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Submission to the CEDAW Committee's Half-day general discussion on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems

WILPF welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the half-day of general discussion on “Equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems”¹ through a written submission. Since its creation in 1915, WILPF has advocated for women’s and girls’ equal right to participation in all spheres of life, including in political and public life. We continue to actively do so with our national sections, groups, partners, and in solidarity with other social movements.

We welcome that the CEDAW Committee intends to analyse structural obstacles that prevent equal and inclusive representation of all women in decision-making systems.

In this submission, we bring to the Committee’s attention some key points that we encourage be taken into account in the framing of the new General Recommendation (GR).

The mere formal and quantitative participation of women in patriarchal, capitalist, racist and militarised systems does not bring structural change

Participation should be a radical demand for genuine agency over decisions impacting our bodies and lives. But women’s participation and quantitative representation alone are not the end goal of our movement; they are part of a broader goal of structural transformation that

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/events/events/2023/half-day-general-discussion-equal-and-inclusive-representation-women-decision>

requires reshaping institutions to be democratic, responsive, and equal, and abolishing institutions that perpetuate oppression and marginalisation. We do not consider participation to simply mean women at the table, but rather, dismantling hierarchies that preserve power in the hands of small groups of people, often powerful white men, to the detriment of the global majority.

Feminist scholars Nancy Fraser, Cinzia Arruzza, and Tithi Bhattacharya have cautioned about “enabling a privileged few to climb the corporate ladder or the ranks of the military;” doing so “subscribes to a market-centred view of equality that dovetails with corporate enthusiasm for ‘diversity.’” The approach taken by liberal feminism, rather than abolishing social hierarchy, “aims to feminize it, ensuring women at the top can attain parity with the men of their own class.” Ray Acheson, the Director of WILPF’s disarmament programme has noted that this kind of feminism “speaks from the logic of equality, not justice. It does not see merit or purpose in dismantling the structures of power, but simply gaining equal access to them.”²

In WILPF’s long history, we have learnt that when the participation of women and marginalised communities have advanced, it has often been tokenistic and not on equal terms. The context of women’s participation in peace processes exemplifies this: despite civil society advocacy for systemic change, women have often been relegated to consultative or observer roles; they have been invited to participate solely on “gender issues”; and their contributions have been considered non-binding or extraneous. In addition, we have learnt that feminist political agendas and participation can be co-opted by patriarchy and other systems of oppression such as racism and ableism. As noted by Acheson, “As concepts such as ‘gender mainstreaming,’ ‘feminist foreign policy,’ and ‘diversity and inclusion’ gain more traction in international and national discourse and policy ... these concepts are being increasingly co-opted to justify and even help advance anti-feminist objectives and practices. Diversity-related

² Ray Acheson, Notes on Nuclear Weapons & Intersectionality in Theory and Practice, a working paper, Program on Science and Global Security, Princeton University, June 2022, available at: <https://sgs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2022-06/acheson-2022.pdf>

reforms co-opt communities into militarism, which is a key source of oppression of those same communities.”³

In the context of peace and security, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is a call to rethink the way that peace is conceptualised and built, including with the equal and effective, and meaningful participation of women. However, our analysis of the implementation of the WPS Agenda shows that many States are disproportionately focusing on increasing the number of women in the military or peace-keeping operations instead of on a holistic implementation of the agenda grounded on the realisation of all women’s rights and human rights. Thus, implementation of the WPS agenda has also suffered from attempts to implement it in a silo, separate from work to dismantle underlying patriarchal systems, laws, policies, and norms. As noted in a WILPF’s report on UNSCR at 20 years, “A simple focus on increasing the number of women in militaries alone eschews the more complex question of harmful gender norms produced by militarism, militarisation, and patriarchal culture, which glorify violent masculinities as well as perpetuating stereotypes about men as protectors and women as those in need of protection.”⁴

Similarly, the increased participation of women and individuals with diverse identities in the private sector and in boards of multinationals will not result in change (except maybe pink and rainbow-washing) unless these same companies undertake gender-responsive human rights and environmental due diligence and redress any harm they cause to people and the planet.

We thus call for the GR to recognise the challenges posed by the co-optation of women and of individuals in marginalised situations and by their mere quantitative participation in systems of oppression.

