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Statement submitted by Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, 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

Human Dignity and Worth Underpins Economic Empowerment for Women in the Changing World of Work.

A focus on human dignity and worth underpins economic empowerment for women in the changing world of work. At the same time, a gender-responsive approach to the structural barriers to women's participation in decent work needs to be addressed. A method that links sustainable development and gender equality has been suggested in the recent discussion paper "Gender Equality and Sustainable Development: A Pathways Approach" [UN Women, 2016]. We extend this to include the central role of spirituality in understanding what it means to be human and empowered. Meditation is a pathway and practical tool that brings about balance and an environment of wellbeing in the world of work. Wellbeing is essential for sustainable development and economic empowerment; not only for women, but for all of society.

Work as an expression of dignity.

Work is an expression of a woman's personal dignity and self-realization. However, work is not dignifying if it involves exploitation or discrimination. Economic, social and political turmoil have created a global deficit in decent work. This means there is also a deficit in social justice and political will to effect needed changes. In a world of material poverty but abundant human resources, the fact that women lack decent work means that they have been in some way excluded. Forced and bonded labour, slavery, women's inferiority and child labour are incompatible with human dignity and worth.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a keystone in all our endeavours to uphold human dignity and worth. The Declaration sets forth standards for all people and all nations that recognize the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. Dignity is intrinsic to a woman's being and is not something conferred or given to a woman by the world, but rather comes from a source that transcends the physical. The Brahma Kumaris understands that all are born with great potential, but without self-worth, this potential is never fully realized. Women who feel useful themselves and to people around them, are more likely to find ways of expressing their inner qualities, and to also cooperate in acknowledging the qualities of others. Work is thus an expression of our worth, not the basis of it.

Structural barriers.

Women experience structural barriers that contribute to the deficit in decent work. These include unequal participation rates, inequitable remuneration, and concentration in vulnerable, low paid, and under-valued jobs. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has long held that women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development. More recently, at the 2016 meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the global business community launched a special commission to articulate and quantify the compelling economic case for businesses to engage in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Unilever, in backing the Sustainable Development Goals, has stated that there is no business case for enduring poverty. The global

gender gap in labour force participation is striking. The report “Transforming Economies: Realizing Rights” [UN Women, 2015] notes that virtually all men in their prime working years (ages 25-54) participate in the labour force. Labour force participation for women varies from region to region, but in all regions males participate at a higher rate than females.

Gender and power are linked.

Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work requires an awareness of power, rights, and equitable societies. Gender and power are linked. Better outcomes for women and girls mean better outcomes for all. To create lasting change, the systemic barriers to gender equality must be addressed, and the power dynamic transformed. Sustainable Development Goal 5.4 calls on the global community to “... Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate”. Women and girls carry out meaningful and constructive tasks that go largely unrecognized and unrewarded despite their obvious contribution to the common good of society. In various faith traditions, this work has been described as service, prayer, or sacrifice. Such work has value and social relevance, and fosters dignity, worth, and self-sufficiency by allowing women to express their innate capacity for creating and giving. This type of work shows the quality of kindness toward others and is born of an awareness of altruism and the recognition that such work brings rewards in spiritual elevation, or generosity of spirit that cannot be measured in purely material terms. This dimension of altruism needs to be revived and integrated into paid work to bring about a balanced reappraisal of human potential.

Putting women at the heart of decent work will help to restore the deficit within the global human spirit — i.e. a poverty of values that amounts to a lack of respect for the intrinsic dignity and worth of women and girls as individuals and as a collective. Resolving this issue therefore involves a moral choice as much as formulation of new economic and social policies and programs. The right to work itself is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and there is widespread agreement on characteristics and practices of decent work. Fundamentally, it is the regard for human dignity and worth that distinguishes decent work from any other kind of work.

Decent work and inner well-being.

Understanding the nature of the human spirit also means recognizing that spirituality is at the heart of what it means to be human. The seed of well-being is rooted in a woman’s ability to self-manage and balance the multiple demands of work, family, and society, and at the same time cope with stereotyping and structural barriers to full participation in decent work. Recent figures published by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE, 2016) show that women aged between 35 and 44 in mainland Britain are 67 per cent more likely to suffer work-related stress than men of the same age.

Using meditation, mindfulness and other reflective practices enables women to distinguish who they are from what they do. Work provides opportunities for women to create and sustain positive and harmonious relationships, and fosters a

shared sense of identity, mutual recognition and cooperation among peoples. Without good relationships, the work cannot be considered decent. In this way, decent work increases wellbeing, reduces stress, and leads to greater economic returns and social benefits.

Societies, governments, and markets that function effectively do so based on qualities of trust, fairness, respect, equitable treatment of all people, responsibility, solidarity and honesty. Such values reinforce human dignity and worth and underpin all efforts to realize the Sustainable Development Goal to achieve gender equality and empower all women in the world of work.
