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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 Women in Law and Development in Africa, 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 organization Women in Law and Development in Africa in West Africa congratulates the Commission on the Status of Women on having chosen to focus the efforts of the international community at this fifty-seventh session on the theme “Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls”. Violence against women is unfortunately still too widespread in the world, and West Africa is no exception.

More than 30 years after the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 20 years after the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and now that the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights concerning the rights of women in Africa, in article 3 on the right to dignity and article 4 on the rights to life, integrity and security of the person require States parties to adopt a series of measures to guarantee these rights, the situation in the countries of West Africa is as follows:

- Despite the progress made as a result of legislative reforms, measures to combat violence against women are in some countries still too general and not sufficiently specific.
- Most countries have a policy and an action plan to combat violence against women, as well as a plan for implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000). However, there is no rational and systematic implementation. Isolated activities and programmes have been undertaken in various countries concerning various types of violence. They have included the creation of units in police stations to assist victims of domestic violence, creation of multi-purpose structures to provide legal, psychological and medical help to victims of violence, programmes to abolish female genital mutilation, efforts to combat trafficking in women, creation of legal aid and assistance sectors and – less often – creation of shelters for victims of violence.

However, some of the actions taken by women’s rights organizations show that, with a modicum of political will, it is possible to reduce violence against women through programmes targeting the underlying causes and involving communities and men in the fight against this scourge.

For example, in five countries in West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo), the organization has implemented a programme with women farmers in which it adopted an innovative approach in rural areas, involving trained paralegal women farmers, communities, men as well as women, and traditional authorities in the prevention of violence against women and the protection of women victims. With this approach, people are made aware of the legal norms adopted at the international, regional and national levels. The approach allows a dialogue with members of the community, who can be helped to discover the consequences of such violence by understanding the causes. Men understand and are dissuaded from engaging in acts of violence of any kind, for fear of earning the disapproval of the entire community. The committees to combat violence against women which have been established in this context act as real grass-roots squads. Traditional authorities, which usually serve on these committees, have reformed practices constituting inhuman and degrading treatment with adverse effects on women’s health, such as widowhood rites and barring women from inheriting land.

Despite the progress made, violence against women is still widespread in all its forms, as shown by the limited statistics available on the subject. According to data compiled in 2011 by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 33 per cent of women interviewed in Liberia, 20.6 per cent in Ghana and 15.7 per cent in Cape Verde had suffered physical violence inflicted by a close partner in their lives. In Ghana and Liberia, 18.8 and 17.6 per cent of women respectively admitted that they had been the victims of sexual violence. Available information indicates that forced and early marriage still exists in all countries, especially in rural and very poor areas. Girls are given in marriage before puberty with payment of a dowry. In Ghana, 16 per cent of girls between 15 and 19 years of age are married, divorced or widowed. In Guinea, it is estimated that 46 per cent of girls in that age group are married, divorced or widowed. Female genital mutilation is still widely practised, despite some progress, for example in Mali (85 per cent of women between 15 and 49 years of age in 2006) and in Guinea (96 per cent of women in that age group).

Most acts of violence go unpunished and victims receive no compensation.

Legislation alone cannot eradicate the phenomenon of violence unless measures and action are adopted to ensure that women, men and members of communities know the law, abide by it and buy into efforts to combat violence against women, unless victims of violence obtain justice and unless the courts assume their responsibilities by enforcing the laws in existence. Lastly, if for various reasons victims are unable to avail themselves of the services of the courts, they should be able to find in their communities appropriate and fair responses, respectful of universally recognized fundamental human rights.

The organization therefore recommends that delegations to the fifty-seventh session of the Commission should include the following recommendations to States in their conclusions on their work:

- All countries should have more programmes involving communities of men as well as women and traditional and religious authorities in efforts to combat violence against women, so that women can assume ownership of the action and the underlying causes of violence can be addressed in depth.
- States should be encouraged to buy into, replicate and expand at the national level the strategies used in pilot projects conducted by civil society organizations which have been recognized as good practices, in order to create a critical mass of communities which could be ongoing vectors of change.
- States should be encouraged to provide adequate budgets for programmes and plans to combat violence against women.
- The legal framework to protect women and girls from violence should be improved, with capacity-building for legal professionals, so that they can strictly apply the laws in force concerning violence against women.
- Legal aid should be provided to the poorest victims of violence.
- Special units should be created in police stations to assist victims of domestic violence.
- There should be more centres providing assistance and legal, psychological and medical help to victims of violence.

- Statistics should be systematically compiled to measure violence against women and girls and allow informed decision-making on efforts to eliminate such violence.
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