



# 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 twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

### **Statement submitted by Women’s Intercultural Network, 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

Since the Fourth World Conference's adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) in 1995, Women's Intercultural Network has been at the forefront working locally and globally to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Ensuring women's full and effective participation in decision making in public life and eliminating violence against women are integral to our organizational mission.

Women's Intercultural Network built the first state policy mechanism to implement the BPfA, known globally as the California Women's Agenda, then brought that mechanism global through US Women Connect and Global Calling Circles – connecting women from the USA, Uganda, Iran, Afghanistan, Japan and around the world – with the US policy mechanism for the BPfA. Our leadership on the Cities for CEDAW Campaign has taken the United Nations Women's Treaty – The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) – to the grassroots of America with 70 cities currently engaged. Local adoption of CEDAW advances the equality of women and girls at the grassroots and provides a local mechanism to advance progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated inequality. In the United States women represent the most economically impacted. According to United States Census Bureau data, of the 38.1 million people living in poverty in 2018, 56 per cent – or 21.4 million – were women. The coronavirus pandemic has put women and families at an increased risk of falling into poverty, as they face greater economic insecurity, due in large part to unprecedented unemployment that has disproportionately affected women. Women are falling further behind men in the recovery and are 5.8 million jobs below pre-COVID employment levels. Further the burden of unpaid care has increased and continues to fall disproportionately on women.

Gaps in wages, healthcare, childcare, and lack of access to paid family leave impede women's participation in decision making and public life. The Human Rights Council (2018) published a report on extreme poverty and human rights in the United States, revealing inadequate social protections and social services, and noting the gendered nature of poverty, racism, disability and demonization of poverty or healthcare.

Institutionalized racism and disability further limits individuals in their rise out of poverty. The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and beyond has revealed the urgency to address systemic and institutional racism that adversely impact health outcomes for people of color and limit their full and equal participation in public life. Even to the extent of exposing greater voter restrictions in communities of color.

Access to healthcare, safety, personal agency, and autonomy are foundational to gender equality and women and girls' full participation in public life. Thus, Women's Intercultural Network deeply disapproves of the recent United States regressive policies on women's human rights. From the "global gag rule" to a domestic gag rule, defunding United Nations Population Fund, the threat of vetoing a UN Security Council resolution on women, peace, and security because it mentioned survivors' sexual and reproductive health and rights, to the establishment of the Commission on Unalienable Rights that appears to directly threaten sexual and reproductive health and rights, to the Women's Global Development and Prosperity initiative that completely disregards the need women and girls access health care, the United States is increasingly hostile to advancing gender equality and women's human rights to the extent that the Administration has looked to garner support at international forums from other anti-choice governments to push back on the global consensus around sexual and reproductive health and rights. The recently released USAID Gender 2020

Policy is regressive and harmful in its failure to acknowledge human rights of all persons regardless of sex, citizenship, or gender identity. The policy narrowly defines sexual relations as occurring strictly in the context of marriage – a definition out of step with reality. Among the dangers of this policy are its impact on women and girls' access to contraception. Without agency, access, and ability to control one's reproduction, women cannot fully participate in public life.

The aforementioned curtailing of women's human rights stands in direct opposition to the BPfA and undermines progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. In the US, the current patchwork of healthcare coverage across states leaves many women and girls uninsured and creates an environment in which women die at higher rates than they do in comparably wealthy countries from preventable maternal and gynecological cancer-related deaths. Human Rights Watch documented (29 November 2018) how Alabama's failure to expand Medicaid eligibility, along with a mix of other policies and practices, has led to a high rate of preventable cervical cancer deaths that disproportionately impacts black women in the state. Alabama, along with Texas, has the lowest Medicaid eligibility levels in the nation and is seeking a waiver to make eligibility even more difficult. Maternal mortality rates are higher for women of color.

As pertains to violence against women, according to the World Health Organization, violence against women is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. It is rooted in and perpetuates gender inequalities. Additionally, the National Institutes of Health – United States National Library of Medicine cited alarming trends in United States domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and girls face violence and harassment in public spaces and online, too. #MeToo helped expose the endemic abuses that women face in the workplace. 2020 should see the start of the structural reforms needed to end violence and harassment at work for them, and all workers, on a global scale. To this end the 2019 International Labor Organization Convention on Violence and Harassment at Work is an important step.

The United States Department of the Interior noted on 11 September 2019 that the Violence Against Women Act and the Tribal Law and Order Act have brought attention to the high rate of violence in Indian Country and the gaps in identifying crime trends in Indian Country. Federal studies have shown that in portions of the country with large Native American populations, Native women are killed at a rate 10 times higher than the national average, yet, reauthorization has stalled.

Solutions to violence against women must include individualized support and systemic interventions that center survivors and ensure environments are safe and supportive. It is also important to invest in efforts to shift culture within every institution to internalize a deep commitment to promote healthy relationships and respect for individual dignity across gender and identity and reject toxic masculinity.

When identifying barriers that limit women's full and equal participation, it is essential to recognize the harm women face in health effects and during extreme weather events, which also exacerbate existing gender inequities.

The Women's Intercultural Network has been charting a roadmap to engage women and girls and bring the global compacts of the BPfA and Sustainable Development Goal 5 to local communities collaborating with other partners to spearhead a national Cities for CEDAW campaign supporting grassroots activists to spur local governments to pass ordinances that employ CEDAW principles to advance equity. The campaign allows local officials, women's and human rights groups to shape their own community needs in order to improve women's economic opportunities, increase girls' participation in STEM, and combat human trafficking and violence against women. As the United States remains the only industrialized

nation not to ratify CEDAW, Cities for CEDAW is a vital mechanism to bring this UN Global Compact to local communities to transform women and girls' lives.

San Francisco, the first city to adopt a local CEDAW ordinance in 1998, has centered women's human rights and achieved results through gender analysis and equity audits across services, budgets, employment, and agencies. The San Francisco Department of the Status of Women in collaboration with local police and the District Attorney's Office has set out to retool the process of managing human trafficking to accurately identify survivors and prioritize their support over victim criminalization.

The CEDAW framework is instrumental in advancing the BPfA. It provides local governments in partnership with civil society organizations the tools to build a sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls by dismantling barriers, centering the voices of those most marginalized, and addressing violence that impedes progress.

The Women's Intercultural Network encourages states, non-governmental organizations, and the public and private sectors to fund and apply the gender-focused evaluation, practices, and metrics outlined in CEDAW to bring this global framework to local communities to advance women and girls' equity.

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