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Statement submitted by Baha’i International Community, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Beyond Mere Economics: A Moral Inquiry into the Roots of Empowerment

Young women from tribal villages in the hill country of Thailand participate in a program that, in addition to furthering their own development, helps them to better accompany the rising generations in improving some aspect of their local community's conditions. Motivated by the contribution they are making, many choose to take jobs in their home villages during holiday breaks, rather than seeking higher-paid employment in more distant cities, so that they can continue supporting the development of their communities.

Women in rural villages in the Central African Republic are assisted to establish informal classes for the moral and spiritual education of young people in their immediate vicinity. As they gain experience and confidence, they begin mentoring other teachers who are newer to the process. In time, they convene gatherings to consult with community members about their aspirations for the village's youngest members, and together establish a community-supported school. At one or other point in this process these women might begin receiving material assistance in support of their efforts. At every point they gain capacity, build confidence, and impact their community.

In vignettes such as these can be found a conception of empowerment that includes, yet transcends, increased economic activity. Women and girls cannot, of course, make their full contribution to society when barred from owning the land they work, or when social norms make them dependent on male relatives to participate in the economy. But the path from doubt to self-confidence, from silence to voice, from passivity to action, cannot be understood only in terms of entering the labour market or integrating into a global production chain of one kind or another. The development of capacity must concern itself with all aspects of human existence — economic as well as social, intellectual, cultural, spiritual, and moral.

At the root of countless barriers to women and girls assuming their rightful place in society is a refusal to embrace the reality that women and men are equal, and that all human beings are one. When left unexposed to the light of justice and reason, distorted conceptions of reality manifest themselves in patterns of superiority, jealousy, mistrust, and fear. Under such conditions, women and girls are systematically disadvantaged in relation to their male counterparts. Their advancement is then viewed as threatening or demeaning. Their contributions can be overlooked and their perspectives discounted. Notably, this worldview in which advantage for some is understood to come at the expense of others affects other many human relationships, including between young and old, native and immigrant, and majority and minority. When the oneness of humankind is rejected, fault lines of exclusion and marginalization seem to appear at every turn.

It need not be so. Evidence of the universality of those qualities that characterize humanity at its noblest — integrity and compassion, excellence and humility, justice and generosity — is abundant for those who wish to find it. There are many examples around the world of instances in which women and men are working shoulder to shoulder as mutually respected partners. One issue before the Commission on the Status of Women, then replication of what is working. How can a culture in which women and men jointly and joyfully contribute to the common good be built in society after society? What is possible to achieve in local communities — not just in a few pilot programs or for the duration of a funding cycle — but indefinitely into the future and all around the world?

Such questions are of critical concern to those working for the empowerment of women. For its part, the worldwide Bahá'í community has been striving to learn about the role that knowledge plays — including its generation, diffusion, and application — in the advancement of society. Decades of experience have shown that when growing numbers of women and men, young and old, of all economic and educational backgrounds, work together to learn about patterns of relationship and corresponding social structures that reflect the fundamental oneness of the human family, real change is possible. The creation of spaces and mechanisms for consultation that draws on the experience of many and values the knowledge that each has to offer at any given point opens pathways for universal participation, and is indispensable to processes of enduring social change.

Educational systems, as a whole, should be concerned with building the capacity within a population to trace its own path of development and contribute to the common good. Our experience has shown that real transformation can occur when those sustaining such efforts at the grassroots strive to create an environment in which growing numbers of their friends, family members, neighbours, and acquaintances come to see themselves as active agents of their own development and protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge toward individual and collective progress.

Crucially, the central organizing principle of this educational process is the development of capabilities for service to the community and society. Assisted to undertake increasingly complex acts of service, participants gradually gain the vision, confidence, and skills necessary to begin offering activities and programs to others with less experience than themselves. In this way, a good portion of those who enter the process simply as participants go on to shoulder increasing responsibility for its perpetuation and expansion.

Understanding one's role in society in relation to the progress and development of others has proven to be a powerful source of motivation. For women in rural areas, it has often fuelled a growing sense of being a capable and empowered contributor to the common good. Just as importantly, seeing women taking on roles of increasing responsibility, visibility, and decision-making has assisted — and not infrequently challenged — men and the community, as a whole, to rethink inherited assumptions about social patterns and the roles played by women and men.

Also, notable in the experience of many Bahá'í communities has been the transformative impact on the rising generations who are engaging in service-oriented efforts. Young people tend to be more flexible in their perceptions of what society could and should be, and frequently, it has been among this population that oppressive cultural assumptions about gender roles have first become susceptible to change. Similarly, the power of moral example that young people can bring to bear, the influence they can exert on mature members of their community through selfless and sustained acts of service, should not be underestimated. For instance, a group of middle-schoolers in Vanuatu created a small marine reserve that was so successful in reinvigorating a section of nearby coral reef that not only the adults of their village but two other villages replicated their efforts. Similarly, a youth group in Uganda convened a series of community discussions on the importance of educating the girl child, and subsequently saw the village send its first young woman to college. Examples abound of morally empowered young people exerting an influence that can inspire a whole community to arise in action.

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These examples are intended to highlight certain elements that seem to be central to the empowerment of rural women and girls. Among them:

- a means for delivering high-quality education at the village level, driven by the community itself
- a focus on both the material and spiritual aspects of individual and collective life
- an approach which quickly translates study into acts of service
- consultative spaces to identify and explore cultural values and assumptions

Member States provide for the well-being of their citizens through a variety of means, such as just laws, equitable service provision, promotion of artistic and cultural expression, and others. In all these areas, they have powerful means to provide for the advancement of women and girls. We hope that the above considerations will be helpful in implementing the gender goals and targets of Agenda 2030 and in pursuing the equality of women and men more broadly.
