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

Statement submitted by Association africaine de l’eau, 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

Water management and desalination key to building a fairer and more equal world for men and women

The year 2015 was the deadline that the international community set itself for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) established in 2000 in New York. Those goals addressed the major humanitarian challenges of: reducing extreme poverty and infant mortality; combating various epidemics including AIDS; ensuring access to education; promoting gender equality; and implementing sustainable development. One of the sub-items was to halve the number of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. That objective was reached in the majority of the countries comprising our community; unfortunately, however, Africa did not follow suit. Once again, the continent was not able to keep its international commitments and water remains, for many people, a rare commodity obtained through extreme sacrifice. At a time when the United Nations is working with Governments, civil society and various other partners to use the momentum generated by the MDG to plan ambitious post-2015 programmes, the majority of developing countries continue to face huge difficulties and still have many shortfalls to tackle.

Of course, in this context of extreme insecurity, it is women that bear the brunt of the delays that have occurred. In the specific context of our work, it is well known that when there is no water in the house it is women who are responsible for collecting it - a task that is often exhausting and sometimes forces women to travel very long distances and transport very heavy loads. That situation cannot fail to adversely affect their physical and psychological integrity.

In 1995, when the Commission on the Status of Women met in Beijing and presented its plan of action for the years to come, we were all full of hope, since such action would strengthen women's social, economic and political power, improve their health, facilitate their access to education and protect their reproductive rights. Today we are witnessing a sad state of affairs for a great many women in developing countries. Indeed, what privileges can women enjoy in society if they are recognized merely as water collectors for their families? What kind of education can we envisage for young girls if, because of their water duties, they are the first to get up in the morning and the last to go to bed and their studies suffer as a result? What kind of health can we hope for from women who are required to fulfil such cumbersome daily duties and travel several kilometres on foot just to find water? Not to mention the risks associated with the quality of that water, which is often collected in dire conditions and endangers the health and even the lives of the entire family? That is the kind of injustice that so many women are forced to suffer even in today's world — women who are not entitled to the same privileges as men and whose future is blocked by their very status as women.

With the help of their development partners, Governments are making a commitment to support populations throughout their territories and to accelerate mechanisms that will enable universal access to drinking water. But the other solution would be to improve the performance of water companies in order to build their capacity to supply households with clean water, not only in rural areas but also, and above all, in towns, where a significant portion of the population still lives in abject poverty. That is the mission that our organization, a grouping of around a

hundred water and sanitation companies, has pursued since its creation in 1980. For some years, we have been developing programmes and partnerships between water companies because we understand that the best way for a company to improve the way in which it operates is to interact with other, more successful companies. Specifically, I can tell you about a partnership we are currently building in Bamako, Mali. Bamako is a town of almost two million inhabitants that is suffering from a very serious shortage of drinking water. It is common to see women with bowls on their heads, walking from district to district in search of a source of drinking water in order to stock up. One of the reasons for that situation is that the only water company in the country has long been registering very significant losses; that is known in our jargon as “unbilled water”, which drags down operational performance. Indeed, between 2011 and 2012 the Mali Drinking Water Management Corporation (SOMAGEP) registered a marked decrease in overall performance, with a drop in production of 3.3 per cent. Overall losses in the production-sales ratio reached 27.5 million cubic metres (mm³) in 2012. You can understand that such a deficit has an impact on households, which rely, as they always have done, on women to carry out water duties.

That is why the Association africaine de l'eau, through its Water Operators Partnership Africa programme, has facilitated a partnership between SOMAGEP and the National Office for Electricity and Drinking Water of Morocco in order to improve SOMAGEP's performance by reducing the losses associated with unbilled water in Bamako. Currently, the results of that partnership are evident in two areas. Firstly, SOMAGEP created a metrology department and a service to improve output; on the operational level, the company then trained staff to detect and search for leaks. In a few weeks, we will be able to evaluate the impact of the partnership on SOMAGEP's performance and assess how life has been improved for households, and women in particular.

All such initiatives, if encouraged and supported, should enable our continent to make up ground with regard to access to drinking water and proper sanitation. Women will undoubtedly be the main beneficiaries. They will be able to obtain water simply by turning on the tap in their kitchen or bathroom — an action that seems mundane to most of us, but imagine what it represents for millions of women living in insecure parts of our large cities. Imagine what it represents for our young girls who are deprived of a school education and for all those rural women who also aspire to a better life! Furthermore, many of our societies have been trying for several years, and with great success, to increase the number of women in employment. By becoming significant providers of work for female populations, they contribute to the economic and social empowerment of those women.

It is vital to invest in the water and sanitation sectors if we want to build fairer and more equal societies where men and women, boys and girls, can legitimately aspire to greater comfort and well-being. We are therefore making this plea to donors so that they will tackle the issue head-on and direct their efforts towards capacity building among water companies.

The Association africaine de l'eau is prepared to serve as an interface for partnerships that aim to create or revitalize programmes that benefit water and sanitation companies. We have experience and our member companies have expertise that they can share. With adequate support, we will most assuredly succeed in helping a great many households and alleviating the suffering of women

caused by the lack of accessible water, thus contributing to the creation of a fairer, more equal world for men and women.
