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Statement submitted by Al-khoei Foundation, 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

The Al-Khoei Foundation is submitting the present statement to the Commission on the Status of Women at its sixtieth session, focusing on the theme of women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development.

The Foundation is an international charitable organization, founded in 1989 by the late Shia Muslim spiritual leader Ayatollah Al-Khoei, which has been in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 1998. It works at the local, national and international levels for the education and welfare of the Muslim community and initiates various projects that promote the empowerment of women and youth. We have continued our work with women and young girls with the aim of enlightening and educating them through seminars and workshops.

Since its inception, the Foundation has been focusing on challenges and difficulties faced by women as they struggle to hamper their growth and development in society. Given that women account for 50 per cent of the world's population, it is imperative that such obstacles be removed so as to allow women to assume positions of responsibility and authority in the economic, social and political spheres. This is not only consistent with basic human rights, but also fosters economic development and growth.

In 2010, the Al-Khoei Foundation launched the Al-Kawthar Project for widows and orphans in Iraq. Al-Kawthar plays an effective role in fighting poverty and supporting the vulnerable orphans and widows with an aim to raise the standard of those living primarily in Southern Iraq including Najaf, Kufa, Hirra, Albu Hidari and Barakiya. Since then the Al-Kawthar has been sponsoring over 600 orphans, whilst looking after 1,000 others excluding 600 widows who are provided with financial care and assistance.

Sustainable Development Goals

Al-Khoei Foundation applauds the United Nations and member states for releasing the Sustainable Development Goals, a more focused and developed version of the previous Millennium Development Goals. The 17 goals are well rounded and balanced between the economic, social and environmental factors and are inclusive of all those in need of international and local aid and support. The Al-Khoei Foundation specifically welcomes Goal 5 which moved a step forward from "promoting" to "achieving" gender equality. Most of the sub targets under Goal 5 are in line with the Foundation's ethos and have been our main focus since its establishment, with specific attention and effort towards eliminating all forms of domestic violence against women. The Al-Khoei Foundation looks forward to working closely with the United Nations and Sustainable Development Goals for 2020-2030.

Al-Khoei Foundation's work towards the Sustainable Development Goals

The Foundation supports the Development Goals and has been working towards them since 1995. The Foundation's ethos of educating women and children goes in line with the Development Goals. We take pride in our continuous work of empowering women and children through high-quality education. Each of the Foundation's offices around the world, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Pakistan, Iraq, France, India and Thailand, administer schools or

educational programmes for women and children. Our education programmes also consist of instilling strong morals and ethics in children and promoting respect for all religious and ethnic backgrounds. By linking our charity work, which focuses on eradicating poverty and empowering the vulnerable economically and socially, to education, we pass down the responsibility to the next generation and teach them to engage with all segments of society.

One of the main obstacles that pose a challenge to empowered women, specifically in the West, is an economic one. The struggles of attaining a fair paid job after graduating that covers adequate childcare and housing is realised by many women in the western society. It is crucial to have economic policies and frameworks that would support career-driven women with children so as to have them independent decision makers in their domestic and economic environment.

The Foundation also strongly believes in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and it does so through interfaith dialogue that bridges the existing gaps between faith communities. It tackles violence and extremism through the medium of dialogue and conversation and collaborating whenever possible in areas of commonality. Furthermore, as part of promoting peace and cohesion, the Al-Khoei Foundation also raises the plight of ethnic and religious minorities at the Human Rights Council sessions. This has proved to build strong ties with other communities and raised better understanding and respect of cultures and religions.

Internally Displaced Persons

After the launch of Al-Kawthar Project for widows and orphans in Iraq, much of our efforts have been directed to supporting widows and orphans financially whilst trying to implement a sustainability framework that would empower widows to be less dependent on aid organizations. The situation in Southern Iraq has been exacerbated by the flux of internally displaced people that arrived from areas occupied by terrorist groups such as Daesh. Since the invasion of Daesh and over the course of their official presence in Iraq, the province of Holy Najaf has had over eighty-five thousand internally displaced individuals, out of which fifty-five thousand are women and fifteen thousand are children.

