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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 International Network of Liberal Women, 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

The theme of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, “Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls”, calls for political, cultural and socioeconomic empowerment of women, whereby liberal principles can help them to manage their own lives and the challenges of their environment.

The main objective of International Network of Liberal Women is to develop women’s awareness of their rights and political, economic, social and cultural responsibilities. The Network, which reinforces relationships and exchange among women from all over the world, believes there is a rich opportunity for women on all levels, especially through liberalism, to come together and share expertise for mutual benefit and empowerment to prevent violence against women and girls.

The Network draws on women’s experience in Asia, Europe, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East and North Africa Region that liberal values liberate the political and socioeconomic potential of women and promote the application of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The Network is developing a strategy to increase representation in more countries in Asia and Africa while continuing with the strategy to focus on liberal values and develop the leadership of women at all levels by, for example, training. As a starting point, the Network supports advocacy for participatory approaches in empowerment and mutual learning, since there is a strong belief in women being experts in their own realities and the real drivers of change. The demand-driven approach, which the Network believes in, means that in all processes, activities must be rooted among and accepted by the people whom they concern.

However, the reality is that even empowered women cannot eliminate and prevent violence against women and girls. Legislation can be adopted and masculine and cultural attitudes throughout societies in different parts of the world can be changed only if all players in society are convinced or are forced to make the change. The Network enumerates hereunder the changes that must be undertaken in general and in specific cases and countries.

Because of gender inequality, psychological and medical care of women and girls after traumatic experiences is often neglected. This is just one reason why the Network believes in the necessity of equal participation of women and men in peace and reconstruction processes at all decision-making levels. Women are major stakeholders in conflict management and resolution and in the prevention of violence. The mere presence of women in negotiations can change the culture and focus of politics as well as violence against women.

International Network of Liberal Women in the Middle East and North Africa Region

The Network is aware of the disproportionate violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa Region as a result of gender inequalities. Women are more often the targets of sexual violence and used as a weapon of war. They suffer an increase in domestic violence during and after conflict. Women and girls are sometimes forced into sex in exchange for food or protection.

The Network is working to achieve:

(a) Eradication of female genital mutilation in Africa. (According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 92 million girls in Africa aged 10 and above have undergone female genital mutilation, which is a violation of the human rights of girls and women, and about 3 million girls are still at risk every year in Africa.);

(b) Abolition of article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which allows rapists to propose marriage to their victims to avoid criminal prosecution;

(c) Criminalization of physical and moral or mental violence against women;

(d) Commitment of Governments in regions in crisis to protect women from violence and prosecute violators.

International Network of Liberal Women in Europe and North America

The Network calls for the elimination and prevention of violence against women and girls through:

(a) Adequate legislation that prohibits cases of violence against women from being negotiable during or after legal proceedings and provides women with free legal support; the criminalization of violence such as sexual harassment, rape, female genital mutilation or any kind of violence against women, in particular domestic violence (for example, in France);

(b) Government support to raise awareness and sensitize the population, while promulgating and disseminating the laws enacted to address violence against women (for example, in the United States of America);

(c) Special education to modify social and cultural bias about violence against women and girls through Government campaigns (for example, in Spain);

(d) Sensitizing the media regarding violence against women and the possible link between such violence and the presentation of women in degrading advertising etc. (all countries).

International Network of Liberal Women in Asia

The Network is very disturbed to observe that:

(a) Violence against women is a pervasive and prevalent problem worldwide affecting physical, social, economic, cultural and legal aspects of women's lives. It clearly shows the culture behind violence against women;

(b) According to the United Nations Development Programme, women across Asia and the Pacific report violence in their own homes, yet many countries have no laws on domestic violence. Few Asian countries have adopted or implemented laws prohibiting violence against women, despite widespread evidence of discrimination and assaults in Asia and the Pacific. Nearly half of the countries in South Asia and more than 60 per cent of those in the Pacific have no laws on domestic violence;

(c) Among Asians, the family is a fundamental and influential foundation, providing financial support and emotional security. The accomplishments of an Asian family are judged in terms of the family as a whole; privacy or independence are thus seen as undesirable. Gender stereotypes are highly conventional and since

women are held responsible for maintaining family honour, known as *izzat*, and avoiding *sharam* (shame), the family may justify women being guarded and considered not as individuals but as property. At worst, the result is an “honour” killing in which a woman is murdered to preserve the “honour” of her family in the eyes of the community.

Consequently, cultural and religious factors resulting in the following:

- (a) Severe isolation by hindering contact with family in the home country and other support systems;
- (b) Using religion to justify domestic violence and threatening the loss of children, social status, financial support and community;
- (c) Pressure from the family of origin to stay in the marriage and tolerate the abuse;
- (d) Silencing battered women and blaming them for bringing dishonour to the family because of shame and public disclosure.

Domestic violence in Asian communities has some different patterns, forms and dynamics of abuse. Two thirds of adult women in the Pacific region have experienced violence at the hands of a partner. In the Philippines, around 18 to 19 per cent of women report domestic violence. Therefore, large disparities exist between subregions: While East Asia and the Pacific are pulling ahead, in South Asia, progress on important issues has stalled.

Can legislation eliminate and prevent violence against women in Asia? A new report from the United Nations says that even in countries with domestic violence laws in place, justice remains out of reach for millions of women. People realize that domestic violence is not a natural thing, but lack of awareness, poverty and social stigma often prevent women from accessing legal help.

According to the Nepalese lawyer, Sapana Pradhan Malla, in her part of the world, excessive use and abuse of power are generally criminalized, but non-action of State actors is not criminalized. It is therefore necessary to criminalize and make them accountable.

International Network of Liberal Women in Asia therefore considers that the elimination and prevention of violence against women could be achieved by:

- (a) Criminalizing State actors and making them accountable for non-action in all cases of violence against women;
- (b) More women being active in law enforcement and in the justice system, which could help victims of violence more effectively;
- (c) Currently, in South Asia, women make up just 9 per cent of judges, 4 per cent of prosecution staff and just 3 per cent of police. Increasing the number of women in such positions could help Asian women to better understand and navigate the justice process;
- (d) Providing education on basic human rights to the many women and girls who are impoverished, illiterate and unaware of the laws and programmes in place to protect them, which forbid any violence against them in any circumstances, as well as obliging States to launch awareness campaigns for women concerning their rights.

In general, in addition to specific legislation on the basic human rights of women and girls and raising women's awareness, police, hospitals and other institutions worldwide need to be sensitized about domestic battering, sexual harassment, female circumcision and machismo.

International Network of Liberal Women calls upon all States to immediately work on these legislative gaps and the many situations of women and girls suffering from violence in their daily life and to effectively take measures to change cultures so as to eliminate and prevent all violence against women and girls permanently.
