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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 Association of Schools of Social Work, 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

Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger

The International Association of Schools of Social Work has held consultative status with the United Nations since 1947. We represent social work education at the international level and consider the promotion of human rights and social development through policy and advocacy a priority. While all of the Millennium Development Goals are consistent with our goals, none of them will be achievable unless poverty and hunger are eliminated. Poverty is a state of multiple deprivations that inflame every problem that a human being may have. Therefore, we are focusing our statement on Millennium Development Goal 1, the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, as it pertains to women and girls. Causes, consequences and solutions are addressed.

Poverty, according to the United Nations, is the ultimate violence. Girls and women are particularly vulnerable to poverty-related physical and emotional suffering because of their inferior social status. Even in a wealthy nation such as the United States of America, 78 per cent of all people living in poverty are single women and hungry children who swell the ranks of soup kitchens throughout the country. The second largest poverty group in the world is the poor elderly, approximately 79 per cent of whom are women. Together, young and elderly women make up more than 70 per cent of the poor in most countries. As at September 2013, while there is evidence of children's nutritional improvement, for example in Asia, the number of stunted children in Africa has increased. Obviously, the situation regarding children is directly related to the status of their mothers. What is more, girls are in greater jeopardy than boys as a result of customs that discriminate on gender grounds. In many cultures, girls and women are allowed to eat only what is left after men and boys have been served.

The United Nations has concluded that there is no country in the world where women and men have equal status. Much of women's work contributes to their oppression, rather than to their independence. It is unpaid or low paid and labour intensive. Women's benefits are almost non-existent and their working conditions often dangerous. In addition to maintaining the home and caring for children, men and elders, women contribute to the economic support of the household. The United Nations notes that women do two thirds of the world's work, yet two thirds of them live in poverty. The notion of equal sharing of family responsibilities first proposed in 1975 by women from non-aligned countries at the United Nations World Conference for Women, held in Mexico City, is yet to become the norm. The concept was incorporated as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication in a report published in 2001 by the United Nations on empowerment of women throughout the life cycle. According to the report, childcare support services must be provided to allow both women and men, especially in poverty, to utilize their employment opportunities and build their capacities.

Women's work burden is incapacitating. More likely to live in poverty, women are subject to physical and mental health risks, including chronic fatigue, malnutrition, depression and anxiety, usually owing to unconscionable social conditions. There is a continued lack of physical and mental health services or research concerning their needs in developing and developed countries. Understanding the sources of ill health for women means understanding how

cultural and economic forces interact to undermine their social status. Violence against women is one such force.

What is clear is that gender and poverty are entwined inequalities. To get a clearer picture of the issues, it is important to be aware of the context. The policies that must be implemented to challenge the universal oppression of women are embodied in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It addresses, inter alia, patriarchal systems that ensure women's continued subservience, their universal vulnerability to poverty, their sexual exploitation and the absence of health care.

Social and cultural patterns lead to discrimination and stereotyped sex roles, ranging from division of labour that leaves women performing unpaid work to sexual exploitation at home and at work to global sex trafficking. In terms of education, from grade school to graduate school, the substance of what women are learning tends to ignore or trivialize knowledge specifically relevant to females. Despite progress having been made, women are less likely to have access to education in many cultures, making them more likely than men to be illiterate. Even in the United States, where women today often outnumber men in colleges, women's socialization, opportunity and aspirations culminate in a lack of awareness about their situation. They, like their sisters in the developing world, continue to perceive themselves and be perceived as less deserving and less knowledgeable than men, despite information to the contrary.

Although legislation in the interest of women's advancement has evolved over time, throughout the world, women continue to lack de jure equality, that which is legislated, and de facto equality, that which they actually experience. So, in the absence of oversight, even when laws are instituted, they do not translate into rights. While the type of discrimination varies from region to region, women throughout the world find that their relationship to a male relative or husband determines their rights.

Policies must come face to face with the perpetuation of gender inequality that perpetuates poverty and social deprivation and vice versa, creating a cycle of despair and demoralization that is transferred to the next generation. Because of the reciprocal impact of this cycle, capacity development is an important strategy, key to ensuring the human rights of girls and women, whatever their age. Development, as social workers know, is not just a geographic, economic or societal concept. It is also about human development, emotional well-being and personal growth. It is, in effect, about human rights. Without attention to the inner self, there can be no real social or economic development.

Economic policies that lead to great inequities in wealth and social resources are particularly critical. Communities that become isolated from political power and opportunity, in which safety nets are removed, spawn cycles of poverty and desperation associated with ill health, both mental and physical. The endgame is absolute poverty that breeds violence, displacement, trauma and depression. If we are to prevent this escalating scourge, healthy policies must be created to advance women's well-being. To do so, creating political will is essential.

Healthy policies for women are designed to advance their cultural, political and legal rights and personal power as human beings. Such policies lift women out of poverty and oppression by ensuring their access to and control over economic

resources. Providing loans for community-based microenterprises is just one example.

The women who participate in microenterprises almost without exception initially consider themselves to be worthless as human beings compared with men. Their culturally defined negative sense of self is wholly centred on subservience and unquestioned labour. Even when offered social and economic opportunities, they refused to participate based upon their inferior self-perception. Leaders find that the psychological development of women in culture after culture must be attended to in the process of social and economic development. Women must view themselves as worthy before they can be successful. Being attuned to the needs of women from their own point of view is the key. Successful programmes always begin with women sharing in small groups, creating bonds and mutual self-esteem, while facilitating awareness of the work that each does on behalf of their families and community. The source of women and girls' strength lies within them. As they begin to realize their strengths and contributions, their awareness is tapped, allowing them to flourish.

Social workers know that creating healthy policies for women means listening to women before intervening, before engaging in research, before developing policy and before creating prevention programmes. Gender mainstreaming is key. Everything must be conceptualized, designed, implemented and analysed by and for women and girls. While research is important, it is participatory social action research that is essential if it is to be useful to women. Prevention programmes and healthy policies flow from the results of such social action studies. This is the case in rural and urban pockets of countries all over the world where women have been taking control of their own lives as a result of the international women's movement and the Millennium Development Goals process. Their personal development is as palpable as their educational and economic successes.

The International Association of Schools of Social Work implores the nations of the world to join us in applying this knowledge gained in recent years regarding the causes, consequences and solutions concerning the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger to the future efforts of the United Nations.
