

Galvanizing action to combat violence against women

Consultative workshop concerning the UN Secretary-General's in-depth study on all forms of violence against women 6 – 7 September 2005

REPORT

Background and introduction

The General Assembly has mandated the Secretary-General to prepare an in-depth study on violence against women (A/RES/58/185). The study will be submitted to the General Assembly at its sixty-first session, in 2006. An interim report will be submitted to the sixtieth session (A/60/___).

As part of the preparatory process for the study, the Division for the Advancement of Women convened a consultation on violence against women and its links with the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); as well as to identify key issues to be addressed in the study. Six panelists introduced the themes. Representatives of Member States, United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations were invited to attend.

Panelists highlighted the challenges, as well as opportunities, for linking efforts to combat violence against women with those aimed at achieving the MDGs. They raised key issues which should be addressed in the Secretary-General's study, including: new and emerging areas that require attention; challenges that prevent the effective implementation of existing standards and laws on violence against women; accountability for action against violence against women; the responsibility of State and non-State actors; and areas where further research is necessary to strengthen the effectiveness of policy responses.

Participants in the consultation added examples from their own experience, and raised issues which, in their view, remain insufficiently addressed in law, policy or at the programme level, including resources required for effective work on prevention and service provision; as well as ways for responding to the inter-section of violence against women and other challenges to women's human rights and well-being.

The panel was moderated by Carolyn Hannan, Director, Division for the Advancement of Women. The six panelists were:

- Sunila Abeysekera: Executive Director, INFORM, Colombo, Sri Lanka
Charlotte Bunch: Executive Director, Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, NJ, and member of the Advisory Committee for the study
Nata Duvvury: Director, Gender, Violence and Rights Initiative, International Center for Research on Women, Washington D.C.

- Françoise Gaspard: Member of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
- Binaifer Nowrojee: Director, Open Society Institute Initiative for East Africa, Nairobi, Kenya
- Sylvia Walby: Professor, Sociology Department, Lancaster University, United Kingdom

Summary of the discussions

Violence against women

Under the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, violence against women means “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm, or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.” (General Assembly resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993, article 1; and General Assembly resolution 58/185 of 18 March 2004). The scope of this definition has since evolved through policy and practice, as reflected in resolutions of intergovernmental bodies and outcomes of global conferences, the work of human rights treaty bodies, special procedures of the Commission on human rights, and regional bodies.

Violence against women is a fundamental violation of human rights. Governments have acknowledged that it is their duty to work for its elimination in all spheres of life. Yet while there is considerable agreement on the goal of ending such violence, little progress has been made towards this end. In some cases, legislation is not commensurate with the seriousness of this crime, and in most cases, inadequate resources have been devoted to combat it.

State responsibility to end violence against women

The elimination of violence against women remains the primary responsibility of States in order to comply with their obligations under international law. States must encourage and support civil society efforts, particularly those of women’s organizations.

Efforts to end violence must be seen as inter-related with other aspects of a woman’s life. The implications of the intersection of gender inequality with other social divisions should be taken into account in each of the areas under discussion. These include, but are not confined to, ethnicity, class, citizenship status, age, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, incarceration, religion, and cultural traditions. Women are particularly vulnerable in conflict situations and during natural disasters. Refugee and internally displaced women face particular risks, and may be barred from seeking asylum on the grounds of gender-based violence. Non-citizen women may be forced to remain in abusive domestic relationships in order to retain residence, refugee status or benefits, or avoid deportation.

The causes and consequences of violence against women are integrally linked to longstanding gender inequalities that restrict women’s full enjoyment of their human rights. Women are overwhelmingly subjected to domestic and sexual violence at the

hands of male perpetrators. Violence against women impairs development and carries a heavy human and economic cost. States should ensure that their economic and legal policies are non-discriminatory and empower women. Representation of women's interests at the highest levels of government is needed.

The need for accurate data

Without accurate data and agreed indicators it is not possible to ascertain the scale of the problem and the impact of the responses. Survey-based data is needed in addition to administrative data because of the difficulties women currently face in reporting such violence to the authorities. Women may be reluctant to come forward for many reasons. Sexual and other forms of violence against women often carry a stigma which can be further exacerbated by poor responses by law enforcement and judicial agencies. Marginalized and vulnerable groups of women may find it particularly difficult to report abuse. It is important to continue to develop sensitive and confidential methodologies when gathering data on violence against women.

