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peace for the twenty-first century”**

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

Empowering Women and Girls by Tapping into their Inner Potential for Leadership to Achieve Gender Equality, Alleviate Poverty and Transform our Institutions

“... women not only bear the brunt of poverty, but their empowerment is key to its reduction.” Khosla, Rena (2009) Addressing Gender Concerns in India’s Urban Renewal Mission (New Delhi: UNDP).

To address poverty, we must focus on spiritually strengthening the inner resolve and awareness of the latent potential in women and girls, identifying, recognizing and supporting them as leaders. As leaders, they would then have the agency to strengthen and play a critical role in transforming our institutions to offer a balanced, inclusive and supportive environment for all.

We desire a world where there is equality, peace and prosperity for all and with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Agenda, leaders have committed to ending poverty by 2030. At a briefing to journalists on Wednesday, 26 April 2023, in a special edition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) progress report, the Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, Navid Hanif, stated that “575 million people will still be living in extreme poverty by 2030.” Hanif added, “Shockingly, the world is back at hunger levels not seen since 2005.” Of the roughly 140 targets of the SDGs, only about 10 per cent are on track to be reached by 2030, close to half are moderately or severely off track, and some 30 per cent have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline.

Gender equality is imperative and cuts across the achievement of many of the SDGs, especially the goals connected with reducing poverty and hunger. The issues are systemic, and therefore require a transformation at a much deeper level. Changing of laws does not necessarily lead to transformation since the challenge is in implementing those laws in environments which are steeped in cultural, racial and economic biases. Despite having made advances, there is a backsliding of genuine progress when crises such as the global COVID pandemic, war and conflict, climate-related disasters break out and political uncertainty is faced. Women are more vulnerable to these external factors, having to sacrifice paid work to step into care responsibilities for the aged, ill and children, leading to greater poverty.

Strengthening women’s collective voices for institutional change

The world’s approach is to strengthen institutions to achieve gender equality. However, the very fabric of our institutions has been created with a historical bias against women and girls. A typical example is where female athletes are often mandated to wear revealing clothing, and this restricts participation since wearing such clothing may go against their cultural, religious, or personal principles. The Norwegian Women’s Beach Handball Team was fined €1500 for wearing shorts instead of the bikini bottoms uniform mandated by the European Handball Federation at the July 2021 European Beach Handball Championship. The rules were changed in October 2021 when women collectively challenged a rule that was set by men, since on the governing board, there are less than 30 per cent women.

Create a supportive environment for women to claim their agency to lead

It is imperative that we identify and support women leaders at all levels of society. Women’s leadership must be included in rebuilding countries, grassroots activism, and political participation. Their voices and contributions in decision-making processes at local, national, and international levels are critical. Supporting

women and girls to recognise and nurture their potential as change-makers, would encourage their role in transforming institutions to serve the needs of communities. When women's voices are involved, change tends to have a more lasting impact.

Women's leadership transforms a political landscape to sustainable peace

The peace movement in Liberia, during the heat of the civil war in 2003, proved that women's active participation can make a significant difference in the effectiveness and longevity of peace agreements. In her article, "We must Involve Women in the Peace Process," Leymah Gbowee shares that the process began with seven women before it became the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace – a mass movement of Christian and Muslim women committed to ending the war and achieving sustainable peace. She emphasised that women are committed participants in peace processes that affect society. The value of what women do at the community level, without recognition, without funding, is incalculable. Political leaders and national strategic plans will come and go, but women's commitment to building a better society remains a constant. Only in an environment of peace and stability can there be growth and space for innovative solutions to uplift communities and create prosperity for all.

What is the necessary process needed so that the advances made to support women and girls to claim their agency are sustainable and make a significant shift in the quality of their lives and families? The conditioning of women being considered as being less than men and therefore having fewer rights, has been instilled in both men and women for generations. To undo this requires a deeper process than just sharing information, it requires a re-education, an awakening of a deeper sense of self to be affirmed.

Where does true transformation begin?

True transformation of deep-rooted beliefs and attitudes is a spiritual process which requires intentional inner reflection and practices. The inner world and outer world are parts of the same wheel of life. For the outer state of the world to be transformed, the inner state of the world must first be transformed. If peace is to be attained, we must start with inner peace. If world stability is needed, we must start by cultivating inner stability. If crime is to be eliminated, we must eradicate crime from our minds and souls to return to our original nature of peace and nonviolence.

