basic needs like education, nutrition, and sanitation. Conversely, some areas of the Platform for Action are overemphasized to the detriment of women's health and rights.

Until recently, the World Health Organization and United Nations Population Fund reported that maternal mortality had been cut in half since 1990. But more recent research from the respected Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation shows that maternal mortality and morbidity has only declined by 22 per cent since 1990. This is scandalous, given that we have known what it takes to make pregnancy and childbirth safe for well over half a century. What women need is access to higher education, skilled birth attendants, prenatal and antenatal care, access to water and sanitation, and emergency obstetric care.

Societies that do not recognize the inherent and inalienable dignity of women cannot survive. Because women alone can be mothers, to neglect the particular needs of mothers is to discriminate against women. The role of women in families should also be valued alongside their other contributions. Unfortunately, motherhood is often penalized by society. It becomes an obstacle for women to work and advance their careers. In some societies having a family is no longer a universally respected option for women because of societal expectations that they must prioritize having a career. More troubling, new negative stereotypes stigmatize women who chose to be mothers and raise a family depicting them as weak and servile. All of these factors contribute to the continued lack of attention to the role of women in the family in international and national policies.

Investments in education, health, and other social services in particular should be increased. Women in the developing world have unmet needs for basic items for

survival and to escape poverty and early deaths. For example, the United Nations World Food Programme reports that nearly a quarter of the people in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from hunger. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reports that 774 million adults, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, and of whom 64 per cent are women, lack basic reading and writing skills. These inequalities affect women disproportionately.

Despite all of this, some countries and even United Nations agencies and programs call for more investment in areas of the Platform for Action that have received ample attention, especially contraception. The world is saturated with contraceptive commodities. The Guttmacher Institute has consistently found over the past decade that only 4-8 per cent of surveyed women in the developing world with a supposed “unmet need” for family planning say they cannot afford or lack access to contraceptives. In Africa, less than 2 per cent of married women say they cannot access or afford modern methods of family planning. Most of the women do not use contraception for other reasons, including concerns about side effects and health risks. Yet, family planning groups say there are 220 million women in the developing world who have an unmet need for contraception and that more resources must be dedicated to “increase demand” among women with access but who choose not to use contraception — in other words, to convince women to use contraceptives.

There are also areas where the emphasis of the Platform for Action was misdirected. In particular, where the Platform for Action promotes the notion of complete sexual autonomy as a human rights norm. Sexual mores are not a subject that the United Nations Charter places within the competence of any body of the Organization. Art. 2 of the Charter states that “Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter.” Sexual mores are one of those subjects best left to domestic legislation.

In light of the many changes in laws and policies to empower women in recent years, the future looks bright for women. But there is still a long road ahead. The post-2015 development agenda, with its new universal focus, must become an avenue that will continue to lead nations to the recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings, and the equal dignity of women and men.

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