



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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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 International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Sites of Conscience, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

Women must have trusted platforms to break the silence surrounding injustices done to them and be able to share experiences of violence, if they are to engage in preventing the recurrence of such traumas. Museums and historic sites can provide such spaces and play an essential role in amplifying women's voices, scaffolding their peacebuilding projects, and bringing them together across boundaries to forge more equitable futures.

The International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience is a global network of over 275 such sites in 65 countries. While each member site works in its own context, they all share one mission: to connect past struggles to their contemporary legacies, using the power of history to spark action on today's most pressing issues.

Since its founding in 1999, the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience has prioritized the collecting and sharing of women's stories and experiences. In 2018, it launched the Women of Conscience initiative, which is dedicated to amplifying women's voices, supporting women's projects, and bolstering women's capacity to lead through local, national, and international platforms. Our 20 year history has taught us that lasting change comes only when the stories of victims are heard. As we celebrate the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which identified 12 areas of critical concern for women, including poverty, violence, and education, we must also pause to recognize other avenues for women's advancement – such as self-expression – that may be less tangible, but are just as necessary to living free and fulfilling lives. If women's perspectives are not fully incorporated into history books, public policy, and the contemporaneous narratives of our lives, women will continue to be marginalized.

What follows are key lessons learned about women and engagement from our two decades of working across the globe.

## **Breaking historical silences**

Silence and invisibility are the two pillars that enable gross human rights violations and cultures of impunity. States enforce silence by refusing to engage in truth-telling and reconciliation processes, and foster invisibility by ignoring or marginalizing the victims of violations. Perpetrators of violations, in all eras and in all regions of the world, intentionally instrumentalize these two forces. This has devastating effects on women, who suffer the most from sexual and gender-based violence, including rape, forced marriage, sexual slavery, and domestic violence, which all carry additional social stigmas that make talking about such injustices even more difficult. Breaking the silence on human rights violations and amplifying the voices of victims are thus the most powerful weapons we have in combating violations of human rights and ensuring a peaceful future.

Over the course of our history, the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience has seen that the most effective sites of memory are those that “flip the official narrative” to ensure victims' stories are heard. Our work stands apart from others' as we focus first on individuals and the power of their experiences to shape a different future: victims, survivors, women, families of the missing, youth, all groups who often find themselves stigmatized and excluded from formal channels to engage in rebuilding post-conflict or atrocity, but all of whom are in fact essential to ensuring lasting peace, as all have a story to share about what life is like with freedom, dignity, and respect for human rights.

Sites of Conscience around the world prioritize amplifying experiences of women. For instance, through our Project Support Fund grants Argentine member Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA – the site of the country’s largest clandestine torture centre, where nearly 5,000 people died during the civic-military dictatorship 1976-1983 – developed an exhibit entitled Being Women at ESMA – Revisiting Testimonies, based on testimonies provided by women who had been detained at the site. What surfaces is a portrait of women’s experiences of captivity, many that included sexual humiliation, brutal intimidation, and extreme cruelty. Women were also routinely subjected to other forms of emotional and psychological torture unique to their gender. For instance, more than 500 babies were born to detained women and then stolen by the military. The exhibit ensures that these women survivors are heard, providing them with psychosocial support and building greater empathy and understanding across the country.

In a similar vein, another of our grants supported a project at Kdei Karuna, a memory initiative in Cambodia that was designed to shine a light on forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge. For this project, Kdei Karuna collected oral histories of survivors, victims, and children of forced marriages, and developed a theater piece that was performed at Phnom Trung Bat, an infamous site of detention and execution that now serves as a memorial site. The performances were enhanced with activities that promoted intergenerational dialogue, made visible the trauma of sexual and gender-based violence, and connected history to the ways in which Cambodian women today still face more hurdles than men in accessing justice for violations related to sexual and gender-based violence.

Both programmes broke historical silences and expanded awareness of women’s experiences that are rarely acknowledged, thus enabling society to prevent their recurrence and support women victims.

## **Engaging women in post-conflict settings through holistic approaches**

Since the launch of its Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation in 2014, the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience has worked alongside survivors and activists in conflict and post-conflict settings to collect the overlooked stories of marginalized groups, particularly women, and leverage those stories for personal healing and larger reconciliation efforts in 46 countries, including Sri Lanka, Colombia, Gambia, and South Sudan. Our approach of working in local settings in a holistic manner has proven vital to peacebuilding initiatives. Effective transitional justice is ultimately about trust – trust between citizens and government, as well between various factions within a country or region. When a conflict has broken that trust, sustainable peace cannot be achieved without rebuilding it. Providing a range of platforms for women to articulate their experiences is central to the reestablishment of trusting, peaceful communities.

As a multidisciplinary consortium of nine international organizations, the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation supports survivors in a variety of ways, from equipping local communities to document the stories of survivors, to training them in forensics, to providing psychosocial support, so they can heal and assist others in healing. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. The most effective results arise when individual communities are given models of platforms for engagement to choose from and decide themselves which ones best meet their needs. Women are central to the success of these efforts, because they often serve as channels of trust and reconciliation in communities. Working in support of local organizations, the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation has facilitated a number of

effective women-only and women-focused exchanges in settings including Sri Lanka and Guinea, wherein women are given – and eagerly accept – the opportunity to share their stories and listen to those of others, even across historic racial or ethnic divides in a conflicted community.

### **Amplifying women’s voices**

In post-conflict settings, local communities must be equipped with the skills to not only own but lead their transitional justice efforts after international organizations leave.

Through the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation, the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience is advising the Colombian Truth Commission, which formally began on 29 November 2018, on the best tools for collecting, documenting, and sharing survivors’ stories of the conflict – an integral step to ensuring lasting peace. To facilitate this work, the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation is facilitating complementary truth-telling workshops with marginalized groups in rural parts of the country. While these truth-telling initiatives closely align with the Truth Commission’s mandate, they are flexible enough to speak to the cultural and historical contexts of individual communities. The Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation also helps connect participants and civil society organizations to the Truth Commission, which needs the trust and participation of civil society organizations to incorporate survivor testimonies into national narratives and peacebuilding policies. In all Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation projects, survivors lead the process, deciding whether an oral history initiative, an art-therapy technique, a knitting based project, or another methodology is the best means to share their experiences. Only when local communities own the process in this way and have the resources they need can civil society organizations work with national processes to sustain long-lasting peace.