



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
10 December 2012

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-seventh session

4-15 March 2013

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
to the 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**

Statement submitted by National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, 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.



Statement

National Alliance of Women's Organizations is an umbrella of women's organizations (service, campaigning and lobbying, networks, single or multiple issues) working in the local, regional, national and international arenas. All members of the Alliance must subscribe to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action; these international instruments hold together groups (faith groups, for example) that might otherwise disagree. All members of the Alliance seek gender equality and women's access to their human rights globally, as well as at home. With violence against women in all its forms evident and pervasive throughout the world and cruelly preventing women and girls, including infants and very young girls, from accessing their human rights and leading reasonable lives, the Alliance believes that the two-week session of the Commission on the Status of Women, valuable as it is, and hopeful as we are of a successful outcome, is insufficient. Hence, the Alliance urges the Commission on the Status of Women to seek the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence with the addition of a new mechanism that should provide greater power and, hence, a more rapid achievement of the shared goal.

To this end, National Alliance of Women's Organizations expresses its support for the proposal for a United Nations convention on violence against women made by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Rashida Manjoo, and supported by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). Current instruments have been improved over the years with the addition of general recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, especially general recommendation No. 19, and there are many initiatives, such as the "UNiTE to end violence against women" campaign, launched in 2008 by the Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, that bring actors together with specific goals to deal with the global pandemic of violence against women, while investment in programmes in both the North and the South seeks to prevent and alleviate the suffering. Furthermore, since the 1990s, the efforts of women's organizations, experts and committed Governments have resulted in a profound transformation in public awareness of this problem. Such violence is now widely recognized as a serious human rights and public health problem that concerns all sectors of society.

Yet, knowledge and understanding of the fundamental cause — the vicious circle of gender inequality, which is deepened by acts of violence, which in turn increase gender inequality — are too often absent. This leads to the fragmentation of approaches to solving the problem and a focus on specific manifestations of violence against women and girls, such as rape, female genital mutilation, early and forced marriage and domestic abuse, without also changing power relations between women and men by ending poverty, enabling women to have control over land and other property, improving educational opportunities and outcomes, ending discrimination in the economy and in employment, pay and promotion, and taking on unpopular approaches to solving the relative absence of women in political and other forms of decision-making, thus empowering women. The Deputy Executive Director of UN-Women, Lakshmi Puri, has said that instead of the vicious circle we must create a virtuous cycle by changing mindsets and stereotypes that are at the root of violence. We must provide women with access to economic opportunities, ensure their equal participation in public and political life, repeal laws and practices

that continue to discriminate against women and ensure that environments are safe for women and girls, including in the streets and in schools. This constitutes the basis of a comprehensive prevention strategy.

A new United Nations convention would make clear that the underlying cause of violence against women and girls is gender inequality and that all forms of gender-based violence further cause inequality, and would encourage a more holistic approach to these grave problems. It would also be valuable in identifying, defining and recommending actions in relation to specific groups of women and specific conditions that require different strategies within the whole — for example, women with disabilities, older and younger women, girls and infants, widows, lesbians and single or never-married women of any age.

National Alliance of Women's Organizations also supports the United Nations Population Fund representatives, who in a recent meeting called for the inclusion of violence against women in the post-2015 agenda and urged a comprehensive goal on gender empowerment, with violence against women as one of the targets with specific indicators.

National Alliance of Women's Organizations has a special relationship with European Women's Lobby. With its sister organizations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, it forms the United Kingdom Joint Committee on Women, which is the coordinating body in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Alliance is proud to be part of an infrastructure for women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Europe engaged in the United Nations and at the global level to eliminate violence against women and girls. It is important to see different regions, including less developed parts of Europe, working together to solve this international problem, and the Alliance welcomes the joint initiative of the European Commission and UN-Women, Spring Forward for Women, a new regional programme for the South Mediterranean region.

Also in Europe, there have been important developments in widely accepted approaches to prostitution. For many years there has been a struggle to identify prostitution as either a free choice unfettered by emotional, mental or social scarring — work like any other — known as “voluntary prostitution” and hence “sex work”, or as a transaction in which men exploit their power over women and pay to use their bodies and those of girls — some very young — in a continuum with other kinds of violence against females known as “forced prostitution”. National Alliance of Women's Organizations believes that it is essential to understand force not only as coercion with a knife or by physical imprisonment but also experienced through a range of circumstances and life events.

The Council of Europe, with an overwhelming vote in favour of the view, now includes a wide range of factors beyond the personal to be addressed by States seeking to tackle the problem. Personal vulnerabilities (pathological aspects, such as mental health problems, low self-esteem and childhood neglect or abuse, as well as drug abuse) and structural problems (poverty, political instability/war, gender inequality, differential opportunity, lack of education and training) can have a very negative impact on prostitutes. It is important that no one should feel “forced”, even by circumstances, to engage in prostitution. This is the advantage of the neo-abolitionist approach: it makes very clear that the demand side, and not the supply side, needs to be tackled.

This has led in some countries to the decriminalization of prostitutes and legislative changes to criminalize paying for sex. There is no unanimity, however, and many different approaches continue. Nevertheless, across the world in times of austerity and conflict, younger and younger girls are being sold into brothels and forced to have sex with many men every day, while desperate women, such as widows who have already suffered from harmful traditional practices, become prostitutes because they must live and feed their children.

In the lead-up to the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 70 women's NGOs in the United Kingdom, together with experts and interested individuals, have met regularly with the objective of working towards a successful outcome at this vital meeting. The United Kingdom NGO liaison group for the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, administered by National Alliance of Women's Organizations, aims to liaise among its members and with the Government of the United Kingdom and, through them, to influence the European Union, which speaks with one voice at the Commission on the Status of Women, all in the interests of a successful outcome. Our networks are working with others across the world to this end, and we will be following up after the session to ensure that recommendations are implemented. We have proposed that the emerging issue be widows — their status and rights — and wish to see the needs and concerns of this vulnerable and harshly treated group specifically addressed in documents and, if not taken up at the fifty-seventh session, considered during the following year. The work of women's NGOs must be acknowledged and strengthened, even as threats are occurring to their traditional involvement in the work of the United Nations.

Recommendations

National Alliance of Women's Organizations urges Member States attending the session to:

- Refrain from all attacks on text that spells out rights hard won by women and progressive Governments that enable women to make decisions, lead healthier, more economically viable lives and raise healthy children.
- Conclude an agreed outcome document that will make real progress towards the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.
- Give serious consideration to a new United Nations convention on violence against women.
- Urge all Governments to keep levels of funding for UN-Women and for development and aid at high levels, particularly in this time of global financial hardship.
- Build on the Council of Europe definition of force in relation to prostitution.