Women are not a monolith and being a woman does not by definition imply being a feminist. We need to systematically ask and examine with an intersectional approach who is viewed as

³ Ray Acheson, ‘Abolition, not arms control: against reinforcing nuclear weapons through “reform”’, available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42597-022-00080-w>

⁴ UNSCR at 20 years, Perspectives from feminist activists and civil society, Page 18, available at: https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WILPF_UNSCR-1325-at-20-Years_Web.pdf

legitimate and who actually gets to participate. This is all the more important when considering access to political and public institutions, which are overall characterised by social class reproduction, patriarchal culture and institutional racism. In this regard, temporary special measures for women and individuals belonging to marginalised communities can play a role but are insufficient in themselves to tackle the root causes of the problem.⁵

Reclaiming activism and safeguarding civil society space as integral parts of the right to participation

As reported in a WILPF and Dawlaty report on Syrian feminist perspectives on political participation,

For decades, politics has been defined by the dimensions related to the public sphere and state affairs, and by a comprehensive separation between the public and private spheres, despite the intersections between the two. This has resulted in a separation between the concept of politics itself, from individual and collective initiatives at the local and grassroots levels. Since the theories and histories of politics have been written and consolidated by male historians - like those pertaining to other social and human sciences - what was studied and published, and thus produced epistemologically, has revolved around politically active male figures and has relied on concepts created by men about the meaning of politics and its limited vision of the nation-state, political parties and movements, and international relations. Therefore, redefining “politics” as a concept is a feminist initiative that seeks to liberate this field from the dominant

⁵ For examples of challenges to implementing temporary special measures for women, see WILPF ‘From Local to Global Accountability: Analysis of Implementation of Recommendations from International Human Rights Mechanisms’ Democratic Republic of the Congo (July 2022) page 13. Available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WILPF_HR-Report_DRC_EN_Web.pdf>; WILPF ‘From Local to Global Accountability: Analysis of Implementation of recommendations from international human rights mechanisms’ Cameroon (July 2022) page 16. Available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WILPF_Cameroon_HR-Report_EN_Web.pdf>; WILPF ‘Joint report for the Universal Periodic Review of Niger’ (October 2020) page 10. Available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WILPF_UPR-Niger_EN-Web.pdf>.

patriarchal modes of thinking, and expand the framework and scope of the concept of political participation, whether on the global, local, or grassroots levels.⁶

To ensure that women's right to participation can be truly transformative, women of diverse identities and backgrounds must have spaces to imagine different forms of political organising and to create alternative mechanisms to push for their feminist agendas aside from patriarchal, sometimes even corrupt political systems, which often exercise violence and harassment against women and individuals from groups in marginalised situations entering traditional political spheres.⁷ In this regard, safeguarding civil society space, including for feminist movements and women's rights organisations, is absolutely critical in the face of the global backlash against human rights, anti-gender propaganda, increased surveillance and attacks against feminist activists and shortfalls in funding for civil society. Thus, the GR must recognise the protection of civil society space as an integral part of women's right to participation in public and political life, and must remind States parties of their obligations under the Convention in this regard.

In the context of the WPS agenda, WILPF has highlighted the international community's failure to sufficiently connect the participation and protection pillars of the agenda, to the detriment of meaningful civil society participation. It is not possible, for instance, for women to participate in peace and political processes if states do not protect their right to security, freedom of expression, and movement. Feminist activists and women's rights organisations face intimidation, harassment, and physical violence as a result of their work to challenge patriarchal political, social, and economic power structures to achieve peace. However, the current siloed approach to implementing the WPS agenda fails to address the root causes that impede their participation, while simultaneously championing the

⁶ Reclaiming Public Spaces: Syrian Feminist Narratives and Approaches to Political Participation, page 1, WILPF and Dawlaty, available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Reclaiming-Public-Spaces-3rd-Policy-brief-web.pdf>

⁷ For examples of violence and discrimination against women in political life, see WILPF 'From Local to Global Accountability: Analysis of Implementation of Recommendations from International Human Rights Mechanisms' Democratic Republic of the Congo (July 2022) page 15. Available at: https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WILPF_HR-Report_DRC_EN_Web.pdf; WILPF 'Joint Submission for the Universal Periodic Review of Lebanon' (July 2020) page 11. Available at: https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/WILPF_UPR-Lebanon.pdf.

representation of women in high-profile spaces that can place them at even greater risk. Indeed, women human rights defenders and civil society representatives who have briefed the UN Security Council in recent years have faced threats and smear campaigns as a result.⁸ This, in turn, can silence women's voices and discourage feminist activism to speak about the root causes of conflict. Thus, efforts to ensure women's meaningful participation in political and public life must link participation to protection and look beyond representation to create safe and enabling environments for feminist activism.

