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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 special session of the General Assembly entitled
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace
for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic
objectives and action in critical areas of concern and
further actions and initiatives**

Statement submitted by Amnesty International, 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

Amnesty International welcomes the theme of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.

This theme is timely because, even though violence against women and girls has been a priority for the United Nations human rights system since the early 1990s, there is continued resistance to its eradication, including disputes about the role of different interpretations of tradition, culture and religion from some States. It is critical that in international forums, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, enough time and resources are dedicated to focusing on progressive and concrete measures to eradicate violence against women and girls.

Interpretations of culture, religion and custom should not be a barrier to eradicating violence

In 1993, the General Assembly affirmed unanimously, in article 4 of its resolution 48/104 on the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, that States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination; and that States should pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating violence against women.

Perceptions or interpretations of traditional values can never be an excuse or justification for violence, or attempts to impair or violate the enjoyment of rights of others. Malala Yusafzai, a 14-year-old Pakistani girl who was shot by the Taliban because she advocated for the right to education for girls, is an important example of how individuals and groups use violence, and seek to justify their actions through interpretations of culture, religion and traditional values. While the outcry about Malala Yusafzai's case has been strong within Pakistan and internationally, many women and girls across all regions of the world are denied their rights — particularly to work and education — through the use of, and threat of, similar violence. Where violence is tolerated because it is seen as an inescapable part of life, families stop women and girls from accessing their rights. States should ensure safe and enabling environments, whether in cities or rural areas, including safe transport for women and girls so they can move freely, participate in their societies and fully exercise their rights.

Traditional values, religion and culture often act as a shield for accountability for crimes of violence, especially where interpretations of traditional values are used to coerce survivors into remaining silent. This is particularly acute when survivors of violence know that they are putting themselves at risk of crimes in the name of so-called "honour" if they report suffering sexual or gender-based violence. Many women and girls who are subjected to marital rape know that there is no point in reporting this crime, as under many legal systems, husbands are deemed to have a right of sexual access to their wives, even when such sexual acts are unwanted, coerced or forced. Cultures of blame affect women and girl survivors of sexual violence in every country, where women and girls are disbelieved, vilified and subjected to demeaning police and prosecution processes.

Freedom of expression about values and traditions in society should be encouraged, and interpretations of traditional values that foster discrimination

should be challenged. Women and girls must be able to have access to their own cultures, traditions and religions, as well as full rights of participation, interpretation and contribution to culture, religion and tradition, not just for its own sake, but also to challenge, modify and discard attitudes which foster and encourage violence and misogyny.

Violence against women is a violation of the right to equality, a fundamental principle of international law

Violence against women and girls was identified as a form of discrimination by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1992. Preventing discrimination and promoting equality are legal obligations on all States, because all States are parties to one or more of the core human rights treaties, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Challenging discrimination begins with comparing the experience of men and women through their own words, assessing how an individual's experience of his or her gender limits or widens an individual's enjoyment of their rights. It has been necessary for the international human rights movement, including the political and treaty-based bodies of the United Nations, to listen to women and girls who have made that assessment and found themselves grossly disadvantaged in comparison with men. Through this simple act of listening and solidarity, the international human rights movement has recognized how gender-based discrimination against women and girls operates and how it leads to gender-based violence. In this regard, women's organizations and human rights defenders have a key role in raising concerns and challenges faced by women, and in proposing ways and best practices to address those issues. States have an obligation to support women human rights defenders and to create an environment conducive to the carrying out of their activities, free from coercion, intimidation or attacks.

Despite the commitment made by the General Assembly in its resolution almost 20 years ago, every State in the world is still far from eradicating violence against women and girls. Progress has been too slow. The fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women is an important opportunity to examine in detail all the appropriate means to eradicate violence against women that have met with success, and to encourage every State to redouble its efforts, through clear, practical, concrete, measurable and time-bound commitments, as required by its legal obligations.

The need for progress in these discussions is great.
