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Statement submitted by International Health Awareness Network, 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

For violence to stop and freedom to flourish — give women a change

“Violence against women is an issue that cannot wait. No country, no culture, no woman, young or old, is immune to this scourge. And we know that when we work to eradicate violence against women, we empower our greatest resource for development.”

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 2008

Violence against women is the most intolerable human rights violation perpetuated in this world. It holds nations hostage to prevailing poverty, poor health, dismal economies, and an uneducated and poorly prepared population. These are the enemies of prosperity and development. We cannot ever hope to have world peace, security and stability without purging the dark forces of violence against women.

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) defines the term violence against women in article 1 as “any act of gender-based violence that result in, or likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.

The Millennium Development Goals were adopted to help nations achieve prosperity and development. In the year 2000, all 192 States Members of the United Nations and about 23 international organizations agreed to achieve these goals by the year 2015. The eight Millennium Development Goals are intertwined in such a way that each is critical to all others. However, we must acknowledge that fundamental to all the Goals is the goal of achieving equality and empowerment of women. Violence against women is the most severe act that prevents us from achieving that goal. Indeed, it undermines a nation’s development and advancement.

The 2005 World Health Organization report “Addressing violence against women and achieving the Millennium Development Goals” clearly underscores the connection between the Millennium Development Goals and the prevention of violence against women. It shows that the targets will not be realized if violence against women — one of the most flagrant expressions of gender inequality — is not recognized and addressed.

In many parts of the world the assault on women begins even before they are born, in the guise of sex-selective abortions, which prospective mothers are often coerced into undergoing by social pressure. In many instances, attacks against the person and freedom of women haunt every stage of their lives, from infancy to adolescence, adulthood and old age. This must end if societies and nations are to prosper, advance and develop.

Unless and until we make certain that each person has the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity, and ensure that women’s values of nurturance and solidarity characterize human relationships, we cannot achieve the goal of a stable, peaceful and productive world order. The key here is establishing societal and legal norms that value the integrity and worth of each person and the role of Governments in protecting women’s personal safety.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen put it succinctly: “The changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change, and its determination

as well as consequences closely relates to many of the central features of the development process ... Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women. This is indeed a crucial aspect of 'development as freedom'.¹

Currently, women are greatly disadvantaged in matters of education, nutrition, health care, land ownership, paid employment, access to banking and credit, and professional and political participation. These issues are key to being able to live an independent life. They are also critical to developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life. The Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) recognized and reaffirmed that reproductive health is an indispensable part of women's empowerment. The Beijing Platform for Action proclaimed, "Empowerment of women and gender equality are prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security" (para. 41).

What we know is that there are scores of international and national agreements and constitutional assertions that clearly acknowledge the importance of women's equality in all spheres of endeavour. What is lacking is the implementation of these proclamations and rules. For this reason, each of the eight Millennium Development Goals has failed to accomplish what it set out to achieve within the time limit.

Many factors contribute to violence against women, including lack of access to education. This limits their role in society and makes them more vulnerable. Of the 960 million adults who are illiterate, two thirds are women. Sixty per cent of the 130 million children between the ages of 5 and 11 who do not go to school are girls. The latest demographic and health surveys for more than 40 developing countries show that the mortality rate among children under 5 years of age is lower in households where the mothers have some primary schooling. Women's education reduces malnutrition by more than 40 per cent.

Education of the mother is a marker for better health not just for herself, but for the family as a whole. When women have equal access to education and have the chance to participate fully in professional and economic decision-making they become a critical force for overcoming poverty. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) observed that women with equal rights are better educated, healthier, and have greater access to land, jobs and financial resources. Their increased earning power raises household incomes. When women enjoy equality and decision-making authority in the household, families, children and future generations stand to benefit. Child marriages, maternal mortality and the prevalence of diseases such as HIV/AIDS are significantly reduced. It is often power imbalance that fosters violence. Equality and freedom allow restoration of a healthy balance and harmony in families.

Recommendations:

- Promote and ensure women's and girls' human and political rights. In order to promote human rights it is essential to recognize and protect personal physical, emotional and moral autonomy as a key human right and to identify violence against women as a transgression of this right.

¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York, Anchor Books, 1999), pp. 202-203.

- It is important that national and local Governments guarantee regimes and rules that support the human rights of women and ensure that such laws are fully implemented.
- Guarantee the right to education for girls and boys. This also provides an opportunity to teach girls and boys compassion and empathy towards each other. An educated population is imperative to enhance the potential of societies and nations. It serves as a marker for what each person can do for herself/himself and for how they can contribute collectively to building a peaceful and productive society.
- Prevention of violence against women should be integrated into all of the Millennium Development Goals. The awareness of this critical issue should be paramount when programmes are developed to help women and men improve their lives. The role of advocacy organizations is significant here. Community forums and groups are fertile venues for discussing the benefits of cooperation and consideration among members of the group. Discussions on the destructive nature of violence against women and the harm it brings not only to women but to men as well should be emphasized.
- Data on the status of women, their safety, personal autonomy and right to live fulfilling lives, as well as on their health, education, access to employment and credit, political participation, inheritance of property and other relevant issues should be collected. Only then can policies based on real data and conditions be devised and crafted.
- Make sure that women are meaningfully involved in planning, budgeting and policymaking processes in local and national matters.

If a girl is denied education, if a woman is denied an opportunity to have a job, if she is denied political and human rights, if she is denied justice, if she is denied the right to make decisions that affect her own body and family, if she is held hostage to a patriarchal regime that subjugates her life: all these are to be considered as violence against women. We cannot tolerate it or live with it.

Thus, if freedom is to flourish around the globe, women must be empowered so they can make their rightful contribution to world peace and prosperity.