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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 the YWCA of Japan, 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**

The YWCA of Japan, founded in 1905 and affiliated to the World Young Women's Christian Association since 1906, was granted special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2019. We are honored and pleased to submit our first ever statement to the United Nations.

We, the YWCA of Japan, believe that every individual, especially women, should be guaranteed and fully exercise their civil rights. We are engaged in activities such as the empowerment of marginalized people, with the aim of promoting women's social participation and realizing a peaceful world where human rights, health and the environment are protected for all.

It is clear in Japan as well as around the world that women's human rights in politics, economy, culture and education are undermined and they are inadequately represented in politics and other public arenas. Young women, in particular, are subjected to age discrimination in addition to gender-based discrimination, which limits their participation in various advocacy opportunities and their experiences and perspectives being reflected in policy making. For this reason, as well as the absence of gender statistics taken by age, the gender and economic disparities faced by young women and girls are downplayed. Still more, it goes without saying that young women who are discriminated against on the basis of their race, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability suffer multiple and intersectional discrimination, making it difficult for them to make their voices heard, let alone participating

in decision-making in the political and public arenas. In fact, in Japan, voices of young women and girls are not being heard in policy making processes and advocacy spaces for the realization of a gender-equal society.

Behind the lack of women's full participation in decision-making lies an unconscious bias, including stereotyped gender roles that root deep in society and imprint on children's minds from an early stage of infancy. For example, we learn from TV that women should do house work, and that most presidents and politicians are men; that girls must be able to cook and be calm and quiet; that boys must take leadership roles. There is no end to such messages, which even influence the future dreams of elementary school children. Expected annual income of a typical boy's dream job tends to be much larger than that of a girl. Furthermore, even if women do try to get involved in decision-making, they are often rejected by the men, usually older men, who occupy the majority of decision-making spaces and maintain an unconscious bias that such roles are for men. In Japan, sexist remarks have been repeated by Diet members and government officials, who unbelievably keep their decision-making posts even after such remarks.

Women who have been accustomed from an early age to such circumstances may not realize that their right to participate in decision-making is not guaranteed, or may not be motivated to exercise this right, forming a vicious cycle that delays the participation of women in decision-making, irrespective of their intention.

As a result, women's participation in politics and economy in Japan has been very slow in progress, as evidenced by its ranking of 121st out of 141 states in the 2020 Gender Gap Index. Women make up only 22.9 percent of Diet members, and the current Cabinet established in September 2020 has only two female ministers out of 20. In 2003, the Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office adopted "the target of 30% by 2020" regarding the percentage of women in leadership positions. However, as of 2018, the percentage of women in management positions stood at 14.9%, up only slightly from 11.2% in 2013. The number of female board members in listed companies is only 2,124 out of 25,273 in fiscal year 2019. According to a survey, as many as 30-40% of the surveyed women wished to get promoted up to section chief positions. On the other hand, the most common reason cited by companies for not increasing the number of women in management positions is that "there are no women suitable to be assigned to these positions", followed by "lack of women willing to be in management positions". This gap suggests that female workers' will and wish are not taken up due to the unconscious bias of management. Some companies survey only female workers whether they wish to be promoted, while male employees are promoted without such questions; such can be also called discrimination. As a result of young women's inadequate participation in decision-making, the following social problems disadvantage women in Japan:

- Women are forced to compromise when building their careers. Women are mainly responsible for raising children, and cases are reported where women are only assigned nonessential/subordinate work upon returning to work from maternity leave. In addition, there have been cases where women give up on their career success in the process of job

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hunting before graduating from university, believing that they cannot balance family and work. This is also seen among those as young as high school students.

- Under the severe economic situation caused by COVID-19, women are facing additional economic and mental difficulties. For instance, as school closures increased domestic work, the burden has been disproportionately borne by mothers and women, instead of being evenly shared with male family members.

- Due to the global economic downturn, a huge number of women have lost their jobs and this has had a significant impact on single mother households, who are in particular in need of support. Even before the pandemic of COVID-19, the employment rate of single mothers in Japan was 80%, but the poverty rate was over 50%, the worst situation among member countries of Organization for Economic Co-operation. Measures are needed in accordance with the preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, such as revisiting the requirements for payment of child support allowance to single-parent families in the event of a sudden change in family finances and providing continuous support, from the perspective of children's welfare.

- Despite the fact that women have not been able to participate in decision-making processes including the permission of nuclear power plants and nuclear waste disposal facilities, the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and women are greatly threatened by the radiation emitted by the 2011 nuclear power plant accident. Both research on the health hazards of radiation and compensation for the harm caused by the accident have been insufficient, as pointed out by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against

Women in paragraph 37 of its Concluding Observations on Japan's seventh and eighth periodic reports; no improvement has been made so far despite the recommendation.

- Girls and women living in areas where military bases are located have been victimized by sexual exploitation.

We, YWCA of Japan, call for the following actions to end this injustice and ensure that young women and girls are immediately empowered to exercise their right to participate in decision-making and have their views reflected, and in turn, to manifest women's executive leadership:

[Actions calling on the United Nations]

- Globally enhance the Unstereotype Alliance initiated by UN Women in order to prevent and raise awareness about unconscious bias in today's society, which is the root cause of underrepresentation of women's participation.
- Support and guide efforts to increase women's participation in countries with a large gender gap.
- Fund programs to promote women's political participation
- Update the Beijing Platform for Action in the light of current social realities.

[Actions calling on governments]

- Introduce effective mechanisms to increase women's participation in the political, economic and public spheres without delay. We strongly demand that any mechanism introduced be legally binding.
- Commit national funds to measures promoting women's participation.
- Conduct a survey to collect statistical data that includes all genders and age groups. Also incorporate a gender perspective in the analysis of statistics.
- Ratify the Convention on Violence and Harassment at Work (International Labor Organization Convention No. 190) without delay and substantially implement its provisions.
- Reform the legal systems that inhibit gender equality.
- Amend the penal code to ensure that the human rights and dignity of sexual violence survivors are fully respected.

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.