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Assembly of First Nations Women's Council
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

(Traditional Greetings)

Mr. Chairman, Honourable Permanent Forum Members, distinguished delegates and Indigenous representatives. I am here today as a member of the Assembly of First Nations Women's Council and, therefore, representing the Assembly of First Nations and the National Chief Phil Fontaine.

The Assembly of First Nations is the national organization representing First Nations citizens in Canada. We are inclusive of all our people- Elders, youth, women and men and citizens residing on-and off-reserves.

I am pleased to address from a First Nations women's perspective the two principle themes of the UN Millennium Development Goals in the eradication of extreme poverty and the achievement of universal primary education.

I would like to begin with a key recommendation that all existing international human rights mechanisms and legal instruments begin to better reflect how gender intersects with indigenous issues as this is not yet fully understood in all of its dimensions and not addressed by experts focused on gender equality, human rights and the rights of women. This approach is critical in addressing the legal, cultural, economic, social and political landscape where Indigenous women are often marginalized because of race, sex, and other factors including disabilities. A report tabled by Rodolfo Stavenhagen, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of Indigenous Peoples states that, "present indigenous women's rights as simply an 'add on' to men's."

The AFN Women's Council is deeply concerned that First Nations Women are among the poorest in our communities and targets of racial and gender discrimination, that the policies and laws of Canada have actively oppressed First Nations Women and diminished our traditional roles and responsibilities and compromised the respect for First Nations Women in our communities.

The impact of colonization and assimilation strategies aided in altering First Nations traditional values and social structures often replacing or enforcing the

colonizers cultural values on First Nations societies. First Nations women's roles and responsibilities in the decision making process throughout North American societies were strategically targeted in the goal of assimilation and loss of culture. The impact of colonization on First Nation's women was doubly debilitating. Colonizers views of men having power over women enforced notions of superiority, hierarchy and the exclusion of women in affairs affecting them.

Research has demonstrated that on all socio economic indicators, First Nations women and Indigenous women around the world are still at the lowest rung, and they face the highest risk of violence, and this very situation affects the health and future well being of Indigenous Peoples. Research has also shown that while Indigenous men and women suffer discrimination it is women who suffer multi-faceted forms of discrimination, impoverishment and sexual violence of epidemic proportions. Research has demonstrated that the exclusion and discrimination of First Nations women has significant consequences on society. Where there has been the inclusion of women in all aspects of a community, research has demonstrated that these communities are healthier and have lower rates or no incidence of suicide.

Our expressed concern is with the issue of "impoverishment "of our nations as a result of the highly-coveted quest for the wealth of our Nations lands and territories. This has led to the loss of our land and resources and our means of subsistence and the degradation of our quality of life and environment. Indigenous women hold particular knowledge of ecological linkages and fragile ecosystem management and as a result have often taken the lead in advocating for the safety and protection of the environment in their communities.

Research has also shown that the western paradigm of education has impoverished First Nations peoples spiritually, culturally and economically. Historically, First Nations women were the historians and transmitters of culture to the younger generation. Empowerment of First Nations women for inclusive involvement in the education process, including all levels of decision making is vital to the future cultural and spiritual well being of First Nations peoples.

First Nations women as teachers and educators are instrumental in enhancing cultural pride and identity among young people, including the passing of vital traditional knowledge to the next generation. We must encourage Indigenous women's equal access to education and resources, including awareness and promotion campaigns, and equal access and opportunity for First Nations women and children with disabilities. There must also be the acknowledgment of the vital role of women in the implementation of special education programs for the rehabilitation of over-represented youth and women in the justice system. In addition to the development of special needs programs for individuals with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. We must also promote an education system that incorporates indigenous knowledge and the preserving of traditional medicinal practices and the recognition of Elders as traditional educators.

The Assembly of First Nations Women's Council is comprised of representatives from all regions of Canada and extends an invitation to the Permanent Forum and UN agencies and experts assembled here today to contact us to work together in achieving these and other UN Millennium Development Goals.

Traditional closing