



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
6 December 2012

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-seventh session

4-15 March 2013

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 Fédération européenne des centres de recherche et d’information sur le sectarisme, 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

In addressing the issue of human rights and dignity in the twenty-first century, we must face the growing need to address the challenge of women and young girls who are victims of violence in the form of repeated sexual abuse, and who suffer in silence. Often the perpetrators of this abuse hide behind authoritarian cults or sect-like organizations that protect them from scrutiny and accountability. According to the Beijing Platform for Action, the human rights of women and the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life at the national, regional and international levels and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on the grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community. It should be kept in mind that this includes freedom from abuse from sect-like organizations that ignore the principles of human dignity.

Our organization and other full-time professionals in the field that we work in meet female and child victims of psychologically and physically damaging cult groups, which exist around the world. We also encounter physical violence and even death, especially in organizations that traffic young girls and use them as sex slaves. We have observed cults that deprive their members of free will by denying them genuinely informed consent. They also use indoctrination methods and environments that deprive access to the outside and create mindsets against using resources that would equip victims to make sound judgements. There are certain factors to be considered when dealing with females in cults, whether they are old or young, but especially when dealing with young girls and children, who are under the legal age of consent. They lack the capacity to protect themselves from abusive and harmful treatment when they are under the custodial authority of older cult members, who protect the cult organizations from legal inquiries.

International news reports and social service agencies have recorded for decades the growing phenomenon of cult groups using psychological and physical violence against women and children. In the twenty-first century we have seen the growth of cults that use girls as sex slaves, and children as soldiers in Africa and for trafficking. The International Criminal Court wants to try the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army for these crimes. Female former members complain of being "brainwashed" while being forced to fight for their cult. One older sect used its female members for prostitution and fundraising. More recently, female former sect members are going public about the childhood sex abuse they suffered in an emotionally and psychologically painful environment, without the protection that a civilized society should provide to minors who cannot protect themselves.

It is important to understand how female cult members are recruited and made vulnerable to this type of influence, which can become a commitment of a lifetime. Societal expectations can cause women to have particular vulnerabilities to cult recruitment and to be more susceptible to abuse within the cult. Academic research that began in the 1990s revealed that up to 70 per cent of cult members were female. Owing to the authoritarian structure of sect-like or cult organizations, abuse of power is a common element in all kinds of cults, whether they be political, lifestyle, self-improvement or religious groups. Dominance of women and girls plays a major role in cults that require submission and full compliance with the group's directives.

Our own research has revealed that women can be more susceptible to recruitment into cults because they offer security and answers in a world where we depict women's roles in a conflicted, inconsistent manner. Cults can become especially compelling for women to the extent that they make an attractive offer of security to people who are conflicted about their career, future, self-image or personal goals. Women who move from highly protected, restricted environments to more open, undefined ones, for example from the countryside to the city, are particularly vulnerable.

Because of these special vulnerabilities, we find — not surprisingly — that a significant number of cult groups tailor their message specifically to women. It is important to observe the treatment of females in the cult. What happens to the females is different from what happens to the males. Sect-like groups generally insist on a greater degree of submission from the female members. The leadership, using psychological manipulation, can cause them to regress to a childlike, dependent and subordinate role.

Within certain cult groups we find that the leader exercises sexual domination and control over the members. Often in such groups, each female member is purportedly afforded a “special” relationship with the leader, and of course that “special” relationship is one that must be kept secret from every other member of the sect — that is, until the women find that they all have had the same “special” relationship with the leader. This involves, again, a tragic elimination of the individual personality and a gender-specific abuse of sexual power.

At the heart of the matter is the lack of respect for the individual. The fact that some women can be vulnerable and that some of them are seekers really reflects an individual situation. It is important to recognize that females experience particular vulnerabilities, which require special care and consideration.

The economic devastation for women who leave many cults is rooted in how money is acquired and distributed by the cult. Virtual and actual slave labour funds various sect organizations, and their leadership receives most of the riches. The most successful cults have acquired billions of tax-free dollars on the backs of women and girls who, when leaving these organizations have meagre or no resources or group retirement benefits. The rank and file members dedicate their entire lives to sacrificing their labour for the cause, without medical coverage in most cases in the United States of America, only to be economically deprived, dependent on society and its social agencies to help them survive on Government resources at taxpayers' expense. We have observed organizations that cause such deprivation of women, especially those who depend on male cult members' resources and have virtually nothing if they do not comply with the sect's directives.

It is important to note that there are numerous female children being neglected, abused and trafficked in the name of religion. Even when allegations of child trafficking have been supported by credible testimony or documentation, standards for necessary action need to be developed. There exist in the United States polygamist sects whose members abuse female minors, including subjecting them to forced marriages and unwanted pregnancies.

The Commission on the Status of Women is in a position to respond and provide equitable guidelines and protection of females who are in destructive cults and those who need support upon leaving. Quality education and appropriate

publications are some of the main tools that can be used to prevent harm to females. Policies for the protection of females against violence, abuse, exploitation and violation of their rights should be applied to cult groups that violate applicable laws. Groups against which such complaints are made should be named and clearly identified and records maintained. There should be an annual report documenting complaints received and actions taken.
