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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

Shakti leadership: Collaborative, Compassionate and Empowered

At this crucial junction as a global community, the COVID-19 pandemic painfully exposed the fragility of our world and intensified many existing fractures in society including racial, ethnic, religious, gender and socioeconomic divides. An ‘unseen’ virus has brought the world to its knees and is forcing us to examine the often invisible or unacknowledged systemic injustices. The impact of this is felt deeply particularly by people with caring responsibilities, who are mainly women. In this critical time, it is evident that real recovery and change requires women to lead and be included as decision-makers both in formal and informal systems and structures in a visible way. This offers us an opportunity to look toward a new social contract that re-institutes the dignity and worth of all life.

There is a growing consensus that COVID-19 has been a defining moment as a global community, and there is no going back to “business as usual”. This is an opportunity for us, both as women and men, to cultivate a new approach to leadership; to co-create new societies based on a new model of leadership. Policies offer a legal foundation; but they do not change the underlying attitudes and mindsets. At a time of crises people often revert to old ways of doing things. How do we create a new way of being that is resilient, compassionate and inclusive even in the face of uncertainty?

Leadership plays a significant role in helping navigate through uncertain times. When leadership fails to connect with peoples’ vulnerabilities and fears, provide truthful information and take brave and decisive actions, it escalates stress which, inevitably leads to aggravating social issues. There is a growing concern that the current crisis is resulting in a backsliding of social advancements, especially those made in gender empowerment and gender-based violence. We need to see leadership that inspires trust, is collaborative, nurturing, compassionate, inclusive, humble and courageous. To cultivate and embody these attributes, another form of power based on spiritual principles is needed to serve as the foundation for how decisions are made and implemented.

The fragmentation we are witnessing globally is occurring because spiritual principles remain buried beneath the surface. It is time we move away from power that is driven by ego, fear, desire for political mileage or assertion of dominance over another, and choose to rebuild a system that prioritizes equality, respect, trust, care, unity, and cooperation. These attributes will create resilient societies.

We find evidence of the success of new models of leadership in an Forbes April 2020 online article “What Do Countries with The Best Coronavirus Responses Have in Common? Women Leaders,” by Avivah Wittenberg Cox. In this article Cox showcases seven women leaders of countries, including Angela Merkel of Germany, Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan and Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand showing that they have fared better through the crises thus far. In one touching story, Norway’s prime minister, Erna Solberg, held a press conference just for children – no parents allowed – where she responded to kids’ questions and told them it’s okay to be scared. This kind of inclusive instinct inspires societies to become engaged. Our fragile world needs this kind of collaborative courageous leadership in visible positions of power.

COVID-19 is an unpredictable challenge, and the overall “health” and wellbeing of society is being tested. This emphasizes that measurement of economic success must be wider than monetary metrics and must include the inner and outer wellbeing and resilience of the people. This is reflected, through the experience of Anabelli Ramirez, the owner of a clothing design company in México during the COVID-19

lockdown. When facing the prospect of having to terminate staff, her spiritual principle of considering the wellbeing of her team above the economic risk for her company guided her to bring together the collective ideas of her workforce to find a sustainable solution. It led to a proposal of working from home and using the current stock of fabric to produce protective face masks which served a wider need than just the survival of the business.

Every crisis can reveal the greatness that is latent in people. We have witnessed attributes which are often unacknowledged but are essential to leadership, such as:

Courage and Vulnerability

Leadership must embrace the stark reality that we are extremely vulnerable. Whether it is the virus or the forces of nature, acknowledging our vulnerability in dealing with climate change, encourages a humble and holistic approach. Everyone has been affected, from presidents to migrant workers; class, status and economic disparities no longer barricade the privileged few. Dr. Theresia Shivera, a lead anaesthetist from Namibia, observed that how to combat COVID-19 was completely unknown. Decisions had to be made quickly based on what was known at that point in time. Leaders who focused on saving lives were more inclined to make difficult decisions that may have risked their reputations.

Honesty

Honesty saves lives. Instead of creating a facade of control, a transparent sharing of information invites proactive action, understanding and adherence to rules and cooperation. Honesty also creates an environment of continuous learning, being flexible as understanding broadens. Honesty, decisive action, and empathy earn trust, which is key in re-assuring people and easing fear.

Connectedness and Compassion

Human life thrives when there is a sense of connectedness. The impact on one has a ripple effect on many others, our connectedness goes beyond our human relationships but also to all life. The way forward must be based on the underlying principle, we are a global family and there cannot be the success or wellbeing of one at the expense of the other. Our resilience, courage and strength are enhanced through this experience of connectedness.

