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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”**

Statement submitted by Universal Muslim Association of America, 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 Universal Muslim Association of America hereby submits comments for the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women and would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity for doing so. By way of introduction, the Universal Muslim Association of America is one of the largest, most active Shia-Ithna'asheri Muslim organizations in the United States with members throughout the country.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was a commendable strategy in advancing the rights and roles of women around the world. As a faith-based organization, the Universal Muslim Association of America is especially supportive of the assertion that the choice of religion and the freedom to practice as one chooses is an unalienable right deserved by all people — men and women. Much of the oppression women face in this regard is when role models, as found in contemporary leaders or in important historical figures, are made unavailable or null for women through suppression of study, erasure of history or lack of education. Religious figures and role models are important to help women achieve a sense of fulfilment in their moral, ethical or spiritual aspirations.

The widespread introduction of relevant female figures who embodied strength, empowerment, intellect and equality is a step in the right direction. For example, Khadija bint Khuwaylid, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, was a renowned and successful business woman who famously supported the entire early Muslim community when they faced economic boycott and persecution. Her ability to engage in business successfully and support not only herself but an entire burgeoning community is a source of empowerment for many businesswomen around the world.

Another important historical figure in Islamic history is Fatima bint Muhammad, daughter of Islam's Prophet Muhammad and his first wife, Khadija. Fatima is known for using the legal system established by her father to press a legal case against the seizure of her inheritance. Though she was a young woman at the time who had only recently lost her father, she entered the legal system and fought for her right to retain the land her father gifted to her. She brought forth witnesses and eloquently stated her case in the public courts. Fatima, as the Prophet of Islam's only surviving child, embodies the rights of women to inheritance, to utilize the legal system to fight for their rights and to resist injustice from a governing body.

Yet another female figure that serves a beacon of hope and inspiration is Fatima's daughter — Zainab bint Ali. Zainab embodies the role women must play in the resistance against injustice, oppression and tyranny. Her family was ambushed while traveling in order to get an oath of allegiance from her brother, Hussain ibn Ali, for the ruler at the time. Knowing that paying allegiance would legitimize the usurping ruler, Hussain and his family refused and were mercilessly massacred by an army said to be in the thousands. After the men in the family were killed, Zainab along with the other women, children and the sole adult male survivor, her nephew, were taken captive and paraded back to the capital. However, refusing to be a broken prisoner of war, Zainab took on the role of defender and matriarch of her family and spoke out against the ruler and his crimes at every stop of the caravan. Upon reaching the capital, modern day Damascus, rather than being humiliated Zainab delivered a scathing speech that has lived on in history. Through peaceful

protest and eloquence, she sparked a cultural and social revolution that revived the true spirit of Islamic justice and peace.

These women are only a few examples of countless others who can serve as emblems of empowerment, inspiration and inner strength to aid women around the world to realize their potential. Women must actively participate within all spheres of life — including the religious sphere and impeccable unimpeachable women in history can serve as role models to promote active engagement.
