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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 Equality Now, 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

Equality Now, an international human rights organization and steering committee member of several coalitions, including as the Secretariat of the Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law and the Solidarity for African Women's Rights Coalition, and a co-founder of the Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRi) and the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights, calls on all member states at the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women to "Take bold, ambitious, accelerated, just and transformative actions to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all women and girls... [and] urgently removal all legal, social and economic barriers" (Pact for the Future).

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action. It remains a significant document that guides the advancement of women and girls' human rights and provides a roadmap for progress. We strongly urge all member states to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, across all its critical areas of concern, including by taking steps to remove any sex and gender-based discrimination in laws, policies, and practice. We also emphasize the urgent need to guard against the rising backlash against women's hard-fought rights and freedoms.

According to the World Bank, no country in the world has achieved full legal equality, and the United Nations estimates that at the current rate of progress we will take almost 300 years to come close to it. Women continue to experience devastating levels of gender-based violence and disproportionate levels of poverty and hunger, along with a lack of meaningful access to health, education, bodily autonomy, and justice. The impact of war, armed conflicts and large-scale violence have also resulted in extreme conditions where the pre-existing inequalities have deepened and left women and girls as the first victims of the crises.

Many countries continue to harbor laws that are explicitly or in effect sex-discriminatory, despite progress since 1995. Equality in law is the first step towards successfully eliminating barriers to justice and ensuring that women and girls are able to meaningfully participate in all aspects of their lives.

Sex-discrimination in personal status and family laws directly leads to women being treated differently than men in profound ways, denying women autonomy entering into, during and at the time of dissolution of marriage and unions; forcing women to live under male guardianship including when traveling; not allowing women to pass on their own citizenship to their children; and subjecting them to discrimination within legal procedures. These laws not only violate women and girls' most basic rights to live with dignity but also impact other aspects of their lives by creating barriers to accessing public services, economic opportunities, or being forced to stay in an abusive household.

Similarly, discrimination in economic status and marital status laws can lead to women and girls being forced to be dependent on men and legally subjected to rape. Failure to protect women from a wage-gap for work of equal value, sexual harassment and discrimination at the workplace, being forced into the lower wage employment sector, and lower minimum ages of marriage than men, are all examples that must be remedied urgently through legal and substantive equality measures. Further, laws and practices against sexual violence must be strengthened through comprehensive measures that will help prevent it, lead to proper investigation, and provide adequate and swift remedy to victims.

Additionally, we urge member states to introduce or strengthen laws that aim to eliminate harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage,

taking a multi-sectoral approach that facilitates preventative measures such as education, awareness, and community-led solutions. Prohibition of marriage before 18 years of age without exception will help protect women and girls from life-long harm. States have the ability to institute large-scale and comprehensive measures that end the cycle of harm, to the benefit of all.

States have the primary responsibility under international law to ensure the removal of all laws and policies that allow inequality, discrimination and harm with impunity. Therefore, we encourage member states at the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women to:

- finally repeal or amend all laws, including family laws, that discriminate against women and girls;
 - adopt and enforce constitutional provisions which guarantee sex equality without exception; and
 - implement all international treaty obligations, the Pact for the Future, the Beijing Platform for Action, and SDG5 and related goals, to promote gender equality.
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