Breaking through stereotypes and nurturing young women leaders

Established in 1936 in Hyderabad Sindh, present day Pakistan, the Brahma Kumaris is the largest spiritual women-led organisation and an example of a growing and sustainable organisation for both women and men where there is gender equality. Today the Brahma Kumaris has a presence in over 120 countries with a membership of all genders, cultures and races. From its inception the founder, Brahma Baba, recognised the potential of women and provided an environment where women and girls were nurtured as leaders and are placed in leadership and decision-making roles, as is stipulated in their constitution. A group of 8 young women were selected as trustees and collaboratively spearheaded the growth of the organization, first to a national presence in India, and today to an international movement participating on global platforms. They led with love, courage, purity of heart and were inclusive in their approach where men played a significant role and thereby created a partnership model of mutual respect. To this day, women are the spiritual and administrative heads of the organisation. This revolutionary concept was established at a time where women were regarded as second-class citizens, a conditioning reinforced by cultural norms and religious beliefs. To break this layered influence, the members of the Brahma Kumaris went through a deeply spiritual process. This process enabled the

founding members to grow from a consciousness of poverty to prosperity, from victim to benefactors from being voiceless or without a position to equality.

The process was rooted in removing the cultural and historical conditioning of seeing themselves as “just girls or women” and creating an identity of themselves as souls with a divine nature. If we are to affect change, we have to define ourselves for who we are within rather than how we have been defined by external factors.

An inside-out approach to transformation

To facilitate this process for women in the context of our current times, the Brahma Kumaris have initiated a “Shiv Shakti Leadership Approach” which offers a framework to women for continuous inner work. This is to awaken and sustain an awareness of themselves as consciousness and connect with a Higher Source. The internal awakening then becomes a basis for their work, power, dignity and choices to be infused with this higher love.

This approach necessitates a practice of contemplation and inner silence to experience themselves as consciousness. Our definition of ourselves informs our capacity for the quality of actions we take. To reconnect with this essence in silence, requires detaching mentally and emotionally from the acquired influences of our inner programming. We then rest our awareness on being consciousness whose true nature is light, peace, love, and power which in turn opens up a capacity for unflinching determination, courage and inner strength. Transformation can only be realized when we reconnect with that invisible spiritual DNA within, like the caterpillar who relinquishes the outer form and connects with the unseen gene of being a butterfly.

In a world driven by materialism, where one is reminded of an identity based on body, gender, race, class or religion it is swimming against the tide to live with a spiritual consciousness. A materialistic mindset is rooted in fear, since nothing in the material world has permanency. Spiritual power is required to break free from the gravity of old perceptions, a power that can only be attained through connection with the Divine Source. Connection with the Divine Source, is allowing the self to experience pure love that restores an inner security of who “I” am irrespective of the circumstances I find myself in. This experience and sense of belonging to the Source of Love, frees our thinking we acquired as a response to pain, anger and fear. It allows the mind to become more still and centred on what really matters. This internal awakening allows compassion and love to become the filter with which to see and act in the world. Actions stemming from this higher internal influence, are motivated by principles of serving, purity of intention and equality. The allure of limited power and material wealth can be resisted by a strengthened conscience and conviction to contribute to building communities of greatness.

Inspiring community co-operation

In Myanmar, a group of young women from the Brahma Kumaris were inspired to create a space where everyone could take the benefit of inner peace through the programs they offered. Land was given to them; however, funds were limited. These determined young women, learnt basic construction skills, and with the support of 2-3 skilled men, built a community hall. Seeing their determination, courage, and passion to serve, inspired the community to co-operate and within 2 years they completed the hall. It has become a sanctuary for the community where people of all cultural backgrounds benefit from ongoing programs on de-addiction, positive thinking, meditation and spirituality. These young women won the respect of local Buddhist monks and co-exist serving the needs of the community.

In conclusion

Women have the potential and capacity to step out as visible agents of transformation. A commitment to the personal work of reconnecting with the authentic self as soul, and fueling her inner resolve through a connection with a Higher Source and purpose, opens a capacity for leadership that is collaborative, principled and compassionate. The alleviation of poverty is only possible when a culture of equality, respect, and unity is re-instilled in our communities. Leadership that is rooted in spiritual powers and virtues engages women and men in a mutually respectful environment that is equipped to combat poverty and transform our institutions into sustainable, flourishing, communities of greatness.
