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I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for allowing us the opportunity to bring forth the voices of African women to the attention and consideration of the Council.

We echo the statement presented to the Security Council Arria Formula meeting during the 6th Anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2006 by 14 Sudanese women's groups.

The proposal by Finland for this special session following Secretary General Kofi Annan's appeal demonstrates the Council's commitment to addressing the situation in Sudan. We wish to bring to the attention of the Council, the urgent human rights and humanitarian situation in Darfur, and especially the suffering of women and girls.

In spite of the agreements acknowledging the dire humanitarian crisis in Sudan, there has yet to be a sustained international effort to address the ongoing slaughter of millions of civilians and the nearly 2 million internally displaced persons in the region, the majority of whom are women.

We abhor and condemn the sexual and gender-based violence experienced daily by the women of Darfur. Women and girls are being systematically raped and tortured with continued impunity for these crimes.

We call on the Human Rights Council to address the ongoing culture of impunity for crimes against humanity and to acknowledge that gender equality is essential to the advancement of development, peace and security. This means facilitating safer IDP camps to protect women from rape and violence. It also means that the Government of Sudan must be made accountable in the creation of an enabling environment in which to report, investigate and prosecute cases of violence against women and secure justice for victims. Moreover, the Government must be accountable to the instruments it has ratified including the CEDAW and the Protocol to the African Charter for Humans' and People's Rights and the Rights of Women in Africa.

Most crucially, all humanitarian and political initiatives must put the needs of women and civil society at the centre of their focus. We call for the Council to create a meaningful dialogue between local women's groups, displaced people and traditional leaders in working to address the crisis and to secure peace.

Only a year after the establishment of the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine, the international community has yet to deliver on its duty to protect the people of Darfur. As the violence and killing escalates and atrocities and suffering continue, we need to wake up: **the time to act is now**. We ask that the assessment mission includes a gender perspective - with gender expertise and gender balance - and we urge the government of Sudan to cooperate fully with that mission.

Thank you Mr. President.