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entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by the International Council of Women (ICW-CIF), 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

The International Council of Women (ICW-CIF), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, has been committed to advancing equal rights and the empowerment of women since its establishment in 1888. ICW-CIF strongly upholds that the attainment of gender equality and the empowerment of women are critical to facilitating progress toward sustainable development for the world.

As a global force for gender equality, ICW-CIF is positioned to contribute to two of the most pressing challenges of our time: Ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls (Priority theme of the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women) and promoting women's full participation in public life and the elimination of violence (Review theme). Uniting women's organizations from diverse cultural and social backgrounds within its network of National Councils worldwide, ICW-CIF provides a unified voice, from the grassroots to the international level, in advocating for the adoption of gender-responsive laws towards the elimination of discriminatory policies and practices, as well as for the establishment of gender-responsive justice systems

Access to justice is fundamental to the rule of law and critical to the realization of all rights under the law. Despite some achievements in recent years, women and girls still face multiple barriers to gaining justice and suffer disproportionately from weak rule of law. In many parts of the globe, women continue to encounter discrimination in education, employment, health care, gender-based violence, and remain under-represented in governance and decision-making. Even where relevant good laws do exist, women can be

unaware of their rights, the laws are not always enforced and implemented, or they may conflict with local customs and culture. The inability to access legal and justice services can be both a result and a cause of disadvantage, which includes poverty, migration, conflicts and natural disasters.

It should be recalled that 30 years ago, the Beijing Declaration called for the integration of “gender perspectives in legislation, public policies, programs and projects”. Furthermore, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women addressed state obligations to remove discriminatory barriers to women’s access to justice in its General Recommendation No.33 (CEDAW/C/GC/33).

Nevertheless, according to UN-Women and World Bank reports, women and girls continue to face significant gendered discrimination across numerous legal spheres, among them property rights, access to credit and labor markets. In many economies, discriminatory laws and regulations create barriers for women, such as restrictions on business registration, access to leadership roles, opening of a bank account, and inheriting family property. The “Women, Business and the Law 2024” report from the World Bank reveals that on average, women hold about 66% of the legal rights of men around the world. Only in 14 of the 190 economies included in the study are women deemed to be of equal legal standing with men across all areas measured (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden). In most countries, women and girls face, (as claimants, victims, witnesses or offenders) serious barriers to obtaining justice due to gender bias stereotypes, stigma, indifference, corruption and impunity.

Access to justice is not merely a matter of law, but also of practical and social realities. ICW-CIF reminds its National Councils to be on the front lines of this work, conducting programs that empower women with legal literacy and awareness of their rights. To effectively dismantle the patriarchal attitudes that often permeate judicial systems and to create an environment where women can seek justice without fear of retribution or cultural bias, women's organizations must join with other civil society organizations in efforts to build the capacity to provide legal support and to engage with both formal and informal justice systems.

ICW-CIF recognizes that sustainable change requires women's leadership and participation within the justice sector itself to create more responsive and accountable justice frameworks that are better equipped to address gender-based crimes and discrimination. This approach is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16, which seeks to provide equal access to justice for all

For women's full and effective participation in public life, as well as for the elimination of violence (agreed conclusions of the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women), the ICW-CIF reaffirms that gender equality cannot be achieved without women's equal participation in all spheres of decision-making in public life and without a society free from gender-based violence. Studies show that women's participation in political and economic decision-making is critical for the formulation and implementation of gender-responsive laws, policies, and measures, including those aimed at the prevention of gender-based violence, one of the most pervasive obstacles to the empowerment of women and girls. According to the World Bank report, "Women, Business and the Law 2024,"

women currently have access to only 30% of the legal protections required against various forms of violence against women, namely domestic violence, sexual harassment, child marriage and femicide.

To accelerate progress towards ensuring women's equal access to justice, increased participation in public life and the elimination of all forms of violence against women, ICW-CIF calls for effective cooperation with UN-Women and all United Nations specialized agencies, as well as with international women organizations, in general, to work together for:

- Advocating for the establishment of strong legal frameworks to protect and promote women's rights, aimed at ensuring the prevention of discrimination against women and girls;
- Promoting the establishment of good quality justice systems that are gender-sensitive and impartial;
- Calling for governments to amend or repeal all sex discriminatory laws, and to adopt new legislation, as a matter of urgency, protecting women and girls, and reducing barriers to justice on the issue;
- Advocating for States to implement laws, policies and measures that eradicate structural (legal, political, economic, social and cultural) barriers to women's access to justice;
- Initiating general educational campaigns and awareness-raising to change social norms and traditional perceptions, beliefs and practices such as female genital mutilation, child marriage, incest, sexual assault, abduction, rape, victim-blaming, myths and stereotypes;

- Pressing for a proper implementation of existing laws which can deter violence against women and girls and combat general climate of impunity;
- Connecting stakeholders and catalysing meaningful joint actions to provide women and girls with the necessary access to legal aid, and to address structural barriers;
- Calling for an appropriate training of personnel in law enforcement and other relevant institutions and for strong systems of accountability for any failures to promote the law and protect women and girls;
- Providing free legal assistance as a core service of women's organizations and of governmental institutions;
- Calling for an increase in the number of women in senior positions within the judicial system and political decision-making.

In conclusion, it is imperative to accelerate the progress of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The International Council of Women urges global women's organizations and all relevant stakeholders to intensify their efforts by empowering women defenders, ensuring women and girls receive equal protection before the law and equal access to justice, and promoting their full and effective participation and decision-making in public life.