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### Commission on the Status of Women

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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 Umuada Igbo Nigeria, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### **The Empowerment of Indigenous Women**

Empowerment refers to the process by which people gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives. It is the process by which people increase their assets and attributes and build capacities to gain access, partners, networks and/or a voice, in order to gain control of their lives. In most Nigerian societies including the Igbo society, the practice over the years tends to place the male above the female counterpart. Though Igbo society is not entirely homogenous, as there is diversity in terms of culture, dialect and etiquette across the Igbo nation, most Igbo societies are patriarchal and the male child is considered superior. The patriarchal attitude underpins the subordination of women which manifest in social, political and economic aspects given men in the Igbo societies' dominance over women. This is so because patriarchy represents a set of social relations with a material base that enables men to dominate women. In fact, patriarchy connotes the distribution of power and resources in the family in a manner that men maintain power and control of resources so that women are made to be powerless and dependent. This state of affairs breeds some sort of inequality in the relationship between the men and the women revolving around three basic dimensions including inequality in prestige, inequality in power and inequality in access to or control of resources.

Educational statistics have been used as an indicator of gender inequalities versus women's empowerment in Nigeria. The population census conducted in 1991 by the Federal Government of Nigeria found that 61% (41 million) of Nigerian women population lack Intellectual property. In 1965, 37.75% of the populations in primary schools are girls while only 9% of undergraduates were female. In absolute term there were 138,334 male and 50,652 female students in Nigeria universities during this period. The challenges faced by girls were due to the perception of the society on gender qualities.

It has therefore become essential for Indigenous women of Nigeria to become empowered so as to reduce women vulnerability and dependency in all sphere of life. In addition, a recent policy research report by the World Bank (2001), identifies gender equality both as a development objective in itself, and as a means to promote growth, reduce poverty and promote better governance. The promotion of women's empowerment as a development goal is based on a dual argument: that social justice is an important aspect of human welfare and is intrinsically worth pursuing; and that women's empowerment is a means to other ends. A similar dual rationale for supporting women's empowerment has been articulated in the policy statements put forth at several high level international conferences in the past decade (e.g. the Beijing Platform for Action, the Beijing+5 declaration and resolution, the Cairo Programme of Action, the Millennium Declaration, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). The traditional involvement of Nigerian women in subsistence activities such as farming, essentially means Nigerian women are historically equipped with entrepreneurial innovation, know-how and experience that can be leveraged for inclusive growth and lasting national prosperity. Abuja is banking on accelerated enterprise development from the microlevel upwards to help achieve the United Nations

Millennium Development Goals and its indigenous target of taking the country to the top 20 world economies by 2020. There is little doubt that the success of these objective rests to a large extent on Nigeria's ability to harness the abilities of its indigenous women folk and drive them as engines of durable growth. Nigeria's future growth prospects are therefore irrevocably tied to the status of its women and its ability to adequately leverage their considerable economic potential.

The empowerment of indigenous women requires development of women in term of politics, social reforms and economic strength which will lead to the development of communities and in turn the development of the nation as a whole. Therefore, the way forward in the empowerment of the Nigerian woman is by simply addressing the following:

- Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. The greatest single factor which can incredibly improve the status of women in any society is education. It is indispensable that it enables women not only to gain more knowledge about the world but helps her to get status, positive self-esteem and self-confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face challenges in life. Apparently, it also facilitates them to procure a job and supplement the income of family and achieve social status. Educated women can play an equal role as men in nation building. Therefore, there is no denying the fact that education empowers women. In spite of the forceful intervention by international women groups, feminist critics, constitutional guarantees, protecting laws and sincere efforts by the government at all levels through various schemes and programmes to uplift the plight of women, education and women empowerment is still an enigma for variation of reasons. The 2003 and 2005 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report indicates that literacy among women is only 54% and Nigeria is still at the risk of not achieving the Education for All goals. The growth of women education in the rural areas is still very low. This obviously means that there are still a large number of women folk who are illiterate, weak, backward and exploited.
- Access to public services such as healthcare, water supply and sanitation which are essential prerequisites for development. Women often have more difficulty accessing this services they need and are entitled to.
- Women are often under-represented in public administrations. Government should strive to ensure that women have a real voice in all governance institutions, from the judiciary to the civil service, as well as in the private sector and civil society, so they can participate equally with men in public dialogue and decision making. When women participate in decision-making there are benefits for women, men, children, communities and nations.
- Legal reforms guaranteeing equal rights of women to ownership, property and financial control. In Nigeria, gender inequality when it comes to land and property is intimately related to women's poverty and exclusion. Barriers which prevent women's access to, control and use of land and other productive resources often include inadequate legal standards and/or ineffective implementation at national and local levels, as well as discriminatory cultural attitudes like in the South East where Igbo Culture disinherits females from inheriting their father's/husband's property because the wife cannot produce a

male child. In many communities, gender disparities with regard to land and property are linked to assumptions that men, as heads of households, control and manage land — implicitly reflecting ideas that women are incapable of managing land effectively, that property given to women are “lost to another family” in the event of marriage, divorce or (male) death, and that men will provide for women’s financial security. Women’s access to, use of and control over land and property are essential to ensuring women’s right to equality and to an adequate standard of living. These reforms would ensure that women are able to provide for their day-to-day needs and those of their families, and to weather some of life’s most difficult challenges.

- Social reforms to enforce humane treatment of women and their worthwhile participation in the development of their families and communities.
- Development of special entrepreneurial initiatives that focus on unbiased participation of women in gainful enterprises and make adequate allowances for their socio-cultural, economic and legal constraints.
- Redrawing budgetary allowances and state expenditure outlays to specifically improve gender equality and promote increased participation of women in new and existing entrepreneurial activities.
- Enhanced collaboration between women and financial, policy and aid agencies through innovative models that takes their lack of formal training and business expertise into account.
- Improved communication and cooperation between women entrepreneurs across related sectors to assist creation of resource pools and sharing of expertise and technical support.
- Improved accountability on women’s issues at both state and federal levels through objective assessment of official programmes.

They do outline in broad strokes the efforts necessary to successfully empower and include Indigenous women in the process of sustainable growth. Despite their past and present condition, Nigerian women hold the key to the nation’s long-term prosperity.

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