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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 Reach Out (REO) “N.G.O.”, 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

Thank you for inviting Reach Out Cameroon to present a statement on the occasion of the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Reach Out Cameroon is a leading women's and girls' empowerment organization with 17 years of experience working with women and girls in rural communities to empower them and build their capacity while advocating for the respect of the rights of women and especially the girl child.

The fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women provides a unique opportunity to highlight the progress in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration in line with the actions to be taken. In line with the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Beijing Plan of Action, Reach Out Cameroon adopted an approach of sociopolitical/economic development in her target communities with a focus on gender equality that has given rise to significant concrete steps to:

- Building a culture of sustainable peace amongst women in conflict situations
- Preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls
- Ensuring respect for International Law in order to protect women and girls in particular
- The empowerment and advancement of women both economically and literacy wise

Post-conflict peace building processes present major opportunities for advancing women's rights and gender equality. But a gender perspective needs to be more effectively operationalised in post-conflict situations and peace building processes. They present major opportunities particularly with respect to education, political representation and rights to land, property and inheritance. Reach Outs' experience in post-conflict Bakassi of Cameroon has shown an example in advancing the rights and position of women and girls.

The difficulties women face in post-conflict situations has grown both in number and gravity over the years especially within the African region as HIV/AIDS, poverty, natural disaster and inaccessibility to justice and economic services, natural disaster make their scourge in addition to already degrading sanitary environments more pathetic and deplorable. In transitional recovery, women's increased care-burdens and the gender specific impacts of macro-economic, labour and social protection policies are largely unaddressed. Justice and security sector reforms are powerful entry points to alleviate the status of women in post-conflict situations, more so because the women are usually left outside the picture during the formulation of such policies and reforms. Our laws as well as Human Rights Law condemn rape, sexual torture and all forms of gender based violations against women generally but their enforcement leaves a lot to be desired.

Peacebuilding may well offer the single greatest opportunity to redress gender inequities and injustices of the past while setting new precedents for the future. But these opportunities can be enhanced significantly — or constrained — by how the international community sets its priorities for recovery and uses its resources for peacebuilding.

In promoting the role of women in preventing conflicts by building a culture of sustainable peace through the skills and confidence of women and girls using traditional communication systems in Bakassi of Ndian Division in Cameroon, the experience is that post-conflict violations against women be treated as security imperatives and not 'mere' women's human rights violations or domestic concerns as is always the case. Our civilian police force and military, in charge of peace and order in our post-conflict areas like the Bakassi Peninsular, should have a reinforced women's affairs department, to manage and be accountable for all violations against women. It is important to acknowledge that this is quite a new concept necessitating capacity building and skills transfer to officers sent to such areas.

Ensuring the respect for International Law in order to protect women and girls in particular has also being a strategic point of action by Reach Out Cameroon. Cameroon has ratified several international treaties that include Universal Declaration of Human Rights, protocol for the promotion of Human and Peoples' Rights in Africa, African Charter of Women and People's right, Convention for the Elimination on all Form of Violence against Women and a host of others. The Cameroonian constitution states that these international treaties take precedence over national laws. Most of these treaties set the minimum marriageable age for girls at 18, which is contrary to the constitution of Cameroon. It therefore means that the local laws should be ratified to encompass these international treaties. The personal and family code bill, which had been previously discussed in parliament, was shelved because of lack of political will. With the high prevalence of child marriage in Cameroon, advocacy action is needed for legislation such that women and girl children are protected. The national consultation on child marriage, sexual and reproductive health by Reach Out Cameroon and her partners declared child marriage and its associated practices an aspect of Gender Based Violence with an accompanying "Buea Declaration" to advocate for it to be abolished and legal actions taken against perpetrators.

Preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women

Women have been passive recipients of forms of violence exercised on them due to their low levels of literacy and limited access to information as well as archaic traditional practices that intimidates and prevents them from voicing out the violence perpetrated on them and their children. This has made perpetrators of acts of gender based violence go unnoticed and unpunished. Women have never been bold enough and in some cases find it a taboo to speak out on acts of violence committed on them, keeping it to themselves and dying in silence. Education, information and communication sessions as well as public hearings help reduce women's vulnerability to violence, discrimination and silence. By empowering vulnerable women with knowledge and awareness about human and legal rights it helps reduce their vulnerability to violence, discrimination and silence.

Another strategic action has been to promote people-centred sustainable development, including sustained economic growth through the provision of basic education, lifelong education as well as literacy training. Through the women working for women and changing lives for economic strengthening project, women's leadership capacity in community economic development has been ensured through the provision of seed capital and the exchange of best practices that serves as a spring board for better networking and exchange of information for success. Women of the project areas are empowered economically and their political, social,

economic and health status are improved thus making them able to participate equally and actively in development activities in their respective communities for better local governance.

Developing the fullest potential of girls and women of all ages to ensure their full and equal participation in building a better world requires that underprivileged and marginalized groups are socially integrated and economically empowered. Through the literacy program for Muslim and Mbororo women, Reach Out have improved on the reading and writing skills of this group of women to ensure their full and active participation in community development initiatives.

Developing a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to the challenging task of promoting women's empowerment is important. Reach Out will thus continue to build alliances with likeminded networks to champion and advance the course of humanity.
