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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 Regards de femmes, 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

In France and throughout the world, the non-governmental organization Regards de femmes works in partnership with many women's rights associations to ensure that all public and private spaces provide women and girls with security, equality, recognition and respect for their dignity. These spaces of autonomy and liberty allow them to study, to be cared for, to be evaluated, to work and to develop along with men and together with other women.

Violence against women and girls is a fundamental obstacle to gender equality and is a violation of women's rights: the right to mental, psychological and physical integrity, the right to dignity and fundamental freedoms, the right to travel without gender-based constraints, the right to security and the right to life.

Rape, prostitution, female genital mutilation, conjugal and domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace and in public, forced marriage, so-called "honour" crimes, polygamy, excision and child molestation stem from a historical, patriarchal system based on male dominance over women of all ages, social backgrounds, sexual orientations or origins.

In order to combat violence against women, including women with disabilities, Regards de femmes bases itself on the following:

- Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which requires States parties to "take all appropriate measures (...) [t]o modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women".
- Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which includes all forms of threats or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering.
- Paragraph 124 of the Beijing Programme for Action, which stipulates that Governments should "[c]ondemn violence against women and refrain from invoking any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women".
- The Millennium Development Goals.

Actions taken

Promotion of registration of births

The Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses the importance of modifying practices and social attitudes in order to protect the rights of the child. Article 7 of the Convention provides that every child has the right to a name and a nationality, and it stipulates that boys and girls should be registered immediately after birth.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 60 million children every year throughout the world are not registered at birth. The lack of civil status is an absolute mechanism for social exclusion.

In some countries, patriarchal laws on the nationality of children, including sexist discrimination that prevents women from registering children or bars their access to schooling and health care, impede such registration. Mothers and children belonging to ethnic minorities generally live in rural areas. Violence, exclusion and poverty are thus self-perpetuating.

Girls who are deprived of civil status documents are at even greater risk of not being able to attend primary school and receive health care. Without an identity, they are invisible and excluded from all the universal human rights. They are sought out for every type of human trafficking. Their existence is denied; they are not listed on State registries. They are the living dead. Their rights are trampled. It is imperative that these invisible girls be made visible so that they can gain access to the many action programmes that target the various traditional, patriarchal, financial and geographic barriers to their security and emancipation. The birth certificate allows each person to prove his or her own identity. It must be presented for all changes in civil status (in particular, marriage, inheritance, divorce and death) and for administrative actions (school registration, registration for health care, job applications, and requests for identity papers, travel passports and residence permits).

Our organization held a workshop at the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to draw attention to this matter. We are planning a workshop in 2013 for the sharing of best practices (Costa Rica, Senegal).

The system of prostitution is one of the mainstays of gender inequality and violence against women. Contrary to human dignity and equality between persons, it is a manifestation of an obsolete patriarchy.

It is the appropriation of another's sexuality, using the power of money over persons who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of personal factors or financial difficulties. The huge majority of prostitutes have suffered psychological or sexual abuse that has destroyed their self-esteem, respect for their bodies and respect for the bodies of others. It is essential to help them rediscover their self-respect.

The elimination of all forms of sexist violence requires the prohibition, by law, of the sale of sexual acts. The human body is not a commodity, and it must be protected from all forms of exploitation or commercialization.

This prohibition is the foundation of all non-sexist education, whose aim is to enable all children, both girls and boys, to become adults who respect their bodies and those of others. This is especially important in view of the fact that the immense majority of young people have easy access to pornographic pictures and films, which pollute their sexual imagination and reflect obsolete patriarchal world views. In the name of so-called eroticism, women are portrayed as humiliated and degraded, and there is no taboo against male domination and female submission. It is therefore essential to disseminate information about the reality of prostitution and to dismantle the prevailing stereotypes.

Reports done in countries where prostitution is regulated (Germany and the Netherlands) warn about the increase in violent acts committed against all women and about the critical situation of prostitutes, who are highly vulnerable.

One corollary of the legalization of the prostitution industry is that clients are treated as legitimate consumers of sex, while there is no freedom for the prostitutes themselves. It is a bargain for pimps and human traffickers.

This violence must be eradicated by applying the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol) supplemental to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; repealing the offence of soliciting and all penalization of prostitutes; and putting in place effective policies to reintegrate into the workplace all persons who desire to escape the confinement of prostitution.

Violence stemming from patriarchal customs and traditions

Although the law in France protects all girls and women against violence based on traditions or religions, families impose the customs of their countries of origin on girls and women. Women's rights associations issue warnings and react strongly against the following two fundamental forms of violence against girls.

Excision

This form of violence may be committed against young girls in France or when their parents travel to their countries of origin on holidays.

French law defines excision as female sexual mutilation. "Mutilation" may be considered an aggravated offence if it is perpetrated by persons who have authority over the girl (parents or relatives); "sexual" offences perpetrated abroad by persons habitually residing in France are prosecuted upon their return to French territory.

Since young children in France are treated by doctors in the paediatric care system, some parents postpone the mutilation of their girls until they are older in order to avoid prosecution.

Forced marriages

The age of consent for both girls and boys is 18. Some parents, in complete violation of the law, arrange religious marriages for their under-age girls, although civil marriage, the only marriage recognized by law in France, must precede any religious "marriage" ceremony. Early marriage and pregnancy are forced on young girls on the basis of the customs of their countries of origin.

Regards de femmes and its partner associations of Franco-African women are tirelessly pursuing their efforts in the entire field of women's rights to ensure that emancipation, autonomy and equal rights, duties and dignity between women and men do not remain solely an ideal but rather become a reality for all women in France and throughout the world. They are working to make sure that the Arab Spring does not become a Winter for Women.

They are calling for all States signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Palermo Protocol and the Beijing Programme for Action to prohibit all forms of humiliation, discrimination or violence committed against or "chosen by" women, including on the basis of religion or custom. The Millennium Development Goals recall that the difficulties encountered by women are passed down to future generations and must be eradicated.