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Statement submitted by International Federation for Family Development, 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

Tackling violence and empowering rural women and girls

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 and particularly target 5.2 call to “eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres”. This commitment calls to urgent action by international bodies to act in defence of abused women and girls around the world.

Power and control issues are at the core of violent and abusive behaviours. Its signs are usually present over time. For example, a strong predictor of violent tendencies in adulthood is the amount of violence a child experiences “in the household in which the person was reared”. The effect, is often as insidious as it is subtle as many children exposed to an environment of ongoing violence and abuse internalize and come to accept this otherwise abusive behaviour as normal.

In many countries, the infamous “cycle of violence” is facilitated and reinforced through intergenerational propagation and it varies from urban to rural areas. For this reason, to better address violence against women and girls it may be needed a holistic approach when focusing on the most vulnerable areas as rural, emphasizing ‘quality parenting’ as the cornerstone for a resilient family environment and share responsibility at home as a recognition of the role of women in society.

Preventing violent situations

Men play a very important role in our society and in our families. They are key subjects to act towards the respect of women for who they are and for appreciating the good that they bring to all. A study called “Men in Families” highlighted the importance that men have while embracing women as equal partners and participating in more equitable ways in all aspects of social and family life”.

In recent years, economic crisis brought many unemployment situations to men with a traditional role of household providers. Despite negative consequences such as “shame, stress, depression, lack of social identity, increased likelihood of engagement in delinquency, armed violence or other antisocial behaviours”, the world of men had to understand the value and importance of women in society, economic development and family life. There is a growing awareness that men, in partnership with women, must play a significant role in ending violence against women while sharing responsibilities at home.

Successful prevention programs are comprehensive, relevant, intensive, incorporate positive messages, and may employ one or more of the following strategies: fostering empathy towards victims, changing individual men’s attitudes and behaviours, teaching men to intervene against other men’s behaviour, and using social marketing strategies to foster positive norms.

Education for the future

In the field of education, both adults and children can develop learning skills that are self-reflective, critical, and process oriented. For example, the International Center for Research on Women in Asia-Pacific has worked diligently to prevent violence against women and girls by educating children in schools as they rightly acknowledge positive change. They mentioned how “notions of gender roles, appropriate behaviours, and the resolution of conflict through the use of violence are all learned, and hence can be influenced. Primary prevention efforts are necessary as

they offer the possibility of preventing the use of violence before it begins. They also provide alternatives of behaviours to children who have witnessed violence in their homes and other intimate surroundings.”

Similarly, the International Federation for Family Development (IFFD) dedicates significant efforts to helping both women and men by stressing a critical-thinking methodology. The organization works in more than sixty countries around the world helping families achieve healthy relationships, providing parents with enough tools to team-up to make important family decisions, respect each other, become good models for their children, share responsibilities, determine how to balance work and family, etc. In the same path, the Nigerian Women’s Board Educational Cooperation Society, in special consultative status at the UN, is working for a Nigeria where all persons can have access to education of good quality and personal development. Our modern society underestimates the challenges a rising from parenthood and familial relationships in general. We see a clear need to facilitate education for parents as they endeavour to raise healthy, well-adjusted children and our leaders of tomorrow.

IFFD teaches communication skills through its courses, which lead to a better understanding of the important differences between women and men with the goal of fostering the mutual respect and cooperation necessary to reach their common goals together, through measures tailored to parents’ expectations and children’s needs without wanting to ideologically influence them. Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept that there are many countries around the world that still keep women from being fully integrated into social, political and economic life. Unfortunately, “prevention programming remains weak in virtually every humanitarian setting around the world”. Efficient-effective prevention programs are required now more than ever, and initiatives such as the ‘Violence Prevention Initiative’ of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, reflecting “government’s commitment to addressing the problem of violence in this province” could be a good example. The people who work with victims of violence use a specific name to focus on “the concepts in relationships that promote respect, equality and demonstrate appropriate ways of interacting in healthy relationships and ways that people who abuse can now choose to act non-violently”.

