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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”**

Statement submitted by Medical Women’s International Association, 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

Twenty years have passed since the Fourth World Conference on Women produced the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, in which a commitment was made to mainstream a gender perspective into all United Nations activities, and to develop gender-sensitive initiatives for women's health in particular. Much excellent work has been accomplished since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. Recognizing that most physicians in clinical practice did not understand the concept of gender mainstreaming and its importance to the health of both women and men, the Medical Women's International Association issued the "Training Manual for Gender Mainstreaming in Health" in 2002. Updated in 2013, the Manual is available on the Association's website (www.mwia.net). As gender inequality and lack of empowerment increase the risk of gender-based violence, the Association is currently preparing a training manual on domestic and sexual violence for the use of medical practitioners, as the victims of violence often first seek help from their female physicians.

Since 1995, there has been a shift in approach from "women in development" to "gender and development". The gender approach recognizes that: (a) women and men are different and need to be valued irrespective of their differences; (b) society values what is male over what is female, and if economic and social advancements are to be made, both women and men must work together towards the goal of gender equality; and (c) gender is not just a matter of biological sex, but also encompasses the role society gives an individual by virtue of being female or male. Owing to this inherent power relationship between women and men, strategies on women in development have failed to improve the position of women in society.

It has been well documented that, as part of a gender and development approach to health, the incorporation of a gender perspective into health-care delivery and policy development improves the health of both women and men. Health is a basic human right.

Gender differences play a significant role in the differential in the burden of disease between men and women. Women and men continue to suffer and die as a result of readily preventable causes because there is a lack of awareness of the gender issues involved. As women physicians who bear witness to this human tragedy in our day-to-day work, we feel a compelling sense of duty and responsibility to address the gender-related aspects of health.

Gender mainstreaming addresses gender relations and is not merely a euphemism for "women's issues", as men can also be placed at a disadvantage by their gender roles. It leads to improvement in the fundamental principles of society in order to make men and women equal. Rather than excluding biology, gender mainstreaming also takes accounts of the social and cultural factors that affect power relations between men and women and that either promote or impede health.

Our attitudes influence the way we physicians treat each other and communicate with one another. Once we are aware of gender issues, we can re-examine our attitudes and develop the skills and knowledge needed to ensure that gender equity and equality are achieved in terms of health and health care. Such understanding will make us better physicians.

Of the 12 critical areas of concern set out in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the work of the Medical Women's International Association is focused on women and health, violence against women, and the human rights of women.

Women have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, but rather a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. The enjoyment of this right is vital to women's lives and well-being, and to their ability to participate in all areas of public and private life. However, health and well-being elude the majority of women as a result of inequalities.

Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. Women and girls in all societies are subjected, to a greater or lesser extent, to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture. Because gender cuts across all other social determinants of health, the low social and economic status of women is both a cause and a consequence of violence against women.

Human rights and fundamental freedoms are the birth right of all human beings. The Beijing Platform for Action reaffirms that all human rights — civil, cultural, economic, political and social, including the right to development — are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, as expressed in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights. The Beijing Platform for Action also reaffirms the importance of ensuring the universality, objectivity and non-selectivity of the consideration of human rights issues. The equal rights of men and women are explicitly mentioned in the Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations. Recognition of the importance of the human rights of women is reflected by the fact that more than three quarters of the States Members of the United Nations have become parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In 1994, at the International Conference on Population and Development, the former President of the Medical Women's International Association, Dr. Florence Manguyu, chaired the non-governmental organization forum, which reaffirmed the reproductive rights of women and the right to development.

Despite the passage of 20 years since the holding of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, there is still much to be done to address gender issues and to make men and women equal. Rather than becoming discouraged by the slow pace of change, we must be forever vigilant in ensuring that the small steps develop into a giant step for gender equality for women, which will positively affect women's empowerment and their influence with respect to improving the health of all — both women and men. A human rights approach must always be our basis of action.