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Statement submitted by Mothers’ Union, 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

Mothers' Union is a worldwide Christian organization with 4 million members living in 83 countries. Members volunteer their time to support family life and to empower women, through prayer, campaigning and enabling activities.

Throughout the world, women and girls are subject to many different forms of violence. Violence occurs within the home, in the community, and is perpetrated by the State, often in conflict and post-conflict situations. Violence affects women and girls regardless of their context and happens across all stages of life, with some forms of violence more prominent at certain ages. The social injustice of violence against women and girls has a profound impact on individuals, including physical injury and illness, psychological damage, social isolation, exclusion, poverty, and, in some cases, death, and impacts on the well-being and development of society as a whole.

The prevalence of violence against women and girls varies across the world and reporting and recording are inconsistent. Physical violence affects from 3 per cent of women a year in France, according to Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), to 50 per cent of women and girls a year in Ethiopia, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Figures for women experiencing violence at some point during their lifetime are even higher. For example, 83 per cent of Kenyan women have been physically abused at least once in their life, according to the Development Centre of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Sexual violence is endemic across the world. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 48 women are raped every hour, according to the *American Journal of Public Health*; and in Lesotho, 61 per cent of women report having suffered sexual violence at some point in their lifetime, according to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Many girls are under threat of sexual violence on the way to and in school, adversely affecting their education. Rape within marriage is not legally recognized in a number of countries and while sexual harassment affects a high proportion of women, including in education and the workplace, it is not prohibited in many parts of the world.

Coercive and controlling behaviour is often a precursor to further forms of violent treatment, and women and girls who experience controlling behaviour have a higher likelihood of experiencing physical violence or sexual violence. This behaviour is now recognized as violence in law in some countries, including the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Emotional and psychological abuse can include ridicule, criticism, jealous control and ignoring the victim.

Harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation are practised most commonly in north-eastern Africa, some countries in Asia and the Middle East, and among migrants from these areas, according to WHO. Rates of female genital mutilation vary from 3,000 cases among migrants in Ireland to 94 per cent of women and girls in Sierra Leone.

Violence against women is an expression of patriarchal subjugation, whereby violence is used to gain and/or exert power and control over another. Violence may be precipitated by internal or external stimuli, but importantly, the responsibility to

control expressions of violence lies with the perpetrator(s). Factors such as financial problems, alcohol, the use of pornography, peer and familial expectations and cultural tradition may serve to inhibit the control and denunciation of violence. Attitudes that perpetuate violence include the belief that women's bodies belong to men and their families, and that it is simply a part of life. These attitudes are also held by women. For example, 86 per cent of women in Guinea agree with at least one reason, for example burning food or refusing sex, to justify abuse from an intimate partner, according to a demographic household survey. Lack of legislation and law enforcement trivializes violence against women and girls, and prevents it being taken seriously as a violation of human rights and treated as a public health issue. Shame and fear of reporting violence also prevent the true scale of violence being unmasked.

Mothers' Union approach

Mothers' Union wants violence against women and girls to end before it even starts. Women and girls must be accorded full and equal status and human rights in the public and private spheres. Across the world, Mothers' Union tackles violence against women and girls in a number of ways.

Challenging underlying attitudes and prevention

Mothers' Union seeks to encourage flourishing and equal relationships, while recognizing the uniqueness of being male and of being female. Through its Literacy and Financial Education Programme, Mothers' Union empowers participants, in particular women, with literacy and numeracy skills, and enables communities to discuss important issues such as violence against women and girls. Once literate, many women form accumulated savings and credit groups and become more economically empowered, leading to greater respect and less violence from their husbands and community members.

“Men used to come home like lions — they used to be very violent. What used to cause the violence was that husbands were the sole family providers. Nowadays, we sit together and share ideas — husbands and wives talk to each other.” — Female participant, the Sudan

The Family Life Programme in Uganda tackles poverty in a holistic way, bringing together families and communities to identify and prioritize issues they face every day, such as food insecurity, poverty, lack of sanitation and HIV/AIDS, and to work as a group to improve their community. Simple solutions make a real impact, such as building smokeless stoves and planting kitchen gardens to improve health. The Family Life Programme has also improved relationships between husbands and wives, thus promoting unity in the home. One of the key effects of the improved gender relations is a reported reduction in domestic violence.

Awareness-raising

Members raise awareness of gender-based violence through workshops, events and protest marches. In Papua New Guinea and across the Solomon Islands, members have run a Human Rights Advocacy Project for women and children who have been subjected to violence from those in the logging industry; acting as community support facilitators for victims of trafficking and child prostitution; and

raising awareness through drama on International Women's Day. Raising awareness can empower women to know their rights and take action against violence.

“We had the case of a middle-aged woman who has suffered at the hands of men who used and dumped her after promising her marriage. One such man is the man she housed, fed and clothed. She virtually provided all he needed and handed over her monthly earnings to him. Despite doing all these things for him, he beats her up at the slightest complaint, brings in other women. Mothers' Union succeeded in educating her on her basic rights and why she must not be exploited. Eventually, she was bold enough to throw the man out of her apartment.” — member, Nigeria

Support and provision for survivors

Mothers' Union offers practical support to women experiencing violence. In the United Kingdom, members provide women's shelters with food, toiletries and clothes. In one area, members provide direct support to survivors of domestic violence by helping them to make phone calls and move house, providing storage for possessions, babysitting, and accompanying them to court hearings.

“In one of the parenting courses we ran, a pregnant mother was recently married. She already had two daughters, aged 6 and 8 years old. It was found that her new husband had married her to abuse her daughters. She needed and received a lot of support from Mothers' Union members and church members and her husband was sent to prison. The mother returned, with her daughters, to her parents' home.” — member, United Kingdom

Recommendations

Eliminating and preventing violence against women and girls requires a transformational approach involving men and women, boys and girls. Violence must also be addressed through a holistic approach of eliminating underlying attitudes, prevention, and providing support for survivors and enforcing legal frameworks that set norms and standards, protect women and girls and punish and rehabilitate perpetrators.

Changing attitudes and prevention

- Individuals, civil society and the State must reject attitudes that accept or promote all forms of violence against women and girls, and empower women and girls to know it is unacceptable
- Governments and civil society should raise awareness and educate men and women, boys and girls about violence against women and girls in order to change attitudes
- Governments should facilitate safe environments, free from violence, for girls' education and women's employment

Provision for survivors

Governments should:

- Support and fund programmes to support survivors of violence against women and girls

- Provide information on how survivors can access support and justice
- Ensure that all involved in law enforcement and justice are fully sensitized and trained to deal with violence against women and girls

Enforcing legal frameworks

Governments should:

- Adopt and enforce legislation outlawing all forms of violence against women and girls in the private and public spheres, including harmful traditional and customary practices, and enforce punishment and rehabilitation of perpetrators
 - Ensure that survivors of violence against women and girls have safe and fair access to justice
 - Tackle the sexualization of women and girls in the media through enforceable guidelines.
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