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peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by World Young Women’s Christian Association, and Young Women’s Christian Association of the United States of America, non-governmental organizations 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

The Young Women's Christian Association of the United States of America and World Young Women's Christian Association are pleased to submit this written statement to the Commission on the Status of Women. As we convene with our sister organizations from around the globe at our quadrennial gathering next month in Johannesburg, South Africa, we are cognizant of both the progress toward gender equality and empowerment which has occurred over the last quarter century and of threats to continued progress. This statement will specifically address issues of gender-based violence, immigration, reproductive health, women's leadership, and young women's empowerment.

The Young Women's Christian Association of the United States of America was granted special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2015. Founded in 1858, we are one of the oldest and largest women's organizations in the United States and are dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. We are the largest network of domestic and sexual violence service providers in the United States, and also provide many childcare, economic empowerment, health, and racial justice programs. Women and girls make up 77 per cent of the more than 2 million individuals served by our 200 local associations, and two-thirds live at or below the federal poverty level.

World Young Women's Christian Association has had special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council since 1947. Established in 1855, we are the largest international women's rights movement, supporting young women to become change agents and transforming power structures that discriminate and hold young women back. Through a journey of critical awareness, confidence building, and transformative leadership, we equip young women to challenge detrimental norms and lead change. We are a longstanding part of the community fabric in 109 countries, with an unrivalled outreach to millions of women, young women, and girls. We envision a future where women are visible and have a voice throughout all levels and sectors of society. Our bold and transformative goal for 2035 is for 100 million young women and girls to transform power structures to create justice, gender equality, and a world without violence and war.

The sixth-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women convenes at a critical moment of opportunity and concern for women and girls. In addition to marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the five-year milestone toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emerging dynamics across the globe threaten the continued advancement of women's rights. Specifically, backlash against women's rights is undermining the goal of achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls (Expert Group Meeting Concept Note, p. 4). This current geopolitical landscape destabilizes the transformative work of our organizations, as we seek to empower young women leaders globally.

The sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women also coincides with significant milestones in the United States that illustrate strides we have made, as well as reveal many challenges that remain. The year 2020 will mark the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which established women's suffrage, and the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, which instituted voting rights protections for people of color. The United States will also hold a critical national election in 2020, while women organize and advocate for structural change and utilize purposfully inclusive and intersectional approaches.

However, just as at the global level, the United States is currently facing severe backlash regarding the full realization of women's human rights. The below highlights current political dynamics within the United States related to gender equality that mirror world-wide issues:

- The continued challenge of ending gender-based violence, particularly for the most marginalized members of our society: communities of color and underserved populations; children and youth; rural communities; immigrants; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer or questioning community; Native American/Alaska Native communities; and elderly and disabled persons. Efforts to update and reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act (a pivotal law, originally passed in 1994, which increased resources to combat domestic and sexual violence in the U.S.) are currently stalled in the United States Congress. We are particularly concerned by the epidemic of gun violence, mass shootings, and intimate partner homicide that are inextricably linked with gender-based violence. Congress and the current administration have heavily politicized this issue, jeopardizing women's safety.
- The appalling treatment of immigrant women, children, and families across the United States, particularly Central American immigrants along the southern border. This has both heightened the risk of gender-based violence for women and girls seeking safety in the United States and amplified the significant trauma experienced by refugees and asylees fleeing violence and poverty.
- Increased limitations on women's access to safe, affordable health care and the full range of reproductive health services. The current presidential administration continues to impede full implementation of the Affordable Care Act (an important law, passed in 2010, that expanded access to health insurance for women and historically marginalized groups). The administration also continues to eliminate women's access to the full range of reproductive health services, including abortion and contraception, both domestically and abroad.
- Too few women in positions of power, particularly women from underrepresented communities. Despite an unprecedented number of women running for and winning elected positions in 2018, only 23 per cent of national representatives, 25 per cent of national senators, 29 per cent of state executives, and 29 per cent of state legislators are women (Center for American Women in Politics).

These issues have an immense impact on the achievement of gender equality in the United States. In our surveys of more than 1,000 United States women in 2018 and 2019, the issues of gender-based violence, gun violence and mass shootings, immigration, access to health care, and access to economic and political empowerment were leading concerns across demographic groups.

Call to action:

The review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and progress toward achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals could not have come at a more critical juncture. We see this as a moment of opportunity for real impactful change and urge the following actions to ensure women's and girls' safety, empowerment, and equality:

- **Reaffirm and update the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.** While progress has been made in achieving the goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, much work remains. Moreover, our collective understanding of gender, gender identity, and the intersecting forms of discrimination and violence that women and girls experience have radically evolved over the last quarter century. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for

Action should be updated to include underrepresented individuals, communities, and identities, (including women of color, indigenous women, LGBTQ individuals, and disabled women) and to ensure that strategic objectives and actions are appropriately tailored to respond to the emerging backlash against women's human rights.

- **Fully fund the United Nation's commitment to women and girls.** Words alone are not enough. To achieve the hope and promise of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality, the United Nations must fully fund its commitment to women at the global level. Member States, donors, and multilateral institutions must step forward with the financial resources needed to put proposals, statements, and initiatives into action.
- **Hold Member States accountable.** Member States must honor their pledges to achieve women's equality and empowerment and must be held accountable for failure to make and keep these commitments. In particular, the United States must ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, as well as take action to uphold the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.
- **Open pathways and opportunities for young women's leadership.** We must recognize and act upon the interconnected nature of power structures and seats of decision-making. To fully realize the vision of women's empowerment laid out in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we must recommit to supporting women's – and especially young women's – leadership in our communities and governments.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement and look forward to working with the non-governmental organization community, the Commission on the Status of Women, and the United Nations Economic and Social Council to advance these critical issues.
