



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fifth session

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

**Statement submitted by Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of the Mission, International Association of Charities, International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and Sisters of Charity Federation, 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

As the world responds to the assault of a devastating virus, women and girls globally are simultaneously victimized by the age-old threats of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Would that the fervent race to discover a vaccine against COVID-19 was matched by equal determination to end violence against women and girls. The surge in domestic violence which has accompanied COVID-19, together with multiple forms of danger outside the home, make it fitting that the 65th Commission on the Status of Women focuses its priority theme upon the elimination of violence for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

The Vincentian Family is a coalition of faith-based organizations, including at least five in special consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council, who concentrate upon addressing poverty, and currently, homelessness. The Vincentian Family consists of hundreds of thousands of members internationally, many of whom provide supportive services to women and girls. Aware of the atrocities of violence, the Vincentian Family calls for Member States and all stakeholders to step up action to end violence against women and girls.

Accounts of violence against females are chilling. The fact that women's lives are at stake is evident from an increase in reports of domestic abuse during COVID-19. One asks, "where is humanity?," when reading of a pregnant, naked woman being shot 36 times by uniformed persons. Or a girl being beaten because she eloped. One can only imagine the fear of women and girls threatened with deportation if they report abuse in some locations. That girls are committing suicide because they were victims of gang rape begs the question, "when will the violence stop?" Local, regional, national, and international entities must do more to end these atrocities.

Some cultural practices add to the suffering of women and girls. The World Health Organization states that over 200 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation. Although recent statistics are difficult to find, honour killings number in the thousands. Reports indicate that COVID-19 could result in millions of child marriages. The inability of women to own land in some locations means that even if volunteers wanted to build a refuge for women experiencing domestic violence, they cannot. These examples are contrary to the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which calls for ensuring that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment. They also present a breach of multiple human rights, including the very right to life itself.

COVID-19 is placing tremendous pressures upon women. In the wake of COVID-19, many women are struggling to balance employment and caregiving. Some women in the informal sector are unable to work or are employed in jobs that offer no social protection. Many are experiencing lockdown with an abusive partner, making it challenging to report violence without being overheard. Efforts to keep the peace at home cause additional stress. It can further be difficult to access health care or legal services when many activities require digital devices and internet access. Yet, according to UN Women and the United Nations Development Program, 42 countries have no gender-sensitive measures in response to COVID-19 in place. This is a clarion call for action.

A particularly impacted group during COVID-19 is women and girls without homes. Domestic violence is a major cause of homelessness among women. Yet, there are an insufficient number of refuge facilities to accommodate women and children who have experienced domestic violence. There is also a dearth of safe shelters to accommodate women and girls with disabilities. Women and girls who experienced violence when children or youth stand in need of trauma care, which is not always available. Trained providers are vital in working with women and girls related to

issues of low self-esteem, emotional distress, or substance abuse which can accompany a history of violence.

While on the streets, women and girls are further vulnerable to assaults, theft, physical and sexual abuse, human trafficking, and more. It can also be difficult to escape an abuser searching for spouse or partner who has sought safe shelter. If encountering unaffordable housing or overcrowded accommodations, some women are forced to return to the home in which they experienced abuse. In some curfew situations, youth without homes who cannot comply with lockdown requirements, are chased, rather than helped, by law enforcement. All the while women and girls are experiencing violence and abuse, some countries are seeking to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, a 2014 pact which calls upon nations to take measures to prevent violence against women, introduce legislation which criminalizes such violence, and monitor progress. While countries address COVID-19 related concerns, they cannot turn a blind eye to criminal actions which harm women and girls.

The Vincentian Family Homeless Alliance is addressing homelessness in multiple ways, but in particular through its 13 Houses Program, which focuses upon construction of houses in various countries. The Alliance adapted to COVID-19 through efforts such as providing personal protective equipment, personal hygiene materials, and food to families in need, including households headed by women.

Organizations within the Vincentian Family further run shelters for women and children (in addition to men), provide access to counselling services, and are engaged in programs addressing the needs of children surviving on the streets. In Tanzania, the Daughters of Charity founded the Association for the Termination of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The Association provides education, awareness, and a camp which enables girls to escape the harmful practice.

It is clear that education must be a priority in addressing violence against women and girls. This should begin in schools and focus on creating awareness of all types of violence in interpersonal relationships and how young people can keep themselves safe. Next, there is a vast need of resources for women and girls who experience homelessness, including skills training, education, mental health support, trauma services, addiction treatment, and physical health care.

To ensure that homeless women and girls experience safety, and that violence against them may end, we recommend that Member States:

Heed Secretary General Antonio Guterres' call of January 2020, to make prevention and redress of violence against women and girls a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19 and beyond.

Include the voices of women and girls in planning for ongoing responses to COVID-19 and future crises.

Encourage stronger liaisons and communication between governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations, particularly regarding crises management, so that transitional services in times of crises proceed smoothly.

Provide adequate, accessible, and affordable skilled trauma care for victims of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

Increase funding for counseling services for persons experiencing homelessness, with a focus upon trauma care.

Mandate training for public servants, particularly police, related to addressing trauma experienced by victims of violence, including among persons experiencing homelessness.

Expand the number of family shelters and shelters for women and children only, equipped to provide the complex services needed by women and girls who are victims of abuse.

Include in school curriculum, modules related to respect for women and girls, as well as those which educate youth about healthy relationships and means of avoiding and reporting violence in relationships.

Vigorously prosecute perpetrators of violence against women and girls and establish programs which help rehabilitate abusers.

Call for the eviction of perpetrators from their homes, so that victims have safe shelter.

Develop effective ways, during COVID-19 and other crises, to enable women and girls to report abuse when they are experiencing lockdown.

Promote programs among local community leaders which help educate and change mindsets related to traditional practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, which harm women and girls.

Increase funding for, and construction of, more women's safe shelters which provide accommodations and services to women and girls experiencing disabilities.

Collect disaggregated data related to violence against women and girls so that effective policies and programs may be developed.

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