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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”

Statement submitted by American Mothers, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.



Statement

Violence against pregnant women: intervention and education through faith-based leadership in rural communities

Introduction

Violence against women is a complex global crisis that encompasses multiple structural issues and crosses all social, cultural, economic, religious and political boundaries. Gender-based violence is manifested in various ways around the world. Women are marginalized by a lack of social power and limited access to basic resources, including legal protection, health care and maternal education. Perpetrators of such violence include partners, family members, community members and authorities. Statistics demonstrate that one in three women will experience gender-based violence during their lifetime.

Violence against women is often exacerbated during pregnancy, resulting in extreme consequences for both the mother and the foetus. As Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women, explains, “Violence in intimate relationships is all about power. There are fewer times when you can have power over a woman than when she’s pregnant. She’s vulnerable. It’s an easier time to threaten her.” There is a greater incidence of maternal homicide during pregnancy and this threat of death extends to the foetus as well.

Although estimates claim that gender-based violence against pregnant women occurs at a rate of 1 in 20 women globally, this particular form of violence is grossly underreported and requires greater attention. While pregnant women are routinely screened for various conditions, the experience of violence is a much more common occurrence that is not properly evaluated. In an article on domestic violence in pregnancy, Rena Blumberg explained: “The most dangerous time for a woman is when she is pregnant.”

American Mothers and reducing violence against pregnant women

American Mothers is a 75-year-old, interfaith non-governmental organization (NGO), which is dedicated to recognizing the crucial role of motherhood through education and outreach. There is nothing that is more important than protecting and promoting the well-being of women as they bring new life into the world. October 2011 marked the birth of the seven billionth baby and it is time the world protects and defends women in childbearing. Through its mission, American Mothers is focused on working towards ending violence against mothers. Recognizing the severity of violence against pregnant women and the lack of current services available for those suffering such brutalities, American Mothers is committed to creating an initiative to address this global crisis.

Faith-based communities as agents of change

As an interfaith organization, American Mothers recognizes the important role faith-based organizations and spirituality play in the lives of women and families overall. Religious leaders and communities have incredible influence and the potential to act as powerful agents of education, advocacy and change. According to the United Nations Population Fund,

Faith and religion play a vital role in the lives and cultures of most people throughout the world. Indeed, about 70 per cent of people identify themselves as members of a religious or spiritual community. Religious values and practices ... play a powerful role in shaping attitudes, opinions and behaviour.

Thus, in order to effectively address threats against pregnant women, this proposal calls for intervention via an education and advocacy campaign centred within faith-based communities. Religious leaders and communities are positioned to create change by educating themselves and others about the devastating effects of violence against pregnant women. Religious principles and teachings of the world's major faith traditions affirm religion as promoting the full dignity of every human being. Faith communities can be used to highlight the problematic nature of violence against pregnant women and the damage that results for women, children and family.

Based on the *Restoring Dignity* toolkit produced by Religions for Peace, this proposal recommends a multi-action plan centred within the religious community. This strategy includes education, prevention, advocacy and support components and incorporates interreligious elements and participation from women and men. American Mothers proposes launching this education and advocacy campaign by providing comprehensive training within a centralized location for religious leaders in North America with the purpose of preparing teachers and clergy to implement the *Restoring Dignity* toolkit to end violence against pregnant women. The initial locations to be chosen will be rural locations where women's access to services, as well as to the community in general, is limited.

The action items to be implemented by religious communities are as follows:

Education and awareness

Interreligious educational programmes

- Train religious leaders, including teachers and clergy, on the global crisis of gender-based violence
- Increase public knowledge and promote an ethical code of living that encourages respect and dignity for women and girls

Religious and spiritual educational events

- Organize meetings aimed at educating the community on the issues involved in gender-based violence
- Incorporate messages about gender-based violence into services and rituals on a regular basis

Healing and leadership building

- Organize skill-building workshops that train survivors to become community leaders and teachers

Develop and disseminate awareness materials

- Mobilize resources to address the global issue of gender-based violence against pregnant women and its effects on women and families, including brochures, fact sheets, posters, etc.

Prevention

Include both women and men in prevention efforts

Interreligious dialogue and multi-faith collaboration

- Implement collaboration between multi-faith communities
- Demonstrate the universal faith-based principles that support the full human dignity of every person

Integrate consideration of gender-based violence into religious gatherings

- Incorporate information and education about violence against women/pregnant women into religious gatherings and services on a regular basis

Discuss gender-based violence with young people

- Offer education and intervention initiatives focused on youth that create the potential for future generations to become agents of change

Advocacy

Reclaim religion as an agent for peace

- Promote scriptures, doctrines and practices that respect the sanctity of life and support the full human dignity of every person
- Condemn all religious and non-religious practices that support gender-based violence

Organize community efforts

- Break the silence about violence and dangers faced by pregnant women through collaboration between religious leaders and community organizations

Connect with community and government leaders

- Unite with community and government leaders to explore how religious leaders can effectively address community needs and work towards reducing violence against women

Support and care

Give attention to survivors' stories

- Offer a safe environment where women and families who have experienced gender-based violence can speak without fear

Develop support groups

- Facilitate group reflections about violence against women to lessen feelings of isolation, to empower and to create larger support networks

Unite with health-care organizations

- Assist survivors in obtaining good-quality health care that addresses both physical and emotional effects of violence
- Work with health-care organizations to create a screening process to identify and interrupt violence against pregnant women

Offer support services to individuals affected by gender-based violence

- Provide counselling to women, children and families who have been affected by gender-based violence
- Create outlets for individuals to distinguish between healthy and abusive relationships

Conclusion

Violence against pregnant women is not simply a women's issue, but a community issue because of its wide-reaching effects; thus women and men must be involved in working towards dismantling power structures and ending violence against pregnant women. Developing an education and advocacy campaign within the faith setting offers a great opportunity to have an impact on the overall issue and create change.

American Mothers is committed to working towards eradicating violence against mothers. This proposal seeks to pursue this goal through the multi-action plan supported by Religions for Peace. By training religious leaders to bring together resources within rural communities a cultural transformation through spiritual healing can begin.
