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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 World Union of Catholic Women’s Organizations, 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

The World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, which was founded in 1910 and comprises more than 100 member organizations from 66 countries, is grateful for the opportunity to provide comments on the discussions to be held and topics to be addressed at the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

We wish to make clear that the following topics should be included in the presentations for and discussions of the Commission.

Family. As the family is the basic unit of society, there should be an interest in promoting its stability. The family unit is increasingly under threat nearly all over the world, which has many undesirable consequences. The Commission needs to reaffirm the position of the family and to recommend means to secure its stability. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Education. Good-quality education for young people, including girls, must be accessible worldwide and must be comprehensive. The Commission needs to address this topic with openness and honesty. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that everyone has the right to education, that education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages, and that elementary education shall be compulsory.

Gender equality and empowerment of women. When we speak of gender equality, we must be cognizant of the intrinsic differences between men and women and recognize their complementarity. We defend the rights of women to hold title to land, run businesses, obtain an education and run for political office. We deplore cultural practices that harm girls (infanticide, female genital mutilation, child marriage, etc.) and we seek the end of such practices. We defend the concept that all persons, whether male or female, are equal and valuable. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. We object to the hijacking of the terms "gender equality and empowerment of women" by some interest groups that seek to further their own objectionable agendas, such as abortion, by using these terms.

Abortion. Aborting entails taking the life of an unborn human being. Those in favour of this practice speak of the rights of the woman, but who will speak of the rights of the child? We firmly reject the idea that abortion is a human right. The rights of an unborn child are clearly defended in the preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, where it is stated that, as indicated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth. We strongly encourage the Commission to recognize that as much time and respect must be accorded to those who speak against abortion as to those who are in favour of this practice.

Human trafficking. Much more needs to be done to make persons aware of this scourge and to end it. The Commission needs to speak out on this issue and make very clear that this practice will not be tolerated. Work needs to be done to rescue and rehabilitate those persons who have been trafficked. The Universal Declaration

of Human Rights provides that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude and that slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Freedom of religion. All persons must enjoy the freedom to choose and practice the religion of their choice, as long as that practice does not harm others. This right is increasingly coming under attack around the world. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and that this right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Sufficient time needs to be allocated to this delicate and important discussion, which should be held in a transparent manner.

Health. Sufficient time should be given to health topics, particularly those affecting women and girls. These issues should not be relegated to discussion circles and merit full presentations.

Urban women. We have focused heavily in the past on rural women and would now like discussions to turn to the problems and realities of urban women, particularly mothers.

Again, we thank you for this opportunity to express our thoughts about the session and wish you the very best in your work.
