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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 Alliance Defending Freedom, Centro de
Estudio y Formación Integral de la Mujer, Mujer para la Mujer
and Vida y Familia de Guadalajara, 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.



Statement

Alliance Defending Freedom: the empowerment of women

Alliance Defending Freedom is a not-for-profit international legal alliance of more than 2,400 lawyers dedicated to the protection of fundamental human rights. It has been involved in over 500 cases before national and international forums, including the supreme courts of Argentina, Honduras, India, Mexico, Peru and the United States of America, as well as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. In addition, the Alliance has provided expert testimony before several parliaments in Europe, the European Parliament and the United States Congress. It has accreditation with the Economic and Social Council, as well as the Organization of American States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Union.

Centro de Estudio y Formación Integral de la Mujer is an organization that promotes respect for values that strengthen the dignity of women, mainly through the organization of conferences, seminars and courses in Mexico and the United States. Vida y Familia de Guadalajara is a private Mexican welfare institution that cares for socioeconomically vulnerable pregnant women and helps them, through education and by building skills, to integrate into society after they have given birth. Mujer para la Mujer is a non-governmental organization that works to promote the fundamental human rights of women, with a focus on improving the lives of rural women of the various indigenous communities in Mexico.

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the historic Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, we call upon Member States at the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to prioritize the immutable human rights of women by focusing in particular on removing the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. Empowering women benefits all of society as it results in faster-growing economies, healthier families and better education, among many other benefits.

We commend the significant progress that has been made towards achieving women's empowerment over the past 20 years. Specifically, we note the well-documented advances in education for the girl child around the globe. Such advances are evident, for example, in Ethiopia, where the percentage of young girls attending school has risen from 20 per cent to 80 per cent since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. We also laud the sharp increases in the number of women serving in political office and the continued increase in laws that protect women against gender-based violence.

As set forth in paragraph 39 of the Platform for Action, "the girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow". In achieving women's empowerment, therefore, it is essential to affirm the immutable rights of the girl child. As stated in the Platform for Action, however, there exists worldwide evidence that discrimination and violence against girls begins at the earliest stages of life and that, in a number of countries, son preference is curtailing the access of girl children to life itself (see para. 38). In several countries where abortion has been legalized, the practice of prenatal sex selection has resulted in a historically unprecedented imbalance in the ratio of men to women. The only plausible explanation for this unnaturally high ratio of men to women is the selective abortion of the girl child.

We call on Member States at the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to give increased attention to understanding and ending the problem of sex-selective abortions. Such abortions represent a grave and overlooked threat to the welfare of women for several reasons.

First, the widespread practice of sex-selective abortions widens the “gap between the existence of rights and their effective enjoyment” (see para. 217 of the Platform for Action). Hundreds of millions of women and girls are demographically missing from certain nations. The selective destruction of girl children on such a massive scale promulgates the notion that men are more valuable than women. If men and women are not viewed as equally valuable, the formal recognition of equal rights for women in the law may not be enough to guarantee the effective enjoyment of those rights. If the girl child is not valuable enough to be brought to term, but instead can be destroyed so that a boy child might take her place, at what point in the life cycle does the girl child attain equal worth with the boy child?

On the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Commission celebrated several vital achievements concerning the empowerment of the girl child, such as an increased global commitment to achieving universal primary education for girls, an increase in the number of Member States adopting legislation addressing the multiple forms of discrimination against girls and a movement towards eliminating forced child marriage. Although girl children have continued to acquire rights during the past five years, girls will only be able to enjoy these advances if they are first given the opportunity to enter this world.

Second, the current epidemic levels of sex-selective abortion may lead to increased violence, especially against women. In areas characterized by an artificially skewed sex ratio, human trafficking for the purpose of sex is abnormally prevalent. Women in such regions face more physical abuse and are subjected to a higher degree of control than women in regions with normal sex ratios. Some scholars have even argued that a disproportionate ratio of men to women plays a crucial role in making violence more prevalent in society in general. Indeed, over the past few decades, as the ratio of male to female births has risen in some communities, the crime rate has almost doubled.

Third, the practice of sex-selective abortion has troubling political and economic ramifications. When there are fewer women in society, there are necessarily fewer female voters and fewer female voices to contribute to political deliberation. Accordingly, it becomes more likely that women’s interests, perspectives and concerns will be overlooked. Similarly, fewer girl children will lead to fewer women participating in the marketplace. Women play crucial economic roles in nations of every type and development level. Artificially skewed sex ratios have the potential to contribute to long-term economic downturns, given that so many countries are facing troubling declines in birth rates, a trend that leads to ageing populations and depleted work forces. When hundreds of millions of women are demographically missing, it may become extremely difficult to correct these low birth rates and avoid the recessions that historically follow demographic decline.

Many countries have made sex-selective abortions illegal, but this step has not been effective in curtailing the practice. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prove that an abortion was carried out because of the sex of the baby. As long as

parents prefer male children and abortions are legal, sex-selective abortions will continue. Therefore, we recommend a multi-pronged effort to combat sex-selective abortions. First, we ask Member States to work with families, educators and those in positions of cultural influence to develop initiatives for studying and altering the preference for male children. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, we call on Member States to enact laws that protect the fundamental right to life of the unborn. It is our position that the only sure way to end sex-selective abortions is to end abortions altogether. The continued performance of abortions is antithetical to the global welfare of women.

We commend the attention given in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to women's health and support all initiatives to provide women, as well as girls, with access to reproductive education and health services. As noted in several recent reports, a devastating number of women and girls die each year as a result of complications during pregnancy and childbirth or after delivery. Even though most of these fatal complications are preventable and treatable, little progress has been made in reducing maternal mortality rates. The solution to high rates of maternal mortality in the developing world is to ensure that every woman has access to quality prenatal care, to increase the number of skilled birth attendants, to strengthen health-care systems and to focus on educating women and alleviating poverty.

Conclusion

We celebrate the progress that has been made during the past 20 years in securing women's welfare and rights. There is still much work to be done, however. One of the greatest threats to the welfare and the rights of women is also one of the subtlest. Publicly visible only in artificially skewed sex ratios, sex-selective abortions are stealing the lives of millions upon millions of girl children and undermining the welfare and rights of women in myriad nations. We call on Member States at the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to take decisive action to end the deeply troubling and increasingly common practice of sex-selective abortions.
