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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 Concile mondial de congrès diplomatiques des aumoniers pour la paix universelle des droits humains et juridiques, 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

Violence against women and girls with disabilities

Women and girls with disabilities who suffer gender-based violence face distinctive barriers to accessing gender-based and sexual violence prevention programmes, post-violence medical care and the justice system because of limitations in physical mobility, communication barriers and isolation. These barriers leave them vulnerable to abuse, including physical and sexual violence.

In northern Uganda, for example, the organization has documented sexual violence against women with disabilities and found that more than one third of the 64 women with disabilities who were interviewed had experienced sexual or gender-based violence, often at the hands of relatives. Women with disabilities have a greater chance of being raped because abusers perceive them as less able to defend themselves or demand justice for violence. For women with disabilities, the process of reporting violence may be more difficult because of limited access, such as when limited mobility impedes their ability to reach justice institutions or when such institutions lack sign language interpreters. Several women with disabilities explained to the organization how their efforts to seek justice for such crimes had failed. Because of the stigma already associated with disability and the stigma associated with rape, women with disabilities have enormous difficulty reporting incidents of sexual violence to the local authorities.

Women and girls with disabilities also face many challenges in accessing reproductive and sexual health services, which may only be exacerbated if they are victims of gender-based violence. In many countries, women with disabilities face ignorance, discrimination and verbal abuse from health-care personnel. For example, our research in northern Uganda showed that women with disabilities who survive rape find it especially difficult to get post-exposure prophylaxis and other necessary treatment, such as emergency contraception, because of physically inaccessible transportation and health-care facilities, as well as lack of confidentiality due to deaf women's need to bring family members as sign language interpreters.

Emergency shelters for survivors of domestic violence are inaccessible to women with disabilities in many countries. In Turkey, the organization researched the response to domestic violence in six cities, and found that none of the locations had domestic violence shelters (State or private) that could accommodate women with physical disabilities.

Women human rights defenders

In order to do our work effectively, the organization collaborates closely with women and groups worldwide who fight for the rights of women. All human rights defenders may face risks, but we have seen first hand that women defenders suffer additional threats and unique obstacles because they are women. The actions taken by Governments are at times insufficient to address the gendered nature of risks and assaults. Even worse, we have documented examples where Governments target women human rights defenders.

The organization has documented various abuses against women human rights defenders such as physical attacks, hand-delivered threats, terrifying telephone

calls, sexual harassment, rape and threats against children of activists, all creating a chilling environment in an effort to silence these women. Often no one is held accountable, and sufficient protection measures for these women are rare.

In some contexts, Governments target, arrest and assault women because of their activism for women's rights. The organization has documented sexual harassment and attacks on women by Government forces for demonstrating in public. In some cases, women and girls have been arrested and abused by their male relatives because of their activism.

Many of the organization's researchers have seen personally the tremendous toll that human rights work takes on women working at the grass-roots level to seek justice for abused women, in particular victims of sexual violence. The women defenders with whom the organization has worked have been raped multiple times for their activism, have had their children threatened or abused or have had to flee their homes. In one particularly difficult case, the stress of continuous threats led one woman defender to take her own life. We cannot imagine holding a hearing on the issue of combating violence against women without reflecting on the unmatched sacrifice and bravery of women human rights defenders around the world who are waging the difficult and daily fight to end violence in their own communities.
