

STATEMENT BY

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TO

**THE 49th SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

Madam Chair, distinguished delegates,

Canada welcomes the opportunity to work with you and with our civil society partners as we participate in this ten-year review of the implementation of the commitments we made in Beijing in 1995 and at the Beijing + 5 meeting in 2000. We join others in congratulating the Bureau members and welcoming Ms. Rachel Mayanja to her position – you can count on Canada's support.

As Minister responsible for the status of women, I want to reiterate the importance Canada places on Beijing+10 as an international milestone that has tremendous relevance for Canadians. For example, 2005, in addition to marking the 30th anniversary of the first world conference on women, also marks the 20th anniversary of the equality provisions of our Constitution.

This past December, Member States of the Economic Commission for Europe reaffirmed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Canada strongly urges all Members States to unanimously and unequivocally reaffirm the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. These agreements reflect the consensus we reached as an international community ten years ago. Our focus now must be on implementation.

A sustained effort will be required to keep the Beijing agenda alive throughout our work, including in the context of the United Nations. Gender equality and women's human rights must be at the forefront as we prepare for the 2005 Major Event and review of the Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The full implementation of both the Beijing Platform for Action and the Cairo Programme of Action is essential to the achievement of the MDGs. We urge that these interconnections be explicitly incorporated throughout the five-year review process of the Millennium Declaration and Development Goals. In this context especially, we would emphasize that the advancement of sexual and reproductive health and rights is nothing less than intrinsic to the achievement of gender equality, and of the MDGs.

Most importantly Madame Chair, we are here to gain from each other's experiences in order that we can all build on accomplishments, avoid pitfalls and move forward in deliberate and coherent fashion.

Women have made great strides since the First UN World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, and also since Beijing. But, as we all know, the gains are not even and they are constantly threatened. Women must stand strong not only to ensure the gender equality bar remains high but to also ensure it is not lowered. Women's human rights need to be rigorously protected and promoted in all areas from economic and political to sexual and reproductive rights. Ministers responsible for the status of women we must support the efforts of women and we must be steadfast in working towards our main goal – gender equality – in itself and as an integral part of sustainable social, economic and democratic development.

I commend the Commission, the Bureau and all the government and non-government actors who have organized panels and events that provide the forums for us to share knowledge, stimulate further thinking and lead to continued collaboration. As our contribution, I will highlight strengths, accomplishments and lessons learned and I

also want to tell you how we have come to identify our gaps and challenges, where we need to put our priorities in Canada and how we plan to move forward.

It is my privilege to share some of examples of Canada's strengths and achievements:

- One key strength remains the strong legal framework in support of gender equality that Canada has had in place for a number of years. Since 1995 we have continued to make improvements in family law through child support reforms and in criminal law, for example, as well as a new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act that requires reporting on gender impacts.
- We continue to improve access to student loans to support women's higher education, to recognize caregiving work and to provide support to families with children and other dependants. The Government of Canada has continued to increase the Canada Child Tax Benefit, and to work with the provinces and territories to provide a range of additional income and service supports for low-income families. There are new caregiver tax credits and a new compassionate care benefit available to workers who must take time off to care for a severely ill or dying relative.
- We also took a major step by doubling the length of parental benefits available to eligible workers under our Employment Insurance system so that the combined maternity/parental period is now one full year. All the provinces and territories also collaborated to amend their leave provisions so that mothers and fathers would have job protection for this period.
- We have good indications that these policies are making a contribution. Women have made great strides in higher education, they have outnumbered men in undergraduate enrollment for several years and are making inroads into male-dominated fields as well. Women's paid labour force participation is one of the highest in the world and the ratios of women's to men's earnings, total income and after-tax income continue to improve.

However, we must also acknowledge that there is still work to do in many areas, and this will require the collaboration of all Canadians. Since Beijing, we have been through periods of fiscal austerity and of growth. We have accomplished much and are steadily increasing investments in areas such as health care that are important to women. Can we do better? Yes, and we are embarking on a path that will meet our priority needs.

Through reports to the United Nations, particularly to the CEDAW Committee, our response to the Beijing +10 Questionnaire, feedback from Canadian non governmental organizations and hard evidence from statistics and indicators, we know what our main gaps and challenges are.

We recognize that despite progress, we need to reduce rates of poverty among women that are still too high, particularly among groups such as lone-parents, recent immigrants and unattached senior women.

- We recognize the need to improve the situation of Aboriginal women who face discrimination. We know that their historical, legal, social and economic situation makes them more vulnerable to poverty and violence.
- We recognize the need for a national childcare system, for our children's development, without doubt, and also **as** a vital building block for gender equality that enables women, as paid and unpaid caregivers, to improve their own economic autonomy, security and well-being.
- We also know that we have the tools for gender-based analysis to develop policies and programs to meet these challenges. We need now to apply them more systematically to get the results we need. Government accountability to Canadians for progress on gender equality does need to improve.

Canada appreciates how Beijing +10 has helped us look back and appraise where we have come from.

Madame Chair,

What matters most, now, is that Canada is looking forward – to build on our strengths, to learn from our own and others experience and to meet our challenges. We will return home with renewed dedication to the goals and commitments in the Beijing Platform for Action and will work to give them meaning to all women, so they can see real changes that will have an impact in their day-to-day lives.

We have already begun through a commitment to of \$5 billion over 5 years to start building a framework for an Early Learning and Child Care initiative based on key principles – quality, universally inclusive, accessible, and developmental. We have made a specific commitment to support the efforts of Aboriginal women to better address the racialized and sexualized nature of violence that particularly affects them. We are increasing support for low-income seniors and reducing taxes for low income earners.

Last fall we created a new federal Parliamentary Committee on Status of Women and it has already increased public attention to issues of gender equality and has made recommendations that will help us move forward. Its work will continue and will add to the results of consultations with non-governmental organizations that we will hold to inform the development of a new federal strategy toward gender equality for the coming years.

To ensure we achieve progress on gender equality, we must conclude this meeting with a strong and unequivocal commitment to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

It is the cornerstone of our work on gender equality and should be a hallmark of this global meeting – the world's women deserve no less.

Thank you, Madame Chair.