



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-seventh session

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**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 Communications Coordination Committee for the United Nations, Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities, International Association of Applied Psychology, International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council of Women, International Federation of Women Lawyers, International Federation of Women in Legal Careers, International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, National Council of Women of the United States and World Council for Psychotherapy, non-governmental organizations 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

### Mental health and violence against women

We, international non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and members of the NGO Committee on Mental Health, working under the auspices of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, are committed to the promotion of mental health, psychological and societal well-being, the prevention and treatment of mental illness and emotional distress, and improvement in the delivery and quality of mental health services, through advocacy and education at the United Nations. Historically, issues relating to mental health have been minimized or overlooked in discussions at the United Nations, but that trend is changing, as evidenced by the inclusion of mental health in the Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases. The importance of promoting mental health for all people was recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) in its Constitution, which states: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition. The health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent upon the fullest cooperation of individuals and States.” This new direction of the inclusion of mental health is further developed in the organization’s Global Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020.

There is perhaps no more significant theme for addressing global mental health concerns than that of the elimination and prevention of violence against women and girls. The harrowing fact is that depression already accounts for the third-highest burden of disease on the planet. Since depression is 50 per cent more prevalent among females than among males, WHO (2008) reports that it is already the leading cause of disease burden for women across all countries and income levels. Furthermore, recent models of male depression indicate that aggressive acting-out and substance abuse are symptoms of a “male-pattern depression”. The interaction of these gendered forms of depression has especially deleterious effects when substance abuse and violence affect families and communities. WHO projects that depression will be the No. 1 global disease burden by 2030. Thus, it is of urgent importance that the interaction of mental health issues with violence against women and girls be effectively addressed in global policies and health programmes.

Family violence and neighbourhood sexual assault are the most commonly experienced causes of trauma and the cause of daily suffering for the greatest number of people. We call attention to the fact that emphasis on the special horrors that accompany natural disasters and war should not overshadow the most common behavioural causes of mental suffering, specifically that of violence against women and girls. In their 2009 book *Half the Sky*, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn provide strong evidence that gender-based violence is ubiquitous in most developing countries and that it creates far more casualties than any war. Most women between the ages of 15 and 44 are more likely to be maimed or to die from violence committed against them by males than from physical disease, accidents and war combined. The most devastating consequence of rape is the suicide of its victims, who often mistakenly believe that they are bringing great shame on their families.

Also frequently overlooked are the intergenerational effects of violence against women and girls. Numerous studies have shown that the safety and mental health of mothers have a direct impact on healthy infant development. Because a victimized and traumatized mother is in a state of chronic biological stress, she cannot support the subtle and crucial non-verbal and embodied self-regulation of her children, the basic biological conditions for resilience later in life. Keeping mothers of young children mentally healthy and physically safe is perhaps the single most powerful intervention aimed at turning the tide of mental illness currently and for the future.

### **Recommendations**

- There have been numerous statements and conventions on the status of women and recommendations aimed at remediating and eliminating major problems. What is key is the need for the development of agreed-upon benchmarks and timetables by all nations to measure improvement and the accomplishment of desired goals such as those listed below. Without such accountability and implementation, the problems will merely continue to be repeatedly pointed out, without effective solutions.
- Girls and women must be educated to reject all forms of violence that are culturally sanctioned, including honour killings, bride burnings, acid attacks, rape as punishment or as a male right, genital-cutting, human trafficking, wife-beating as discipline and the overall devaluing of females, especially prior to birth and in old age.
- Economic opportunities and development for women and girls must be a priority in eradicating poverty, which is a major contributor to violence against women and girls.
- Males must be educated about alternatives to violence and encouraged to honour the unique contributions of females to the economy and cultural dignity. Underlying male depression must be addressed.
- The development and implementation of global legislation for the protection of women and girls from all forms of violence must continue to be supported. The prosecution of violent crimes against women and girls must be strengthened and supported and documented accurately and in detail. The safety of women who come forward to report crimes must be ensured.
- The use of traditional and social media and technology must be promoted in disseminating information about successful efforts, such as those of Equality Now, based in New York, which prevailed upon Ethiopia to change its laws so that a man is liable for rape even if his victim agrees to marry him. Media and technology are also powerful tools for educating and informing women and girls and helping to foster future community participation and government leadership.
- Research and the compilation of reports on the laws of all nations pertaining to all forms of violence against women and girls and the subsequent criminal prosecution and economic sanctions of all forms of violence against women and girls must be given high priority by all nations as the first step towards accountability.