



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
9 November 2016

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-first session

13-24 March 2017

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 New Japan Women’s Association, 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

Since its foundation in 1962, the New Japan Women's Association, with its 150,000 members all over Japan, has been working for the abolition of nuclear weapons, rights of women and children, and solidarity of women around the world for peace.

Income Gap and Poverty Growing in Japan

In Japan, we have seen young mothers organize demonstrations chanting, "It's me who can't get a slot in day care centre for my child," and more and more people start raising their voices about difficulties they face, saying, "My company is a sweatshop" or "I've been long on the waiting list for special nursing home". They urge the government to carry out politics according to the will of the people. Behind the trend is the reality that the relative poverty rate of Japan, the world's third largest "economic power", hit an all-time record high of 16.1 percent with child poverty rate reaching 16.3 percent. One in six of the Japanese population suffers from poverty and income inequality.

Women are hardest hit. 70 percent of the non-regular workers are women, their average wage is about half of men's, and 30 percent of the single working women earn less than 1.14 million yen (about 10,932 US dollars) a year. Poverty is indeed a women's issue. As the day care shortage attracts social attention, many women find themselves in dire straits being unable to work even if they want to, or to make a living even if they have jobs. The poverty rate among single-parent families is 54.6 percent and these parents are forced to work two or three jobs. Women's low wage results in low pension benefits. In the questionnaire conducted by the New Japan Women's Association, 80 percent of the women surveyed said that they find it impossible to live on a pension. Poverty is widespread among women, young and old alike.

There are three factors that have caused the current situation

One is that the series of adverse revision of the labour laws carried out in the name of "deregulation" or "diversification of employment patterns" have caused a sharp increase in temporary, contract and other forms of non-regular workers. Long working hours and low pay without rights have become common rapidly and widely. The conditions of these workers are so harsh that they are described with such terms as "disposable workers" and "on the verge of dying from overwork". Workers' average annual salaries have decreased by 450,000 yen (about 4,320 US dollars) in these 20 years and by 200,000 yen (about 1,929 US dollars) in the last four years. 18,920,000 households, about 30 percent of all, have no savings, and the "working poor" population continues to grow.

Secondly, the government policy to reduce spending on social security and education is making things worse. Cuts in pension and welfare benefits along with the raise in health and nursing-care insurances premiums and charges for care services, impose heavier burdens on people's shoulders. Japan's public spending on educational institutions is only 3.5 percent of its Gross Domestic Product, the lowest among 32 of the 34 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries where data were available. High tuition fees and

scholarship loan debt with interests aggravate poverty and deprive young people of their opportunities for education. We see more cases that parents cannot afford to pay for school meals and that students have to leave school because of high tuitions.

Thirdly, the rising commodity prices and the consumption tax rate hike from 5 to 8 percent, resulting from “Abenomics”, economic policies of the current government, are hitting the low income population directly. On the other hand, tax breaks for the wealthy and corporate tax cuts have benefitted the rich. The collective wealth of Japan’s 40 richest people was valued at 7.2 trillion yen (about 69 billion US dollars) in 2012, and it has more than doubled in four years since, swelling to 15.4 trillion yen (about 147.7 billion US dollars) in 2016. The amount of large corporations’ internal reserves has exceeded 300 trillion yen (about 2.9 trillion US dollars). All these indicate that in Japan, income redistribution, a government function to redress income inequality and reduce poverty by imposing more tax on those with large income while providing generous benefits to those with low income.

The government has been advocating for a “society in which women shine” and a “society in which all 100 million people are active”, and now speaks about “work style reform” to enforce the “same job, same pay” principle and to “address long working hours”. However, what it is up to actually is further amending the labour laws for the worse to introduce a “zero overtime pay” system, to reduce wages to eliminate income gaps, and to establish a system that “allows businesses to dismiss workers and pay them off to settle a dispute”. The “reform”, if implemented, will force women to be used as cheap labour and will not reduce but increase poverty.

Of grave concern is that the government is implementing these employment and economic policies along with militarization. In September, 2015, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s administration forcibly enacted the unconstitutional “war legislation” in spite of the opposition from a majority of the people. Under the legislation, Japan’s military budget topped 5 trillion yen (about 47.9 billion US dollars) for the first time, military bases in Okinawa and elsewhere across the country are being reinforced, Self-Defense Forces troops have been dispatched to South Sudan to participate in the United Nations’ Peace Keeping Operations in the middle of fierce shelling and gunfire. While the United Nations expressing its deep concern over the devastating situation there, the government plans to assign the Self-Defense Forces personnel in South Sudan with new duties, which may end up in killing civilians. The push to make Japan a “war-waging nation” by the Abe Cabinet, composed of extreme rightists who glorify Japan’s war of aggression, will lead the nation to repeat the same mistake of forcing women into sex slavery infringing upon their dignity and human rights. The so-called “comfort women” issue, wartime sexual slavery by the Japanese military, must be resolved in a way acceptable for the survivors based on the genuine apology expressed by the Japanese government. The effort to achieve such settlement should be made in conjunction with the movement to stop the attempt to transform Japan into a “military state”.

To do away with neoliberal economic policies and militarization is the sure way to eliminate poverty and inequality, as well as to promote women’s rights.

In Japan, women and young people with no experience of social movements came forward to protest the war legislation. Cooperation among diverse citizens has developed around the common goal of “Repeal War Legislation”, “Restore Constitutionalism” and “Establish Policies Which Respect Dignity of Individuals”. They have successfully brought opposition parties together to unite in the national elections with a view to achieve political changes. Citizens’ voices and actions are generating new activism that individuals raise their own concerns to make their voices heard by local governments, parliament and the national government.

Cut Military Spending to Invest in “Gender Equality, Development and Peace”

Women and citizens are voicing and acting around the world against austerity policy and for moving the resources from nuclear weapons and military security to human needs.

A draft resolution has been tabled in the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly to convene negotiations in 2017 on a “legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons”. Last April, an international petition campaign was launched for the first time by the Hibakusha, atomic bombing survivors, calling for banning and eliminating nuclear weapons. The campaign seeks hundreds of millions of petition signatures worldwide by 2020 and signatures will be presented to the United Nations every year. On October 6, 2016, 560,000 signatures were submitted to the First Committee. One nuclear-bomb explosion, intentional or accidental, will bring irreparable consequences to human beings and the earth. A colossal amount of money is spent to develop and produce these weapons and their ban and elimination will be a huge contribution to the drastic cuts in military spending.

The New Japan Women’s Association hears our call “Cut military spending to use the money for people’s living, social welfare and education” resounding throughout the world. We will continue acting in solidarity with women around the globe to promote “gender equality, development and peace” and to achieve a peaceful, just and sustainable society.
