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"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 Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, 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

Throughout the world, women are the foundation of their families and communities. The moment a child is born, a woman takes on the role of nurturer, teacher, protector and caregiver. They are the holders of tradition and all things sacred. Women are central to the progress of the family and have increasingly become active contributors to the global economy. Often, these traditions, roles, practices and cultural identities are then passed on to the girls within a family and community.

However, one practice that cannot be considered cultural is violence.

Gender-based violence prevents women and girls from enjoying their human rights and fundamental freedoms. Millennium Development Goal 3 aims to "eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education". A lack of education creates barriers in achieving gender equality. Gender inequality has proven to impact the success of girls and women in obtaining decent work and political power, and in ending the pattern of violence they endure in their homes and communities.

Violence against women and girls is a worldwide problem that affects women and girls of all ages, ethnicities, nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds. It cuts across lines of income, class and culture. Some forms of violence impact women and girls disproportionately, such as domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and human trafficking. Around the world, social, economic, political and religious forces impact women's human rights in different ways. These violations may include forced and early marriages, female genital mutilation, honour killings, rape and rape as a weapon of war, and female infanticide.

Many times, women are at risk even in their own homes. The constant cycle of violence creates a feeling that women are worth less than the male members of their families and communities. This discriminatory attitude towards women of being "less than" could be learned by their children, continuing negative and destructive belief systems and patterns of behaviours.

Violence against girls in schools, often in the form of sexual violence, harassment and bullying, persists in all countries. It represents a generalized violation of human rights and an obstacle to girls' access, retention and success in the school system. This ultimately impacts and influences girls in the process of making decisions for her future.

There is equally a growing awareness that violence at work is not merely an individual problem but a structural, systemic problem rooted in wider social, economic, organizational and cultural factors. The power imbalance in the workplace and the precarious employment conditions of numerous women increase their risk of being victims of sexual harassment, abuse and rape, which also raises the risk of HIV/AIDS infection. Certain types of work situations increase this threat, such as women who travel for their work or who migrate to find work. Many women are also confronted with insults, threats and other forms of moral harassment in the workplace.

For example, in a small community outside Nairobi, violence against the women and girls, both at home and in the workplace, had become common practice. The women felt powerless and voiceless. One summer, a non-governmental

organization was invited to visit this community and provide skills-development training so the working women could eventually qualify for higher-level work in their places of employment. Throughout the training, the women would be asked questions and very few would speak. When they were split into small groups, arguments would take over the discussions. There was so much anger among this group. And when asked what the cause of the arguments was, regardless of the reason given, the underlying sentiment was that no one trusted anyone else. There was no feeling of unity or support for one another in the training. The women did not see the value of receiving training because none of them believed herself capable of advanced-level work. Then it became clear to the facilitators what the root cause was.

For as long as most of these women could remember, they had experienced violence in one form or another. As children, they were verbally and physically abused by their parents and elders, some even sexually abused. As wives, their husbands beat them or sexually violated them. In the workplace, they endured sexual harassment and verbal abuse. One woman even remarked that her boss had once slapped her for taking the previous day off to care for her sick child. These women did not see their own self-worth. Moreover, this situation also reflected how disempowered and devalued the women felt. They could not find their own voice to put a stop to the violence. Because they had experienced a constant cycle of violence, they were not aware of their own dignity or self-worth, and therefore did not believe they could actively pursue a higher level of work.

This situation of violence in one small community indicated that violence was rooted in many areas: the home, the workplace and the community. The elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls requires a multifaceted approach that requires the active involvement of both men and women.

When women and girls are accorded their rights and afforded equal opportunities in education, health care, employment and political participation, they drive social and economic progress. They lift up themselves, their communities and their countries. But none of these benefits is possible unless girls are able to learn without fear and women are able to have autonomy and decision-making power over their own lives, and those are the very things that violence and the fear of violence take away.

Political and social thinkers have insisted on the need to place the issue of violence on the agenda of social dialogue with employers. By working with employers, violence can be eradicated in the workplace. Action related to the workplace, schools, and even in the home must be part of overall Government plans to tackle discrimination and violence against women and girls.

