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Statement submitted by Asia Pacific Women's Watch (APWW), 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

Asia Pacific Women's Watch recognises the CSW 65 thematic area as critical, especially in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a disproportionate impact on the lives of women in all their diversity. We recognise the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 25, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Targets 5.5, 10.2 and 10.3, the Beijing Platform for Action Critical Area G and Articles under the International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women demanding legislative and statutory reforms and policy initiatives across governments; to support the production and use of sex disaggregated data and gender analysis to inform government policies and programmes; and to strengthen consultative mechanisms with civil society groups, including women's advocacy groups, on key budget and policy issues of national and sub-national governments. We agree with the United Nations Secretary General's statements that many of the gains made through the Beijing Platform for Action over the last 25 years are at risk of being rolled back.

The reality is that despite normative and developmental frameworks to advance gender equality over the last 25 years, and national and regional Gender Equality Plans and Declarations, women in all their diversity remain under-represented in leadership at all levels of political and high level decision making. Women in parliaments across the Asia Pacific is below 25 percent, 2 countries in this region have crossed 30 percent representation and 3 countries have no women in Parliament. Women's representation in the Pacific is the lowest at 19.4 per cent. Asia recorded the slowest growth rate of any region, having gained only 6.8 percentage points over the last 25 years. This is far from the 30 percent target committed to in the Beijing Platform for Action and falls short of the Sustainable Development Goal targets.

These figures testify to major barriers for women and a distinct lack of political will to implement measures to increase the participation of women in all their diversity in national and regional governments as well as in senior management positions. Political leadership takes long-term commitment, pathways to parliament for women are complex and steeped in stigma and discrimination. Social norms and narratives do not fully consider women in all their diversity as equal, legitimate and capable leaders and participants in public life. Access to decision-making, political participation and representation are essential markers of equality, yet women, girls, gender diverse and non-binary people, women with disabilities, indigenous, refugee and migrant women remain absent. Many of these structural challenges have been exposed bare throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women's leadership is key to transformative change, reducing poverty, promoting economic growth, democracy and increasing the wellbeing of communities. Women in all levels of decision making can raise awareness, influence political agendas to respond to the needs of all and support more gender-responsive legal frameworks. COVID-19 offers an opportunity for a gender equal world and women must be part of all decision making and policy framing. Some women in politics may be more exposed to gender-based violence than others: young, indigenous, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex activists, human rights defenders, opposition or minority groups and those voicing minority, dissenting or "controversial" views.

Violence against women constitutes a serious violation of human rights, it is an obstacle to achieving political parity and gender equality and is a major deterrent for women's participation in decision-making at all levels. There is an urgent need to design, adopt and enforce laws and policies that will effectively combat and prevent violence against women, guarantee the equal participation of women in political and public life, and protect their right to equal political participation. Across Asia and the Pacific violence towards women in leadership roles, their families and/or kinship groups persists as a key challenge to achieving, sustaining and succeeding in leadership.

Abuse in terms of gender, race, aboriginality, sexuality and social status occur in mainstream and in abusive social media posts and images, twitter campaigns and on-line bullying. Normalising the abuse of public figures and dismissing sexism, xenophobia and misogyny in the political world, has devastating consequences for democracy and the participation of women in leadership at all levels. Masculine narratives are used to exploit predominantly female care work both at the frontlines of COVID-19 and in the home.

COVID-19 is being used to strengthen masculine narratives that creates a climate of severe disadvantage for women in all their diversity. COVID-19 lockdowns, lack of mobility across and within borders, increased surveillance, increased caring responsibilities, limitations on movement and increased police / military presence have created excessive impacts and increased vulnerabilities for women in all their diversity. Militarizing current responses to the global health crisis limits a scientific response as well as perpetuates human rights abuses in the region.

The lack of diverse women in key decision-making positions produces and prolongs a climate which disadvantages women in all their diversity. Threats of violence; social and community exclusion; insults based on appearance, weight or race; belittling comments based on gender stereotypes; or references to a woman's sexual attractiveness continue as a common rhetoric in the media and undermine women in leadership. Families of women in positions of decision-making and leadership also report facing abuse through intense media focus on personal details of their lives. A scrutiny and focus that does not exist with male counterparts. It is the responsibility of politicians, respective parties, institutions, police, legislature, media and civic society as a whole to challenge abusive behaviour and to tackle the issue at its root.

Despite strong campaigning by courageous women with and for women in leadership, and the obvious structural gender issues arising through COVID-19, deep rooted power imbalances, xenophobia, misogyny and patriarchal attitudes prevail. Without immediate and sustained actions to address these attitudes and imbalances, Gender Equality will not be reached.

There is now more than ever, a need to ensure meaningful engagement of women and girls in all their diversity in all COVID-19 decision making on preparedness and response at the national, provincial and community levels, including their networks and organizations, to ensure efforts and response are not further discriminating and excluding those most at risk. There is a need to conduct Country Specific Gender, Disability and Inclusion Analyses with contextualised response recommendations and there is a need to ensure availability of gender and age disaggregated data, including on differing rates of infection, economic impacts, care burden, and incidence of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Rapid assessments undertaken following the COVID-19 outbreak need following up and further investigation across all areas of the Beijing Platform for Action.

We call States to

Bring national legal frameworks and policies in line with international human rights standards on preventing and combating violence against women, as set out in the Beijing Platform for Action and Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and general recommendations 19 and 35 on violence against women and all relevant regional agreements.

Guarantee women's full and meaningful participation and equal representation in policymaking and decision-making in the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, including social and economic recovery plans, at all levels and to recognize women as significant agents for societal change.

Adopt and implement legislation prohibiting and criminalizing violence against women in politics or incorporate adequate provisions into existing laws on eliminating violence against women, consistent with international and regional human rights standards, that includes laws to prohibit sexism, harassment and other forms of gender-based violence against women in politics, public life and parliament and includes new forms of violence including online violence and hold the perpetrators accountable and advance system-wide change to achieving equality between women and men in all areas of life and parity in political and public life..

Strengthen the legislative basis for gender parity in all branches and at all levels of government to guarantee women's full participation in political and public life establish access to justice mechanisms and reparation measures for women victims of violence in politics and undertake urgent and immediate actions to address the lack of gender parity not only in Parliaments, but also in judiciary and other enforcement agencies.

Address all Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women non-compliant legislation gaps in areas of access to justice, women's access and control over land, resources, finance, family life, citizenship sexual violence and harassment and non-discrimination.

Recognise social and cultural barriers remain to women's leadership, and engage churches, traditional leaders, media, and male advocates in progression of women's leadership at all levels.