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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 Voluntary Service Overseas, 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

Voluntary Services Overseas presents this statement addressing the priority theme of the 69th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which will be on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action as well as the outcomes of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is one of the most comprehensive global policy frameworks for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. Endorsed by 189 countries, 2025 marks three decades since the global adoption of the BPFA and is also the commemoration of nearly a decade after adopting the agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Realizing the promise of these two important frameworks is critical for all women and girls in their diversities.

To realise their full potential, women and girls need to be healthy with proper nutrition, sexual and reproductive rights as well as freedom from violence. According to a UN Women Report, 800 women still die every day from preventable pregnancy-related causes, and 99 per cent of these occur in developing countries. This is an appalling number, exacerbated by the fact that women's bodies have become political battlegrounds globally. If women and girls cannot make choices concerning their own bodies, then they are unable to exercise any other rights. Member states should seriously and urgently consider the decriminalisation of abortion and advance progressive laws providing for safe abortion, in line with the Maputo Protocol.

We recognize that over two-thirds of the member states have enacted laws to combat sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including domestic violence. However, there are still weaknesses in States' commitments to support prevention programmes, hold perpetrators accountable, pass inclusive and gender transformative laws and policies, and provide young people with inclusive, comprehensive sexuality education countering harmful gender and sexual norms. It is also important to remember that women and girls with disabilities are facing disproportionate amounts of sexual and gender-based violence. Not addressing the weaknesses and gaps highlighted by feminist movements and women's rights activists enables the escalation of high numbers of incidents of femicide witnessed in the recent past across the world.

We, therefore, call on member states to invest in prevention and pass inclusive and gender transformative laws while simultaneously going beyond legislation to provide young people with accessible and inclusive comprehensive sexuality education and ensure that the laws are enforced to hold perpetrators accountable for SGBV. There is also a need to address the socio-cultural norms which allow this vice to continue with impunity.

While today there are more educated women and girls than ever before, significant gaps remain. Especially for young women and girls with disabilities, and those who fall under the category of most marginalised (refugees and teenage mothers), who are still unable to access inclusive education. The digital gender gap is also significant. And this is happening as the budgets for public services are being gutted, especially in African countries, due to the debt crisis and austerity measures. The gains mentioned above were achieved due to investment in the public sector. The focus on privatization, private funding, and other neoliberal strategies are putting people, especially marginalized populations and the planet, at risk. It is time to adopt approaches that put people first.

And despite the immense contribution that women make towards economic growth, member states have still failed to recognise unpaid domestic and care work as part of the index for measuring GDP, hence women's work remains largely unrecognised and unrewarded. Women, girls and gender diverse persons are disproportionately affected by poverty, which affects the enjoyment of other rights including education and thereby affecting their (sexual and reproductive) health outcomes and wellbeing. In the 1990s, only 40 per cent of the world's women were paid wages. Today that has increased to just 50 per cent, yet women earn 10-30 per cent less than men for the same work (UN Women). We call on Member States to recognise women's unpaid and domestic work and its contribution towards GDP and create mechanisms to close the gender-pay gap.

Today, over 140 countries guarantee equality between men and women in their constitutions, yet women and girls in all their diversities still face discrimination, harm and violence directly and indirectly. Furthermore, institutions at all levels hardly capture disaggregated data on discrimination through laws and policies, gender-based stereotypes and social norms. These institutions are further threatened by the well-coordinated, well-resourced and global anti-rights and anti-gender movement who are determined to reverse the gains made since the adoption of the Beijing Platform of Action and other relevant frameworks. Retrogressive laws and policies that give governments and non-state entities a say in the most intimate aspects of the lives, bodies and wellbeing of women, girls and gender diverse peoples are being passed around the world, reinforced by negative social and gender norms. We ask that disaggregated data on gender, disability and age becomes the norm at all levels. We demand that governments recall all discriminatory laws against women and gender diverse persons. Member states should commit to and fund intersectional and gender transformative approaches in recognising and protecting women's and girls' human rights.

We call on member states to recommit to the Beijing Platform for Action, demonstrate their ambition to accelerate progress on Agenda 2030 and reject false solutions that further marginalize, impoverish and violate the rights of people around the world, especially women, girls and gender-expansive persons in all their diversities.