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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 Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace, 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

The purpose of the present statement is to highlight the increased threats to women's security and their ability to realize their full human rights, resulting from the rise of regressive and extremist groups that have been newly empowered in the wake of political transitions in the Arab region and beyond.

The main theme of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women is "Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls". The Women's Learning Partnership believes the theme to be timely, relevant and critical, especially in the light of the recent revolts and ongoing transitions occurring in parts of the world where democracy and full human rights have yet to be realized for women.

Over the past year, Women's Learning Partnership, an international partnership of 20 active, independent women's organizations across the world, which works to strengthen women's leadership and political participation as well as confront violence against women, has been engaged in the creation of various spaces in the Arab region and beyond to ensure that the voices of women are heard, especially in response to increasing manifestations of violence in countries in transition.

Throughout the past year, as a result of a combination of grass-roots work and international engagement, we have noted some critical trends that appear to be setting the clock backward for women. The main trends we have observed are as follows:

(a) The widespread occurrence of uncontrolled violence against women in the public sphere across much of the Arab region. Street harassment, intimidation of women and girls, and outright violent physical and sexual attacks and verbal abuse have become commonplace in many countries, sometimes at the hands of law enforcers;

(b) Mechanisms that were otherwise put in place to offer some kind of protection against domestic violence have become totally non-operational;

(c) After making headway and becoming a public and political issue — particularly as a result of feminist activism inspired by the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) — attention to violence against women appears to have been abandoned as an issue of major concern. Moreover, newly empowered political groups are advancing ideologies and policies that undermine women's rights and choices, such as lifting all forms of restriction on the minimum age of marriage and encouraging female genital mutilation, as well as polygamy;

(d) This is accompanied by a consistent effort to alienate and even intimidate women from being present, visible, and vocal in the public and political spheres. Indeed, women's representation in most post-revolt electoral processes has significantly diminished. This is consistent with the fact that women have been aggressively isolated and kept out of various forms of nation-building processes and mechanisms such as electoral, administrative, and legislative reforms;

(e) Constitutional reforms, a process that could provide opportunities to strengthen human rights, have been used as a weapon to erode the gains that women have made during the past decades. Women were again kept at a safe distance from constitutional commissions and other similar processes. As a result, constitutional

reform processes have moved away from international conventions as their frame of reference and have further cast religion as a unique source of law;

(f) Of considerable added concern is the usage of patriarchal language by political leaders, such as the attempt to frame women as “complementary to men” rather than citizens deserving full, equal rights, as displayed in the latest discussions over the constitutional reforms in Tunisia.

To meet these serious threats to women’s human rights and bodily security, over the past year Women’s Learning Partnership has convened dialogues and exchanges in various parts of the world to facilitate analysis and collective strategizing.

Our main conclusion is that the current trends of increased conservatism, militarization and reliance on religion as a sole source of legislation are becoming global and not necessarily limited to the Arab region. With these trends going unchecked, the risks to women are increasingly coupled with devastating manifestations of violence in the private and public spheres.

Women’s Learning Partnership calls on the United Nations and its States Members to:

- Recognize the increasing violations to the rights of women and increasing manifestations of gender-based violence
- Publicly condemn any State or non-State entity perpetrating or contributing to these forms of violence
- Ensure that international instruments are binding and adhered to and that they provide for sanctions in cases of violation
- Recognize and support the efforts of the women’s movement in denouncing and challenging the combined impact of extremism, militarism and fundamentalism, which is resulting in curbing the human rights of women and girls worldwide.
