



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women  
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled  
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the  
twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by International Federation of University Women, 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.



## Statement

Recognizing the significance and necessity of all 12 areas of concern from the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the International Federation of University Women and the undersigned organizations have identified six issues that require follow-up action: the role of women in the economy, women's education and training, the challenges faced by girls, violence against women, women's health issues and women's role in decision-making.

### Women and the economy

To help women realize financial independence and empowerment, quality education that is both academic and practical, and provided in both institutional and informal settings, must be provided to all girls and women to ensure equal access to employment opportunities across all sectors of the economy. Despite being enshrined in international law since the adoption of the Convention on Equal Remuneration in 1951, the principle of equal pay for work of equal value has still not materialized across all sectors or in all States. Barriers giving rise to gender inequality in pay include:

- Difference in perception towards roles and careers for women versus men
- Lack of social infrastructure that would allow women to balance work life with domestic commitments
- Less emphasis on preparing women for leadership and decision-making roles.

States must prioritize financial literacy in the education system, which is critical to empowering women to take charge of their own economic independence and must be part of school curricula. From managing personal and household budgets to knowing how to become entrepreneurs, having such a skill set empowers women to overcome their financial vulnerability, which is often a direct result of outdated norms that view men as the principal breadwinners and providers.

Certain groups of women face increased economic marginalization, especially women with disabilities and those from indigenous, minority or migrant backgrounds or those displaced by war. States must ensure that women with disabilities are provided with tailored education and training, while legislation must prevent employers from discriminating in their hiring practices. It is critical that indigenous and minority women are not prevented from accessing learning, be it due to linguistic, geographical or other barriers. States should incorporate technology and non-traditional means and forms of education to allow indigenous women to access the job market. Women migrant workers are a distinctly vulnerable economic group, with increased exposure to long hours, low pay, poor working conditions and lack of support infrastructure. These women are underrepresented in professional and skilled jobs, despite often being educated to a higher level than nationals. To increase the economic protection of female migrant workers, the empowerment of women should be a specific target in all migration policies. This can be achieved by:

- Recognizing equivalent foreign qualifications or by providing transfer programmes to align foreign qualifications with their national equivalents

- Investing in free language programmes to facilitate integration and job market access
- Providing evening, part-time or other tailored courses to allow women migrant workers the opportunity to access formal education, skills training and work-readiness programmes
- Legislating equal rights for non-migrant and migrant workers, including access to trade unions and standard working conditions.

### **Education and training**

Our goal is for 100 per cent of girls and women in the world to obtain a quality education beyond primary school. This is critical to securing sustainable development, female empowerment and substantive gender equality, as articulated in general recommendation No. 25 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. At the secondary level, we call on States and the education sector to ensure universal access to free, quality secondary education, including through the provision of financial incentives and support to keep girls from the poorest families in school. School policies must halt gender-stereotyping and the streaming of girls into certain disciplines of learning. Girls should be actively encouraged to study science, technology, engineering, mathematics and information and communications technology, in order to increase innovation and close the current gender gap within related professions. Tertiary education must also be made accessible, including through encouraging higher education institutions to provide part-time or evening study programmes to allow women to balance family obligations and other commitments. Lifelong education must also be provided, including professional, vocational and other non-traditional types of learning, thereby allowing for the acquisition of knowledge and skills through methods that extend beyond formal means, institutions and sectors.

### **The girl child**

The girl child must remain a priority on local, national and international agendas given the growing vulnerability of girls in many societies. This is particularly the case for girls from rural or indigenous backgrounds, girls who have been displaced by armed conflict or girls who are disabled. Child marriage and female genital mutilation are practices specifically suffered by the girl child, which, in addition to being significant barriers to education, also carry serious health risks that may possibly lead to death. Statistics reveal just how worrying and widespread these trends are: of the girls and women alive today, 250 million were married before the age of 15 (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014), while 125 million have been subjected to female genital mutilation (World Health Organization, 2014).

### **Violence against women**

Girls and women are exposed to more incidents, are at greater risk of physical and sexual violence and are more often subject to harassment and mental abuse, in all societies across all countries and regions. Violence against women occurs in domestic, professional and public settings. Gender-based violence also increases the risk of exposure to HIV (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2013). In addition, the threat of violence at schools and in institutions of learning is a distinct cause of many girls and women not receiving an education. States must implement

concerted plans to tackle violence against girls and women, including through the adoption of criminal legislation that penalizes the perpetrators and serves as an adequate deterrent.

### **Women and health**

Certain women's health issues, including maternal, reproductive and sexual health, are in need of particular attention. Gender-specific medicine is an important factor to be recognized by health-care providers, as diagnosis and treatment must take into account physiological, psychological and other material differences between men and women. Providing girls and women with a quality education results in tangible, long-term benefits to the family and society. It is estimated that, if all mothers completed primary education, maternal mortality would fall by two thirds, saving 98,000 lives. Similarly, if all women received a secondary education, child deaths would be cut in half, saving 3 million lives (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2013).

### **Women in power and decision-making**

Women are often systematically discriminated against in terms of salary and professional advancement when compared with their male colleagues. Despite studies showing that companies with more women in senior positions perform significantly better (Catalyst, 2004), women only account for 18.3 per cent of top-level management (World Bank, gender enterprise surveys). Similarly, although only 21.8 per cent of national parliamentarians were women as of July 2014 (Inter-Parliamentary Union), it has been shown that parliaments containing a higher percentage of women consider a broader range of issues and adopt more legislation on health, education, anti-discrimination and child support issues (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2014). Quality education that is both academic and practical, and provided in institutional and informal settings, is critical to the empowerment of girls and women with the qualifications, skills, training and determination necessary to pursue and obtain higher-paying careers and positions.

## **Summary**

Recognizing the quintessential role of quality, lifelong education of girls and women in sustainable development, social change and economic advancement, we call on all States, the education sector and policymakers to take the following actions to address the remaining challenges and obstacles to achieving substantive gender equality:

- (a) Develop and introduce tailored, accessible lifelong education and training for marginalized women, including disabled women, those from an indigenous or rural background and those who have been displaced by war;
- (b) Incorporate protective measures for migrant women in national migration policies to mitigate the risk of exploitation; introduce qualification transfer systems and accelerated certification programmes to recognize foreign qualifications; and provide linguistic and vocational training to facilitate access to the job market;
- (c) Implement universal access to free, quality secondary education;

(d) Design tertiary education curricula to incorporate flexible learning options, including part-time, evening and online classes;

(e) Introduce national legislation and ratify international commitments to prioritize the protection of the girl child from harmful practices, including child marriage and female genital mutilation;

(f) Expressly criminalize all acts of violence against women in national legislation; train law enforcement officers and the judiciary in how to appropriately address cases of gender-based violence;

(g) Provide access to clinics and health care for girls and women, including facilities offering maternal care, sexual health and mental well-being services;

(h) Formally adopt legislation to prohibit gender discrimination in the workplace, with particular focus on applying the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

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*Note:* The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: Center for Women's Global Leadership and Soroptimist International.