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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 Institute of International Social Development, 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

A lack of functional literacy and, above all, legal literacy, comprise the chief challenges that women face today. Lack of awareness of rights and privileges awarded to women are not made available to women at large for ensuring enforcement of such weapons of liberty for a safer and progressive living. The present education system makes women vulnerable to abuse and torture, in which curiosity is aroused through the syllabus with an overdose of information on gender differences and functional roles of gender taught in detail.

While information is provided for pure academic purposes, it converts the students' minds into that of abuse. In today's period of conflict and unhealthy competition among nations, women of the enemy country become a soft target of the winning side to capture, torture, and abuse women of the defeated side. When nations carry out ethnic cleansing, the most tortured and slaughtered by the state-sponsored cleansing are the women of the target clan for persecution. Women are the pivot of any civilization and the origin of humankind. In case any enemy force wants to destroy any civilization, it is the women who are the target of such clans who are dominating a less dominant civilization.

While women have such external enemies, they have internal enemies like ignorance of rights. They have to fight lifelong for this heinous enemy called ignorance. In the ancient Hindu/Sanatani civilization of India, women were made to know martial arts and were fully aware of what could be deemed as abuse. They were made to follow rules that looked like stifling restrictions, but were actually steps to keep women out of danger from abuse. In ancient Indian times, women played an important role in societal decisions. In our epic, Ramayana Queen Kaikeyi directed her husband to send Rama, her stepson, and the eldest son of King Dasarath in exile. The king had to obey her direction. The king had to obey the queen's dictum.

The epic is a representation of the contemporary society during the period it was penned. Indian culture as it came to be known in later years did not keep women within the confinements of narrowness and ignorance, but at the same time, did not make women vulnerable to abuse. The people indulging in abuse of women were always defeated by people who respected women. We can find such examples in large numbers from ancient Indian literary works. In Ramayana, Sita, the wife of Rama was abducted by King Ravana. Rama killed Ravana for abduction of his wife. In another epic, Mahabharat, Queen Draupadi was dragged in Royal Assembly by her wicked cousin brothers-in-law who were greedy to enjoy power and wealth, as there was a fight of power between the children of the original king and the cousins who had no right to the throne. The fierce battle of Kurukshetra was fought, and Draupadi's abusers were killed.

Today, women are abused in workplaces. In every place, women walk on their own after experiencing life and death situations. Sadly, the cases of criminals abusing women have hardly resulted in stiff punishments for the abusers. Women have become vulnerable to abuse more in the present times than in ancient times, due to erosion of moral values from the existing system. None of the abusers are found in the time to ensure punishment. An innocent girl child is not aware of the difference between healthy contact of affection and abuse. Often, a small girl is exposed to abuse due to lack of protest and erosion of value systems coupled with an overdose of information on functions in the syllabus at a time when the mind is adventurous without the flavour of values.

The growing vulnerability of women being soft targets of abusers makes it difficult for the girl child to find ways to exist peacefully and think of progress. To enable actual women's empowerment to happen we need to counter evils of

consumerism and overdose of gender information by ensuring return of a cultured, well-defined value system in the syllabus of the academic system of every nation. This is the greatest impediment against women at large, which needs to be worked on for the uplifting and empowerment of women, and safe upbringing of the girl child. Women must be made functionally literate on common legal codes for protection against abusers and backstabbers.