In addition, there is another aspect that must be considered in the prevention and elimination of violence and also in caring for the survivors. A process that takes a spiritual approach is needed for those who endure the violence, but also for those who inflict the violence; a process where each man and woman has an opportunity and is given space to rediscover their self-worth and dignity, i.e., a process that empowers them. Empowerment does not come from the outside. Empowering is a process of understanding and connecting with one's core value and self-worth, and learning how to use them. Empowerment is not simply a question of strengthening survival skills or externally redressing wrongs; it involves inner growth and development.

Looking back at the small community in Kenya, the training could not help the women because they could not see their own value and therefore they showed no interest in the training. So rather than continue with the training, one of the facilitators put aside the day's agenda and asked one question: "Putting aside your role, title and responsibilities, tell me about yourself." This was not a simple exercise for the women. They were so connected to their roles, responsibilities and titles, and also to how others (i.e., their husbands and male employers) viewed them, that they could not see past that initially. So the facilitator began. She said, "I am caring. I am loving. I like to smile and I like to laugh." Then one of the women spoke up, "I am strong. I am kind." Then another woman said, "I am generous. I like to laugh." And then, one after another, each woman spoke.

Slowly, smiles and even giggles filled the room from all the women, except for one. One woman sat quietly listening with tears filling her eyes. She raised her hand and said, "I wish I were as strong as all of you, but I don't think I could ever be as confident or even happy. I don't want to be unhappy anymore. I just hurt so much, on the inside and outside." And she began to cry. In an instant, the women in the room all leapt to their feet and surrounded her. Each one hugged her. They all cried, together. They told her that just by speaking up today, she has already shown how strong and confident she was. And then they told her that she was not alone and that they loved her.

The facilitator then went on to talk about the women's inner power. She shared what their inner powers were: love, kindness, peace, honesty, dignity, integrity, unity. She also spoke about how they could access their own inner power through tools such as writing, dialogue and meditation. Then the facilitator guided the women through a very brief meditation exercise. The room filled with silence.

Following this exercise, the women all had smiles on their faces. One woman even said she felt like she could breathe for the very first time. The women started to speak about how they needed to bring their husbands and their male employers to the training, not for the skills training, but for a workshop on inner powers. They said that if they could have the workshop at their workplaces and also in their community centres, maybe they could improve their relationships with each other and eventually put an end to all the violence. They wanted the cycle of violence to stop and they wanted their voices to be heard. Finally.

In Costa Rica, a programme was developed for girls between the ages of 11 and 13 who were former commercial sex workers. Programme facilitators would spend several weeks visiting the girls, doing arts and crafts and other activities with them. Over time, the girls began to trust the facilitators and began to share their stories about the abuse they had endured from their families and communities. As one facilitator stated, "It was very hard to see girls [aged 11-13] suffering from this discrimination, poverty and violence."

At first, no one knew whether helping these young girls with their recovery would be a complicated task, or even what the outcome would be. As the facilitators spent time listening to the girls, they discovered what resilience and capacity for survival the girls had. The facilitators' task from that moment on was to support the girls as they discovered their own inner powers, their inner strength. It is difficult to measure the results or success of this programme because the social circumstances and environment the girls live under play an influential role. Some of the girls continued attending school and studying, including one girl who went to beauty

school with the hope of one day owning her own salon. This experience with the girls is a clear example of how people have the capacity, strength and inner power to move forward in their lives, even under the worst circumstances. This strength is non-violent and does not cause any harm. It is the power of the inner spirit.

There is no simple solution for the elimination and prevention of violence against women and girls. Conversation among political, economic, social and religious thinkers and decision makers are necessary. Programmes such as the ones that took place in Kenya and Costa Rica, where a woman's dignity and self-worth are rediscovered, must continue. These programmes demonstrate how strengthening our spiritual attitudes and inner powers can promote gender equality, harmony and peace. Women and girls need the opportunity and space to explore their own inner power, but men also need to be active participants in the conversation for real, sustainable change to occur.

However, the real challenge for both women and men comes in integrating a practice of non-violence into one's own daily life. Our deep realization and decision to change is a powerful entry point for ending the pattern of violence and shifting towards an attitude filled with peace, love and dignity. This realization and conscious awareness can afford each of us strength and hope, and can be a powerful tool to help overcome the indignities of violence.

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