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“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 Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights, 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

Rise of suicide among girls in Chitral

Chitral district is the remotest area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Malakand division, bordering with Afghanistan on its north-western side and Dir and Swat on its southern side and touching Wakhan strip on its northern side. The total area of the district is 14,850 km², with an approximate population of 400,000. About 50 per cent of the whole population consists of women, the majority of them working as housewives in remote villages and engaging in subsistence agriculture activities. Literacy rates among women are high compared to the neighbouring district, but the number of job opportunities available to educated girls is very low, as there is no industrial base in the area from which employment opportunities are generated for youth. The educational system is outdated and is not relevant to the job market. Educated youth seek employment in a limited number of positions in the traditional education sector. The irony of fate is that in the developed world the education sector develops the technical labour force for productive sectors of the economy, but in Chitral educated youth are more vulnerable than their illiterate counterparts. Unemployment among educated youth is increasing. Jobless youth will provide the best recruiting ground for terrorist organizations, which are active in the region, as well as in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Joblessness among educated girls has developed as a crucial problem in the area. Every week a case of a suicide of a girl appears in the local newspapers, and this has continued for the past many years. The Government has not taken any measures to control this loss of human life, which has a direct relationship with the economic problems of the affected community. Usually, educated girls, like their illiterate counterparts, participate in such domestic activities as rearing of poultry, kitchen gardening or other work directly or indirectly related to agriculture, and they are not paid in a proper manner. In the job market, no suitable employment opportunity is available for educated girls, and this state of affairs leaves them in perpetual distress and in an uncomfortable situation. With the passage of time, they develop psychological sickness, as the girls realize that they have not fulfilled the expectations of their parents and society. As a result they prefer to commit suicide rather than live under continuous stress.

Another problem with girls in this district is the high number of forced marriages. According to their cultural obligation, parents decide on the destiny of their daughters. When daughters refuse to obey, they become marginalized and often mentally tortured by their parents. Their likes and dislikes do not count in deciding on marriage, which is regarded as a very important decision. The majority of the girls accept forced marriage as a matter of fortune, while some demonstrate resistance and are reprimanded and coerced by their parents. Consequently sensitive girls prefer suicide. Hence, forced marriage is another cause of suicide among women in Chitral.

The third reason for girls in Chitral committing suicide is out-of-district marriages. As industry and other employment and income-generating opportunities are lacking in Chitral, women of the area live in extreme poverty and are mostly misguided by opportunist groups to marry outside the district to obtain a comfortable life. Such marriages are carried out by agents, who collect commissions. After marriage innocent girls find themselves in serious trouble when

their decades-old husbands die and the girls are still very young. After the husbands die, the stepsons eject the girls from their homes and the girls find themselves totally helpless. The girls also feel some sort of shame and uneasiness in returning to their parents' home and facing society, owing to rigid cultural norms. In the Chitrali culture, when any girl returns from her in-laws' home after divorce or the death of her husband, she would not be comfortably accommodated in the society. In such a grave situation, a girl prefers suicide rather than exposing herself to this domestic environment. Out-of-district marriage is also regarded as a cause of rising suicide cases among girls in Chitral.

How to control this menace of suicide among girls presents a big dilemma to be tackled both by members of civil society and Government officials. For many years, Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights has been the only organization tackling this grim situation in Chitral. According to a survey, interviews and case studies, it has been established that rising suicide rates among women result directly from three major causes:

- Joblessness among educated girls in Chitral
- Forced marriages and domestic violence
- Out-of-district marriages

In order to control this menace, the Government and other stakeholders should think about these three reasons and provide sustainable solutions for each of them. The education system should be reformed in such a manner that it could establish a direct link to the job market. General education in the society does not fulfil the market's requirements. Technical and professional education should be provided to youth so that they are able to find employment. The prevention of domestic violence could also help in reducing suicide among educated girls in Chitral. Out-of-district marriages should also be totally controlled by legal means, and in this regard our organization is working through awareness workshops, seminars and other advocacy campaigns so that community members are educated on human rights issues, in order to control out-of-district and forced marriages, which are creating social and cultural problems in the area and resulting in suicide among women in the community. Skill development for girls also helps to reduce unemployment among educated girls in the area. Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights is working on these issues with community members and other partner organizations to address human rights issues faced by women in the community. In particular, free legal aid is being provided to vulnerable women in various cases of inheritance, divorce and domestic violence against women. There are many other issues faced by women in the community, but recently Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights has been working on the specific issue of rising suicide cases among girls in Chitral and wants to address this problem in partnership with development organizations engaged in women's issues. This crucial issue has also been selected by Board members of the organization to be sent to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

Through this statement Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights condemns the attack on Malala Yousafzai and fully supports the cause of the daughters of this region in letter and spirit. All members of Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights and the entire people of Chitral are proud of their daughter Malala Yousafzai and pray for her early recovery and good health. This brave daughter of the soil worked to

espouse the cause of all women in the community amid a serious security threat but still remains resolute in her noble mission of ensuring the right of girls to education in this tumultuous region after exposing herself to a threatening environment. For her courage, bravery and commitment to her mission, Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights salutes her and works hard so that every daughter of the area acts like her. Malakand division is a male-dominated society, where freedom for women to make decisions at the household and community levels is negligible. Under the umbrella of Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights, members are working with full commitment and dedication so that violence against women can be controlled and women are brought into mainstream socioeconomic development.
