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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 The Grail, 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

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The Grail Movement is an international non-profit movement of women, founded in 1921 and present in eighteen countries distributed in all continents. The Grail is committed to building a world of justice and peace. Members are organized in national and international groups that orient and carry out social programmes and projects with the aim to overcome inequalities and empower women. The Grail nurtures a culture of care for all the earth, working for gender and race/ethnic equality and social justice. In Brazil the Grail works in partnership with several entities. One of the main partners is The Feminist National Network for Health, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights, founded in 1991. It is a national network of women with a feminist and anti-racist agenda. The network is composed by non-governmental organizations, feminist activist groups, researchers, academics and health professionals. It participates in Brazilian national and international commissions and public forums with the aim to ensure that women have access to integral health care and that sexual and reproductive rights are guaranteed as basic human rights. The Grail and the Feminist Network have elaborated the present statement in collaboration.

Women have been repeatedly recognized by international organizations as fundamental actors in economic progress and expansion of democracy. The most important international conventions and agreements recognize the need for sustainable development and the essential role of women in this process. In Brazil, however, we have witnessed a progressive loss of women's rights, leading to increasing exclusion of women from the political and economic spheres. Current social policies neglect social welfare, allowing for the continuation of inequality and deepening the extreme vulnerability of women, in particular indigenous women, women of colour, women living in traditional communities and in poor inner cities neighbourhoods.

Even though current government in Brazil is considered progressive, most of its political and economic resources favour large construction corporations, mining and hydropower exploitation initiatives, and mega-sporting events. This has perverse effects on society as a whole. A very tangible effect is seen in the current shortages of water in large cities. More neglected and profound effects involve traditional peoples being expelled from their native territories and having no alternative but migrating to larger cities. Cultural traditions are destroyed, individuals face unemployment, precarious housing, poor health care, and limited educational opportunities. In these circumstances, women are the most vulnerable. Particularly for young women and female teenagers, sexual exploitation and prostitution, human trafficking, and involvement with drugs and crime have been increasing. Amidst such hardship, several women with little resources organize themselves and practice sustainable forms of economic activity. These forms of organization should and need to be incorporated into farther-reaching models of sustainable development. However, without significant support of policies and budget allocation, these initiatives end up being only mere survival alternatives for women, their dependents and small groups.

Despite advances observed over the past twenty years in the struggle for prevention of violence against women and girls, Brazilian people now witness

reduction in public budgets and services, as well as conservative setbacks on laws and policy. Recently, the national education directives had to be modified to remove all references to the schools duty to combat discrimination based on gender, diversity and sexual orientation. Conservative, Christian right-wing politicians and activists argued that such references would endanger the heterosexual family model and were thus a threat to society. The directives text cuts were implemented at the expense of respect for basic human dignity of violence victims, especially lesbian, cisgender and transsexual women. Not accidentally, expansion of political power of religious fundamentalists concurs with increasing exclusion of women from public spaces. Fewer and fewer women have managed to occupy power positions in the legislature.

Relatedly, the field of health, sexual and reproductive rights, reversals have also taken place. For example, ordinance No. 415, from the Ministry of Health of Brazil has been repealed. The ordinance was a directive to public health services to ensure women's access to abortion in those cases already allowed in Brazilian law: pregnancy due to rape, anencephalic fetuses and risk of death due to pregnancy. Because of such limited reproductive rights, one of the main causes of maternal mortality in Brazil is unsafe abortion. Once again, poor women and women of colour are at greater risk. Other decisive factors affecting high and unacceptable mortality rates among women include inadequate services of prenatal care as well as more general health services in rural and remote areas. These structural and budgetary problems are intensified in face of the inflated HIV/AIDS incidence among women and female teenagers.

Comprehensive healthcare for women can only be guaranteed with active engagement of women's rights groups. Advances in Brazilian health care have been seen due to activism of these groups, but is still limited in scope. Focus is still considerably restricted to maternity rights and services. Other issues related to sexual and reproductive rights, including prevention of obstetric violence and basic health rights for indigenous women, women of traditional communities and imprisoned women, still need considerable advances.

If civil society loses mechanisms to monitor and influence government activity, its most fragile members suffer further abandonment and exclusion. Democracy and sustainability are processes, not facts. Brazil's women's movements will need to improve its organization and effectivity, because mechanisms for participation of the people in governance are progressively being dismantled. Women's public forums and councils are fragile at the moment. The Secretariat of Policies for Women, that used to have the status of a Ministry, has been dissolved and absorbed by the more general Ministry of Women, Racial Equality and Human Rights. There is the risk that these changes might weaken the power of each to set out the political agenda.

Conclusion

On the occasion of the Sixtieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, priority theme: women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development, and review theme: the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls (agreed conclusions from the fifty-seventh session), we appeal to the Member States of this session to prioritize actions that

effectively promote inclusion of women in positions of power and ensure alternatives for their economic development. Specific actions should be planned with the aim to guarantee women's social and citizenship rights. Member States should commit to overcoming poverty of women and girls, especially of women of colour, indigenous women, women in rural and inner city communities. We also recommend that human rights organizations implement a more rigorous monitoring of the setbacks and negligence engendered by policies of conservative, fundamentalist governments.
