



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-first session

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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 Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace, 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

In every aspect of her life, a woman's autonomy, freedom, and opportunities are shaped by the degree to which her nation's laws uphold gender equality. Central to social and economic inequalities faced by women in Muslim majority societies are Family Laws, which dictate power relations between spouses, parents and children. At the 61st United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace — a partnership of twenty independent women's rights organizations across the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and South America — aspires to promote awareness, dialogue, and strengthened mobilization around the reform of discriminatory Family Laws that erect barriers to women's economic empowerment.

Nearly every Muslim-majority country adheres to sharia as the basis for its Family Laws. While some legal systems in Muslim-majority societies have evolved beyond traditional interpretations of sharia law, religiously justified discrimination against women remains pervasive in Family Laws, particularly in the area of economic rights. Family Laws and society at large still act within the framework of conservative norms that award men comprehensive control over women's mobility, inheritance and property rights, economic participation and earned income, and decision making in all aspects of life.

The architecture of discriminatory Family Law systems confines women to complete economic dependence on male relatives, opening doors to physical, sexual, and psychological violence against women and children without recourse. For example, a number of Family Law systems deny women the right to gainful employment if they cannot obtain a male relative's consent, and undermine equal property rights for women in divorce. When disastrous financial consequences stipulated by Family Law prevent an abused wife from seeking a divorce, she is subject to unrelenting violence from which she cannot remove herself physically. When a woman cannot find the means to be independent because Family Law prevents her from working, she lives at the mercy of the men who are entitled by Family Law to make every decision for her.

Patriarchal norms in conflict with women's economic independence and equality with men are reinforced by Family Law systems in Muslim-majority societies, particularly in regard to women's labour. Wage inequality and hiring discrimination against women reflects deep-seated gender roles of husbands as sole breadwinners and wives as homemakers, and these roles are clearly prescribed by Family Law. Despite the obligations of men in return for women's domestic labour outlined in the Quran, women's work in the home is devalued or entirely ignored by society and Family Law.

Without the reform of Family Laws from the perspective of gender equality, as well as committed and long-term implementation of these reforms by governments and civil society, women's full economic empowerment will never come to fruition. In general, advocacy for Family Law reform has been driven by legalistic arguments and overshadowed by conservative interpretations of the foundational texts of sharia. At the 61st United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, we will bring to light these different interpretations of Family Law in order to challenge the

basic premise that sharia can be used to justify economic inequality and other forms of violence against women.

Building on what we have already accomplished through our advocacy training on women's leadership and economic empowerment reaching 50 countries, Women's Learning Partnership launched research-based advocacy campaign in conjunction with our activities at the 60th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women to meet the critical need for Family Law reform identified by women in Muslim-majority societies. This project provides the research and processes required to build a support network to all those who experience discrimination and violence justified in the name of religion, and will become a powerful engine for collective advocacy against all forms of violence against women. Its results will encompass more than just changes to legal systems, since it addresses the root cause of social and cultural beliefs that make reform and the actual implementation of progressive laws so challenging. We are also documenting the stories of real women who have had to endure physical and emotional violence in the name of faith and because they lacked economic independence. The findings of our research will be publicly available to support activists working for gender equality in our online Corpus of Laws. In creating this online collection of voices, who, in turn, will become a community of individuals who support one another across nations and cultures, Women's Learning Partnership will foster a powerful coalition of activists and supporters who can mobilize for real cultural change.

Women's Learning Partnership is looking forward to the upcoming 61st United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which will provide a space to discuss and raise awareness of economic inequality imposed on women by discriminatory Family Laws and how traditional interpretations of sharia law catalyse this form of oppression. We call for all member states to adopt the ethos of equal economic rights for women in all national laws, without resort to sharia.

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