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"Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for
the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Training for Women Network, 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.

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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

Women have long been recognised as having played a major and visible role in peace movements. Debates relating to innate passivity in women, socialisation processes, differential impact of conflict and coincidental factors are explored. Notions of civil society are also investigated and how women are included in the theory. In particular, it is argued that the participation of women is a key identifier of both binding and bridging social capital. The interaction of civil society with the project of peacebuilding is also analysed, where the involvement of civil associations is a factor in building participative democracy and has a role in bypassing conflict elites which often hold societies along lines of division. Using the investment in women's training as part of Peace and Reconciliation funding in Northern Ireland as an example, it is concluded that the empowerment of women through building their capacity to participate is essential to building social capital and creating the conditions for a lasting, inclusive peace.

Women have been long associated with peace and peacebuilding. Accordingly, the participation of women in peacebuilding efforts has been justified on the basis of justice and equality, the necessities of policy criteria, contributions to economic growth and the strengthening of societal cohesion. However, a direct causal relationship between women as peacemakers, women as essential components of civil society and civil society as a pre-requisite for peacebuilding has not been thoroughly explored. The exploration of this issue requires a methodology that sufficiently represents the viewpoint of women and their experiences of political and social influences. To this end, a methodology that is 'feminist' should be used. The form and even existence of such a methodology is in dispute, so an exploration of the background to the use of such a methodology should first be explored.

A perspective and research methodology that is feminist can thus be utilised to examine the position of women in the area of peacebuilding. This will be examined using theoretical notions of women and peace, women and civil society and civil society and peace. Using this theoretical model, the particular context of how women's development and empowerment in community-based projects in the transition from conflict can be analysed and evaluated. The detailed investigation of generic themes relating the conceptual models to peacebuilding activities at the community level will have applications for inter- and intra-societal conflict in wider contexts where ethnic conflict management or transition for conflict is being attempted.

Notions of civil society have been envisaged in a variety of forms, generally taking the form of non-state activities and relationships between citizens. The concept of social capital has been used to define the strength of civic engagement and cohesion, but again there is little consensus on the measurement of this phenomenon. Historically, notions of citizenship have been formulated in the absence of women, and more recent ideas relating to social capital appear to have ignored gender as a factor or to have accepted gendered norms in their understanding. Uncertain as these concepts remain, they are of critical importance in prevailing attitudes regarding participative democracy, where civil society is expected to be consulted during the course of policy development. Such engagement offers opportunities to women to become more involved in policy-making processes, the majority of people involved in organisations associated with civil society being women. However, this cannot be seen as a substitute for effective

representation on formal political decision-making structures and there would need to be a greater representation of women on the bodies that claim to speak on behalf of civil society to ensure that even this limited contribution to policy development does not exclude the views of half of the population.

Women have been visibly at the forefront of efforts to bring about peace in the international context and in divided societies. While debates around innate pacifism, socialised protection mechanisms and experience-related interest in peace continue, the fact of contributions to peace being weighted towards the female gender is difficult to refute. Furthermore, whether based on a consideration of gender-specific assumptions about qualities of peacemaking, grounds of equality or an acknowledgement that a wealth of untapped resources is being neglected, international notions of peacebuilding include specific reference to a gender element and participation. Women are therefore essential to the formal processes of building peace in areas of conflict.

Developing notions of civil society are subject to disagreement and debate. However, the qualities and definitions of a vibrant civil society accord to the imperative of the participation of women. Like society in general, civil society is gendered, but there are sufficient opportunity spaces for women to organise and influence in ways that are difficult in formal political processes. While there is some tension between what constitutes civil society and the ideals embodied in contemporary feminism, there is scope for women to claim substantial sections of civil society for their advantage. Indeed, the strength and cohesion of civil society depends largely on how women are integrated into its structures and processes. As with formal political and economic structures, the positions of influence and power within civil society remain largely in male hands, but women have a marginal advantage in this field in comparison with the often hostile environment of political institutions.

Theoretical and practical applications of peacebuilding processes in areas of conflict increasingly indicate the meaningful participation of civil society to a greater or lesser extent. This not only recognises the role of civil society in the concept of participative democracy, but also the understanding that, as conflict involves and affects whole societies, the transition from conflict must also do so. In addition, the predominance of conflict elites requires alternative mechanisms to bypass their influence in maintaining lines of division, requiring the multiple channels of communication and participation that exist in civil society to be involved in the peacebuilding process. As women are a defining factor in the understanding of civil society, the participation of women in the project of peacebuilding is a sign that civil society is being meaningfully engaged.

As a group, women are differentially disadvantaged by the processes of conflict in society, women's needs and aspirations being subordinated to the imperatives of competing national identities. This creates a deficit in the capacity for women to participate in society. Structured training and group experiences, tailored to the specific contexts women find themselves in, create the formal qualifications and opportunities for self-improvement and progression needed to facilitate a greater participation in society, the economy and political life, whether formally or through the consultation processes of civil society. In addition, informal processes of empowerment and self-development are crucial to the process of moving beyond a conflict identity. While economic development has been the

primary focus of peacebuilding activities, this can only partially contribute to the development of a more peaceful society. Individuals require the confidence and capacity to engage with different communities and to take on leading roles in structures of leadership in communities and civil society that are not oriented towards a conflict stance.

Empowerment of women in a post-conflict society is a long and difficult process. Women need to travel from a marginalised position during conflict to one of leadership during peacebuilding. This has to take place in the form of equal political representation in institutions, influence in leadership structures in civil society and a recognition of the extensive impact of women's involvement in maintaining communities throughout conflict and in the transition, as well as healing processes during and after conflict. The training of women in the community, particularly in areas most affected by conflict, contributes to the essential framework of promoting peace and creating the conditions for women to become more empowered and assertive in transition from conflict and the formation of a post-conflict society.

Greater investment in these activities creates multiple contributions to the task of building peace. Firstly, the extension of women's participation in employment and entrepreneurship strengthens the economy required for societal stability. Secondly, the economic independence of women contributes to their options for emancipation, which is a pre-requisite for a just and egalitarian society. Thirdly, such training builds women's confidence and capacity to challenge traditional power structures and exert pressure on decision-making processes, leading to a full role in the reconstruction of society.

Finally, the empowerment of women in the community provides greater recognition of the resources available and potential for leadership in civil society in its role in peacebuilding.

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