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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third 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 Femmes Afrique Solidarité, International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms and Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, non-governmental organizations 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.

* E/CN.6/2011/1.



Statement*

1. Femmes Afrique Solidarité, the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom have analysed the priority theme of the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century" and consider that the inclusion and participation of women and girls in all aspects of communal life, including education as addressed in this session's theme, remain vital to the creation and maintenance of peace.

2. There is a clear obligation on the part of the international community to ensure that the educational requirements of women and girls are met and it is equally clear that it is taking this issue under serious advisement. In March 2010, the Commission on the Status of Women assessed the progress made in 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action, including the education and training of women and girls. Three months later, in June 2010, the Economic and Social Council chose gender equality and women's empowerment as the theme for its annual ministerial review. The United Nations High-level Plenary Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September of 2010 attempted to further galvanize political will towards commitments made in 2000, which include education and gender equality targets as determined in accordance with Goal 3 of the MDGs.

3. These renewed commitments and affirmations come at a time when 60 per cent of countries have not reached the target of achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005, as set at both the World Education Forum and the Millennium Summit in 2000. Furthermore, the percentage of illiterate women has not changed over the past 20 years: women still represented two thirds of the world's 759 million illiterates in 2008 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics Global Education Digest 2010). In conflict and post-conflict situations, those numbers are likely to be even more skewed to the disadvantage of women and girls, who are relied upon to fulfil a variety of household and economic tasks and are often married and bear children early. Women and girls' educational opportunities are generally less valued, further prejudicing the environment against them. The Inter-Agency Network for Education and Emergencies reports that, in conflict zones, 20 million girls are out of school, and girls account for only 30 per cent of the refugees enrolled in secondary school.

4. The education of girls is often hampered by security, culture and familial burdens. Women and girls in many conflict and post-conflict situations fear for their safety when seeking an education. They are subject to sexual violence, including rape employed as a tactic of war. They are often stigmatized by society, in spite of their victimhood. As a result, girls are less likely to attend classes if their school is located far away, as safety fears outweigh their desire for education. For example, in the difficult security situation of southern Sudan, UNICEF reports that only 37.6 per cent of students today are girls. Many children won't make the long walk to school as they are vulnerable to attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army.

5. Culturally, under-educated women are far less likely to participate in public life. The importance of women's participation in peace processes is reflected in Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1889 (2009), which link women's

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experiences of conflict to their being able to participate in security and peacebuilding. The lack of education and training for girls and women is a self-perpetuating problem for the advancement of the role of women as co-contributors to the development of society at large. Women who are ill-educated/trained are easily excluded from the mechanisms of governance and policymaking, while this exclusion further limits their ability to engage in productive activities in their societies. The problem, both persistent and systemic, requires that the solution be deliberate and sustainable, well beyond the conflict and post-conflict reconstruction stage. Empowerment through education and training is essential to ensure full political and policy participation.

6. It must be noted when addressing the needs of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations for education and training, Governments and international actors alike must be aware that there are distinct obstacles and needs characteristic of women's diverse cultural contexts.

Recommendations for Governments, international actors and civil society organizations

7. There are several barriers that prevent girls from going to school. Although the MDGs have focused on primary school education, there is a need to ensure that this momentum is not lost in the transition to secondary school. Separate, private, and safe girl's sanitation facilities must be provided in schools. Increased security is needed to prevent sexual harassment or violence both at and en route to school. There is a need for curriculum reform and teacher training for higher quality schools to provide a more robust and relevant educational opportunities for girls.

8. The financial burdens that prevent girls from going to school and getting an education need to be alleviated. This can be done by providing scholarships, cash transfers and eliminating user fees; tracking completion and attendance rates; and scaling up investments in girls' enrolment in secondary school.

9. Furthermore, in post-conflict recovery, there is an urgent need to empower women and their enterprise, connecting them with new technologies and enabling them to penetrate the ever-changing markets. The traditional approach tends to focus mainly on re-building infrastructure and often ignores the need to promote and strengthen women-led businesses.

10. There is a need to invest in sexual and reproductive health education. This would help achieve gender equality and women's empowerment and help women ensure a higher standard of hygiene for themselves and their families. Maternal mortality rates will fall, family planning will take place, high adolescent fertility rates will be addressed, and measures to help women living with HIV will be taken.

11. Education and training relevant to labour market demands need to be met with regard to gender gaps in school-to-work transition for youth. It is essential that girls be prepared to enter the marketplace; furthermore, it is integral that women be provided with training and technology, supporting women's enterprise through information as well as continued legislative support for quotas and reservation policies for women and girls. Through these measures, women's involvement in business sectors will be ensured, while increasing women's access to leadership and to decision-making roles.

12. Investments in gender equality must be scaled up and accounted for; this includes institutionalizing gender responsive budgeting as part of public financial management reforms to ensure that financial commitments are commensurate with policy commitments to gender equality. These financial commitments must have a trickle-down effect to increase financial and technical assistance to women's organizations at the local level, in order to promote greater organizational participation in security areas such as security sector reform, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, peacekeeping, and small arms and light weapons control and disarmament. It is important that disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes also focus on mothers of all ages and their children, with special emphasis on meeting educational needs.

13. Governments and the international community must address the security concerns that impede educational access, create trauma and limit opportunities for full participation as adults. It is clear that participation by women in political life is hampered by a lack of education, training and skills as well as by security, cultural constraints and by disproportionate burdens of family and community. The full participation of women cannot happen without education and training, for women and girls. Access to education for adult women must happen through consulting with schools, women's organizations and networks on how to address their security, particularly in relation to environments characterized by gender-based violence. There is a clear and compelling need to conduct adult education and literacy campaigns for women in situations of post-conflict recovery.

14. There is also an urgent need for Member States to reduce military spending and redirect that expenditure to meet human and environmental needs. As the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute notes in the release of its 2010 yearbook, while the financial crisis did not seem to affect military spending, it probably did undermine the willingness and ability of major Governments and multilateral institutions to invest other, non-military resources to address the challenges and instabilities that threaten societies and individuals around the world. Among these challenges is the question of how to provide adequate education and training for women worldwide.

15. It is important that these recommendations be given high consideration in the current global context, where financial and humanitarian crises have resulted in diminished education and training priorities for women and girls due to reductions in international aid and national budgetary funding. However, without adequate access to education and training, there is no way for women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings to break out of the cycle of poverty and insecurity that threatens to envelop their future. It is our duty to affirm the right of women and girls to an education, to training and access to markets, and thereby to a better life. We must act and the time is now.