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to the special session of the General Assembly entitled**

**“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for
the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Ma’arij Foundation for Peace and Development, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The Maarij Foundation wholeheartedly agrees that education is a human right, fundamental for achieving equality, development and peace. We recognise the significant contribution and impact that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has had in establishing a global framework for women's empowerment and gender equality and in particular we applaud its attention to women's equal access to non-discriminatory education and training.

It is widely known that when a girl receives an education the benefits extend to their families, communities and the overall development of their nation. An educated woman is more likely to be engaged in gainful employment and studies show that when women earn an income they typically reinvest 90 per cent back into their families and community. When girls remain in school beyond the 7th grade, they are more likely to marry later, are less likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth, have healthier children and send their own children to school.

Solid progress has been made over the past 20 years to narrow the gender gap in education and ensure more children, both boys and girls, are obtaining a primary education. The Millennium Development Goals, in particular Goal 2 to achieve universal primary education and Goal 3 to promote gender equality and empower women, have had some positive impacts. The rate of primary school education in developing countries has improved and is now at 90 per cent and we welcome the news that gender disparity in primary school enrolments has steadily narrowed and has already been achieved in some regions.

Yet despite these gains, there remains much work to be done to narrow the gender divide, particularly at the secondary levels. Ensuring that girls remain in school until the end of upper secondary education is critical as evidence suggests this is necessary to ensure that the multi-layered benefits of a girls' education are achieved. Women continue to make up two-thirds of the world's illiterate population and in regions where poverty and conflict persist, in remote areas and in places where girls and women are more likely to be socially excluded, the rate of school enrolment for girls is likely to be much lower.

Affirming the Beijing Declaration, which called for an improvement in the quality of education 20 years ago, we note that this critical factor has been largely overlooked over the past two decades. We regret the absence of any targets or indicators in the Millennium Development Goals to measure the actual quality of education, which is now a serious issue requiring urgent attention. We are concerned by recent findings outlined in the 11th Education for All, Global Monitoring Report, commissioned by UNESCO, which found that regardless of whether a primary school aged child attends school or not, one third of these children are failing to learn the basic skills. Accordingly we welcome the proposed Sustainable Development Goals, outlined in the Open Working Group's Outcome Document, in particular Goal 4, calling for the inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Obtaining a quality education relies on a number of factors, teacher availability being one important aspect. Unfortunately, the marked improvements in school enrolment rates over the past two decades, have not been matched with a proportionate number of extra teaching staff in a number of places and we are concerned by findings which suggest that the teacher to student ratio remains overly high in a number of countries, leading to overcrowded classrooms, which hinders

the educational development of students. Another concerning trend is the hiring of unqualified teaching staff to fill the shortage of teachers.

There needs to be solid investment in the recruitment and training of teachers, and governments must ensure there are adequate numbers of female teachers and teachers from a wide range of backgrounds to advance the goal of inclusive education. The presence of female teachers at all levels of schooling is an important factor in achieving greater gender equality in education, as female teachers are known to contribute to better attendance rates among girls and improved educational results, especially in more traditional settings, where girls and young women have greater restrictions of movement imposed on them and have fewer life choices. Studies have shown that when the number of female teachers is increased, particularly in rural zones of developing countries, access to education and learning outcomes for girls are improved.

At a practical level, investment in infrastructure can be another factor which can encourage girls to attend and remain in school beyond the onset of adolescence. Recognising the link between the lack of clean, safe, separate and secure sanitation facilities in schools and the elevated rate of absenteeism and dropout rates for girls, governments must commit to invest in appropriate facilities for girls and young women in all educational institutions. It is also important to ensure that girls and women with a disability can easily access these facilities.

We affirm the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and reject harmful gender stereotypes in school curriculums and teaching materials, which serve to reinforce traditional gender roles and limit girls' and women's learning opportunities and career choices. Gender equality in education must be reinforced. Apart from textbook revision to remove gender stereotypes, gender equality should be incorporated across a variety of subjects and teachers and educators should also receive gender awareness training in order to break-down prejudices, which can sometimes lead to discriminatory practices in the class room.

In order to ensure that every girl and woman can enjoy their universal right to education, governments must also recognise and address the root causes which are obstructing them from obtaining an education and causing girls to drop out early from school. Issues such as early marriage and pregnancy, unaffordable school fees, a heavy burden of domestic labour from a young age, long distances to school, a lack of sanitation facilities in educational institutions, a fear of harassment either from pupils or teachers, and gender stereotypes which devalue a girls' education are all contributing factors which are obstructing girls and women from obtaining their right to education. Recognising that the most vulnerable groups of girls and women, in particular those with a disability, poor, rural, indigenous and those in conflict situations are often missing out on an education, the post-2015 agenda must affirm the principle of inclusive and equitable education, to ensure that the most vulnerable groups of girls and women are not left behind and trapped into a life of disadvantage.

We applaud the Beijing Declaration's forward looking outlook and calls to improve girls' and women's access to education and training in technical fields, where they remain greatly underrepresented. Governments need to look at implementing national strategies to encourage more girls and women to study and pursue careers in the technical fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and

Mathematics. We applaud strategies which seek to encourage more women and girls to pursue study and careers in these fields, such as the provision of scholarships, the introduction of female role models and mentors, the deconstruction of gender stereotypes and the creation of non-discriminatory classroom environments to ensure equal treatment between boys and girls in the classroom.

We are concerned by the lack of opportunities, particularly in developing countries for women and girls to obtain higher education and acquire important Information and Communication Technology skills and competencies, which are now vital to obtain skilled employment in this technological era. Women are grossly underrepresented in this sector, particularly at decision-making levels and make up just 30 per cent of the workforce. More girls and women must be encouraged to pursue education and training in this domain which can greatly increase their career prospects and allow them to contribute to the technological development of their country. It is important that vocational training for women and girls focuses on developing skills sets which meet current labour demands and incorporate the use of information and communication technology.

Affirming the power of quality, equitable and inclusive education as a driver of other development goals, and one of the most effective ways to contribute to women's empowerment and gender equality, policy makers must commit sufficient resources and attention to ensure that education is placed at the centre of the post-2015 agenda to ensure the sustainable development of all.
