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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for
the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic
objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further
actions and initiatives**

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.



Statement

Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls

Introduction

In relation to the priority theme of the fifty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women addressing challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls, the present statement draws attention to the topic of human dignity.

Human dignity is a state of being. It can never be taken away from an individual so long as she or he continues to hold on to it internally. The realization and conscious awareness that dignity is intrinsic can give us strength and hope and can be a powerful tool to help overcome such indignities as unemployment, poverty, and the loss of liberty or opportunities. We need to ask ourselves, “Do my actions add to or detract from the dignity of myself or anyone else?” Dignity is a value that includes self-respect and respect for others. It emerges from the intrinsic and innate virtues of peace, love, joy, purity and truth, which are present within every human being.

The Millennium Development Goals have provided a strong platform for States to commit to specific targets in order to address a variety of areas for the advancement of human dignity. Notable progress has been achieved in a number of areas such as water, sanitation and child mortality. In addition, by 2015, it is expected that most countries will achieve equal access to primary education.

However, several challenges remain. According to the *Millennium Development Goals Report 2012*, the goals that are most off track and least likely to be achieved are the ones that relate to gender equality. Gender norms, viewing women as inferior and the ways in which women see other women, and themselves, must be shifted. The Millennium Development Goals are targets that mitigate the consequences of gender inequality but fail to address its root causes. Globally, patriarchal structures prevail, often enhancing systems and customs that belittle, degrade, or undervalue women. For example, data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that among its member States men earn more than women, work less, and occupy more of the top jobs. This not only impacts a woman’s capacity to generate income, but also indicates that the labour market does not recognize the skills of women and men as being equal.

In relation to health, gender discrimination often limits and affects a woman’s decision-making ability and access to money, along with her mobility, which can delay or prevent her from reaching health services and purchasing essential medicines.

Gender-based violence remains a big challenge in achieving gender equality and reflects broader cultural, social and public health problems. There have been many achievements in terms of policies and laws in several countries, but there are major gaps in their implementation, owing to cultural patterns of violence based on gender. The Millennium Development Goals can do more to tackle cultural beliefs that directly affect women. They can also do more to empower women’s belief in themselves and their sense of worth.

With reference to poverty, more than half of the world's women are in vulnerable employment. It is common practice throughout the world that during financial crises, women and girls are taken out of school, the quantity and quality of their food are reduced, they forgo medical treatment and often become involved in sexual exploitation for survival. Unless all these systems of discrimination are addressed, it will be very difficult to make substantial progress on gender equality.

Overall, the Millennium Development Goals have provided for compartmentalized interventions and often ignore the side effects of those interventions. A focus on human dignity can help create more holistic approaches. This requires changing how we look at ourselves and how we look at others, particularly women; changing how men see women, and how women see each other. A spiritual perspective based on the innate dignity of every human being, as stated in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, will promote social progress and better standards of life for all in a holistic way that includes any services we may offer in this regard.

Focusing on human dignity

For more than 25 years, Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, as a non-governmental organization, has contributed to the work of the United Nations by offering a spiritual perspective on issues of global concern. If implemented, this perspective can help envision holistic interventions while addressing the root causes that prevent the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Currently, we hear a great deal about "natural resources", "human resources", "financial resources" and, even more commonly, "lack of resources". Lack of quantity as well as quality of these types of resources has become a cause for great environmental, economic, political and humanitarian concern. The "lack of resources" is rapidly leading to increased feelings of fear, frustration, powerlessness and depression within individuals and communities the world over.

If we break the word "resource" down into its two separate parts, we find some interesting insights into the meaning of the word. The original Latin definition for the prefix "re" is "again", or "back", and the word "source" can be defined as "a person, place or thing from which something originates".

Based on the current state of the world's physical resources, it seems that we are now living in a time when we may be obliged to "go back to" and explore all possible sources, that is, all persons, places, and things that may provide us with the means to function more effectively. We need to "re-source".