In many countries of the world representative sample surveys have been carried out on violence against women. The methodology has been developing rapidly, with much learning between countries¹. The availability of common indicators on violence against women for use in all Member States would further spur the development of robust data collection in this area by the responsible national statistical bodies. It is also expected to enhance achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). There are several potential indicators including prevalence of violence, number of incidents of violence, the extent of injuries, and the level of tolerance for violence against women.

It can be useful to estimate the cost of violence against women to the wider society. Such knowledge can help to prioritize the allocation of resources to address the problem. Data and policy analysis should be carried out within a rights based framework and placed in a broader development context. Areas that require particular attention include women's access to justice; education; health, including sexual and reproductive health; housing; and social services.

Preventing and responding to violence against women

The elimination of violence against women will require sustained attention to alter deeply held views that condone violence against women. This may involve media and education campaigns. Efforts to engage men as part of the solution are an important aspect of any campaign.

Actions to reduce and eliminate violence against women include both preventive and responsive policy actions that should be taken by both the States and the entities of the

¹ UN expert group meeting final report 'Violence against women: A statistical overview, challenges and gaps in data collection and methodology and approaches for overcoming them' at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw-stat-2005/docs/final-report-vaw-stats.pdf>; Sylvia Walby 'Improving the statistics on violence against women', *Statistical Journal of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe*, 23 (in press 2006) accessible at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw-stat-2005/docs/expert-papers/walby.pdf>

United Nations system. Government policy should concentrate on preventive measures. In the development of these policies a wide range of agencies need to be involved and coordinated. Capacity building of government, private sector and civil society agencies should be an integral part of these efforts. Attention also needs to be placed on preventing impunity and achieving justice for women victims of violence, including through international means of redress.

The Millennium Development Goals and gender equality

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) constitute a global consensus on quantifiable goals mapping the progress made in achieving development outcomes. The process towards their achievement has created a wide debate on strategies for development among governments, civil society, the United Nations system, and donors. This process is perceived as an important opportunity to leverage the commitment to the MDGs for improving the lives of women and men in poor countries.

The MDGs mark an important opportunity in terms of their focus on gender equality. They include a specific goal on gender equality, as well as a goal that acknowledges the importance of girls' education, and another goal on maternal health that addresses women's health. The Taskforce on Gender Equality² has highlighted that gender equality is a goal in itself as well as a cross-cutting issue, and its implementation requires that all goals and related targets and indicators integrate consideration of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Unless attention is paid to the systemic discrimination of women across all the Millennium goals, the achievement of the MDGs would in fact be jeopardized.

Violence against women is the most direct expression of this systemic discrimination and is a critical obstacle to development. The Taskforce on Gender Equality has identified ending violence against women as a priority strategy for achieving the MDGs. The Millennium Development Goals Report 2005³ has reaffirmed the criticality of ending violence against women globally. It is therefore most timely to delineate more comprehensively the specific links between violence against women with each of the goals and identify strategies for addressing these links.

Links between violence against women and the MDGs

Violence against women has serious consequences for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by any country. The following provides a brief indication of these links in relation to each of the eight goals.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Violence against women is a cause and consequence of economic dependence for women. Injuries and fear of violence prevent women from engaging in productive employment leading to a drain on both households and national economies. One study has estimated that incidents of violence can result in loss of household income equivalent to 25-30 per cent of the monthly income of poor

² UN Millennium Project 2005. Taking Action: Achieving gender Equality and Empowering Women. Task Force on Education and Gender Equality.

³ The Millennium Development Goals Report 2005, United Nations, New York 2005.