Given that most of the international aid resources are injected in Northern Iraq, the situation in the South is growing desperately without it. The cultural and religious barriers are restricting government and other independent organizations from gathering accurate statistics and information that would otherwise shed some light on the thousands of internally displaced people in the region. For instance, only 200 cases of internally displaced women who experienced sexual torture by Daesh have been privately recorded. The reality of hardships faced by internally displaced people in Southern Iraq is yet to be realized.

Internally displaced people that have relocated to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala come from all various religious and ethnic backgrounds, including Christians, Yazidis, Sabeans, Faili Kurds, Turkmen, Shabaks and other Sunni and Shia Iraqis. These internally displaced individuals have not been allocated camps, however they have been designated shelter known as “Mawakeb” in the Iraqi Arabic language, a term referring to space that is used for religious commemorations. Mawakebs that are used for the internally displaced people in Southern Iraq are located between the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala which are generally used annually by the public for a period of ten days in the season of “Arbaeen” (the 40th

day in commemoration of the Ashura event). Mawakebs between Najaf and Karbala range from stalls to tents or halls and include very basic utility and infrastructure. The Mawakebs are not equipped to host people for a long period of time especially in the scorching heat of the summer in Iraq. Air conditioners, coolers, fans and refrigerators are essential needs in the summer, which are not available in Mawakebs.

Families have no choice but to share the Mawakebs, restraining their privacy and making it more difficult for them to be independent. In many cases, a Mawakeb would have up to three or four families who separate themselves using curtains. This has led to a spread of scabies which has been a challenge to the local authorities due to the lack of medicine and medical equipment such as sterilizers. The overcrowding of individuals in Mawakebs has also reduced sanitation levels, exposing them to numerous hygiene related diseases.

Furthermore, there is only one accessible hospital for the internally displaced people known as Alhaydaria Hospital that is located by the main road between Najaf and Karbala. The local authorities have tried to meet the medical demands by installing nine medical camps, however this has not been sufficient enough for the growing medical and urgent needs of the internally displaced people. In fact, there has been no regard to mental health yet and no programmes that would deal with mental and psychological issues. There is a record of at least 40 orphans who have lost their parents and in several cases witnessed the beheading of their father and their mother being raped. Addressing the psychological issues of the internally displaced people is quite crucial for it has long-term and irreversible impacts if not treated immediately.

Recommendations:

Al-Kawthar's fieldwork experience in areas at times of conflict has led to many realizations and observations. One of the many includes the lack of an international framework or mechanism that would protect the vulnerable in times of conflict specifically widows and orphans. Unfortunately, the Sustainable Development Goals have not addressed violence against women in war zones. The growth of extremist groups in Africa, Middle East and Eastern Europe have left women and children at risk with very little channels to empower them. There needs to be an international mechanism or protocol which states can adopt that will address economic, social and environmental sustainability of women in conflict and post conflict areas.

With a record breaking 38 million internally displaced people worldwide, we have yet to see a framework or protocol that would empower them economically and socially and aid them in reintegrating in their new settlement and community.

The Al-Khoei Foundation strongly urges the Council to:

- Establish an international protocol that would protect women and children from violence in conflict areas
- Develop a sustainability framework that would empower women, especially widows, to be independent economically and socially in post conflict areas
- Deploy humanitarian strategies aiding the internally displaced people across the country

- Urge Member States to collectively defeat extremist groups and stop its advance in Iraq and Syria
 - Urge Member States to dismantle the social media network of extremist and terrorist groups and other similar organizations, in order to prevent the further spread of extremist ideology
 - Act upon preserving ethnic minorities in Iraq who are one of the oldest existing communities and to promote their identities
 - Demand educational reforms in the Middle East to encourage freedom of religion, plurality, respect to religious traditions and minorities and refraining from using teaching material for preaching hate and discord
 - To implement mechanisms in order to hold non-state actors accountable for their crimes
 - To develop international instruments in finding appropriate mechanisms to protect sacred and heritage sites in Iraq and across the globe
 - We call to promote equal protections of Internally Displaced People and ethnic and religious minorities under the law, and to combat impunity for targeted violence around the world
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