Empowering Women

The Secretary General’s remarks at High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment celebrated in September 2017 included the reference that “women’s economic empowerment contributes to more stable and resilient economies, and more peaceful societies”.

Empowering woman can take many forms. For example, empowering women who are mothers is particularly important because they have a strong influence in their families and in their communities as agents of peace. A study by OECD called ‘Doing Better for Families’ shows that mothers who have access to flexible work are most likely to have the children they want. In this sense, policies that empower the woman as mother will directly empower families and their well-being.

Empowering women who work is important because a greater presence of women in society will help to manifest the contradictions present when society is organized solely according to the criteria of efficiency and productivity. Women should also receive equal pay for equal work and protection for working mothers should be provided. Policies should focus on conciliation and balance between family

and work life, through the recognition of the family and highlighting the role of the family and the value of having a successful family life.

Empowering women who are in political positions is important because they will increasingly play a part in the solution of the serious problems of the future. They will also remind governments of the need to condemn those who abuse women sexually and pass laws that defend them from such violence. The United Nations Development Program works to ensure that “women have a real voice in all governance institutions, from the judiciary to the civil service, as well as in the private sector and civil society, so they can participate equally with men in public dialogue and decision-making and influence the decisions that will determine the future of their families and countries”.

Challenges of rural women

The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges, coincides with the vision and core objectives of IFFD projects. In collaboration with Women’s Board-Educational Cooperation Society, our Federation has driven capacity building programmes that directly provide all women — from rural areas in particular — with technical skills, literacy, leadership training, health and maternal services, etc., that favourably position and empower them to play a positive role in their own personal and community wellbeing and development.

Nigeria provides an example of it, with a population of 186 million, when women constitute half and while 51 per cent of Nigerians live in the rural areas. Evidence shows that agriculture contributes 24 per cent of the GDP and 46 per cent of Nigerians are classified as poor and over 20 per cent are from rural poverty gap at national poverty lines.

Rural women play a major role in agriculture but cultivate less than one hectare of land per household. The consequence of this inequity, which directly impacts food production and hunger, is that women and households headed by women are the most chronically poor.

A number of factors are responsible for this abysmal status of women in this regard:

- The most fundamental of these factors is gender inequality in education. The fact that most women in rural Nigeria do not have the benefit of formal education has excluded them from participation in the formal sector of the economy and from accessing credit to increase their agricultural yields. The economic imperatives of globalization and the introduction of certain monetarist policies by the Nigerian State, to cope with these, have also further eroded the capacity of rural women to function competitively economically and in a wide spectrum of other activities. This has led to palpable poverty and an increase in rural ailments such as malaria and malnutrition.
- Another factor is the rural woman’s lack of political leverage. At present, women in rural areas do not actively participate in the political space, despite the fact that women in precolonial Nigeria played complementary roles to the men in making political decisions. This exclusion is not unconnected with the practice of liberal democracy, which is dependent on literacy. They have been many efforts to tackle this political dis-empowerment through a conscious policy of educating the girl child. But, development for rural women cannot be equated strictly with welfare and poverty alleviation alone. Rural women need

fundamental changes in power relations and a re-engineering of social structures that perpetuate their dis-empowerment, such as changes in law, property rights and inheritance.

- Rural women are repositories of culture, and despite the onslaught of globalization on indigenous cultural values, they continue to pass these to the next generations through socialization. Through this process the family institution is preserved and children are inculcated with the norms and values of the society.

In view of the foregoing, we suggest the following:

- Promote domestic saving by the liberalization of financial services and encourage rural women access to credit.
 - Revamp policies that exclude women from ownership of land so that rural women can have more access to land to increase their agricultural yields.
 - Bridge the gender gap in education so that more women would play prominent roles in decision making in order to address systemic discrimination against women.
 - Strengthen sustainable and healthy families starting with the youth. More incentives to support resilient households and efforts to prevent breakdowns will reduce families in vulnerable situations and promote poverty.
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