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Statement submitted by The Fishermen, 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

Physical and sexual abuse of institutionalized and street children: statistics and recommendations

The Fishermen wishes to draw to the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women to the issue of physical and sexual abuse of abandoned, orphaned and street children: the present statement will focus on females only. Children of both sexes are at risk of abuse, but the incidence is estimated to be five times more likely for females. According to Battered Women's Social Services, up to 50 per cent of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16. Our concern is for the abandoned, orphaned and street girls ranging from infant to 18 years of age, who are at increased risk of abuse owing to a lack of family support and protection, and are perceived as easy targets. It is the mission of The Fishermen to be a voice for these children, to raise awareness of their plight, and to assist in providing the tools necessary to assist in the prevention of violence against them.

The statement will address the following three categories of at-risk children:

- Orphan: a child who has lost both parents either through death or abandonment
- Street: a child residing primarily in the streets of a city without adult supervision or care; may or may not be orphaned
- Foster: a child without parental support and protection, placed with a person or family to be cared for, usually by local welfare services or by court order

As reported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2005, as many as 153 million boys and girls around the world are technically orphaned (having lost one or both parents), of which 13 million are classically orphaned (lost both parents). Eight million live in institutional care. These numbers continue to grow and may reach 400 million by 2015. Studies have found that violence in these residential institutions is six times higher than in foster care, and children are almost four times more likely to experience sexual abuse. In a 2001 report, Human Rights Watch stated that 30 per cent of all severely disabled children living in institutions in the Ukraine died before they reached 18 years of age owing to mistreatment and neglect. They are not alone. Human Rights Watch has also investigated institutions in China, Kenya, Romania and the Russian Federation and uncovered similarly alarming cases of abuse. If their reports are indicative of the plight of orphans worldwide, it can be estimated that at least 20 to 30 per cent of institutionalized children are being physically and/or sexually assaulted. According to our research, mistreatment is largely a result of poor or non-existent screening of new employees, low to no pay, insufficient training, high stress due to overcrowding and inadequate facilities and services, indifferent management and/or administration and ill-defined guidelines on how to handle disciplinary issues.

Street girls may not technically be orphaned, but are at greater risk of abuse and sexual assault since they are unaccountable to anyone and move from shelter to shelter. The exact number of street children is very difficult to measure but is approximately 100 million worldwide. The largest concentrations of street children are found in Latin America, India and Africa. It is estimated that 48.5 per cent of street girls in India have been abused. In Africa, the numbers are much higher. It was reported in Rwanda that 95 per cent of girls had been raped, either by street boys or other members of the community. The numbers for Kenya and the Congo

are similarly staggering. In Guatemala, the number of street girls who fled their families owing to incest and rape was 64 per cent. Even in a country as affluent as the United States of America there are an estimated 1.3 million street children, many of whom are victims of violence and abuse.

The final category is children living in foster care. Foster children, unlike orphans, often have surviving parents, but their families can no longer care for them adequately. Their parents may suffer from extreme poverty, debilitating illnesses or be deemed as being “unfit” or “dangerous.” Although these children have been placed in homes they may still have limited contact with their biological parents. Foster care programmes are the safest of the three at-risk categories, but females in these programmes are still vulnerable to abuse. It is difficult to determine the exact proportion of abuse occurring in foster care; however, several studies conducted in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland indicated a wide range of alleged abuse in foster care, from 3 to 37 per cent. The actual number of cases of abuse may be much higher as these studies do not examine foster care in such high-risk regions as Africa, Latin America and Central Asia.

It must be considered that the above data may be inaccurate and do not reflect the actual extent of abuse among institutionalized females and street girls. Aside from highly variable data from international agencies and irregular investigations of issues regarding orphaned and street children, there is the regrettable issue of the underreporting of cases of physical and sexual abuse, which is a pandemic problem ranging from orphanages to the aid agencies charged with the task of protecting vulnerable children. There is insufficient data to substantiate the number of orphans abused by aid workers or non-governmental organization (NGO) volunteers, as few United Nations agencies and NGOs collect detailed information on the abuse of children by their own personnel and even fewer make this information publicly available. If we took unreported cases into consideration, regardless of NGO involvement, the number of abused children would rise substantially. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that each year 40 million male and female children under the age of 15 are victims of family abuse and neglect serious enough to require medical attention. These astounding numbers do not even take into account the cases of abuse occurring within the orphaned, street and foster child community. Pure speculation on the number of unreported cases of abuse in institutions and foster homes, in addition to the number of abused street children, could increase the WHO estimate of 40 million by up to 20 per cent, raising the number to 48 million. This is a modest estimate. Even if the number was just one, we should not allow incidents of criminal violence against children to occur when we have the ability to prevent it.

The task of preventing abuse of institutionalized and street children is daunting, and there is no perfect or easy solution. However, it is our responsibility to come together and strive to improve their condition. The Fishermen presents the following recommendations:

1. Develop and enforce stricter hiring policies and guidelines for United Nations aid workers and other NGOs which work with the orphan/street girl community. Though it will not eliminate the bulk of possible acts of abuse, it will help reduce the number of predators seeking access to young women under the guise of humanitarianism;

2. The United Nations may take a more active role in the prevention of abuse within the orphanage system by implementing a simple and inexpensive routine inspection of institutions utilizing existing local United Nations resources or NGOs. These inspections would be voluntary — Government and private orphanages would not be obligated to participate — but considering that such inspections may lead to outside assistance from aid agencies they may welcome United Nations observers;

3. United Nations aid workers should be trained how to recognize the early clinical signs and symptoms of physical and sexual abuse, how to detect emotional or behavioural aberrations in the children, and receive some basic training in crisis management. The organization is in the process of creating a handbook entitled “Act” for the United Nations and NGO community, which will help aid workers, health care professionals and social workers identify early signs of physical and sexual abuse. The guide is formatted to be user-friendly with several tables, charts and diagrams. Medical and dental descriptions are clearly explained yet kept simple for non-medical aid workers. A sample chapter will be available on our Economic and Social Council page.

The statistics are staggering and will only grow along with the size and scope of the addressed issues. Though it is beyond our power to lower the number of orphaned and street children, let us work together to reduce the possibility of abuse against them.
