



## **Economic and Social Council**

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

#### **Fifty-seventh session**

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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**

#### **Statement submitted by Centre for Social Research, 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.



## Statement

Violence against women is prevalent in every country in the world and is one of the leading causes of morbidity for women. Violence against women is underpinned by misogynistic cultural, social and economic structures and is one of the key tools used in the ongoing global war on women.

In South Asia, which is home to one fifth of the world's population, violence, or the risk of violence, permeates every aspect of women's lives from birth to death. It is estimated that one third of South Asian women experience violence throughout their lives, and violence against women is institutionalized through family structures, wider social and economic frameworks, and cultural and religious traditions. This violence is insidious: it is a widely accepted method for controlling women, is largely overlooked by law enforcement agencies and is ignored by those in power.

Violence against women has negative impacts on women's health, dignity, rights and empowerment, and also has strong implications for the health and development of families and societies at large. This violence needs to be addressed in order to build a strong and equal global society. In South Asia, it is necessary to develop a culture in which violence against women is not accepted or condoned. Whether violence is committed in the name of tradition, culture or custom, it must be ensured that the perpetrators of such acts are held to account and that all members of society are aware that violence against women will not be tolerated. Only when women can live free of the threat of violence will it be possible to achieve legitimate development.

Several forms of violence against women are prevalent throughout South Asia, including domestic violence, sexual assault and rape, sex-selective abortions and female infanticide, dowry harassment and mortality, honour killings, acid attacks and trafficking of women. This violence starts before women are even born and continues throughout their lives.

In India sex-selective abortions are increasing, and in 2008 257,000 girls were missing as a result of the practice. Furthermore, the custom of dowry continues despite being outlawed, and dowry-related violence is widespread. There were 8,618 dowry deaths in India in 2011. Forced marriage and child marriage are widespread in Afghanistan, where the Independent Human Rights Commission estimates that forced marriages make up from 60 to 80 per cent of the marriages in the country. Furthermore, approximately 57 per cent of the girls are married before the age of 16. In Pakistan, honour killings are a common form of violence; 705 people were killed in the name of honour in 2011.

Trafficking of women is prevalent in Nepal, and it is estimated that 5,000 to 10,000 Nepali women and girls are trafficked into sexual exploitation in India annually. In Bhutan the collection of data on violence against women is extremely limited. However, even in that small country, 416 cases of domestic violence were reported in 2009. In the Maldives, almost 30 per cent of women experience violence at least once in their lives, while in Sri Lanka the rape of women as a consequence of internal armed conflict has gone totally unreported, and women receive little protection or support in the face of violence.

While these figures speak for themselves, in reality the prevalence of violence against women is understood to be much higher. Low reporting rates make it

difficult to assess the extent of violence, but it is widely recognized that for every crime against women that is reported 10 crimes go unreported.

### **Response to violence against women in South Asia**

All South Asian countries have either ratified or acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and most have enacted legislation to prohibit violence against women.

In spite of this legislation, violence against women persists throughout the region. While legislation may protect victims of violence in theory, in many cases the penalty outlined within the legislation is weak. Furthermore, the implementation of these laws remains limited and, in many cases, ineffective in preventing violence or prosecuting the perpetrators of this violence.

A lack of commitment to ending violence against women at the political level is evident right across the region and is preventing substantive government action. Governments must be held to account for their failure to effectively address violence against women and ensure that women's rights are upheld. Furthermore, efforts must be made to encourage and support Governments in developing effective and comprehensive approaches to violence against women.

### **Action required by the United Nations**

We call upon the United Nations to:

#### **1. Facilitate a regional consultation on violence against women**

A regional consultation is necessary to renew the focus on violence against women throughout South Asia. Such a conference would provide a platform for assessing the status of violence against women throughout the region, sharing best practices and developing regional approaches to violence against women. It would also pressure Governments to build a framework for reducing violence, including the development of legislation, policies and programmes that address violence against women.

#### **2. Promote the convening of a fifth world conference on women in 2015**

In 2012, almost 20 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, half the world's population is still demanding change. A fifth world conference on women would have the ability to inspire positive change and action. The conference would bring nations together to engage on gender issues and would put violence against women back on the global agenda. It would be an opportunity to reflect on gender relations on a global scale and on current attempts to rectify gender inequalities. Furthermore, it would place women's empowerment at the forefront of government planning and policy and would motivate substantive action to address persistent gender discrimination.

#### **3. Increase investment in women**

The United Nations must encourage South Asian Governments to increase their investments in women, including promoting women's rights, addressing violence against women and facilitating gender equality. South Asian Governments are developing legislation to address a range of gender concerns; however, it is

necessary for this policy to be backed by appropriate funding. Without appropriate budgetary allocations the policy will be unable to effect any real change in women's situation.

#### **4. Advocate for the development and implementation of legislation**

While Governments have made efforts over the last 15 years to develop legislation to protect women from violence, there is a need for further legislation in most countries and for improvements in the implementation of this legislation. With regard to violence against women, the United Nations must pressure Governments to develop strong legislation and must monitor its implementation to ensure that it actually reduces violence.

The review process of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women needs to be improved. Governments must be required to collect data on the number of cases of violence against women, the status of the implementation of legislation on violence against women and the budgetary allocations for this legislation.

The issue of rape is particularly in need of legislative reform. The majority of legislation in South Asia focuses specifically on penetrative rape, which limits the impact of the law. This legislation needs to be broadened to include all forms of sexual assault.

#### **5. Build the capacity of the independent media**

The independent media are vital for holding Governments to account, and there is a need for the development of strong independent media throughout South Asia. The United Nations must provide capacity-building for media agencies to increase their ability to undertake independent journalism and monitor and evaluate government action to ensure that it has positive impacts on both women and men.

#### **6. Strengthen civil society**

The reduction in investments in civil society is restricting the capacity of women's organizations to effect change at the grass-roots and policy levels and is a big concern throughout the region. A lot of gains have been made over the last three decades; however, the recent global financial crisis has led to a reduction in funding opportunities for women's organizations worldwide and a slowdown in the work on behalf of women's rights. There has also been a backlash against the achievements in women's rights and equality.

It is important that South Asian Governments and the United Nations provide adequate resources to strengthen civil society to ensure that the improvements to the situation of women over the last 30 years are sustained and can continue to work towards gender equality.

We are calling upon Member nations to declare their territory to be a no-tolerance zone for any form of violence against women and to break down the patriarchal structures that are used to justify this war on women. Unless we stop these crimes against women and ensure that women can live without fear of violence, we will never achieve real development or build a truly peaceful world.