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### **Statement submitted by Afro-European Medical and Research Network, and Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, non-governmental organizations 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

### **Gender based violence – Africa’s shadow Pandemic: Safeguarding the health of Women and Girls in Africa**

25 years after the Beijing Platform of Action was adopted, women all over the world are still being subjected to all forms of harmful traditional practices, discriminations, sexual assault and violations of their human rights. They experience violence in the confines of their home, or outside of it – in the streets, schools, workplace; and in times of peace and during conflicts. It is tragic to note that gender-based violence increased across the continent during the pandemic. Yet these issues remain less prioritised.

A United Nations statistical report of 65 countries showed that more than 250,000 cases of rape or attempted rape are recorded by police annually. In South Africa, a woman is raped every four minutes, and out of the 66,196 rape incidents reported to the police last year, only 4,500 led to convictions. By the end of the first half of 2020, Liberia recorded a 50 per cent increase in gender-based violence, and 27 per cent increase in Central African Republic. In Kenya, 4000 pregnancy cases were reported among school girls purportedly raped by relatives or police officers in a period of about three months following the break-out of COVID-19 in Kenya since March 2020. Across the world, hundreds of women are raped but only a few are reported. This under-reporting results in many rape offenders going free.

Rape and violations of Women’s rights occurs in a variety of situations, either by individual or by gangs. Girls and women are forced into prostitution or sexual slavery by an occupying power during conflict.

There is a litany of these tragic incidences during conflicts. During the Genocide in Rwanda, an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 were rape victims. Rape is a weapon of war, a deliberate weapon of terror and demonstration of power to humiliate and degrade its victims. In conflict areas in some parts of Africa, female victims of rape suffer the triple tragedy of rape, rejection and an unwanted pregnancy and consequences of having a child out of wedlock. Heart-breaking sad stories abound like that of a young woman from a village in East Congo who got pregnant with twins after been raped by three men, had no access to gynaecological and obstetrical care nor any psychosocial support. Instead of receiving any support, this survivor of gang rape was ostracised, stigmatised, blamed and shamed for the gang rape whilst the perpetrators walked away free. She bore the silence of rape.

Covid-19 has not only exposed inequities in the health care systems but has also further worsened gender disparities in our societies, including in the formulation and delivery of health policies protecting women and girls across Africa. As the world celebrates Beijing+25, we owe it to Women and Girls all over the world, and in particular in Africa, to make this decade of Action count in the achievement of Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals and its targets.

The worsening gender disparities is further alarming despite several resolutions, policies and laws to eliminate all forms of violence against women that are now in place. Increasingly women and girls continue to face heightened risks even in humanitarian crises as a result of the systemic violence against them. The greatest challenge is the lack of political will reinforcing the impunity and the gender gap in the implementation of policies to protect women and girls. The patchwork responses to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has glaringly shown how wholly unprepared the world was to ensure safety and protection of women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence.

The deep-rooted belief of inequalities between sexes in many societies is both a cause and consequence of gender-based discrimination. Tolerance of patriarchal customs and traditions reinforces the inequities that continue to manifest in different areas including the low representation of women in leadership. Africa's 'shadow pandemic' will persist as long as there are more men in Government than women, and thus the call for the urgent need to tackle the root causes of gender inequities.

Although legal accountability is crucial to deterring perpetrators, it should be accompanied with measures for normative and societal change. In this endeavour, the legal and judicial system can make a critical difference. Successful implementation of laws reflect society's awareness of violence against women. The ability of laws and the judicial responses to gender-based violence can shape public opinion and sensitize the public. Adopting strong laws and clear concise judicial responses, backed by implementation and services for protection and prevention, is vital to guaranteeing changing social norms, attitudes and practice. Respect for the fundamental rights of women and girls should not be a demand but self-evident.

We therefore urge Member States to urgently mainstream rights-based education and training for all relevant stakeholders, including boys and girls, to understand not only the trajectory but the causal linkage of the root causes of gender inequality and violence against women. Empowerment of women and girls is key to breaking the cycle of discrimination and violence and for the promotion and protection of their human rights, and their right to the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health, including sexual and reproductive health. We call for the enforcement of legislation to protect the human rights of women across life course and safeguard them against of all forms of gender-based discriminations including abuse and loss of dignity.

We call for the implementation of measures designed to put an end to discriminatory stereotypical attitudes and behaviours that have direct implications for ongoing rape and the ensuing treatment of women and girls. Such negative stereotypes impede the implementation of legislative and normative frameworks that guarantee gender equality and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex.

There is an urgent need for both legal accountability and the adoption of a rights-based multi-sectorial approach to address discriminatory social and gender norms for long term normative and societal change. There is also a need to incorporate rights-based measures for equal and effective participation of women, across life course, in all areas.

We therefore conclude: Ensuring normative and societal changes is essential to achieving shared gender equality goals.

We must end the silence of rape and any other form of violence against women.  
Thank you

This statement is submitted by:

The Afro European Medical Research Network and the  
Inter African Committee on Traditional Practices  
Affecting the Health of Women and Girls.