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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-fifth session

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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”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work**

#### **Statement submitted by Women’s National Commission, a non-governmental organization in special 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 Women’s National Commission (WNC) is the UK Government’s national, official independent advisory body on women. The WNC has over 670 partner organisations and individual partners drawn from women’s voluntary and community organisations, professional associations, trade unions and faith groups. In addition, the WNC works with women’s organisations in the European Union and UK based international organisations. The UK Government has announced as part of its Spending Review in the context of the global financial crisis to move towards greater localism and less centralised government, to abolish many non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) including the WNC. The UK Government however has restated its commitment to the principles of women’s advancement and equality.

The WNC welcome the CSW 55<sup>th</sup> Session focus on access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work. Despite many existing human rights instruments, international agreed goals and commitments to address gender inequality in this area, it remains broadly an ongoing challenge steeped in discrimination

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\* E/CN.6/2011/1

evidently more so in the gender disparity in access to and participation in science, engineering and technology (SET).

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) for example sets out clear strategic aims to tackle the critical area for action: *'Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to, education and training'*. The BPfA calls governments, national regional and local bodies, all educational institutions and research bodies, employers, trade unions and youth organisations and civil society to work collaboratively to bring about sustainable improvements for women to reach this goal.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires States parties to eliminate discrimination against women in education and employment. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) contains specific provision on fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value for women and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions of particular relevance to gender equality include the Discrimination and Occupation ) Convention, 1958 (No.111). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) address gender equality and education in two of the eight goals.

Access to education is widely recognized as the gateway to economic security, and opportunity- particularly for girls and women. It is cited in international development discourse that educated women are more likely to delay marriage, enjoy better health and participate in family decisions<sup>1</sup>. Access to education has increased globally for girls at all levels, and particularly in primary education, over the last decade. According to the 2010 MDG report 3 there were 96 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in primary school, and 95 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in secondary school in 2008, a sizable increase compared to the 1999 ratios of 91 and 88 per 100 boys.

Nevertheless, women's educational attainment does not necessarily translate into improved employment opportunities particularly in SET fields. Among the 20 to 24 year-old population, women continue to lag behind men in labour force participation in all regions. Women, who find employment, whether in the informal or formal sector, also face many challenges, including over-representation in vulnerable employment and wage differentials. The creation of UN Women is a positive step in ensuring that specific actions to address these issues are taken forward.

### **Evidence of the situation in the UK**

Since the adoption of the BPfA in 1995, there have been a number of developments across the UK to improve educational and training opportunities for women, to tackle the causes of occupational segregation, to increase access to education training and employment for women in their multiple identities and investment to increase women's employment in science, engineering, technology, mathematics, information technology, electronics and the construction industries. Following devolution there have been national policy objectives across the four nations (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), so the following list is not exhaustive, however major developments have included:

- the establishment and funding of the UK Resource Centre and associated bodies across the four nations to coordinate knowledge and deliver services focused on advancing women in SET careers;

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<sup>1</sup> UN Millennium Project (2005). *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*. London: Taskforce on Education and Gender Equality

- the establishment in 2006 of the Women and Work Commission (WWC) to examine the causes of occupational segregation and its subsequent follow-up report to monitor progress on the implementation of recommendations;
- two successive Gender Equality Public Service Agreements with underpinning targets to increase women's participation in SET and increase apprenticeship opportunities for young women in the construction industries;
- the implementation of the Gender Equality Duty in 2007;
- the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy for England (2000-2010), which sought to increase the proportion of teenage parents in education, training and employment to reduce their risk of long-term social exclusion;
- the priorities of the Olympics Development Agency (ODA) to provide training and employment opportunities for women across the equality strands in under-represented sectors and opportunities arising from the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games; and,
- the provisions within the Equality Act 2010, including public procurement.

The CSW55 theme, *Access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology*, provides a timely opportunity to review progress during the last fifteen years, to celebrate improvements, identify challenges and policy gaps across the four nations and highlight NGOs' priorities. It is also a period of change within the UK. Large scale cuts in public spending as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review Autumn 2010 and new Coalition Government priorities such as the 'Big Society' may have an impact on policy development and resourcing in future years.

The Women's National Commission is committed to enabling partners to contribute to the priority theme. In order to stimulate discussion in advance of the 55<sup>th</sup> Session, the WNC held a partners' event to discuss issues and to inform thinking on the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) goal on education more broadly. Discussions were centred around six overarching themes which were as follows: 1) National Mechanisms for Gender Equality, 2) Education, Careers Options and Advice for Girls and Young Women, 3) Science Engineering and Technology, 4) Barriers to Getting into Work and once in workplace, 5) Women in Leadership and Role Models and 6) Access and Participation, Equality Strands and Women's Multiple Identities.

Partners commented that more needs to be done to encourage girls into STEM subjects and more money needs to be invested in careers advice training. Partners called for more positive depiction of women in STEM careers in the media in addition to more training for teachers in gender-sensitive teaching methods within the education system to challenge the relatively narrow educational and occupational paths for girls and young women. More could be done to challenge gender-specific stereotypes in early education and the role of men and boys as agents of change should be widely acknowledged. Partners highlighted successful initiatives which could be rolled out more widely. For example, "*Take Your Daughter to Work*" days has been an extremely successful mentoring tool in many Member States, but is usually limited to once a year in most cases. Partners cite awards such as "*Champion for Women*" helpful in embedding good practice.

