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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 Comité français pour l’Afrique du Sud, 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 and girls is a scourge that transcends countries, ethnicities, cultures, social classes and age groups. The figures are worrisome. Depending on the country, 15 to 71 per cent of women have been victims of violence at some time in their lives. No woman or girl in the world is immune from violence on account of her sex.

There are many forms of violence against women and girls: excision, forced marriage, rape, prostitution, etc. The available data show that in South Africa, up to 7 out of 10 women report having been victims of physical and/or sexual abuse at some point in their lives; and up to 50 per cent of all sexual assaults have been committed against girls under 16.

Between April and December 2007, South African police identified more than 36,000 cases of rape, while according to experts only one in nine cases is reported to the police.

Given that HIV/AIDS infection remains a serious problem in spite of the measures taken, rape is of even more acute concern, as the disease may affect both the women raped and the children that are born. Because of HIV/AIDS, the infant mortality rate has more than quadrupled over the last decade, rising from 150 to 625 deaths per 100,000 births between 1998 and 2007.

Finally, some women are even more vulnerable to such violence. Lesbian women may be victims of rape of a particular kind, called “corrective rape”, whose alleged purpose is both to punish them for their homosexuality and to “return” them to heterosexuality. Similarly, women and girls with disabilities are a group at risk.

South African women are also victims of domestic violence. Every six hours, in South Africa, a woman is killed by her boyfriend.

The Comité français pour l’Afrique du Sud wishes to make its contribution by proposing the concrete measures below.

1. Step up awareness and prevention measures

Implement awareness campaigns aimed at men, who often do not realize the seriousness of their actions

In a recent study conducted by the Medical Research Council of South Africa, more than a quarter of South African men admitted having committed rape, 46 per cent of them more than once. The study points to a culture of violence against women that is deeply rooted in people’s minds. However, there are a number of initiatives with proven effectiveness in changing mindsets.

The EngenderHealth Association has implemented the Men as Partners programme, which includes workshops for men in places such as workplaces, trade unions, prisons and religious institutions. Most of those who attend then reject violence against women. Adolescents are more likely than older men to change their point of view.

In the same vein, a video game for young men was put out during the 2010 World Cup to raise awareness of the issue of violence against women.

Removing the abuser in order to protect women and their children

South Africa could learn from an experiment undertaken in France whereby persons placed under protection through removal of the abuser receive a hotline to directly notify an emergency service, which immediately knows where the caller is by the caller ID and can send the police as quickly as possible.

Also in France, under a recent decree, every woman in danger may now receive immediate protection measures before lodging a complaint and independently thereof. Under these measures, arrangements can also be made for the victim's everyday life, in particular with respect to housing or the exercise of parental authority.

Helping victims not to reproduce the violence they have suffered

The World Health Organization, in a paper presented on 21 September 2010 at the World Conference on Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion, noted for the first time that one of the main risk factors for being the victim or perpetrator of domestic and sexual violence is having oneself been abused in childhood. Of those who witnessed their mothers being abused, 42 per cent reported having used physical violence against a partner in the past 10 years and 9 per cent reported having done so in the current year.

Treatments for these traumas do exist, and are effective. Special care must be developed. A duty of care must also be enjoined on those convicted of violence.

Remove the risk of HIV/AIDS infection

Apart from the risk of direct infection, it has been shown that women who have been victims of sexual abuse in childhood may, as adolescents or adults, engage in riskier sexual behaviour, further increasing the risk of HIV infection.

Therefore, actions must be taken like those of the Nisaa Institute for Women's Development, with its safe houses and HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention and care programmes for mothers and children alike.

Communicate to women with disabilities

In Namibia, South Africa's neighbour, the International Federation for Family Planning, a United Nations Trust Fund beneficiary, has created an outreach programme focused on women and girls with disabilities. Following this training, women with disabilities have had better access to protection services.

Specific tools for women with disabilities, such as awareness brochures in Braille, should be developed.

2. Improve support for victims*Facilitate the reporting of violence by establishing a single toll-free number*

Many associations and Government departments have a phone number for victims. However, establishment of a single nationwide toll-free telephone number that is widely publicized through media campaigns would make it known to all and give victims easier access to help. The lines would be maintained by specially trained people to better guide victims after hearing their stories.

Train police officers to receive victims' complaints

Particular emphasis should be placed on the concept of marital rape, often likened to a dispute between spouses. Domestic violence is too often regarded by the police as a private matter. Its seriousness is underestimated, and investigation is rarely satisfactory.

The goal is for one police officer at each station, preferably a woman, to be trained in this area and designated to receive complaints.

Increase the number of safe houses for abused women and their children

South Africa has increased the number of places available in emergency shelters for battered women. However, there are still too few, and such centres are mainly located in cities, creating a void for non-urban women. The target set by the United Nations of one shelter place for every 7,500 inhabitants, must be reached as soon as possible, and an effort should be made to create rural shelters.

3. Ensure that victims can really assert their rights

Great progress has been made at the level of laws and policies to combat violence against women. As of today, no fewer than 125 of the 193 United Nations Member States outlaw domestic violence. Since 2007, South Africa has possessed, in the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Act, a very comprehensive tool to fight against that scourge.

The world over, enforcement is the area where progress is still needed.

According to the Council of Europe, conviction rates for rape are declining almost everywhere in Europe, even as reports have increased.

In South Africa, as in France, recent cases have suggested that rape can be committed with impunity. In addition, even today many people guilty of the murder of a woman are not brought to trial or convicted of any offence.

The justice system must hand down strong, exemplary sentences to the perpetrators of such acts. Specific training should be provided for judges, to make them aware of the relevant legislation.