Dr. Anjali Grover, a frontline physician from New York reflects poignantly, that there were experiences during the peak of the pandemic for which her traditional training had not prepared her. In those moments she had to access her internal spiritual resources. She felt connected to the seed of life, which was more than what was visibly in front of her. Her work was more than just the saving of lives, it was honouring the dignity of each individual. Knowing that what we cannot see, still exists.

Collaboration

The way forward has to be a collaborative effort. COVID-19 dissolved borders and spread invisibly, dismantling the artificial barriers of geography, economic inequities and cultural difference. The solution has to be drawn from the collective learning, collaboration of skills, information availability and shared resources. We need each other to end the pandemic and build the future we want.

Cultivating Attributes of Shakti Leadership

We are challenged now to hold a higher and broader vision, to act with strength, love and courage; to trust the invisible spiritual fabric which ultimately defines our life. In a growing climate of instability, it calls for an emergence of a power that is beyond gender, position, race or economic privilege. It is an innate spiritual strength which is referred to as 'Shakti'. The word Shakti is translated as "power" or "life force." It is derived from the root verb "shak," which means "to be able," "to do," "to act." Shakti is a sacred feminine power originating from Divinity and translated into practical implementation. Connecting with Shakti helps to emerge love as a power, which is needed now to influence the way we see, the motivation for our actions, and in doing so, increase the ability to lead from a place of compassionate strength both in personal and public spaces. Love is a unifying life-force which holds the capacity to heal, gives birth to new beginnings, and nurtures life.

If we are to affect change, we have to define ourselves for who we are rather than how we have allowed ourselves to be defined by external factors. Our definition of ourselves informs our capacity for the quality of actions we take. This connection with our inner being becomes the anchor that offers internal security and stability, so that we can retain the clarity of thought, vision and intention irrespective of the shifting sands of the external climate. We are called on to renew our identity beyond limited beliefs, to acknowledge the unseen parts of ourselves, the living consciousness, which is the seed of our potential. Transformative change can only be realized when we reconnect with that invisible spiritual DNA within, like the caterpillar who relinquishes the outer form and reconnects with the unseen gene of being a butterfly.

This process necessitates a practice of contemplation and inner silence to awaken the awareness of ourselves as consciousness. As we turn within, we tap into the experience of being Shakti, allowing us to access a deeper truth in that moment so that our thinking can be influenced by a greater wisdom and love. This experience frees our thinking from the conditioning we acquired as a response to pain, anger and fear. This internal cleansing is what allows compassion and love to become the filter with which to see and act in the world.

The power of Shakti is deeply embedded in her connection with the Highest Source. It is this sacred connection which fuels her will, her capacity to be a conduit of love and her courage in actions. Actions stemming from this state of consciousness are naturally life-affirming and benevolent. These actions touch on the goodness of the self and trust that goodness lies in the other. This is an enabling quality of leadership that draws out the goodness of others so that the way forward is based on inclusivity and collaboration - building communities of greatness.

Shakti is a deeper intuitive capacity to know in the moment what is the right course of action that will serve all. A mind that is calm and clear is able to sustain a sacred connection to the Highest Source, which heightens an inner sense to catch the subtle signals of the moment and act from a deeper wisdom. Such action has a ripple effect which serves beyond the moment.

Opportunities for Strengthening Shakti Leadership

The Brahma Kumaris as a women-led spiritual organization, comprising of both men and women, has been supporting women to emerge and strengthen their inner capacity of Shakti through ongoing meditation retreats, leadership dialogues and international projects. For example, to support women leaders to enhance their resilience during the COVID-19 lockdown, the Brahma Kumaris offered a series of online workshops in June/July 2020. In addition, a series of meditations reflecting a

virtual United Nations Meditation Room was created on the theme of ‘Karuna’ (a compassionate) response to the Coronavirus.

Conclusion

We believe that the need of our current time is an enabling, collaborative and compassionate leadership. Now more than ever, it is time for women to be the visible agents of transformation. Accessing the power of Shakti opens an invisible door to a pathway of opportunity leading to the upliftment of all.

“In today’s world true success will require constant courage and complete honesty on our part. If you ever do feel afraid or discouraged here is a secret, I would like to share with you: Take just one moment of silence, go within yourself, and evoke your courage. Have the faith that you do have a solution, you do have answers, you do know what must be done...just turn inwards, emerge the wisdom that is within and do something with it.”
