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**SPECIFIC HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES:  
WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

**Written statement\* submitted by the Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 July 2005]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **Human rights of women**

The worldwide problem of violence against women persists and has long concerned Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights. The roots of the problem are complex, relating to women's traditionally subordinate role, which is often maintained by violence. No country is immune from this plague, with violations ranging from workplace discrimination and harassment to domestic violence, sexual trafficking and rape. Minnesota Advocates has, for 12 years, reported on violence against women not only in its own country, the United States, but also in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union countries, where these problems have been exacerbated by the economic, social and political upheaval related to the transition to democracy and a free market economy.

The regions of Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union countries are extremely diverse, encompassing various cultures, religions, social and political situations. In all the countries, however, implementation of protections lags dramatically behind the almost universal formal ratification of the major human rights treaties. Strong patriarchal cultures and negative stereotypes of women combine with the priority given to economic issues to block real improvements in security and equality for women. In addition, the long term isolation and closed societies of many of these countries prohibited progress that is promoted by a free exchange of information and ideas.

In all parts of the world, advocates working to end violence against women use a wide variety of strategies aimed at increasing awareness of women's rights, promoting services to victims of violence and holding governments accountable to their obligations under human rights law to prevent and punish violence. Communication between advocates is essential to developing the most efficient and effective response to violence against women. Successful and unsuccessful strategies, laws and policies are all learning tools.

Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights has developed an innovative on-line communication and learning tool aimed at confronting violence against women in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union countries. The Stop Violence Against Women website—[www.stopvaw.org](http://www.stopvaw.org)—is a ground-breaking distance-learning, networking and mentoring tool for women's advocates working in Central and Eastern Europe, the Newly Independent States, Mongolia and the U.N. Protectorate of Kosovo. Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights is hopeful that this new tool will bring a new dimension to the overall effort to end violence against women and provide a model for other regions in the world.

The Stop Violence Against Women website (StopVAW) provides narrative discussion about research and law and policy developments in the areas of domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and trafficking in women. StopVAW also includes a resource library of best practices, training materials, an online mentoring program, message boards for advocate discussions, and country pages which summarize developments related to efforts to combat violence against women in each of the 30 countries of the region.

StopVAW will help meet the urgent need in CEE/NIS for current and comprehensive information on strategies to end violence against women. The website's goals are as follows:

- Provide advocates in CEE/NIS with current, cutting-edge information on laws, policies, advocacy strategies, and research in four areas of violence against women: Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, and Trafficking in Women.
- Provide advocates in CEE/NIS with on-line mentoring and a forum for information exchange between individuals and groups within CEE/NIS and outside the region on strategies to end violence against women.
- Enable advocates to create more effective strategies to end violence against women in the region based on their access to comprehensive and current information, coupled with a forum for on-line mentoring and information exchange.
- Build a network of advocates in the CEE/NIS to strengthen and enrich the effort to end violence against women.

StopVAW was originally developed in collaboration with UNIFEM, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights and the Open Society Institute's Network Women's Program (NWP). Each organization identified the need for advocates to have immediate and efficient access to information about model laws, strategies, policies and research on violence against women. Since a huge amount of this kind of information exists, there was a need to organize and synthesize the data and present it in a user-friendly format. StopVAW responds to this need.

Advocates in the CEE/NIS are in the process of drafting and lobbying for the passage of new laws, new government policies, new services for violence victims and new education and outreach initiatives on violence against women. The best way to maximize the effectiveness of these strategies is to ensure that advocates have access to the most relevant and cutting-edge information about these topics from around the world. The StopVAW website provides this. In addition, it presents the information in a way that recognizes the social and political circumstances of each country. StopVAW provides both introductory materials and more in-depth materials relevant to particular areas of expertise. For example, there are sections entitled *Explore the Issue*, aimed at introducing topics, and sections providing information about specific law enforcement policies for those working with police and prosecutors.

#### National Violence Against Women Monitor Program

The National Violence Against Women (NVAW) Monitor Program of StopVAW uses the *Country Pages* sections of the website to encourage communication and collaboration between advocates in the CEE/NIS. This program was launched in 2004 and designates one expert from each country to facilitate communication about developments in her country on violence against women. The *Country Pages* present general information about each country, which treaties they have ratified, their country reports on human rights, their laws on violence against women, new research and reports and new reform and advocacy efforts to combat violence against women.

Internet technology has changed the world in countless ways. With the StopVAW website, Minnesota Advocates' goal is to harness the capacity and power of the internet and put it to use in the global effort to end violence against women.

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