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Statement submitted by Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, 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 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



The Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic (“the Clinic”) is the only clinic of its kind in Canada, providing specialized services for women who have experienced violence including legal representation, counselling and language interpretation services in over 200 languages. The Clinic also engages in educational initiatives and works on law reform. Since its inception in 1985, we have assisted over 65,000 women who have experienced gender-based violence. In 2019, we assisted over 9,000 women.

Discrimination is rarely based on an individual characteristic. The reality is that women often experience multiple forms of discrimination which occur in a manner that is indistinguishable and mutually reinforcing.

Women are not equal to men in Canada. This inequality is visible in the wage gap, a persistent barrier to gender-based equity and freedom from violence. Women currently earn on average 87 cents for every dollar earned by men. Indigenous women earn as little as 65 cents to the dollar, while racialized women earn 67 cents and migrant women earn 71 cents.

We recognize that financial vulnerability is a key factor in women’s decision-making. Many women are unable to seek justice when forced to choose between exercising their rights or securing housing and food. They are often forced to remain in dangerous situations because of financial constraints.

The gender wage gap reinforces the undervaluing of women, contributing to their marginalization and exacerbating the effects of gender-based violence.

Even amongst women, there are equality gaps. For example, indigenous women are disproportionately criminalized, representing almost one-half of women in custody despite making up only four percent of the population. Indigenous women also face rates of violence more than twice that of white Canadian women.

Migrant women are often unable to obtain or retain work permits and may be forced to remain underpaid and overworked in unsafe and abusive conditions. Migrant women are often unable to access health, legal or labor services due to language barriers, lack of information and fear of deportation. These same barriers may also prevent them from attaining status in Canada.

In our practice, we have observed that the idea of “culture” has created another barrier that prevents women who are victims of violence from seeking justice. Women may avoid seeking help where they believe that will only contribute to stereotypical conceptions of their culture. Service providers may be biased in screening mechanisms, risk assessment and the type or level of assistance offered. Finally, cultural misconceptions of gender-based violence can complicate women’s lived experiences, often resulting in applying western perspectives to their situations and potentially not providing appropriate protection.

We support the HLS’ theme of empowerment, inclusivity and equality. We urge Canada and all countries to continue their efforts to improve women’s equality.