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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 Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, 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 an issue pertaining to all countries and communities, irrespective of whether they are developed or developing nations. We believe that in order to attain the goal of eliminating and preventing all forms of violence against women and girls the following issues need to be tackled.

- (a) Addressing the root causes of cultural, structural and economic discrimination;
- (b) Empowering girls and women through education and economic resources;
- (c) Legal protection, and punishment for those committing violence against women and girls.

Root causes

It is ironic that the twenty-first century, which has been witness to tremendous advances in science and technology, has seen very little positive changes in gender equality. Violence against women has its roots in cultural, structural and economic discrimination in any given community. Deep-rooted patriarchal values create a preference for the male even today in certain countries. Gender discrimination or lack of equality in education and health care, sexual harassment, unequal pay for equal work and unequal participation in decisionmaking, have become “normal”. Growing up with the cultural attitude that “it is okay to beat a woman”, or seeing the father beat the mother, can cause these negative practices to continue for generations. This has become an accepted tradition in a number of countries, particularly those that are economically deprived. Women and girls also fall victim to culturally acceptable traditional practices that violate their human rights, such as female foeticide, infanticide, neglect of female children, female genital mutilation/cutting, incest, forced and child marriages, honour killings, wife inheritance and marital rape. From infancy, women are taught to normalize violence and believe it is a cultural practice that they must endure, while boys and men are not taught otherwise.

The media have a vital role in reinforcing patriarchy by portraying women and girls as sex objects as well as glorifying the culture of violence. The cultural acceptance of discrimination leads to structural discrimination, creating a bias against women and girls in society. Lack of adequate political representation of women places women in a disadvantaged position in making policies and decisions concerning their needs and demands.

In many societies, women are either unpaid or receive unequal pay for their work compared with their male counterparts. Women are often referred to as “the poorest of the poor”, and their lack of financial stability and financial dependence on men affect their ability to provide for their families and make them vulnerable to violence. This prevents some women from leaving toxic domestic situations while others, desperate to make ends meet and feed their families or to flee from an abusive partner, turn to prostitution, and are beaten and raped.

Distorted thinking of men on sexual relations

Rape is used as a weapon of war in some countries, but if men’s wives are raped they reject them. In a survey conducted in the Democratic Republic of the

Congo (branded by United Nations as the “rape capital of the world”), 61.4 per cent of the men interviewed said that women sometimes deserve to be beaten; 42.7 per cent said that “if a woman doesn’t show physical resistance when forced to have sex, it’s not rape” and 27.9 per cent believe that sometimes women want to be raped. This distorted thinking should not be tolerated. Well over 40 per cent of the men polled asserted that a man should reject his wife if she has been raped. These rape myths need to be uprooted, along with the idea that men have a “right to rape” or have sexual relations against a woman’s wishes. Zero tolerance of all forms of violence must be adopted by all States and communities as a policy and practice in order to prevent further violence against women and girls.

Economic discrimination

Just because someone is born a girl, she should not be denied a fair share of the ancestral properties, which often are only given to the male child. The patriarchal society can discriminate against women in an enormous number of ways. Financial dependence on men affects their ability to provide for their families and makes them vulnerable to violence. Other situations contributing to violence are the condition of extreme poverty and conflict, and an inadequate response by the national and international communities. Poverty and violence lead women and girls into human trafficking. The great global demand for sex as well as the hope of a better life if they leave their country make women and girls fall prey to trafficking for sexual purposes, exploitative labour or removal of their body organs, and subject to abuse and rape by their traffickers.

Education as a tool for social change

The underlying bias of the patriarchal society can be changed by education that values and focuses on mutual respect and gender equality. Equal access for boys and girls, men and women to education, violence prevention as well as education in socialization and acceptable behaviour between males and females should be made mandatory in schools and homes. Special efforts should be made to ensure access to education for rural women and girls, who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society. Human rights education should be included in the curriculum to reinforce respect for one another as equals in society. Violence against women and girls should not be seen as a women’s issue, but considered a societal issue. Girls and boys should be made aware of the importance of gender equality and the unacceptability of violence against women and girls. Men and boys are crucial to the conversation and must take their rightful place in it, by learning and promoting respectful relations with women and girls, and learn to value their relationships with girls and women as celebratory and life-giving. The rehabilitation and reintegration into society of perpetrators of violence and abusers is also a necessary task. Religious leaders, educational institutions, States and civil society are important players in rectifying the unhealthy practices in society, and with proper education and guidance, people can change.

Economic empowerment

Equal access to education and parental properties as well as equal pay for equal work for both men and women must become a new norm in order to combat violence against women. Women should be able to have economic independence through education and skills development for income generation.

Legal protection and punishment for violence against women and girls

The constitutions of many countries guarantee equality for men and women and many Governments adopt national legislation to end violence against women; however, they fail to implement it. More women should be involved in decisionmaking processes, and States must work actively to prevent and punish violence against women, whether it takes place in the public or the private sphere.

Those living in extreme poverty, indigenous people, immigrants, refugees from climate disasters or conflict situations, as well as victims of trafficking are more vulnerable to violence and need special protection and resources for their rehabilitation.

Recommendations

- Eliminate extreme poverty and provide access to resources and skills development for women's economic empowerment
- Educate boys and girls, men and women on gender justice as well as self-esteem and guide them to enjoy legitimate rights and mutual respect
- Ensure equal representation of women in all decisionmaking bodies, in order to ensure gender justice
- Strengthen the legal system to criminalize violence against women and girls and adopt zero tolerance of violence as a policy and in practice
- Urge all Governments to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and adopt and ensure implementation of the recommendations made at each review by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
- Promote best practices and reinforcement of positive behaviour towards girls and women from early in life

Conclusion

We would like to conclude with the words of Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of UN-Women: "Women must enjoy full and equal rights — to education, to sexual and reproductive health, to be equal participants and leaders in their economies and societies, and to be free from violence and discrimination." This is the dream we share for all women in the world, and together we can make a difference.

We, the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, are committed to working for gender equality and violence against women and girls together with other civil society organizations, Governments and the United Nations.

Note: The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Council: Carmelite NGO, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and UNANIMA International.