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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 International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 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

The International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary welcomes the priority theme for the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women: “Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls”. We, the members of the International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who engage in the service of the most vulnerable in 22 countries, believe that although much has been accomplished, many challenges still remain. In looking at violence against women, we believe that extreme poverty and gender inequality beget violence. When human rights are violated, violence occurs.

The General Assembly has repeatedly stressed that “it is important that States strongly condemn all forms of violence against women and refrain from invoking any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women”. It also called on States to take all appropriate measures so as to achieve that end.

The Deputy Executive Director of UN-Women has stated that “as many as 7 in 10 women around the world report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime”. The most pervasive form of violence is domestic violence. This includes intimate partner violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting, male domination, physical and emotional abuse, polygamy, honour killing, trafficking, and harmful cultural practices such as sexual cleansing. Women suffer other forms of violence due to lack of respect for their human rights, including inadequate health care, food, water, education and decent work. It is known that many women work in sweatshops in degrading conditions for scandalously low recompense. We are also aware that violence against women and girls with disabilities, as well as the aging, migrants, indigenous and runaways, needs to be addressed.

Every day almost 800 women die from complications of pregnancy due to lack of prenatal and post-natal medical care. Obstetric fistula caused by prolonged obstructive labour in most cases causes the baby to be stillborn and the mother to be left with a terrible injury that leaves her incontinent, ashamed and excluded from daily community life, abandoned by her husband and living in dire poverty. This is “almost entirely preventable when there is universal and equitable access to high quality reproductive health care”, according to Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), But for the people living in poverty this is only a dream. Other serious health care issues include malnutrition, shortage of trained health-care workers and HIV/AIDS. Owing to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, children are left as heads of families, caring for their younger siblings, and thousands of children are left orphaned. Some of our members experience this reality in their everyday work.

Sexual exploitation, today’s most common form of slavery, is a practice driven by demand from buyers of sex (according to statistics, they are mostly men) and is fuelled by pornography and profit. Sexual exploitation and prostitution are rooted in poverty and the structural inequalities between women and men, more particularly in discrimination against women. These oppressive acts are inherently violent and

demeaning of all persons. This is a global problem and needs to be addressed by and between all States through an international law enforcement network.

Every year an estimated 10 million girls are married before they reach the age of 18. Girls as young as 8 years old are being married off to men who are three to four times their age. These girls drop out of school and are physically and sexually abused, leading ultimately to slavery. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes in article 16 the right to free and full consent to marriage and makes it clear that the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect. UNFPA says that by 2030 the number of underage girls marrying each year will grow to 15 million if current trends continue. Its 2012 publication *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage* contains statistics on child marriage around the world that are a cause of despondency, and the images of girl children being married off are heartrending. Yet, celebrating the first International Day of the Girl Child on 11 October 2012 filled us with hope for a future when it will never again be said “I do not count because I am a girl”.

There are many initiatives that work to alleviate violence against women and girls. The International Labour Conference in June 2012 adopted a new international labour standard, the Social Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202). This recommendation reaffirms that social security is a human right and provides guidance to States in providing and extending social security. In a statement made before the General Assembly on 17 October 2012, Kevin Cassidy of the International Labour Organization (ILO) said, “Through the establishment of a social protection floor we help women become their own agents of change through the labour market and educational opportunities once they gain income security and access to essential services provided by the floor. Our experience shows, for example, that benefits paid in the form of social transfers directly to women result in the improvement of their status and their capacity to exert increasing control over how household income is spent”.

Registration of births is a big problem in some developing States where mothers are so poor they cannot afford the registration fee for their newborn babies. Without a birth certificate these children have no identity and are deprived of the basic human right to education as well as other basic social services.

Education is a very important basic human right for all people. In least developed countries approximately 25 million school-age children do not attend school. Girls represent 54 per cent of the total number. Children without birth certificates may not attend school. Another obstacle to attending school is the cost of uniforms, fees and books and boys normally get preference. Lack of properly trained teachers adds to this problem. Community centres are vital for the education of women and girls especially, as just mentioned, for those who are deprived.

Many women in developing countries have poor access to the courts and to justice when they look for redress from violence. When reporting violence, men must accompany them to the police station. In some circumstances the man is the abuser. If the women do not agree to reconciliation there is no place of refuge for them.

There are also other problems such as sexual harassment, bullying of women in the workplace, especially those at vulnerable stages in their careers, lack of political advancement for women and some religions failing in gender equality.

Recommendations

The International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary recommends that:

- Laws regarding the registration of births be enforced and that lack of finance should not be an obstacle
- Laws pertaining to the age of marriage for girls be rigorously enforced and impunity eliminated for those who infringe it
- Laws against trafficking be strictly enforced by national and international guardians of the law
- Laws forbidding female genital mutilation/cutting be enforced globally and that rites of passage for girls that exclude violence be initiated by and with the full participation of family and community
- All laws enacted in each State, especially those relating to justice for women and girls, be enforced and monitored
- As education is a basic human right, it is therefore imperative that it be provided for all women and girls
- Human rights education be available at every stage of life, from early childhood through all levels of schooling, adulthood and in the senior years; this would result in better access to the justice system for women and girls
- Community education involving men and women, boys and girls, family and community and local leaders be initiated to bring about a paradigm shift in attitudes and behaviour towards women and girls
- Developing countries put more funds into basic health-care services for women and girls and that rich countries honour their commitments to provide financing, technology and other aid for the same purpose
- Social protection floors in accordance with ILO Recommendation No. 202 be implemented by all States

Note: The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Loretto Community, Salesian Missions, Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, Temple of Understanding, The Grail and Sisters of Charity Federation.