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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 WePower – Women’s Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women’s Leadership in Israel (R.A.), 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**

### **Accelerating gender equality in the Israeli political arena**

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, focused the world agenda on gender equality. One resolution was to increase women's presence and involvement in politics, conflict prevention, and resolution management. The low representation of women being elected all over the world, including Israel, has limited women's presence on committees, political forums, and round-table discussions where policies are determined.

WePower – Women's Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women's Leadership in Israel (R.A.), an Israeli non-partisan non-governmental organization, has been working since 2000 to narrow the gender equality gap in the political arena of Israel. The Israeli Declaration of Independence proclaims equality in rights and obligations. However, there is still a low rate of women in high-level positions.

Since 2000, WePower – Women's Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women's Leadership in Israel (R.A.) has succeeded in creating awareness and passing legislation that enables women to enter the political ranks. Via training and support, more women have considered and entered the political realm. Measurable results are seen in more women candidates running for office, an increase in women being elected, and a rise in political activism throughout the country and today is establishing a new initiative – an accelerator to achieve gender equality in Israel in local elections by 2023 and on the national level by 2030.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly created a worldwide platform and a pivotal turning point in the world's focus on gender equality and women's empowerment. Under category G of the summary, the delegates conceded that there was a gross underrepresentation of women in decision-making bodies in all areas, including politics, conflict prevention, and resolution mechanisms.

WePower – Women's Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women's Leadership in Israel (R.A.) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization in Israel founded in 2000. As the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was ahead of its time, so was WePower – Women's Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women's Leadership in Israel (R.A.), which was established to face the challenges of underrepresentation in the political arena in Israel. WePower's main goal was to formalize systems that would create statewide solutions and provide services, support, training, and knowledge for the empowerment of women aspiring to become prominent political leaders and decision makers. They also started building collaborative work environments with government, non-profit, and other organizations as a strategy to help women promote themselves in areas that create public policies and to narrow the gender gap that is so prevalent.

#### **Israel: background**

Formally, the Israeli legal system has no restrictions preventing women from fully participating in politics. The Declaration of Independence and the guiding principles of Israel's first government stated distinctly that the State would guarantee women full equality, in both rights and obligations, in the political, social, economic, and legal circles.

Over the past 25 years, recent legislation has addressed gender equality in the formal legal-electoral system; thus, Israel is entirely egalitarian on paper. Proportional representation, especially in a single-district format, promotes

sociopolitical minorities; however, women have not advanced in the national elections. Once women are voted in and join the ranks of the political parties, these parties serve as protectors of the parliamentary system, which means that Israeli women politicians find it very difficult to climb the political pyramid and be elected to the Knesset. Furthermore, the single-vote electoral system compels voters to prioritize their agendas and cast their one vote to serve their major concern, in which we find case security will always override social concerns, including women's rights. Notice that the ultra-Orthodox and Arab parties do not include women in the political dialogue. In 1995, women's involvement in Israeli politics was only 8 per cent on the national level (Knesset) and 9 per cent in local municipalities.

WePower – Women's Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women's Leadership in Israel (R.A.) began to investigate the political and social reason why women were not running for public office, given there are no legislative barriers. This non-government organization started a systematic mapping process, which concluded that women needed to be educated about the campaign process to determine if they want to run a campaign. Attaining pertinent information was not easily understood or accessible. In addition, we found that women need a strong support network and tools to deal with the financial, family, and media issues that arise.

Once women are in positions of power, they will be able to influence allocations of resources and address women's needs and concerns. WePower – Women's Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women's Leadership in Israel (R.A.) understands that once the percentage of women reaches a critical threshold, the process will be self-reinforcing and require skill building and resources to be reelected.

WePower defined three strategies to attack the problem at hand: legislation; identifying candidates, training, and networking; and raising awareness.

#### Legislation:

- Advance the sustainable infrastructure for promoting women into leadership.
- Change laws to create incentives that encourage women to run for office.

#### Identifying candidates, training, and networking:

- Accessing tools and methodology to enter the political arena.
- Creating support and networking groups.
- Maintaining political support networks.

#### Raising awareness:

- Utilizing social media for the promotion of encouraging women to enter politics.
- Building coalitions with more than 25 non government organizations creating a wide platform to raise awareness and encourage women to create an action plan.
- Appealing to the Israeli Supreme Court to challenge policies that prevent the inclusion of women on lists (e.g., ultra-Orthodox policy).

### **Accomplishments**

Legislation – A major result of this strategy was that a new law was enacted in 2014 and provided for a financial incentive – additional funding of 15 per cent – to party lists where women constitute a third or more of the candidates, which proved to help raise the number of women candidates in 2018.

Identifying candidates, training, and networking – First, they identified candidates, organized conferences and gatherings statewide, under the title, This

Council [will be] under My Leadership. This provided services for women who considered running for office, such as; educating them on how to manage a campaign; providing mentoring from politicians who had experience as candidates and as elected public officials; networking, information, and other services for women in isolated locations; peer support that created a sense of community; and creating a countrywide alliance for women. A special online programme, College for Politics, was created to reach women candidates in isolated locations.

Raised awareness – By gathering a diverse group of 28 organizations from the Jewish, Druze, Arab Moslem, and Christian populations to work together to raise awareness among all sectors. Hundreds of WePower – Women’s Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women’s Leadership in Israel (R.A.) programmes were running to empower women countrywide: Women of the Future; Leaders of Tomorrow; Your Voice is HeardMatters (for Arab and Jewish Orthodox women); Women of the Future; Senior Management in the Central and the Negev Regions; and Gender-Conscious Management. These programmes focus on raising awareness in different social groups.

These strategies proved to be successful in promoting WePower – Women’s Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women’s Leadership in Israel (R.A.) goals, leading to positive outcomes on the local political level, where there was an increase in women candidates for local authorities from 533 in 2013 to 1,283 in 2018, and from 6 elected women heads of authorities (including mayors) in 2013 to 14 in 2018. We are proud to mention that 25 per cent of graduate alumna were active in the political scene throughout the country. On the national level, women representation has reached 30 per cent – an increase of more than 411 per cent.

Twenty-five years ago in Beijing, the United Nations challenged the world to drive women’s empowerment. For the last 20 years, WePower Women’s Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women’s Leadership in Israel (R.A.) has embraced this goal with significant results in Israel. We are now establishing a new initiative – an accelerator to achieve gender equality in local elections by 2023 and on the national level by 2030. We believe that our strategy has helped women of Israel move forward towards mainstreaming women in high-level positions in local and national government. It is our vision to share these principles for the benefit of women around the world.

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