



## **Economic and Social Council**

Distr.: General  
11 November 2014

Original: English

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

#### **Fifty-ninth session**

9-20 March 2015

#### **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 Al-khoei Foundation, 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 Al-khoei Foundation is submitting the present statement to the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-ninth session, focusing on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, to contribute to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda and to address the implementation challenges encountered.

The Foundation is an international charitable organization, founded in 1989 by the late Shia Muslim spiritual leader Ayatollah Al-Khoei, which has been in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 1998. It works at the local, national and international levels for the education and welfare of the Muslim community and initiates many projects that promote the empowerment of women and young people. We have continued our work with women and young girls with the aim of enlightening and educating them through seminars and workshops.

Working with women, the Foundation realizes that women face challenges and difficulties when it comes to achieving a comprehensive education, hampering their growth and development in society. Given that women account for 50 per cent of the world's population, it is imperative that such obstacles be removed so as to allow women to assume positions of responsibility in the economic, social and political spheres. This is not only consistent with basic human rights, but also fosters economic development and growth.

## **What the Millennium Development Goals should work towards**

The Foundation would like to take this opportunity to focus on the rights of women and children in post-conflict zones. This includes promoting gender equality and empowering women in war-torn regions where internally displaced women and children are forced to survive in refugee camps.

The Foundation takes pride in its continuous work of educating women and young children by providing high-quality education around the world. We administer schools for children in London, New York, Montreal (Canada) and Pakistan and also run a number of other educational programmes in the Middle East, Paris and Thailand. Our schools follow the national curriculum and focus on instilling a strong moral and ethical foundation in our pupils, as well as promoting respect for all humanity. Worldwide responsibility is taught through engagement with the poor and the disadvantaged in other communities. The Foundation also recognizes the role of teachers in schools as professionals who may be able to recognize signs of abuse in girls and families and to educate them regarding the existence of violence against women and ways to combat this.

We also run various seminars and workshops, in accordance with the requirements of the Millennium Development Goals, and focus on the empowerment of women through global projects relating to women and children, such as a project for widows and orphans. The Foundation has observed that many neglected women and children are severely affected by poverty in post-conflict zones.

The Foundation has seen what has happened to internally displaced women and children in Iraq. Women and children have been greatly affected by constant political insecurity and terrorism. Children have been denied their rights to primary

and secondary education, while women have lost the security of having a home and a stable financial income. Women have found it harder to enter the job market and earn a basic living and are deprived of access to clean water, sanitation and health care.

It is an unfortunate reality that the number of refugees and internally displaced persons is growing at an uncontrollable rate. None of the indicators for the third Millennium Development Goal actually measures the development and disposition of women in such insecure environments. The Foundation believes that addressing the issue of women and children in war-torn areas through grass-roots projects is crucial in eliminating poverty and achieving sustainable development in those regions. The Foundation strongly believes that conflict and violence have been barriers to achieving the Goals for women and girls.

### **Shortcomings of the Goals**

The Foundation welcomes the achievements and success of the Goals, specifically Goal 3, on empowering women. However, we believe that greater results could have been achieved if the following points had been addressed:

(a) The Goals have not taken violence against women as their priority. Violence against women is considered a crisis in almost every region of the globe, including Europe, the Americas, the Middle East and Africa;

(b) Resources have not been distributed equally to women, primarily because the indicators are not heavily dependent on gender, but rather on statistics indirectly relating to gender;

(c) The accountability mechanisms are weak, allowing room for underresourced and ill-prepared organizations to deal with the issue of women lightly;

(d) The Goals do not work with men to address and remove any stereotypes of women that they may have. When addressing gender issues, both sexes need to be consulted.

The Foundation hopes that these points will be taken into consideration for the post-2015 period. While the current goals and indicators are vital for change, we think that the post-2015 goals should be more qualitative and address the root causes of the disadvantages that women face.

### **Our work towards the Goals**

The Foundation has contributed significant resources towards the attainment of Goal 3. We work with community activists and religious leaders on issues relating to family violence and abuse against women by raising awareness about the religious guidelines and legal tools available to deal with violence. In addition, the Foundation provides in-house religious advice and counselling for victims, while having centres open every day to assist women who are victims of domestic violence.

The Foundation is taking steps within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to work on the issue of female genital mutilation at the interfaith level by becoming a signatory to the female genital mutilation declaration

for religious groups that condemn the practice of female genital mutilation and states firmly that it is not a religious or religiously condoned practice. Research has shown that female genital mutilation can be eliminated very rapidly if practising communities themselves decide to abandon the practice. The Foundation wants to be part of the solution to this ongoing crisis and urges leaders from all faiths to speak out against this extreme practice and contribute to reducing violence against children.

We are aware that immediate assistance is not the core solution to eradicating violence against women. While we believe that it is vital to assist women who are victims of violence, we also provide training and run awareness campaigns specifically targeting and working with community leaders and schoolteachers.

Through the provision of high-quality education, the Foundation spreads its message of equality and women's empowerment, a message that is in accordance with Islamic principles and teaching. We set high examples by instilling moral and ethical foundations in our pupils and promoting respect for all humanity.

The Foundation operates at the grass-roots level and lobbies and engages in advocacy for women's, children's and religious rights within the United Nations. Most recently, it participated in the sessions of the Human Rights Council, submitting a statement on eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women, which includes eliminating the practice of female genital mutilation and ending forced marriage, actions that are considered to be a grave violation against girls and women.

We firmly believe that our faith can provide us with the tools to deal with this devastating social problem, but also recognize that religion is all too often used as a pretext for undermining the capabilities of women and girls. We echo the sentiments of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, who said, at the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly, in 2013, that "harmful practices inflicted on women or girls can never be justified in the name of religion" and that "countless women are exposed to complex forms of human rights violations based on both religion or belief and their sex".

### **Recommendations**

The Foundation makes the following recommendations, which are based on our work and experience with women and girls:

- (a) We call upon States to work on policies that reduce inequality for women by taking into consideration the environment that they are living in, for example war zones or poverty;
- (b) We call for the implementation of justice in the context of promoting women's rights in Muslim countries and for better resources for the implementation of women's empowerment initiatives at both the governmental and civil society levels;
- (c) We call upon policymakers urgently to formulate national and international policies and action plans for ending violence against women;
- (d) We strongly encourage faith organizations and leaders to address the issue of domestic violence by liaising with women victims and educating society in general;

(e) We recommend that full attention be given to women, not only in underdeveloped countries, but also in industrialized and developed countries, who face inequality in their day-to-day lives;

(f) We encourage all parties to fully use social media as a means of effectively raising awareness of the violence inflicted on women.

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