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Statement submitted by Women’s Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 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.



Statement

The Women's Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a faith-based international organization with 800,000 members located across four continents in 32 countries, understands that gender violence cuts across all cultural, ethnic, religious, national, international and socio-economic parameters. The membership of the Society includes women in North America, South America, the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia.

We are aware that around the world at least one woman in every three has been beaten, raped, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Violence against women is widespread and a major cause of morbidity and early mortality.

We join with the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women in its ongoing opposition to all forms of violence against women and girls. We are committed to all of the Millennium Development Goals, and our ongoing programmatic agenda reflects the same. However, we are particularly sensitive to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. We are aware of the adverse impact violence has on the sexual, psychological and physical aspects of the lives of women and girls for generations. We are steadfast in our commitment to breaking this cycle that prevents women and girls from realizing their potential.

After 18 years of international agreements and policies, we continue to witness a rising number of women of colour impacted by violence. In the United States of America, Native American women experience the highest rate of violence of any other racial/ethnic group. African-American women experience intimate partner violence at a rate 35 per cent higher than that of Caucasian women, and at about 2.5 times the rate of women of other races combined. In a lifetime, 23.4 per cent of Hispanic/Latina women are victimized by intimate partner violence. The data is even more devastating in Africa and South America.

In the past decade, a rapidly growing worldwide trafficking industry has developed around forced labour and/or sexual exploitation of women. War, displacement, economic and social inequities between and within countries, the demand for low-wage labour and the growing sex trade all work to exacerbate the exploitation of women and girls. The Society acknowledges that violence against women is a major health problem that is often ignored and undocumented.

The Society also recognizes that violence against women includes geographical and culturally specific forms of abuse, such as female genital mutilation, dowry deaths and honour killings, and continues to raise awareness about these and other pervasive acts of violence.

The eradication of gender-specific violence must be approached from a multiplicity of avenues, such as promoting changes in government and public policy and taking action through collaboration with community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, Member States and United Nations agencies and affiliates. The global community is required to ensure fundamental human rights to women. Women and girls must be able to live in a world with equal protection, where they are not subjected to torture, inhumane and degrading treatment. This also requires that we hold all perpetrators accountable for their actions and impose severe consequences when violations occur.

Breaking the cycle

The Society advocates for healthy, well-functioning families where men and women share equal partnerships that allow each gender to express its uniqueness. In a safe and nurturing environment, partners learn to value each other. Boys should not be perceived as superior to girls; boys and girls should be viewed as complementing each other's strengths.

Education is critical for girls as a vehicle for their success in society and should be provided for all girls unhindered. There are 37 million girls who do not attend primary school. More boys attend college than girls in parts of Africa and South Asia. When women and girls are educated they develop a positive self-image and become empowered to change not only their lives but that of their families and communities.

With education comes the prospect of employment and entrepreneurial possibilities that can break the cycle of poverty that many uneducated or undereducated women face. Women and extreme poverty should not be synonymous. Currently only 20 per cent of women in southern Asia, western Asia and western Africa are wage earners.

Impact of natural disasters

Enduring and surviving a natural disaster creates a number of challenging hardships for women. Unfortunately for women, drought, earthquakes, hurricanes and other devastating acts of nature actually lead to an increase in violence against women and girls. Makeshift camps that are designed to meet basic needs of food and shelter often leave women and girls vulnerable to sexual violence and more. In countries like Haiti, violence against women is exacerbated following an earthquake or hurricane, forcing dislocated survivors into camps where they are sleeping and bathing in public places and seeking basic needs in unprotected areas.

The Society and its global ecumenical partners are working to eradicate violence against women and girls locally, nationally and globally. We have heard from women around the world who see the reversal of these strides forward following devastating acts of nature. There is a greater need for protection during times of displacement. Funds raised to help with post-disaster relief must also target efforts to safeguard women and girls. The Society appeals to responders, non-governmental organizations and Member States to include or increase funding for the safety of this marginalized and vulnerable population in all disaster relief plans.

Battered and wounded caregivers

The connection between gender-based violence and the transmission of HIV cannot be ignored. Women who have been physically, sexually, emotionally and mentally abused are highly susceptible to receiving the HIV virus through unprotected, and forced sexual acts. These violent acts are not limited to gang rapes but extend to forced sexual activity with a spouse or mate. The random acts of rape increase substantially during times of devastating disasters, which force women and girls to relocate from the familiarity and safe havens of their towns, cities or villages to makeshift public shelters.

The Society recognizes that, in many instances, women who contract the HIV virus through violent sexual acts must also find the strength to care for family members who are battling HIV/AIDS. Battered and abused women are also often outcasts in their communities and seldom receive much-needed services. We also acknowledge that the same women are most likely to live in poverty with limited or restricted access to health care, which makes it even more difficult to move from a place of brokenness to wholeness.

The Society will engage with Member States and other involved entities that provide services to this segment of the population to address the dual needs of women HIV/AIDS caregivers who are survivors of sexual assault and victims of HIV/AIDS.

Response and resources

There is a general lack of research on gender-specific vulnerability to the impact of major disasters and displacement. Evacuation planning organizations are more often led by men and their activities carried out by men. There is a lack of medical supplies specific to women; feminine hygiene and contraceptives are not a part of disaster relief supplies, nor, in all too many instances is something as simple and basic as female undergarments. Counselling for psychological distress and domestic violence is not provided.

The Society recognizes that a basic function of any disaster relief effort is to protect and serve the most vulnerable. Women and girls sometimes experience disparities in rescue response and resources. In some cultures girls have less value as it relates to extending the family lineage, so the boy is often the first to be spared when making a choice relative to survival. Sometimes girls are sold or exchanged for food and supplies. In these untenable conditions, the husband may abandon his family, or resort to domestic violence because he is unable to cope. In refugee camps the women and girls become prey to violent situations. In the aftermath of disaster events, the needs of women and girls require more research and better accommodation. We believe that funding for further research into the cause and effect on women and girls who have been displaced needs to be appropriated.

Conclusion

The Women's Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church joins with the United Nations, its Member States, affiliated non-governmental organizations and associated agencies as it addresses the social and cultural patterns of conduct and practices that might contribute to the increasing and varied acts of violence against women and girls.

In addition, the Society joins with the global community as it continues to promote equality for women as active and equal partners in the decision-making process at all levels of society.

Further, as giant steps have been taken by the United Nations and Member States to include women in other arenas, we encourage the global relief community to involve more women in the policy and procedure aspect of the work to lend the specific female voice and view as it addresses the needs of evacuees during times of natural disaster, war and other events that might cause displacement.