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Statement by

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Bring the power of Sports to women

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to speak as the representative of Dutch women,

Nelson Mandela once said: 'Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, it has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. Sport can awaken hope where there was previously only despair.'

Today, I would like to focus on the importance of sport for the empowerment of women and gender equality.

Women and girls are the best strategic target group to focus on when it comes to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and eradicating poverty. Poverty is female. It is time to respect the rights of women and girls.

Participating in sport allows women to develop mental and physical strength, self-confidence and new leadership skills. It also brings more joy to their lives. Sport is empowering because working towards a mutual goal brings a sense of satisfaction and gives higher self-esteem. It enables women and girls to develop new interpersonal networks and a sense of identity. It is fun and gives people time to forget, even just for a moment. It is healthy and healing.

Sport is essentially low-cost, high-impact. It can be quickly implemented, easily accessible. Even today, 62 million girls do not attend primary school. If properly supervised by committed coaches, sport increases school participation.

Sport is a way of empowering women in a multicultural society. The Dutch government encourages young girls from migrant backgrounds to participate in sports through targeted financial incentives. For example, Jamila Achahchah set up a sports association for migrant women and girls in Utrecht. Within 5 years it had 700 members, mostly Muslim. The scheme is run by women, for women, allowing participants to gain self-confidence and develop leadership skills through sport. These women and girls are key agents in their local community, building valuable social capital by using sport to connect with communities outside their own.

Sport is also a way of giving peace a chance. For instance: Felicite Rwemalika from Rwanda is the founder of the Kigali Women Footballers, which combats trauma by empowering women and young girls. For traumatised female Hutu and Tutsi survivors of the 1994 genocide, football has become a way of leaving their past behind.

Mr Chairman,

Sport teaches people about roles, rights and responsibilities. In Africa the sports infrastructure is a useful channel for educating girls about issues such as disease, HIV/AIDS prevention and care, and hygiene and sanitation issues. Young girls often have to care for family members living with HIV or AIDS. This generally means exclusion from education and from the support and companionship of their friends. Organising sports activities is an easy way to prevent further isolation, and offers an opportunity to teach girls about their right to decide about their own body. Sport provides women and girls with both a trigger to change their lives and the capacity to sustain the changes.

Sport is a way to be who you are and not what others think you should be. Playing cricket at the end of the working day gives low-caste girls in India a moment of joy and companionship. And think of the young women in Kabul who used to play in the Afghan national soccer team. They take a lot of risks

to put their passion into practice. It was wonderful to see them train with two of the Dutch national women's team and share their mutual love of football.

Mr Chairman,

Today, I would like to propose that we make the following commitments:

- we recognise the cycle of insecurity in women's lives, and the need to enhance participation and integration through sport;
- we recognise the trauma and vulnerability to violence and conflict in women's lives, and the positive influence of sport;
- we work towards a practical solution for these problems, using sport

I also recommend that we recall CEDAW article 13 (c), The right to participate in recreational activities, sports and all aspects of cultural life and Resolution 63/135, Sport as a means to promote education, health, development and peace.

I welcome the initiatives of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace. I recommend cooperation between this Special Adviser and the Special Representative on Women and Peace and Development. Practise based evidence shows that it is effective to use sport as a means for reconciliation and dealing with trauma.

We should also acknowledge the power of sport and the major role the Member States and the United Nations can play in promoting the empowerment of women and girls through sport and physical activity.

I would like to invite you to exercise your power to give girls and women equal access to resources and opportunities to participate in sport and play together. I would also invite you to strengthen the role of sport in primary education. I urge you to invest in sports infrastructure, so as to promote the organisation of sports events and activities. Finally, I would like to stress the need for each of you to play your part in increasing the number of women leaders in sport, who can support women and girls the world over.

So Sport can awaken hope!

Thank you, Mr Chairman