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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 Cultural Survival, 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

Twenty years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform of Action, we find that many of its resolutions and recommendations have not yet reached many Indigenous communities, and Indigenous women are still working toward equality without signs of change.

Native American and Alaska native women are 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than other women in the US; 86 per cent of reported cases are perpetrated by non-Natives.

A 2014 study by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police concluded that Indigenous women in Canada are four times more likely to be murdered than non-Indigenous women. Indigenous women in Canada are still 3.5 times more likely to experience violence in their lifetimes. A recent report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz stated that 1,017 Indigenous women and girls were murdered between 1980 and 2012 in Canada.

A study focusing on Southeast Asia found that in Fiji, India, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, and Timor-Leste, militarized conflict over Indigenous land has led to gang rape, sexual enslavement, and the murder of tribal women. In Indigenous territories occupied by the Burmese army, the rape of Indigenous women is both “entertainment” and part of a strategy to demoralize and weaken the Indigenous population.

In north-western Kenya, British soldiers stationed in the area since the 1980s have reportedly raped more than 1,400 Maasai and Samburu women. Rape survivors and their families still suffer from the legacy of those attacks, such as stigmatization of families with mixed-race children.

Twenty years after Beijing, Indigenous women across the globe are still fighting to protect their land and resources against governmental bodies, harmful forestry projects, and extractive industries, which pollute their land resources.

It is impossible for Indigenous women to fulfil crucial roles within their communities when they are crippled by the injustices of disproportionate violence, lack of access to health care and education, all whilst defending their lands, languages, and cultures. Violations of Indigenous women’s rights go hand in hand with violations of Indigenous land rights.

Indigenous Peoples make up 5 per cent of the world’s population while representing 15 per cent of those living in poverty. Women are disproportionately affected by the systemic poverty that affects Indigenous peoples, due to their roles as caregivers and managers of resources in their communities. The role of Indigenous women in society is one of crucial importance. They are activists, healers, life bearers and mothers, teachers, faith keepers, and caregivers to ancestral lands and the Earth. They are beacons of traditional knowledge and languages. From the matriarchal political systems of the Haudenosaunee to the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, Indigenous societies have long recognized the critical role that women play in the public sphere.

Indigenous peoples, especially women, tend to have low levels of education and health relative to the rest of the population, generally as a result of the

geographical and political marginalization of Indigenous communities. When education and health services are available, they are often blind to the specific needs of Indigenous peoples, and particularly the needs of Indigenous women. A lack of adequate data on Indigenous communities disaggregated from the wider population results in Indigenous Peoples' specific needs not being understood in the context of national education and healthcare policy and planning.

Regarding Indigenous women's civil and political rights, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recently stated in her report on Indigenous Women and Girls that Indigenous women are commonly excluded from both Indigenous decision-making structures and local and national political processes, which leads to a lack of priority for women's concerns in policy making. Indigenous women are overrepresented in criminal justice systems, largely because of difficulties with the law due to prior violations of their human rights. Estimates suggest that Maori women in New Zealand represent 40 to 60 per cent of the female prison population, while the Maori people represent around 15 per cent of the general population.

We call upon the United Nations, governmental bodies, and women's groups to recognize Indigenous women's importance and to respect, protect, and fulfil their rights. As stated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, issues of poverty, education, violence, and policy should be addressed with the full participation of Indigenous women with respect to our knowledge, tradition, and languages.

When death rates for Australia's Indigenous women are three-times higher than the population average and Indigenous women across the world disproportionately face life-threatening and gender-based violence, there is a great indication of a need for change.

This commission serves as a platform to mobilize and encourage the action of both women and the governments under which they live. Furthermore, it gives Indigenous women the ability to educate and inform the general populace on the socioeconomic circumstances of their communities and the conditions under which they must work and thrive. Whether terrorized by racial profiling, commercial and energy interests, or the dissolution of traditional practices, there is much the world must know regarding the plight of some of the world's first cultures.

There is much work to be done. The time has long passed for Indigenous women to remain underrepresented on a global scale. Indigenous women must be involved in discussions on policy that impact their futures, hence there is a need to fund their participation and access must be given to decision-making. They must be allowed to utilize their traditional knowledge in a modern context to best maintain traditional lands and cultures. Ultimately, they must be able to make informed decisions on their right to health, education, and self-determination.

At the 2013 World Conference of Indigenous Women in Lima, Peru, Indigenous women endorsed the principle: "Nothing about us, without us", and further declared "Everything about us, with us."

Cultural Survival has several recommendations.

- We call upon states to recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples' rights to lands, territories and resources as enshrined in Indigenous customary law, the

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and other international human rights instruments. This includes Indigenous Peoples' right to freely pursue their own economic, social, and cultural development. The principle of free, prior and informed consent to the development of all laws, policies and all programs should be implemented in all areas.

- Weaknesses exist in monitoring systems and in implementation in relation to Indigenous women's rights, a lack of disaggregated data regarding Indigenous women, and neoliberal economic and development paradigms are key challenges for advancing Indigenous women's rights and need to be addressed.
- Action should be taken to both encourage and promote positions of leadership held by Indigenous women. They should hold positions of representation in their communities, nationally, and internationally with regard to their cultural diversity. Mobilizing women in disenfranchised communities, often stricken by poverty or disability, serves as a valuable method of encouraging self-determination in women who often face barriers to their own empowerment. Indigenous women hold valuable knowledge that can and will contribute to voicing the concerns of communities that might otherwise go unheard.
- Programs should be developed, and those in existence continue to be developed upon, that give Indigenous women a seat at the table regarding policy in all areas affecting them.
- National governments should: improve access to culturally sensitive education and health-care, with interventions targeted towards understanding and overcoming the specific barriers faced by girls; review and improve poverty-reduction programs; invest in research that supports understanding of food insecurity among Indigenous communities and develop programs to ensure the rights of Indigenous Peoples to food.
- Action should be taken to immediately address the unjust continuation of violence against Indigenous women, both from outside their communities and within the home. As long as statistics persist such as one of every three Native American women being sexually assaulted in her lifetime, this issue cannot rest. Mechanisms must be put in place to address human rights abuses related to all forms of sexual assault, sex trafficking, domestic abuse, and the thousands of unsolved cases regarding missing Indigenous women.

With these recommendations, it is our hope at Cultural Survival that Indigenous women will not be overlooked in this process, and that all women — Indigenous and non-Indigenous — will be able to enjoy a society in which they feel safe, respected, and empowered. Indigenous women and girls must be recognized as development partners in the goal for global sustainable development.