It is widely documented that gender stereotypes and attitudes play a major part in women's limited participation in STEM. Partners commented that the imminent rise in university tuition fees will lead to even less participation. In the case of medical students debts of at least £50k will be commonplace upon graduation. It is predicted that this could inevitably lead to disproportionately fewer women entering medical and engineering fields. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), Gypsy and Traveller and asylum seeking and refugee women may well be doubly disadvantaged as a result. Partners acknowledge that the current economic

downturn creates further challenges for STEM industries which inexorably will have a negative impact on women. For example, the *long hours* culture in many STEM industries impacts on caring responsibilities which disproportionately affects women. Partners therefore would like to see a tightening of the perceived *weak* legal regulations on working time in order to protect the health and work-life balance of UK employees which will go a long way in tackling the “*long hours*” culture and limited flexible working options which is endemic in STEM industries. Coupled with this, women also have to confront additional challenges, such as being isolated in a predominantly male environment and the issue of unequal pay.

Debates around maternity leave and effects on SMEs<sup>2</sup> have been the focus at both national and EU levels, particularly in light of the recent proposal to extend maternity leave to 20 weeks on full pay by the European Commission. Concern has been expressed by partners that this proposed directive has been deemed ‘*unaffordable*’ by the UK Government in light of the current economic situation. Partners feel strongly that policy should not be influenced by temporary economic downturns. On the other hand, there is an increased fear that it would also make it harder for women, as SME employers would be less likely to hire those of child-bearing age because of the potential costs they faced if the employee became pregnant.

Childcare is widely recognized as the number one barrier to getting into work. Without the presence of quality and affordable childcare, a woman's capacity to maintain their desired level of engagement within the workforce is considered to be increasingly difficult despite an increase in paternity leave provisions. Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) identified this as a huge concern in Scotland. Partners called for more employee incentives to be introduced to assist with childcare. The Trade Union Congress (TUC)<sup>3</sup> has been cited as a model of best practice in this area by offering 50% of childcare costs and 75% for single parents.

Confidence skills, lack of training opportunities (particularly for returning and older women) and a lack of women role models in senior positions were recognized as additional barriers and partners have recommended a number of measures to address this including introducing more specialist women's programmes in the workplace and ‘*back to work*’ initiatives. In addition, it was recommended that initiatives developed to address women's multiple identities would be a hugely positive step. For example, the STUC recently hosted a workplace representatives conference on the Equality Act where partners identified that trade union representatives, trained in equality and diversity policies provide additional and vital support for women in the workplace.

Although UKRC SET<sup>4</sup> (and associated bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and ODA are widely recognised as exemplary in addressing the gender disparity in STEM, partners recommended adopting more best practice examples and positive models from the USA, Canada and Europe where initiatives to narrow the gap in participation is proving to be successful. The lack of access to start-up grants due to the economic downturn and recent Spending Review could greatly impact on female entrepreneurs. Similarly, a cut in

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<sup>2</sup> Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

<sup>3</sup> The TUC is the voice of Britain at work. With 58 affiliated unions representing 6.2 million working people from all walks of life, we campaign for a fair deal at work and for social justice at home and abroad.

<sup>4</sup> The UKRC is the UK Government's lead organisation for the provision of advice, services and policy consultation regarding the under-representation of women in science, engineering, technology and the built environment (SET).

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research funding in the UK and other developed Member States is leading to a “*brain drain*” to boom countries where careers in STEM are still hugely male dominated.

### **What needs to be done now?**

The WNC welcomes government legislation and initiatives to address the access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work. The WNC recognise that though the UK has made steady and exemplary progress in this area, more needs to be done to improve the situation for women and girls and therefore further consideration should be given in a number of areas. Partners would welcome continued enhancement of legislation for flexible working and improved maternity and paternity leave provisions as this will help to reduce this barrier to women’s access and participation in employment. Partners would like to see the appointment of a ‘Gender and SET’ government champion at ministerial level to drive a cross-governmental and integrated strategy to tackle gender segregation in education, workforce and science policy<sup>5</sup>. Partners welcome government support for the specific resource centres which have been set up to address the difficulties facing women and girls in the STEM professions. Partners recognise the considerable expertise built up in these centres and the demonstrable achievements gained in terms of improving both the access and retention of women and girls to STEM industries. Partners believe that it is vital to build on this expertise with appropriate investment and support.

Implementing the public sector duties of the Equalities Act which responds to women’s diversity enables choice and ensures women’s roles within the family are compatible with careers and earning a living, and encourages a broad-based culture change, which increases men’s roles as carers would also be immensely desirable. Partners would be very receptive to more media and awareness raising campaigns targeted at parents, children, business and adults to widen occupational aspirations, explicitly breakdown stereotyping, profile role models and highlight the relevance, variety and excitement of science, engineering and technology. Partners would like the Government to consider gathering evidence on the positive impact of women in STEM industries; in particular the economic impact on societies would be compelling evidence for convincing the Government of the United Kingdom and governments of other Member States to invest more in women’s participation in STEM.

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<sup>5</sup> **UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology Policy Proposals**