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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 Womensport International, 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

Violence against women in sport: if you do not want to believe it, you will not see it

We believe that focusing on preventing violence before it occurs will be imperative because doing so will involve promising preventive strategies and recommendations for action. We hope that work on prevention and control of violence against women and girls in sport will be included in the outputs of the current session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

The importance of sport in society is interpreted as a source of concern for human life. Sport serves as a means of recognizing and creating opportunities for powerful experiences. Recognizing sport as a low-cost intervention, the General Assembly adopted resolution 58/5, in which it invited Governments to use sport to promote education, health, development and peace. Moreover, as sport covers a range of activities, movements, forms of recreation and games, it can be employed to achieve multiple objectives: development of human health and welfare, education and recreation; development of society by promoting stability, tolerance, social cohesion and association; economic growth by promoting investment opportunities and professional employment; and policy development, promotion of peace and respect for the rules of democracy. The benefits of participation in sport have been documented extensively in research as being powerful and multidimensional, encompassing somatic, psychological and social aspects.

Concerning women, who comprise half of the world's population, in a recent study conducted by the Montenegrin Olympic Committee and Directorate for Youth and Sport, in cooperation with other agencies, it is argued that the participation of girls and women in sport has been linked to a number of positive health-related outcomes, improved educational outcomes and better academic performance. Girls' participation in sport has also been linked to improvements in family satisfaction and superior quality of life, as well as positive psychological outcomes and social empowerment. However, girls and women today still face obstacles that limit their interest and participation in sport. These barriers range from lack of proper clothing and equipment to cultural stereotypes and decreased opportunities as a result of war or political conflict.

Violence, in particular sexual violence, against female participants appears to be another considerable and complex barrier, given that it harms participation numbers and, most importantly, the physical, psychological and social health of participants. The devastating effects of sexual violence on female athletes and exercisers have also been documented in research. Research data on sexual harassment and abuse in sport have been available since the early 1990s, along with calls to the sports community to recognize and address the problem. Since then, our knowledge on incidence, prevalence, prevention and control has been enriched, while directives and preventive recommendations have been developed. Some of the recommendations provided by international organizations are presented below.

In 1994, Womensport International published the first information brochure about sexual harassment. Recommendations were made to implement codes of ethics and conduct for coaches; maintain a climate of open discussion about the issues of sexual harassment and abuse; adopt athlete and parent education

programmes to provide information and advice on rights and on how to maintain integrity and autonomy; and adopt rigorous screening procedures for the appointment of all sport personnel.

In 2004, Womensport International produced the first position statement condemning any form of sexual harassment towards female athletes. Recommendations included adopting harassment-free policies and procedures and systematically monitoring their effectiveness, initiating education and training programmes on harassment-free sport for all individuals involved in sport and embedding democratic leadership styles to mitigate abuses of power.

In 2007, the International Olympic Committee, through the work of a group of experts, in which Womensport International members were also involved, adopted a consensus statement on sexual harassment and abuse in sport, in which it suggested several practical steps to improve athlete safety by providing guidelines for prevention and resolution. The recommendations, owing to lack of progress on prevention and control, once again promoted actions such as the development, monitoring and evaluation of policies and procedures to prevent sexual harassment and abuse in sport, the development of education and training programmes and the nurturing of strong partnerships with parents or caregivers.

In 2007, Carole Oglesby and Kari Fasting, past presidents of Womensport International, worked on *Women 2000 and Beyond: Women, Gender Equality and Sport*, a publication of the Division for the Advancement of Women, in which they wrote that there should be commitment to creating safe and supportive environments for women and girls to participate in sport and that initiatives must address a number of key issues such as gender stereotyping and power relationships between coaches and athletes, as well as the link between international sporting events and prostitution and the risk of human trafficking to fill that demand.

In 2010, a group of experts, including Womensport International members, prepared a United Nations Children's Fund review document on protecting children from violence in sport, in which the absence of research data and knowledge and the need to establish structures for eliminating violence in sport were revealed. Accordingly, prevention policies should be based on reliable evidence, given that, without an evidence-based framework, policies may be based on myths, stereotypes or lack of awareness and may simply be ignored. Specific areas where further research was needed were presented, such as the diverse forms of physical and emotional abuse of children in sport; the prevalence, forms and impact of violence in sports worldwide; and the experiences in societies outside the current research base.

Since education is recognized worldwide as the best means of prevention, efforts to educate all individuals involved in sport are strongly pursued. In 2012, the International Olympic Committee through a group of experts, again involving Womensport International members, launched a remarkable educational web-based tool on sexual harassment and abuse in sport with videos, animations and links to supportive scientific information.

In a publication on the prevention of sexual and gender harassment and abuse in sports, experts working for a programme entitled "Prevention of sexualized violence in sports — impulses for an open, secure and sound sporting environment

in Europe”, funded by the European Union, pointed out that the following recommendations were those most often made over the course of the past 18 years:

- (a) Deliver and disseminate additional research;
- (b) Develop codes of ethics;
- (c) Educate and train all involved parties (coaches, staff, athletes, parents, etc.);
- (d) Develop action plans and adopt policies against sexual violence;
- (e) Establish specific procedures to support and protect all involved;
- (f) Monitor and rigorously evaluate all measures in effect.

In order to make a difference in the world of sport, these recommendations need to be endorsed at all levels of sport. The sports community must acknowledge that, if the potential benefits of sport are to be realized by the participants, there must be collaboration between the agencies responsible for sport for development and those responsible for child protection and for equal rights. Without effective partnerships for knowledge generation and sharing of best practices, change will be haphazard and limited, with perpetrators in sport continuing to exhibit inappropriate behaviour and many children, women and men continuing to experience harassment and abuse within sport.

Today, there are really no more new recommendations to be made. What is necessary now is political will in sport, in schools and in countries. It is time to protect sport participants by enforcement. As millions of children play sports around the world (participation in sport is a right, just like education), providing safe sport environments for girls and women ought to become more imperative in our societies, especially when so much learning and development takes place through sport.
