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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace
for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Centre d’accueil et de volontariat pour orphelins, abandonnés et handicapés du Cameroun, 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 promotion of gender equality is for us inseparable from all the efforts made by Cameroon within the international community to foster sustainable and solidarity-based development in countries of the South. Since the 1970s, our country has been a signatory to all the international commitments aimed at achieving greater equality of rights between men and women. This is a question as much of principle, dictated by a concern for justice, as of contributing to economic and social progress.

First of all, the struggle for gender equality is part of the broader framework of promoting human rights, to which our country, faithful to its republican values, attaches the greatest importance. But gender inequalities also mean, for many people, the perpetuation of development inequalities. To invest in strengthening women's capacities, then, is to make a commitment to a sustainable improvement in the economic, social and political situation of developing countries. It is in this respect that equality between men and women is a condition *sine qua non* for achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

On the occasion of the special days commemorating women's action, we believe that Cameroon has fully integrated gender equality into its international cooperation policy. In this connection, we propose the following four complementary objectives:

- to translate its international commitments into real actions in the field, by implementing policies that will contribute to improving the status of women or will help them to participate actively in the debates over ideas, while financing action-research programmes.
- to make gender equality a crosscutting theme in all sectors and at all levels of intervention of our development assistance, by providing coordination tools, training and methodological instruments for mainstreaming the gender approach in all our actions.
- to put in place cooperation programmes specifically geared to strengthening women's capacities or to combating gender inequalities.
- to strengthen collaboration with partners who are concerned about gender issues and have expertise in this area: multilateral organizations, universities, research centres, cooperative networks, and local governments.

To make progress in the area of gender equality and to put gender tools to effective use is an ambition that should mobilize us collectively. We encourage all those involved in these efforts to pursue their commitment.

Women around the world continue to face discrimination in all fields: civil, political, economic, social, etc. In order to meet our countries' demands with regard to human rights, democratic governance and efficiency, cooperation strategies and actions must take this reality fully into account.

Cameroon has subscribed to all the international commitments that, especially since the 1970s, have sought to promote greater social justice and equality of rights between men and women. During that time, there has been a profound evolution in the approach adopted for taking account of women's interests in development assistance. There has been a shift away from interventions focused on women as beneficiaries of assistance projects towards actions in support for policies where

women are treated as prime players in development. This deliberate approach also permits earlier intervention, with respect for and a critical understanding of each context, in order to change the generally unequal social relationships between women and men.

This statement is addressed to public players and to those members of civil society who are involved in international cooperation and solidarity. It has three objectives: to inform about international commitments, recalling the successive stages involved in raising awareness about gender inequalities and the progressive mainstreaming of the gender approach (an approach often poorly understood by Cameroonians); to present an overview of actions taken or under way (without pretending to be exhaustive); and lastly, to share some new initiatives taken by Cameroonian international cooperation and by researchers, NGOs and local governments. This statement constitutes a progress report, as part of a strategic renewal in favour of mainstreaming gender equality objectives in development policies. The intent is to give concrete expression to one of the commitments from the 1995 Beijing Conference, which was to “integrate gender perspectives in legislation, public policies, programmes and projects”. It is to this task, which involves all stakeholders in Cameroonian cooperation, public and nongovernmental, that this work is directed.

The objective of commitments in the area of gender and development

After 60 years of institution building and major conferences at the United Nations, the international community is today equipped with a whole set of international conventions and action plans in favour of gender equality. These achievements constitute points of support for all the efforts made at the international, national and regional levels to protect and reinforce women’s rights.

Equality is now enshrined in the constitutions of most countries, and many discriminatory laws have been withdrawn from the codes governing labour, the family and elections. Progress has been made in the area of education, where there is just as much concern for the success of girl pupils as for that of boys. Great numbers of women have entered the labour market, in the South as well as in the North. Over the last 20 years, women’s life expectancy has increased by 15 to 20 years in developing countries. Rape and other forms of sexual violence committed in conflict zones are at last being recognized as war crimes. Yet despite these advances, today — 50 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed the equality of rights between men and women, and nearly 30 years after the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and more than 10 years after the adoption by all States of the Platform for Action from the Beijing World Conference on Women — we find that progress remains slow and uneven. There is still resistance, and even backsliding. A study by the United Nations General Secretariat published in October 2006 confirmed that the persistence of violence against women is an obstacle to all human progress.

Millions of women are still effectively excluded from the processes of sustainable development and economic globalization. Among the 106 million children who were out of school in 2004, 60% were girls, and of the 860 million illiterate adults, two-thirds are women. There is an enormous gap between laws and actions, between political awareness and changes in mentalities.

Gender inequalities persist in the area of rights and access to resources. In countries of the North as in the South, women are little represented in economic, scientific and political decision-making positions, and violence against women is still all too frequent.

As noted at the beginning of the 1990s by the Nobel Prize Laureate in economics, Amartya Sen, the world is “missing” more than 100 million women and girls. This demographic inequality is due to the fact that millions of female babies are eliminated each year because of their sex, and this aggravates trafficking, forced marriages and the exploitation of girls and women in the sub-region.

Legislation and participation in politics and decision-making

Only 3 out of 192 heads of state are women, and women account for only 15% of parliamentarians on average. More than 30 countries still have laws that discriminate against women. Only 17 countries (including Rwanda, Costa Rica and South Africa) have achieved the objective of having 30% of elected positions filled by women, a proportion considered by the United Nations as the minimum for ensuring that policies reflect the social, economic and cultural values of society as a whole. Women’s share of economic and political decision-making positions remains marginal.