households. It has also been estimated that for the United Kingdom the loss of economic output due to violence against women is as high as 3 billion pounds per year. Poverty alleviation programmes can in fact be undermined by this huge drain of resources at the household and national levels. Further, domestic violence is linked to the unequal distribution of resources within the household resulting in poverty and hunger for women and their children.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education. Violence, or fear of violence, including sexual harassment by teachers, is cited by parents as a key obstacle to sending girls to school. Violence within the home against women and girls has a disastrous effect on girls' performance in schools.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Eliminating violence is essential for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women. The existing target, to eliminate the gender disparity in education, captures only one, albeit a key, dimension of gender inequality. Eliminating violence against women is a prerequisite for gender equality and empowerment of women.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality. Violence against women, especially during pregnancy and during infancy of child, can have a negative impact on the life and health of the child. Violence in pregnancy is widespread and often results in low birth weight babies, an important predictor of child malnutrition. Mothers who are abused may be unable to look after their children as well as they would like. A reduction of violence against women is likely to reduce child mortality.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health. Violence against women is a significant cause of maternal ill health, sometimes leading to complications in childbirth.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Violence against women can be both a cause of infection and a consequence of being HIV positive. Violence against women makes women more vulnerable to forced and unprotected sex which plays a key role in the spread of HIV/AIDS. Violence and threats of violence limit women's ability to negotiate safe sex practices, access information and testing services, and adopt practices to prevent mother-to-child-transmission.

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability. Women can be key to developing practices for environmental sustainability. Women who are subject to violence are less likely to be able to contribute.

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development. Development requires effective inputs from and participation by all actors, both women and men. Women who are subordinated through domestic and other forms of violence are unlikely to contribute their expertise to the development process, with a critical loss of knowledge.

Despite the importance of addressing violence against women to achieve the MDGs, there is little articulation in the goals of the required strategies to address violence against

women. Key constraints to developing innovative strategies are the lack of political will and committed leadership, lack of resources, and lack of understanding cultural and traditional practices that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women. Furthermore, as countries are introducing innovative policies and laws, the knowledge base needed to assess and evaluate the effective implementation of existing standards and laws is inadequate.

Galvanizing action

Consequently, the Millennium Development Goals, the increased priority accorded to human rights in the Secretary General's report '*In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all*'⁴ for the 2005 World Summit, 14 – 16 September 2005, the efforts of the United Nations human rights machinery, as well as the Secretary-General's forthcoming in-depth study on violence against women provide the opportunity to build on the consensus and move forward the strategies and responses to address violence against women.

Against this background, the consultation puts forward the following recommendations in support of efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and for use in the Secretary-General's study on violence against women.

Recommendations

- The study should call for the systematic collection of data on violence against women, and highlight the important role of national statistical offices in such endeavours. The United Nations Secretariat should take the lead in the development of summary indicators on the extent and nature of violence against women in order to have a knowledge base to evaluate and monitor progress in the extent of violence against women, as well as of the impact of policies and other measures. The United Nations Secretariat should lead a coordinated effort to establish a readily accessible data base on statistics, legislation, training modules, good practice, ethical guidelines, lessons learnt, and other resources with regard to all forms of violence against women.
- The study should recommend further work to develop the methodology for assessing the cost of violence against women for the wider society.
- The study should address the role of national machineries – particularly law enforcement and justice mechanisms – in combating and eliminating all forms of violence against women, and ensuring the effective implementation of policy recommendations that will be outlined in the Secretary-General's study, including timeframes for achievement of specific objectives.
- The study should encourage all human rights treaty bodies and special procedures, as well as other relevant bodies, to address all forms of violence against women within the framework of their mandates so as to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of, and response to violence against women.
- In compliance with General Recommendations No. 12 (1989) and 19 (1992) by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, States

⁴ A/59/2005

should include in their periodic reports under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women information about: legislation to protect women against violence, existence of support services to women victims, statistical data on the incidence of violence, and other measures adopted to eradicate this violence.

- Governments must commit adequate resources for sustained programmes to prevent, respond to, and eliminate violence against women. Such funds should be earmarked in national budgets. Additional resources are also necessary at the international level in support of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women.
- Governments and the entities of the United Nations system should engage and support civil society, community-based advocates and academics in a shared process to develop the knowledge base and design new policies to eliminate violence against women.
- The General Assembly should continue to identify ways and means for better implementation of government commitments and obligations to combat violence against women. Such efforts should engage policy-makers at the highest level as well as grassroots and community groups. States should encourage and support civil society and other non-governmental initiatives.
- All stakeholders should undertake advocacy at the national/country level to link violence against women and the MDGs, create country-specific knowledge on violence against women and develop monitoring mechanisms that would also include civil society organizations and women's groups.
- All stakeholders should undertake advocacy with entities of the United Nations system, especially the World Bank, IMF and UNDP, and other multilateral, bilateral and donor agencies on the links between violence against women and achievement of the MDGs for commitment of increased resources to combat violence against women.

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