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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 World Union of Small and Medium Enterprises, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Gender status, gender equality, gender issues

In keeping with the theme of the United Nations program to empower women on a global basis, it is imperative that we define certain words upon which the program is built i.e., GENDER. It is important to point out that virtually every time the word gender is used in the title of a program, a conference, an organization or a general cause currently, it is perceived as referring to an issue of which women are the focal point.

There is nothing more important nor is there anything more rudimentary than this fact: global commerce mandates inter-gender contact. Inherent in this statement is the need for a far more significant shift in mind-set by men and women in understanding all parties and the changing nature of business, especially in the Small and Medium Enterprises arena, where enterprise and entrepreneurship often bring a 360° view into place with regards to all parties, male and female alike, as essential to growth and sustainable transformation of economies and social communities. The world is changing not merely due to women becoming a greater part of the picture, but because the very substance of business markets, locally and globally is evolving fast.

Inter-gender collaboration and empowerment go hand in hand ...

The First Imperative: For an exchange — or commerce, if you prefer — of any kind to take place, be it the sale of merchandise, the procurement of a service, up to and including something such as enrolling in college, inter-gender contact will occur and the parties may be made up of any diverse population, male and female being a baseline combination.

The Second Imperative: With the First Imperative as a given, we must all make every effort to interpret, as accurately as possible, what is said and done when inter-gender communication takes place. A transparent interaction between all parties, whether all male, all female or mixed communities, where words and deeds align and genuine contribution is valued, is now more and more the exchange that empowers everyone in the best way to a thriving growth business.

The Third Imperative: Once something is communicated between and/or among individuals of different genders, and within genders, we must know, with a realistic degree of certainty, that we have an accord upon which appropriate action can be taken. Collaboration and inclusion of all parties deemed to be a significant contributor to continued profitable business.

With the global population being split approximately 50/50 with regard to men and women (accurate to within 3 per cent to 5 per cent), across the world and in most countries, and with an increasing number of women entering global commerce continually, we submit that the time to quibble over long debated and divisive issues is over. We must discontinue:

- Defining what women should be doing with their time and with their lives,
- Creating policy (rules/conditions) governing how women should approach and manage a career, an education, domestic choices, public service, etc., and

- Implementing quotas with the goal of achieving the gender balance that every thinking person — man or woman — knows could create the positive change that we would all like to see.

Virtually every hierarchy, from business to education to government that may appear unattainable should not necessarily be made a target simply to change the male/female percentages that exist. There is no panacea for the problem and common sense dictates that there may often be a need for further in-depth discussions on a case-by-case basis. Seldom do across-the-board fixes fix anything for any length of time.

There can be no doubt that, in many instances, the attempt is made to try the problem in the media where charges are made and rebuttals are offered without much substance entering into the fray. Women do require support with regard to getting honest grievances before those with the power to make a difference, and that will continue to be the case for some time to come. But again, such support should lead to positive conversations taking place in an atmosphere of mutual respect and much improved understanding of gender issues — those closely held if nominal biases harboured by both men and women in the workplace.

It is our considered opinion that there is a need to stress that any issues grouped under the gender banner relate to both men and women, and that the empowerment of women cannot be achieved without a consensus that men and women are now indelibly partnering each other in business, in society and in their life journeys. The debates referenced earlier have long since passed their usefulness. It is time to put all false perceptions aside, and to rid ourselves of the bias that takes form when we hear and/or see certain words that trigger it. It is time to realize and to admit what someone once said a few years back; “The problem is not that we don’t understand each other. The problem is ... we fail to understand that we don’t understand.”

Gender equality has not moved forward as it might have done on many issues — be it pay, opportunity, lifestyle, wealth, harassment or discrimination between men and women — because gender sameness has been the focus over the last 6 decades. Quite simply, men and women are not the same, biologically, socially, emotionally or with regard to lifestyle functions or goals. Men and women play different roles, have different functions in society, and have different life paths whether single or in a relationship. They normally have different values, goals and aspirations, and can hold many different perspectives. It is apparent that we all cling tenaciously to our own closely held view of what gender is all about.

Across the world today, women are gaining ground and changing the landscape. The trends are noticeable and measurable but not dramatic enough to place greater numbers of women in the upper echelons of education, business and politics — at least not enough to come closer to the percentage of qualified leaders that their total numbers would mandate.

A focus on a new blueprint may be a viable option, i.e. to expand current parameters to embrace the freedom for women to be at work, work a flex-schedule, run their own businesses or aim for loftier positions in the corporate world if they want. Those options are severely impeded by the current male-dominated business model that the world adopted more than two centuries ago. Where business and enterprise growth was established and has been maintained via this model, a new

structure is needed. We should no longer settle for the status quo simply because it has been in place for so long.

With technological advances and online mobility available to growing numbers of men and women, we see a very different landscape emerging. We believe that now is the time for United Nations initiatives focused on the empowerment of women and true gender equality to review and redefine how women, with and through the understanding and support of the opposite gender, build a mutually beneficial and all-inclusive common-sense approach to promoting, creating and maintaining full gender equality at work and at home.

It is not women or men who need to change so much as the playing field upon which commerce has continued to play the game over the past 200 years. We see the need for a systemic change that not only allows for all genders but that welcomes them instead. There is room for everyone with a desire to get into the game. There is room for all to transform their dreams into reality

We believe that women need men to embrace them as complementary to success rather than as competitors; as partners in business and life, dedicated to jointly building the new business blueprint we are suggesting. They want to work with men to create a new mind-set that removes bias, forge appropriate and effective inter-gender communication while creating mutual value.

The World Union of Small and Medium Enterprises is keenly aware that their members and owners of small and medium enterprises everywhere — men and women alike — welcome ALL to be empowered with a deliverable focus on gender awareness. They actively promote the elimination of gender bias and the adoption of the implementation of a gender intelligence approach to global commerce and, of greater importance, the creation of an all new, inclusive gender dynamic blueprint.
