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peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by The Red Elephant Foundation, 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 the 25 years that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has existed, there have been many advancements and many areas still left awaiting improvement. We respond to this call for inputs from civil society organizations as an organization enjoying special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council under the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

The basis for any change in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is the current state of global affairs. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action came about in response to structural and overt discrimination against women at the material time, which is specifically underscored by the Cold War and the post-World War II institutional arrangements (which have also evolved today). That the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was a fillip for the mobilization of women represents its path-breaking impact.

Beijing came to, “symbolize a rallying call for feminist activities, used to mark out certain lines of argument or kinds of actors” (Cornwall and Edwards 2015, 1). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action emphasizes the advancement of the goals of equality, development, and peace for all women everywhere and that, “local, national, regional, and global peace is attainable and is inextricably linked with the advancement of women who are a fundamental force for leadership, conflict resolution, and the promotion of lasting peace at all levels” (Cornwall and Edwards 2015, 18). In the process, a certain measure of strategic essentialism operated (Spivak, 1988), including a heteronormative approach to the idea of “women” and the inclusion of “sexual orientation” as an identity factor within the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Girard, 2007).

The focus of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is on cis gender women and heterosexual women. For the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to operate inclusively, it is vital to include transwomen and queer women, as well as women of non-heterosexual orientations, so as to address particular challenges they face. In its explicit recognition of the inequality between men and women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has rendered gender binary and conflated sex and gender (Girard, 200, 5). The conflation of “gender” and “women” as it equates gender to sex, though they are entirely different (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2016; Charlesworth, 1999), ignores the truth that one can be targeted through generic violence for their sexual orientation (Moore and Barner, 2017). Segments of the declaration could include more inclusive language that takes into account other gender identities and sexual orientations, and use a less heteronormative lens.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action should move beyond the scope of essentialism that equates women to mothers by affirming the scope of their health to their fertility (Provision, 17). By falling back into stereotypical constructions of what the scope of women’s health is, there is a clear demarcation of who can be a “woman”, to be included within the declaration. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action excludes women who do not conform to the image of a cis-het woman – the emphasis on fertility and reproduction isolates bodies that identify as women by gender but might not be able to give birth by sex. Instead, it could expressly address better access to mental health services/psycho-social support for survivors of gender-based violence; focus on raising awareness; normalize menstrual hygiene by making menstrual products more accessible; address transitioning in gender to acknowledge the fluidity of identities; and dismantle heteronormativity and binaries of gender. Even as the twelve areas under the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are entirely comprehensive and expansionary, it is necessary that the scope of the provisions under these areas be expanded to speak to structures that are in place

currently. In addressing women and health, it is important to acknowledge particular challenges, such as reproductive and sexual health, as well as the right to transition for a person ascribed male at birth. Furthermore, under (Provision, 18), there is re-sexing of gender in that it treats women as either victims or as part of the peace process because of their inherent qualities that are largely confined to their assigned sex at birth as women. It tends to limit women's inclusion in peace processes as a function of their "inherently" peaceful and nurturing nature, thereby making them better equipped for peacekeeping (Whitworth, 2004, 126). It is important to acknowledge intersectionality and bring forth voices that represents multiple stakeholders from different identity backgrounds and contexts that render their gender experiences unique.

Much of the language of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is centered on equality rather than equity – and emphasizing on making things more accessible, so that everyone can benefit from a far more holistic solution toward building gender equal worlds. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action does not seem to articulate goals that can be measured. Another flaw is that the idea of engaging women is limited to merely increasing the number of women in decision making positions. This is hard to achieve in many nations because doing so needs requires other factors to be addressed, such as systemic and structural barriers and the lack of access to full public participation. Despite reservations for women to take office at various positions, the "quota" is either never filled or appropriated by those that already have privilege.

Further, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action mentions that it is determined to encourage men to participate. A major challenge to this is the deep-rooted custom of recognizing men as the "superior gender", or the prevalence of patriarchy. By emphasizing education that includes gender sensitization, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action can drive comprehensive strategic change into fruition. The current spectrum of emphasis appears to be on prevention – but without direction.

Even as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action addresses violence against women, it does not take a stand against war, which by itself is antithetical to feminist foreign policy. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action calls for the respect of international law and international humanitarian law toward the "protection" of women, without calling for demilitarization. In doing so, it normalizes the violence of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, as well as war and is busy attempting to make, "war safer for women" (Shepherd, 2016, 10). It does not condemn war and excludes room for "anti-militarist feminism" in advocating for international peace and security (Confortini, 2012). The mere inclusion of women in peace processes does not automatically mean that women will be part of identifying and shaping what constitutes armed conflict and responses to armed conflict, as well as peace processes (Ni Aolain, 2016, 276). While the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action builds a link between violence against women and girls and international security (Shepherd, 2008), it does not acknowledge the several structures that act as a barrier to the exercise of women's agency (Aroussi, 2017).

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action does not acknowledge the adverse impacts of structures and structural violence against women. As a result, it has failed to account for the role of historical, intergenerational, post-colonial, and post-Cold War (now) traumas that challenge women in the way they are treated. The reliance on structures to exclude and continue to keep discriminatory treatment against women alive remains one of the major systemic disadvantages that women face in engaging in and enjoying full access to public spaces and lives.