Moreover, it is essential to address what meaningful participation means in relation to support to women activists and relationships between donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs. This is in order to avoid reproducing and maintaining in the human rights sector and more broadly in development aid, hierarchical relationships often based on colonial legacies. Indeed, as identified in the above-mentioned report by WILPF and Dawlaty, Syrian women activists shared that they have not been able to have their agendas adopted by funders and INGOs, and that instead: "Most of the programs are arranged in advance, and local organizations sometimes have a role in participating in developing plans and programs, but the goals and ideas themselves are prearranged. Most international and donor organisations rely on forms of work that may appear to take into account local perspectives through involvement in programming, but they do not include these perspectives in decision-making processes."⁹ They said that: "participation in decision-making basically means the existence of a joint dialogue that is not hierarchical or based on power relations between women, local and intermediary organisations, and donors. In other words, it is not enough for women and organizations to ask about the required needs; instead, there must be dialogue and joint action

⁸ As recently as 27 January, a Malian woman civil society representative that briefed the UN Security Council was later the target of threats and a social media misinformation campaign to discredit her. See Security Council Report, Mali: Meeting under "Any Other Business", (February 2023) available at <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/02/mali-meeting-under-any-other-business.php>.

⁹ Reclaiming Public Spaces: Syrian Feminist Narratives and Approaches to Political Participation, page 11-13, WILPF and Dawlaty, available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Reclaiming-Public-Spaces-3rd-Policy-brief-web.pdf>

at all stages.”¹⁰ This GR should include practical considerations and recommendations to both the UN system, States and donors to support feminist activism in an effective manner.

Furthermore, the GR should make recommendations about women’s participation in international decision-making fora to address the barriers they face in this regard, including discriminatory visa policies that impede women activists’ advocacy, language barriers and the prioritisation of activists who speak English, and security issues and the risk of reprisals among others.¹¹

The political economy of women’s participation

In order to foster meaningful political participation of women and other marginalised groups, WILPF emphasises the importance of feminist political economy analysis, which helps “put a spotlight on inequalities as root causes of war. It helps us argue that sustainable peace cannot be built without socio economic security, underpinned by justice and equality. Feminist political economy enables us to understand who, what and how in the relationship between social, political and economic structures of power, resources and access to them.”¹²

The enjoyment of the right to participation is closely linked to the enjoyment of all other human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. Assessing the measures that need to be taken to secure the right to participation therefore requires not only an analysis of the obstacles (including economic ones) women face at the individual level when they seek to participate in public and political life, but also an approach that goes beyond individual “empowerment” to address the structural barriers and policies that impede women’s participation. Indeed, as we have learnt from feminist analysis, the public sphere cannot be

¹⁰ Reclaiming Public Spaces: Syrian Feminist Narratives and Approaches to Political Participation, page 11, WILPF and Dawlaty, available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Reclaiming-Public-Spaces-3rd-Policy-brief-web.pdf>

¹¹ WILPF RESOLUTION, 33rd Congress, Brisbane, Australia & online 24 July 2022, Facilitation of Visas for Women Activists to Enjoy Their Right to Participate in International Meetings, available at: https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/WILPF_Congress-2022_Visa-facilitation-WILPF-International-2.pdf

¹² A WILPF guide to feminist political economy available at: https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/WILPF_Feminist-Political-Economy-Guide.pdf

separated from the private sphere, and the political choices that are made in economic and social policies have a direct impact on women's right to participate in public and political life.

For instance, WILPF has raised how neoliberal austerity policies implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine have undermined women's economic and social rights and as a consequence, their ability to exercise their right to participation in public and political life.¹³ In advocacy on other countries, WILPF has also raised the issue of formal obstacles to women's participation that often constitute indirect discrimination against women candidates in elections, including financial obstacles¹⁴ that impede female candidates from campaigning and educational requirements on eligibility, which disregard broader socio-economic discrimination against women.¹⁵

¹³ WILPF 'Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review of Bosnia and Herzegovina' (March 2019) page 4. Available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/UPR-Bosnia-Herzegovina_2019.pdf>; WILPF 'Obstacles to women meaningful participation in peace efforts in Ukraine, Joint submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Ukraine" (March 2017) page 2. Available at: <https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/UKRAINE.UPR_JointSubmission-30-Mar-2017.pdf>.

¹⁴ 'Joint Submission for the Universal Periodic Review of Lebanon' (July 2020) page 11. Available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/WILPF_UPR-Lebanon.pdf>; WILPF 'From Local to Global Accountability: Analysis of Implementation of recommendations from international human rights mechanisms' Cameroon (July 2022) page 15. Available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WILPF_Cameroon_HR-Report_EN_Web.pdf>;

¹⁵ WILPF 'From Local to Global Accountability: Analysis of Implementation of Recommendations from International Human Rights Mechanisms' Democratic Republic of the Congo (July 2022) page 15. Available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WILPF_HR-Report_DRC_EN_Web.pdf>.