Much of the "outer" world has been, and still is being, explored (geologically, technologically and scientifically) for more resources that will continue to make our lives more functional and enjoyable. Yet we continue to experience a "lack". It seems a reasonable, if not necessary, suggestion that we begin exploring the "inner" world for possible resources that would serve the same function. Our "inner world" simply refers to within ourselves. In our external world, there is an increasing concern to replenish our environmental resources. Scientific evidence regarding sustainable development tells us that we are running out of external resources. In our inner worlds there are no set boundaries. The resources of our inner worlds are unlimited.

Inner resources are values, virtues, principles, strengths and personal powers that help us live our lives in a more effective and enjoyable way. However, the range, depth and potential of these strengths are possibly more extensive than most people realize, and therefore remain underdeveloped. Like any resource, they can only be fully and effectively utilized when we know exactly what is available. Although most people draw on their inner resources daily to some degree, it becomes evident that without being consciously recognized, nurtured and utilized, inner resources often remain buried deep within the uncharted territory of the individual.

Human dignity is one of these inner resources. By understanding what human dignity truly is, we create an awareness that recognizes each person's self-worth. We create the world around us and it responds directly to our attitude. When we see the world with a vision of the whole, we draw on the proficiencies of people, generating a sense of kinship with the world's population, rather than attempting to "fix" those who are "other" than us. Our actions are then influenced accordingly. When we see the world in a new way, we can no longer take the same action we would have taken before. This cycle of awareness, attitude, vision and action can transform the capacities of communities and Governments to implement lasting change. It also allows us to think holistically and stop thinking about compartmentalized interventions and to focus on addressing root causes.

For example, the Global Hospital and Research Centre, in partnership with Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University and Children's Hope India, educates villagers on the importance of preventive health measures relating to personal hygiene, maternal and child health care, substance abuse and other health-related issues. As the women and girls gain education in health care for themselves and their families, they are also becoming aware of their own well-being and value as women and girls. As a result, with this new vision of themselves, they are motivated to take action and apply what they have learned to make better choices in their lives and families, thus raising the level of hope in the community.

Another example is an initiative of the Rural Development Wing of Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University involving both women and men farmers, called sustainable yogic agriculture. Sustainable yogic agriculture uses a holistic approach. It integrates thought-based meditative practices with methods of traditional and organic farming. This sustainable system of farming was founded by two young women from farming communities in India. They believed that if each farmer understood how to use her inner resources and made decisions accordingly, each could bring positive change into her life, her family and her community.

In the early days of the initiative, farmers faced difficulties transferring from chemical to organic systems of farming. However, the two women who founded the project believed in the initiative, particularly in how changing one's awareness and self-view could impact farmers' work and family lives. The farmers, empowered, were encouraged to apply their inner resources developed through meditation to their farm, just as they would apply any other organic input. Meditation became an integrated part of farmers' crop management systems. Sustainable yogic agriculture is now in its tenth year and is being practised by approximately 1,000 farmers in more than five states of India.

Meditative practices have demonstrated tangible benefits in the lives of female and male farmers. Along with economic benefits and positive quantitative results in

crop yield, there have also been positive qualitative effects. Sustainable yogic agriculture has increased farmers' self-esteem and therefore reduced the frequency of suicide and social violence. Farmers have a renewed sense of purpose and pride in their lives as farmers. There has been a substantial positive impact on the relationships of farm couples, with far less anger and associated violence in their homes. All of these positive results are rooted in a renewed understanding and respect among female and male farmers of each other's value as contributors to their community and family, their own self-worth and dignity. A whole-system approach, similar to the one used in sustainable yogic agriculture, is necessary to achieve the Millennium Development Goals; that means recognizing and applying all aspects of human life, including the inner resources.

The knowledge base of Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University emerges from the understanding of the spiritual dimension of humanity, which can be of great support in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. We can address root causes of gender inequality by designing and implementing holistic interventions to improve women's lives. At the root of gender equality lies the subject of the human dignity of both women and men. True dignity emerges from an understanding of the intrinsic worth of each person. Dignity is such that in order to recognize it in others, we must each recognize our own self-worth first. Then, drawing on our inner resources, with a sense of personal integrity, the vision of dignity we hold towards others can have the power to uplift them and enable them to bring change in their own lives. Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University has a continued commitment to "re-sourcing", exploring and creating initiatives that empower women and participating in public conversations regarding the dignity of women with a focus on the post-2015 development agenda.
