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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”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Zonta International, 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

Zonta International, a non-governmental organization that enjoys general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, presents to the participants in the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women the following statement for the consideration of the Commission in its deliberations on the priority theme “Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls”.

The forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls are myriad. They include, but are not limited to, domestic violence, trafficking, female genital mutilation, honour killings and sexual violence committed by those engaged in armed conflicts. In the case of girls, they include the same discrimination as that suffered by women, as well as forced early marriage, child labour and the denial of nutrition and education. Such gender-based violence is essentially a violation of women’s and girls’ human rights. Violence against women and girls is rooted in the long-held belief that women and girls are nothing less than property that can be used and/or disposed of at will.

In the nearly two decades since the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted, little has changed in the realm of prevention, and so elimination seems as unlikely as it was in 1995. Social and cultural norms are repeatedly used as justification for violence against women and girls. If these norms are not entirely aimed at direct violence or discrimination, they influence and support the violence. The Beijing Platform for Action, in its paragraph 124 (a), unmistakably calls for all States to “refrain from invoking any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women”. The Commission and experts in the field have called upon States to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and have recommended that laws be aligned with the objectives set out therein. This presupposes that States will examine their laws and practices in order to exclude any customs or traditions that rationalize violence against women and girls. Yet, these practices and customs continue, resulting in flagrant violations of human rights.

We must look not only to customs and traditions, but also to the rule of law, and to the role of the judiciary and criminal justice systems to enforce the law. For example, in the case of brothel owners who exploit trafficked women and girls, the cost of the fine that is imposed upon them is often a mere fraction of their weekly revenue; they consider it an expense of “doing business”. Much of the reasoning for this assertion is set forth in *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* by Siddharth Kara. When trafficking is no longer lucrative, brothel owners will look to other avenues of revenue, hopefully legal ones. In addition, the law may impose severe prison sentences. As can be concluded from the example above, the rule of law can be a most valuable tool when it is implemented to its fullest extent, always keeping in mind that the laws are adequate.

While the rule of law plays a most important role, when women and girls are unaware of their rights under the law, legislation to protect them becomes ineffective. Women and girls in rural areas are especially vulnerable, as they have been kept out of school and lack the ability to seek justice for the wrongs that have been committed against them. A systematic approach to educating women and girls

about their rights under the law is of the utmost importance as we go forward in beginning to eliminate violence perpetrated against them.

In the case of women and girls who have been sexually harassed and sexually violated in conflict and post-conflict areas, they are often targeted with sexual violence used as a tactic of war in order to dehumanize them and establish an atmosphere of fear. According to Security Council resolution 1820 (2008), which reaffirms Council resolution 1325 (2000), “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide”.

Combatants should be aware of the punishment that will be meted out to them if they undertake to commit such violations of human rights.

The development of a true strategy to begin to prevent and eventually eliminate violence against women and girls should include partnerships that include Member States, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and civil society. These should be organizations, such as Zonta International, that have a history of supporting efforts to improve the status of women, especially in the area of violence against women and girls.

As we approach the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Zonta International calls upon the Commission to endorse and support the following recommendations:

(a) Call upon Member States to endorse a plan to advocate an end to violence against women and girls by raising awareness on a worldwide scale;

(b) Call upon all Member States to implement both the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as well as the Optional Protocol thereto;

(c) Call upon Member States to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child so that girls are protected from discrimination and violence;

(d) Call upon all Member States to stiffen penalties for all violence perpetrated against women and girls and to structure special courts to deal with such violations. These courts should provide free services for survivors of sexual violence and their families;

(e) Call upon all Member States to agree that gender sensitivity training should be mandatory for police so that they may better respond to instances of violence against women and girls. Recruiting women into police forces would also be effective in helping women and girls to enjoy their rights under law and so that their assailants will be punished;

(f) Call upon all Member States to enact legislation calling for elementary and high school education for all children, especially girls, who are often prevented from attaining an education;

(g) Call upon all Member States to require that parties to armed conflict protect women and girls from all forms of violence. Impunity for offenders should not be an option;

(h) Call upon all Member States involved in conflict to mandate that women be included in post-conflict peace talks. Women must have an important place at the table in order to achieve true conflict resolution.

Zonta International offers these recommendations in the hope that this session will truly help to ensure that the promises of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are finally realized.
