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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for
the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Fielding Graduate University, 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

Fielding Graduate University's Worldwide Network for Gender Empowerment works to promote change at many levels: global, societal, organizational, local, and individual. We understand the importance and interdependence of each level and their interconnections in structures and systems that oppress many groups of people, including women.

One area of inquiry for the Worldwide Network for Gender Empowerment is exploring capacity building of women at the individual level. Individual transformation is one important strategy for effectively addressing collective transformation. We have been fortunate to partner with groups who have a great deal of skill in addressing the mind-body connection as a strategy for empowering individuals. Through experiential learning, yoga, thought field therapy, and the promotion of emotional intelligence, for example, we have seen women — and men — develop the strength to combat gender-based violence, to deal with the trauma of armed conflict, and promote the development of children who have been abused, neglected and abandoned.

The 2015 sustainable development goals address health (Sustainable Development Goal #3) but there is little reference to mental health, or the internal psychological-milieu, with the exception of a secondary mention in 3.4:

By 2030, reduce by one-third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being.

We are finding through our research and work that in order to holistically support significant populations of women and girls for whom trauma has been a formative experience, we must first address those layers of internalized trauma a priori to implementing educational strategies (Sustainable Development Goals #4), maternal health initiatives (Sustainable Development Goals #3) and sustainable livelihood development (Sustainable Development Goals #1). In order to effectively and efficiently support gender empowerment (Sustainable Development Goals #5) we must first fully cultivate a core-level of awareness (mindfulness) and acceptance (compassion) in the individual. This awareness and acceptance then provides the fertile ground and framework to create the space to support internal and external investigation, healing and learning. Thus, individuals — through recognition of their inherent biological worthiness, resilience and interconnectivity — begin to see the world around them differently. Worldview transformations in turn foster wider and wider circles of rippling engagement, affecting families, communities, cities and nations.

To understand how trauma can significantly interfere with everyday functioning, even long after the traumatic experience has passed, we must understand our body's "fight or flight" response to threat. The amygdala, a small structure in the brain's limbic system, prepares our bodies to flee, fight, or freeze in the presence of danger by activating brain areas responsible for releasing stress hormones. These stress hormones increase our heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing to provide us with enough energy to escape from or defend against threat. Sometimes we have this reaction even when we are not in the presence of the specific danger, for instance, when we react to a traumatic memory as if we are

reliving the experience. This phenomenon in which one's emotional reaction is disproportionate to or incongruent with threat is known as "amygdala hijack" (Goleman, 1996). Individuals who have experienced trauma can thus become "stuck" in their traumatic experience, emotionally and physiologically reliving their trauma through intrusive flashbacks, memories, and sensations (Van der Kolk, 2014). This "cycle of trauma" can significantly interfere with an individual's psychological well-being, social functioning, and everyday life.

There are unequivocal linkages between the work of the Worldwide Network for Gender Empowerment's scholar-activism, the work of our partnering organizations, and Fielding Graduate University's commitment to broad-scale movements for social and environmental justice through our master's and doctoral programs in clinical and media psychology; infant and early childhood development and adult development; and educational leadership for change. By embedding a cross-cutting, multi-disciplinary approach that seeks to identify and understand the intersectionality of modalities and processes, we create a scaffolding for research and investigation that supports the development across the lifespan.

In closing, our written statement urges the Economic and Social Councils' Commission on the Status of Women to consider the following thematic issues:

- The inclusion of mental health and well-being among the priority strategies for addressing gender empowerment, health, education and poverty.
- Opening a dialogue marked by an awareness of the intersectionality among currently isolated processes, thereby leveraging strengths and building bridges (and deleting redundancies) to address the individual as a whole person within a social and economic context.
- Working to address global transformation through cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and connectivity at the individual level.

Fielding's Worldwide Network for Gender Empowerment is eager to enter into dialogue and collaborative relationships aimed at addressing the sustainable development goals at all levels of research and action.
