JOINT STATEMENT BY THE WOMEN'SMOVEMENT AND MBALE LOCAL DISTRICT GOVERNMENT ON HOW CULTURE CAN BE USED TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN UGANDA.

DATED 18TH NOVEMBER 2022

We gathered here today, stakeholders and participants including the Mbale Resident District Commissioner, Chief Administrative Officer, Local Council (LC) V Representative, District Community Development Officer, District Councillors, Child and Family Protection Unit District technical staff, Cultural Leaders, Religious Leaders, Media and Civil Society Organizations have come together as a follow up on the events that took the whole country and region by surprise when young girls were exposed under the disguise of culture. The video footage and pictures of the event which made rounds on various media platforms showed a cross section of a cultural music procession with young girls dancing while half naked, with their breasts painted white and their hips and thighs covered with see-through banana leaves in the name of exhibiting culture. When cautioned, the organisers of the event insisted that this was not the first time

such a breast parade of culture had occurred in the region, stating that this action was permitted by the required authorities.

Following up on that incident, UWONET together with the Women of Uganda issued a press statement, on the 15th of June 2022, condemning the discriminative events that transpired during the Elgon Cultural Festival which took place in Mbale district on 11th June 2022. This was later followed by another statement by the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development addressing the same issue. The women's movement however argued that such practices were not justifiable and that continued inhumane actions towards women and girls in the name of preserving culture needed to be abolished, adding that they were reprehensible and disgraceful especially in a country such as Uganda which continues to grapple with defilement, child marriages and teenage pregnancies, among others. UWONET stated that these actions contravene Article 33 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda on the Rights of women, clause (1) which states that Women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men. Clause (6) specifically states that laws, cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare or interest of women or which undermine their status, are prohibited. In addition, Article 24 states that no person shall be subjected to any form of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading

treatment or punishment. Article 2 of the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) states that, state parties should take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women. In addition, these actions also contravene Section 7 of the 1997 Children's Act which states that a person shall not expose a child to any customary or cultural practice that is harmful to his or her health, wellbeing, education or social-economic development.

As part of a follow up and concerted effort, to push back the negative social-cultural norms that objectize women and girls' bodies, exposing them to inhumane treatment, we gathered in a meeting held on 18/11/2022 in Mbale District at Wash and Wills Hotel with the key district, cultural and religious stakeholders mentioned above, to jointly agree on what we can do to promote gender equality and women's rights in Uganda. While we acknowledge that poor cultural practices impede women's empowerment and gender equality, following this one-day consultation, it was resolved that we can use good cultural practices as a catalyst for the promotion of gender equality and women's rights nationally. Women and girls everywhere are experiencing extensive abuse and their stories need to be brought to light. The culture of silence coupled with stigma and

impunity has allowed violence against women and girls to prevail with far reaching implications to the lives of women and girls, household and community welfare and national development. There is need to harness the influential role of cultural leaders who not only preside over customary informal justice processes in their communities, but also play a crucial role in framing discussions around societal values and cultural norms related to VAW/G. As custodians of culture, traditional leaders have the influence to alter underlying values and beliefs that are detrimental to community members. Such values and beliefs include inequitable gender roles that lead to culturally sanctioned violation of women's rights. Traditional leaders also have a wide reach in their communities through various traditional fora. Such opportunities can be used to inform community members of the adverse impact of violence against women and girls. For this reason, their influence should be used to fight violence against women and girls, encourage protective practices and advocate for women's and girls' rights to enhance the promotion of gender equality.

In spite of positive developments over recent years, the legal and policy environment in Uganda remains unconducive to women's rights. The positive legal frameworks that are currently existing are not systematically implemented. For instance, Uganda is signatory to, and ratified commitments under the Convention on

the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC 1989), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993, EVAW), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform (1995). Uganda is also signatory to the Maputo Protocol, the global Sustainable Development Goals, the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda and the National Development Plan III (2020/21 – 2024/25) among others. However, women continue to face huge barriers. Despite the presence of these laws, culture, social norms and gender stereotypes continue to compound the achievement of gender equality, allowing biases and discriminative tendencies to prevail in Uganda. We therefore resolved that there is need to make deliberate efforts to understand and create awareness about the existence of these legal instruments which are all aimed towards achieving gender equality, women's rights and basic freedoms.

We also resolved that the harmonisation of some cultural norms that are so far fitting in a modern setting is necessary. It was agreed that equal opportunities will be created for women and girls as opposed to past periods. Great strides will be undertaken culturally to accord women and girls land, as well as consider bride price as a token of appreciation and not a mandate or justification for men to trample over their women, among others.

It was also unanimously agreed that interventions that support citizen competence building on their rights and obligations will be developed and implemented by Government stakeholders.

The global cost of violence against women and girls prior to the COVID-19 pandemic stood at US$ 1.5 trillion, an equivalent of 2% of the global domestic product. It would therefore be abominable to tolerate practices that undermine and slowdown the attainment of gender equality especially after close to over 2 million girls being victim to violence as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To effect the change that we need to see in our society, our key asks are as follows;

To the Cultural Leaders

1. Protect and preserve human dignity through deliberate focus on interventions that promote response, prevention and ending of VAW/G and the enhancement of women and girls' rights in Uganda.
2. Revise / abolish all customs / practices which continue to dehumanise and sexualise women and girls in Uganda.
3. Develop and document traditional justice systems and enhance their capacity to understand culture, human rights and the rule of law.

To the District / Local Government Leadership

1. Set ethical guidelines and standards for related cultural festivals moving forward, ensuring the promotion of dignity.
2. Participate in organizing these events to ensure that ethical standards are applied in preparation and practice.

To the Government of Uganda

1. Ensure that Uganda Police delivers on its mandate to maintain law and order by keenly monitoring such gatherings / festivals, relaying warnings and sanctions to event organisers and effecting penalties for all forms of misconduct.
2. Strengthen synergy between CSOs and cultural institutions on ending VAW/G and harmful traditional practices.

To Civil Society Organizations

1. Frequently hold dialogues with leaders from cultural and religious institutions to build a shared understanding of the issues that escalate Violence Against Women and Girls (VAW/G) in their communities in order to get their support in boosting advocacy efforts to ensure the elimination of VAW/G in Uganda.
2. Orient formal and informal duty bearers in Mbale district on case handling, gender norms, and gender mainstreaming in the protection of the rights of women and girls by the informal and formal structures.

3. Conduct strategizing workshops with the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development in Uganda in order to understand the current gender and social norm issues that perpetuate VAW/G through culture and address the issues.
4. Invest in training women and girls on VAWG, and the existing laws and policies providing for their rights.

To the Media

1. Ensure authenticity of the information shared on the various media platforms and adopt a gender sensitive reporting style.
2. Document and popularize the various cultural practices and norms which complement the laws and policies on prevention of VAW/G, and promote women's rights and protection.

To Religious Leaders

1. Advocate for positive social norm change in the prevention and response to GBV in the society.

Going forward, UWONET will continue dialoguing with key stakeholders including religious and cultural institutions, government, offering mentorship to women and girls and advocating for the promotion of gender equality and women's rights in Uganda.

Thank you, For God and My Country.

Uganda Women's Network (UWONET),
Plot 710 Bbuye Kigowa, Mirembe Close
Ntinda, P.O Box 27991 Kampala, Uganda.
Phone: +256414286539,

Email: info@uwonet.or.ug
Website: www.uwonet.or.ug

Blog: http://uwonetnews.blogspot.com
Facebook: https: //www.facebook.com/uwonet
Twitter: @uwonet.