



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
17 November 2015

Original: English

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Sixtieth session

14-24 March 2016

**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 International Council on Social Welfare, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

The aspiration of the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the creation of a more just and prosperous world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity where “no one is left behind” and where transformative steps required for sustainable development have become part of the day-to-day reality. The International Council on Social Welfare, one of the oldest non-governmental organizations with a global reach, wholeheartedly supports the Commission on the Status of Women in its work aimed at gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, considering these two goals a crucial contribution to progress across all the goals and targets of the new development Agenda.

Women have a vital role to play in the realization of the sustainable development agenda. Their voices must be heard, and should be recognized and promoted. Equality and empowerment of women of all ages are both the objective and a crucial part of the ongoing quest for solutions. We share the conviction that the achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is simply not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full rights and opportunities. Beginning with enjoyment of equal access to education and equal opportunities for employment, the world community should continue combatting gender based-discrimination and violence in all forms it may assume, including old-age discrimination and violence.

The International Council on Social Welfare believes that gender and sustainability should be recognized as cross-cutting priorities of all development programmes conceived at the national and international levels. Much depends here on ability of government, civil society and the private sector to join forces and act together. Given that women of all ages are more vulnerable than men to the negative impacts of climate change, largely because the livelihood of the majority of the world's poor, including women farmers, closely depends on natural resources threatened by climate change, it is essential to reduce existing vulnerabilities and build up resilience.

In this light the International Council on Social Welfare strongly believes that wider use of internationally agreed instruments such as the ILO Recommendation 202 on National Floors of Social Protection could facilitate a fight against poverty and promote women's empowerment. Social protection schemes already in use in many countries have proven critical in redressing the disproportionate impact of economic, social and environmental shocks on women, but the potential of such schemes is far from exhausted and many cannot fully correct the disadvantages and discrimination that women still face on the labour market, in sharing of reproductive work between genders and in the education systems. However, there is a clear synergy between gender, social protection and environmental sustainability. Better and more gender-proactive social protection schemes can bring about structural changes in the economy and society, facilitating both mitigation and adaptation. The 2015 Report on the progress on the World's Women states (p. 15) “A comprehensive approach to social policy that combines universal access to social services with social protection through contributory and non-contributory transfer systems is the best way to realize economic and social rights for all without discrimination”.

Together with our partners in the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors the International Council on Social Welfare takes an active role in the global

advocacy campaign aimed at better understanding of core principles of social protection floors, and analysis and building of the evidence base for social protection floors. We also believe that civil society organizations must take an active role in monitoring and evaluating the social protection floor impact, including assessment of additional benefits that are generated for sustainable development. The quest for gender sensitive responses to the effects of climate changes should be considered in the context of better targeted development efforts, where social protection is firmly embedded among the key priorities.

An integration of a gender perspective into development programmes and better visibility of all women within development theory and practice has been an important outcome of international and national efforts to uphold gender equality and empowerment. But much more needs to be done. For example, older women are often overlooked in discussions of gender equality, empowerment and sustainable development. This is in spite of the fact that world's ageing population is projected to reach 2 billion by 2050, with women age 60 years and older projected to comprise over 1 billion of the ageing population at that time. Studies demonstrate that less than 10 per cent of older women need institutional care at any given time in old age. However, the stereotypic conflation of old age and dependency establishes the basis for harmful policies as well as traditional practices that exclude older women from full participation in society and do not support or recognize older women's capacity for productive and active ageing.

In the Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly — Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons: Second World Assembly on Ageing ([A/70/185](#)) released on July 24, 2015, a number of gaps were identified in achieving gender equality and empowerment for all women, specifically older women. It notes that women and men experience old age differently and while both experience age discrimination, older women also experience negative stereotypes that label them unimportant, limit their access to services and entitlements, and cause them to face cumulative life disadvantages due to lack of education, decision-making and participation in public life, access to age appropriate health care, lower earning capacity and the additional barrier of discriminatory gender-based laws and customs that apply to property and inheritance.

Shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals included the failure to tackle structural underpinnings of gender inequality such as violence, unpaid work, limitations in control of assets and property, and unequal participation in private and public decision-making, resulting in cumulative life disadvantages in old age. While the addition of language modifications in the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (for example, the addition of "all" prefacing references to "women and girls" intended to promote inclusion) implicitly referenced older women, the primary reference was the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, with older women relegated to the important but non-binding General Recommendation No. 27.

Discriminatory laws and practices against older women continue to fuel violence and abuse. Harmful traditional practices continue with older women accused of witchcraft, justifying horrific abuse against them, as well as financial abuse of older women denied rights to inheritance and property. Older women are often excluded from studies on violence conducted by the World Health Organization and other United Nations entities, based on ageist assumptions that

older women do not experience domestic violence or sexual abuse, would not remember such abuse due to age-related cognitive limitations, and would refuse to disclose such experiences because of a distaste for sharing distasteful memories. Age cutoffs for subjects in these studies are often up to age 49, the presumed end of reproductive functioning.

Given the ageing of the world's population, recognition that gender inequality and empowering all women and girls is a life-long process and a life-cycle analysis of gender equality is needed. While the centrality of gender equality and women's empowerment has been increasingly recognized, we must not overlook some key segments in society such as older women. Focusing on girls and women of reproductive age is important for building a foundation for empowerment of women in old age, but is only a partial strategy. It needs to be recognized that a focus on older women in the later phases of their lives is also critical to achieve gender equality and empowerment of girls and women of all ages. Understanding and integrating gender-specific vulnerabilities can help with the implementation of gendered adaptation practices, eventually relieving some of the disproportionately high burden of the adverse effects of climate change that women of all ages bear.

Another important policy issue that affects older women and their social and economic protection in old age is the need for recognition and valuing of unpaid work. Girls and women of all ages take on responsibility disproportionately in the family for caregiving of children and other care dependent family members, limiting their involvement in the formal workplace. If working outside the home, women of all ages are more likely than men to work in the informal economy, creating disadvantages for receiving pension benefits in old age. Older women are more likely than men to experience poverty, including extreme poverty in old age in most countries, and developed economies are no exception. It is critical to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibilities within the household and family as nationally appropriate to ensure women are not disadvantaged economically in old age due to cumulative disadvantages throughout the life course. It is also critical to undertake reforms to give all women equal rights to economic resources as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws. This represents a tangible fight against poverty and is a clear boon to sustainable development.

To ensure that gender equality goals for older women are monitored, nations must include disaggregated data by gender and age on economic status and other indicators on an ongoing basis. For example, indicators such as "percentage of the population covered by social protection floors/systems" should be disaggregated by age and sex to allow the tracking over time older women's poverty and the outcome of policy initiatives to eliminate it. Monitoring and hence the creation of statistical visibility of inequalities creates the policy space for civil society to demand new or more effective public policies to correct inequality.

We recognize that each country faces specific challenges in its pursuit of sustainable development. Integration of gender-specific targets across other goals of the new development agenda is an important pre-requisite aimed at curtailing high economic costs that are closely linked to social inequities and environmental degradation, bringing closer a just, equitable and inclusive world.