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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 Sakyadhita, 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

Since 1987, Buddhist women have created an international network of laywomen and monastics from many different traditions and socioeconomic backgrounds who have worked together to nurture an awareness of gender issues. The right to choose one's own marriage partner, to divorce and to remarry are already the norm in Buddhist societies, but problems of sex trafficking, domestic violence and pernicious patterns of male dominance persist. To address these deficiencies, Sakyadhita is working to increase awareness of gender disparities and the causes of gender inequities through seminars, workshops, national and international conferences and a wide variety of publications in diverse languages. As a result of these efforts, Buddhist women worldwide are honing their skills and insights and promoting research in the areas of gender development and women's empowerment.

These inspiring and cutting-edge programmes are having a profound impact on many of the world's 300 million Buddhist women, a number that may be much larger if Buddhist women in China are included. To date, however, Sakyadhita's innovative efforts have just begun to trickle into the mainstream of Buddhist societies, even into Buddhist studies programmes around the world. For example, the Emory-Tibet science initiative, a programme to expand the horizons of knowledge for Tibetan monastics, which has been operating for six years at Emory University in Atlanta, United States of America, has only offered these opportunities to monks, not nuns. Although the university's courageous leadership and bold vision of transformation through knowledge is praiseworthy, the fact that women have not been included in a programme designed to relieve suffering around the world is a major oversight. For over 2,500 years, Buddhists have acknowledged the sufferings of living beings and have even particularly acknowledged the sufferings of women, yet Buddhist rhetoric is quite distinct from the lived realities of women in Buddhist societies, who face many inequalities in education, health care and employment.

In 2010, at the conclusion of the eleventh Sakyadhita international conference on Buddhist women, convened in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 2,400 participants at the conference passed a resolution to support the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls, especially to promote gender equality and empower women. The provisions of this resolution were:

- (a) To strengthen the Sakyadhita alliance of Buddhist women and help unite Buddhist women around the world to work for peace, harmony and social justice;
- (b) To promote education, both religious and secular, among Buddhist women;
- (c) To work for recognition of the Bhikshuni Sangha (full religious rights for women) throughout the world;
- (d) To work for the abolishment of trafficking in girls and women throughout the world;
- (e) To promote gender equity within Buddhism;
- (f) To call upon international communities to assist victims of Agent Orange to improve their lives and assert their rights;

(g) To lend Buddhist women's efforts to fulfil the Millennium Development Goals.

In addition to stressing the importance of greater educational opportunities for girls and women and equal access to full employment and decent work, Sakyadhita works to achieve equal religious rights for girls and women, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The issue of ordination for women has implications for women in Buddhism as a whole, not only because it is an issue of religious rights for women, but also because it signals the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for women in every aspect of society. Over the last 25 years, the struggle for equal religious rights has brought a broad swath of Buddhist women together and helped them to develop solidarity across differences of language, ethnicity, nationality, social class and economic class. Working together across differences of language and culture has energized Buddhist women and raised their awareness about the benefits of equal access to studies, research, practice opportunities, vocational training and language acquisition.

Sakyadhita is currently developing and implementing education programmes for girls and women in many countries, especially needy girls and young women in developing countries, especially in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal and Viet Nam. The development and implementation of these programmes is limited both by a lack of financial support and by a scarcity of qualified teachers and administrators. Although there are many educated and highly qualified Buddhist women in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, the United States and Europe, because of a lack of awareness about the needs and problems faced by girls and women in developing countries, and also because of language differences, efforts to provide teachers, transfer knowledge and translate educational materials are still in the development phase. Most rely on volunteer efforts, owing to a shortage of funding, and are therefore extremely limited in scope and effectiveness.

One of Sakyadhita's main goals therefore is to increase awareness among Buddhist women in developing countries about the challenges faced by girls and women in developing countries and to encourage greater support for a variety of programmes, for example, programmes in education, gender training, conflict resolution skills and research on topics where gender, women and Buddhism intersect. The intersection points are of interest across traditions (e.g., comparative research) and are far broader than women or Buddhism (e.g., human rights, religious fundamentalisms, sex trafficking and substance addiction).

One current effort to increase awareness will be an e-learning course on women in Buddhism that will be offered free of charge by the University of Hamburg, Germany, in 2014. The programme will be a comprehensive research and educational initiative within a cross-disciplinary setting to encourage individual and collaborative scholarship. Within its host institution, the programme will develop academic and community partnerships in countries around the world. The programme will foster joint initiatives between the university and other institutions with relevant expertise, such as the University of San Diego in the United States and the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Thanks to the far-reaching networks among scholars and practitioners that Sakyadhita has fostered over the years, in an effort to reach out to students in economically disadvantaged segments of society, all speakers in the e-learning course have agreed to provide guest lectures in the series without compensation.

The initial e-learning course will be a pilot project in what will hopefully become a comprehensive study programme on women in Buddhism. In this educational initiative, it is envisioned that thematic areas of study will include Buddhist mythology and the feminine, gender and political economy, human rights in Buddhist societies, contemporary women in religious life, Buddhist feminist ethics, gender and religious fundamentalisms, Buddhism and masculinity, gender and Buddhist social ethics and other areas prioritized together with collaborative partners. In addition to engaging academic resources, the e-learning course will incorporate the experience and expertise of women in developing countries and will be available to any students who have access to the Internet. The course will help foster both knowledge and transnational networks among international scholars, practitioners, artists, and activists in the increasingly global Buddhist community.

Other Sakyadhita initiatives include outreach programmes on the ground in developing countries. Volunteer teachers and workshop facilitators travel to countries such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal and Viet Nam to facilitate workshops, short-term and long-term educational enrichment programmes, hands-on health-care training, nutrition workshops, literacy programmes and workshops on child maternal health. Further, Sakyadhita intends to expand its efforts to increase awareness to North America and Europe, especially to infuse engaged Buddhism with greater gender awareness.

One way that women are influencing Buddhism is through their interest in monastic practice. The tradition proclaims that men and women have equal opportunities for Buddhist practice but there is much work to be done to implement this in reality. In Buddhist societies, monasteries are the principal sites for Buddhist study and practice. Historically, women have had the right to choose their own marriage partner and have not been forced to marry. Buddhist monasteries have provided a safe environment for women to receive an education and engage in spiritual practice without needing to worry about issues of appearance, sexual attraction or sexual predation. As Buddhism spread throughout Asia, communities of fully ordained monks were established and thrived but communities of nuns were not always established alongside them. A vibrant international movement to institute full ordination for women in all Buddhist societies is now under way. A major breakthrough occurred in 2013, when a full ordination ceremony for nuns was held in Thailand, a country where orthodox views about women's ordination persist. In another breakthrough in 2013, the Department of Religion and Culture in Dharamsala, India, decided that women in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in India and Nepal were eligible to receive the highest academic degree in Buddhist studies and 25 nuns successfully passed the exams. Building on those successes and historical breakthroughs, Sakyadhita feels confident that, given sufficient support and encouragement, conditions will continue to improve for Buddhist women around the world in the coming years.
