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***Religion Must Elevate, Not Violate or Discriminate***

**Concluding Statement of The Carter Center Human Rights Defenders Forum,  
April 5-6, 2011**

April 6, 2011

We have gathered at The Carter Center in Atlanta to combine our voices on behalf of equal rights and dignity for women and men. We come from many backgrounds: we are believers, scholars, activists, and traditional community and religious leaders. We came to build a bridge between secular women's rights efforts and those carried out in religious contexts and frameworks.

Our sacred texts and belief systems, which provide solace and guidance for the vast majority of the peoples of the world, must not be used as a weapon to degrade more than one half of the human race: women. Religion is meant to be a platform for each person's spiritual quest, not a cage for the dreams and aspirations of women and girls.

The branding by some religious leaders of women as inferior to men is the cause of much violence and discrimination. The exertion of such profound influence makes it more difficult for secular groups and women to achieve changes and resist abusive treatment.

The truly divine purpose of religion has always been to serve humanity as a whole and each of its members. If it fails in this essential purpose, it can become a force for oppression and denigration.

Religious and traditional leaders bear a large responsibility for transforming our culture because of the influence of these belief systems in society. While governments bear responsibility for the protection of human rights, their efforts are hindered when religious and customary authorities misuse and misrepresent their sacred texts in a way that inhibits the implementation of universal human rights principles. Thus, we have gathered more than 70 participants from 22 countries to discuss an issue that affects every country.

Individual believers also have the right to self-determination and are responsible as well for the power conferred on religious authorities. Individuals can exercise their power to challenge leaders through effective consensus-building within communities. Through internal community dialogue combined with human rights learning, ancient traditional practices, such as female genital cutting, child marriage, and domestic violence have been eliminated, and such transformations can be expanded through social networks.

No religion asks a woman to allow herself to be killed, to be raped, or to be discriminated against in the name of tradition or religious principles. Yet women are expected to accept treatment that can harm them or lead to their death. The scourge of HIV/AIDS and violence against women and girls in both developed and so-called "developing" countries, make this a matter of urgency.

While expanding leadership roles for women in religious institutions is vital, it is not enough. Patriarchal systems that do not acknowledge the full equality of women must be challenged and reformed.

The problem of abuse of religious authority is not confined to one region, culture, or religion. We call on all believers in all faiths in all countries to give careful consideration to our appeal.

We call on religious leaders and communities to view the United Nations' human rights bodies as partners in advancing the well-being of humankind. The High Commissioner for Human Rights acts as a global voice for human dignity. All governments have accorded this role to the high commissioner when the post was created by the General Assembly in 1993. In many cases, these bodies have helped improve the situation for women.

The keys to progress are held by us all, from the citizen to the religious to the powerful, and include:

- Human rights education - knowing one's rights is the beginning of individual agency and collective transformation.
- Solidarity - recognizing that women and men's humanity is bound together not as superior and inferior but as interdependent and equal parts of a whole; we must be partners in action.
- Courageous leadership - understanding their influence in setting social norms and practices, traditional, and religious leaders must make it clear that equality between women and men is divine.
- The most pervasive violence and discrimination against women occurs within the family, making a spiritual remedy essential.
- Community-based solutions - the foundations for human rights exist naturally in each community, and our mission is to recognize and build upon these foundations for women and men alike.
- Diverse approaches will be needed, from public campaigning to hold governments accountable to gradual consensus-building within communities.
- Violence in war zones results in horrific violence against women that requires intensive diplomatic efforts to prevent war and to remedy its impact.

Many religious and traditional leaders have remained silent for too long; and too many religious and non-religious people have remained complicit. The dictates of human rights and of our faith demands that all of us together put an end to gender-based violence and discrimination.

We resolve to work in unity for the advancement of the whole human race, with our sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, to live up to the nobility with which our creator has endowed us.