

STATEMENT BY THE COORDINATING COMMITTEE OF PARAGUAYAN WOMEN (CMP)

The Coordinating Committee of Paraguayan Women (Coordinación de Mujeres del Paraguay, CMP), is a network of women's organizations that has been working for the last 22 years for women's rights. Faced with the developments related to President Fernando Lugo's fatherhood, CMP shares its reflections and positions with the public through this statement:

· **Responsible fatherhood, a matter of public interest:** Children's rights – just like women's rights – are a public matter because they are recognized and must be guaranteed, respected, protected and promoted by the State. A decades-old Feminist slogan says "the personal is political": that which appears as an individual experience with no political relevance has a political nature as well, because it is part of an overall system of male domination and female subordination. The existence of rights breaking this dominance is the product of citizen's struggles that must be known and recognized by all, women and men alike.

· **The power of one individual man is not above the law:** As Feminists, it is important for us that it is proved that there are mechanisms and tools to exercise our rights and that those must be accepted even by those who have power. As a Paraguayan citizen, the President is not above the law and he must fulfill his duties by acknowledging, caring for and feeding those who come to be identified as his children.

· **President Fernando Lugo's behavior reflects the persistence of the patriarchal order:** The President is part of a male-dominant culture that is fully present in Paraguayan society. Much has been already said about the power relations between Lugo and some of those who allegedly are the mothers of his children, analyses that seem relevant to us and that challenge the patriarchal order. At the same time, we are concerned about references to these cases reinforcing other stereotypes about women as pitiful and helpless victims, incomplete beings who need a man to protect them, and individuals subjected to male dominance in a context of compulsory heterosexuality. It is precisely this ongoing compromising of their autonomy that damages women in front of bosses, male leaders and the different powers of our patriarchal culture.

· **In a secular State there are no discriminations or privileges based on religion:** Currently all children (those of a President as well as those of everybody else, regardless of the circumstances of their

birth) enjoy equal rights before the law. In the past there were different statuses based on the marital status and the relationships between fathers and mothers. For instance, the offspring of priests, bishops and other members of the Catholic Church hierarchy were considered “sacrilegious children”. That was so because civil law’s thinking was ruled by canonical law but, even though this influence is still present, there have been changes. Therefore, it is important to eradicate all traces of canonical law from our laws, so a single religion can no longer influence in discriminatory ways. Only a secular State can guarantee the rights of all, regardless of their religious beliefs.

- **The double moral standards of the Catholic Church discriminate and damage women:** Cultural and political pressure from institutionalized Catholicism on our country’s laws, policies and customs is something negative for women’s rights. The Catholic hierarchy has protected the prevailing moral double standards, using the pulpits and its power to condemn sexual and reproductive rights and deprive people of them, while protecting their own members who live their sexual lives in irresponsible manners. It is high time for the Church to acknowledge and change this situation.

- **The nuclear, heterosexual family is not the only valid model for girls and boys:** We can use laws to force men to acknowledge their offspring and to be economically responsible for them, and this is needed in a country full of irresponsible fathers as Paraguay is. However, we must not forget that the traditional model of the nuclear, heterosexual family is not the only valid one to raise girls and boys. Laws can do nothing to satisfy the need for affection and love. We are against fathers’ acknowledgement – and even more so when it was denied in the first place – being accompanied by a disproportionate power for men who, in spite of formal acknowledgment, will be absent from the daily demands placed by the upbringing of girls and boys.

- **Sexual intercourse with a minor: a mockery of women’s rights and dignity:** Besides the fact that the crime must have prescribed, we are concerned by the fact that the President might have committed a punishable offence against a person’s sexual autonomy in the past. But, what would happen if Lugo were to be found guilty? According to what our *machista* and discriminatory Penal Code says, he should pay a fine and that would be all. This is the seriousness with which our laws treat women’s dignity. We are deeply disturbed by the fact that individual politicians and political parties who are Parliament members and did not heed our demands to change the penal law (in this aspect as well as in many others) are now using the alleged presidential offence for their own political ends.

· **Feminists are heard when it is convenient to do so:** It is surprising to us that Feminists are being pushed to take public positions on Lugo's fatherhood when in our daily struggle we are never listened to and when many Feminist organizations and individual activists have already made their positions public, showing the diversity of our social movement in Paraguay. When we made suggestions during the process of Penal Code reform; when we fought for passing a law to protect victims of crimes against sexual autonomy, or pressed for a sexual and reproductive health law, nobody listened to us. The same people who oppose our demands are now condemning and demanding that we speak so our voices can be used against the government. The hypocrisy, opportunism and double moral standards that prevail in a good portion of our political class are made evident through these developments.

· **We oppose the political utilization of women's struggle:** CMP rejects the fact that political parties and the ruling sectors who have always benefited through our country's history are now using women's victimization for their own ends. Only when these sectors truly commit themselves to our struggle will they be able to speak on these issues in a credible way. In the meantime, do not attempt to turn our demands into cannon fodder for your political aspirations.

· **As Feminists we support the position of our comrades who are working for the State:** CMP members support the performance and the efforts of our comrades Gloria Rubin and Liz Torres who are respectively, the Secretary for Women and the Secretary for Children and Adolescents. Their history of struggle proves their interest in improving the situation of women and children, and they do not owe their positions to any powerful man. We are glad that they remain in their posts to continue with their work and we do not want to leave those spaces to those who are demanding their removal. On the contrary: we believe that this is an opportunity to demand even more strongly for changes that will place the rights of women, children and adolescents at the center of public policies and, in particular, to carry on a strong campaign for responsible fatherhood.

In the light of the preceding considerations, CMP rejects the irresponsible and *machista* attitude of President Fernando Lugo and demands that he acknowledges and remedies his mistakes, not just in words and by telling the truth when confronted with claims, but also by promoting public policies on sexual and reproductive rights without any discrimination or hypocrisy.

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Coordinación de Mujeres del Paraguay (CMP) is a Feminist network made of ten organizations: Aireana - Grupo por los Derechos de las Lesbianas (Lesbian Rights Group), Alter Vida – Centro de Formación y Estudios para el Ecodesarrollo (Center for Training and Studies on Ecodevelopment), Asociación Trinidad, Base Educativa de Apoyo Comunitario (BECA) (Community Support), Centro de Documentación y Estudios (CDE), Círculo de Abogadas del Paraguay (Paraguayan Women Lawyers), Colectivo de Mujeres 25 de Noviembre, Grupo de Estudios de la Mujer Paraguaya (GEMPA), Kuña Róga and Mujeres por la Democracia.