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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 Human Rights Consortium and Women’s Platform Limited, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The Beijing Declaration for Action was groundbreaking in 1995, introducing major new commitments on gender equality for global governments, and significantly for the first time putting the girl child in policy focus. The Declaration drove progress on gender equality across many policy areas and governments throughout the end of the 1990s, and acted as the basis for entirely new datasets on boys and girls, men and women, allowing for new and more effective decision making. Women's health also became a greater priority, while the Declaration underpinned new legislation and initiatives to strengthen women's role in the workplace, public life and decision making. The benefits continue to be felt until today.

However, progress has dramatically slowed down in recent years, and women and girls are falling behind again; women and girls in regions across the world have seen roll back of rights in all areas from access to education, employment and social protection. Afghanistan stands as the most urgent and extreme example, with women now largely confined to their homes and silenced in public, in an unprecedented attack on women's rights that women rights defenders have described as erasure of women. In Iran, increasingly restrictive dress code laws are enforced strictly and sometimes brutally, as showcased by the death in custody of Jima Amini. In the United States, the overturn of Roe vs Wade has rolled back reproductive rights for millions of women; only weeks ago, the CEDAW Committee found that the abortion laws in Poland harm women and constitute a breach of women's human rights. Alarming, these regressive policies aimed at repressing and curtailing women's rights as a means to controlling society are gaining momentum as part of a wider global anti rights agenda and movement, and action has never been more urgent. The context of climate change, growing conflict and deepening global inequalities is visible across the world through increasing displacement; the lack of change to power relations is very clear in the significant risk of violence that women and girls are facing both while on the move and at home, through domestic abuse and conflict related sexual violence.

In the United Kingdom, gender equality and women's rights did see progress following the Beijing Declaration for Action, including in maternity protections, flexible working and representation at local authority and Westminster level, although changes to legislation and practice were at the time also driven by integration of the European Convention of Human Rights into domestic law through the Human Rights Act, and European Union legislation. Women in Northern Ireland were part of negotiating the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and women now constitute over 40 per cent of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Northern Ireland introduced Equality Impact Assessments, groundbreaking in their time, as part of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. An inquiry under the Optional Protocol to CEDAW contributed to decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland in 2019, equal marriage was eventually legislated for in the same year. The introduction of the focus on the girl child introduced disaggregation of data on young people by sex, and has over the last 30 years enabled monitoring of educational achievement, employment pathways, health and lifestyles, amongst others, which has changed public debate. Recently, a focus on young people has highlighted ongoing issues of sexual harassment and violence disproportionately affecting girls, and alarming increases in misogynistic attitudes among boys.

However, progress in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, has stalled. Gender equality has low priority in decision making, and for example implementation of abortion provision is only slowly being completed in Northern Ireland. Elsewhere in the UK, prosecutions of women undertaking late term abortions have markedly emerged for the first time in almost a century. Lack of affordable and accessible childcare and adult social care is a major barrier to many women having a genuine choice whether to participate in paid work, while increasingly inflexible working conditions are having the same impact, particularly at the lower end of the

skills spectrum. Reforms to social protection systems in the last 14 years have seen women experience a significant loss of income and living standards, with women from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and disabled women experiencing the largest drops. Research from Northern Ireland highlights that women from more disadvantaged areas live in long term poverty and persistent precariousness, which has been exacerbated by rising living costs, and mean many are in debt, unable to heat their homes adequately and an increasing number unable to secure sufficient food for themselves and their families. Domestic and sexual abuse remain high, and access to justice is slow, with only three per cent of sexual violence cases reported resulting in a conviction, often following a process lasting years. Meanwhile, the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020 and a very punitive migration policy pursued by the government in office until early July 2024, highlighted by the High Commissioner for Human Rights as breaching international obligations, highlights a departure from multilateralism and political tendencies towards protectionism that are reflected elsewhere and significantly threaten global collaboration and solidarity as principles that the Beijing Declaration for Action and other instruments were built upon.

These brief snapshots clearly demonstrate the need for action at national and international level, with a return to multilateral action crucial to address global challenges from climate change to conflict and displacement. The newly agreed Pact for the Future offers a mechanism for achieving change, and it is vital and very welcome that gender equality is a cross cutting priority. This demonstrates a global agreement that gender equality is a prerequisite for sustainable development, which reflects the commitments of the Beijing Platform for Action and underlines its continued relevance. The 30th anniversary and the review of progress at the Commission on the Status of Women 69 offers a further opportunity to reiterate this commitment, and set a roadmap to agreeing more concrete actions and funded commitments under the Pact for the Future.

The Pact for the Future sets out to build on the Sustainable Development Goals, and this further underlines the need for urgent, multilateral action. The Goals are currently not on track, with many risking regression in the aftermath of Covid-19 and global instability, and renewed political will is essential to change course. The anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action offers such a starting point, and vitally a basis for strengthening investment in women, girls and gender equality. Investment is currently low at five per cent of all overseas development investment, and achieving a significantly increased, consistent budget is essential for kick starting change and securing sustainable and safe living conditions for women and girls worldwide.

In conclusion, the Beijing Platform for Action remains relevant as a guiding framework for achieving gender equality worldwide. Crucially, it was achieved with significant support from civil society, in a context where civil society had access to and influence on decision making within the UN. This space has been shrinking, as has been seen also at the Commission on the Status of Women, and the Pact for the Future is disconcertingly quiet on the role of civil society. In addition to revitalising commitment to the Beijing Platform, it is vital that options for strengthening engagement with civil society, as a partner in policy making as well as service delivery, are explored as part of developing a future agenda. Civil society plays a crucial role in engaging communities, building capacity and confidence to engage with services as well as policy making, and can bring a wealth of valuable evidence, experience and expertise to the global effort for an equitable, sustainable and prosperous future for all. The anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action offers a major milestone and opportunity to review this agenda, and it is timely, relevant and essential to build momentum for the global agenda to take this opportunity, for women and girls and for the future generations of our planet.