

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Statement by Ms. Louise Arbour UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the occasion of the 8th Session of the Human Rights Council Meeting on Human Rights of Women

Geneva, 5 June 2008

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

With the adoption of resolution 6/30, the Human Rights Council affirmed its commitment to advancing women's rights and gender equality. The task now is to translate that commitment into concrete steps and priorities to give real effect to women's rights and dignity.

Thus, I greatly welcome the Council's debate today, focusing on the two pressing issues of violence against women and maternal mortality. The outcome should not be just more talk and more venting of frustration over the fact that six decades since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, women and girls continue to be regarded as lesser beings in many corners of the world. The debate today should inspire and embolden the Council's members to take further steps to accelerate the attainment of gender equality and the protection and promotion of equal rights for women and girls around the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The General Assembly has tasked the Human Rights Council with setting priorities in addressing violence against women as a follow up to its consideration of the Secretary-General's study on the subject. Released in 2006, the study unequivocally demonstrates that multiple forms of violence against women remain pervasive throughout the world. The report describes this violence as "a pandemic," and "one of the most serious challenges of our time." But these alarming words just barely afford a glimpse into the desperate and dehumanizing conditions that millions of women and

girls are subjected to on a daily basis, and in many cases with no relief or recourse to justice.

In particularly egregious forms, violence, including sexual violence, has been committed and continues to be perpetrated in the midst of conflict and in post-conflict societies on a magnitude and level of brutality that defies belief. Rape of women and girls is deliberately used as a weapon of war in many of these conflicts, with the intent of destroying families and communities. Frequently, family members are forced to watch or actually participate in these violations, laying the seeds for future retaliation and igniting a vicious circle of attack and retribution. Such acts of unspeakable savagery are often perpetrated in conjunction with other heinous breaches of the law, and all too often go unpunished.

Bringing perpetrators of violence against women to account must be a priority for all governments and other actors in positions of power and influence. History has shown time and again that a failure to do so emboldens perpetrators and encourages others to join their ranks.

Although violence against women has been an ugly feature of wars since time immemorial, only recently has there been a recognition that such violence is punishable by law as a war crime, a crime against humanity and indeed, at times, an act of genocide. International enforcement of that law represents a vital step forward. But the focus on violence against women in conflict must not result in losing sight of other forms of violence against women, which are everyday occurrences in the lives of countless victims. These include rape, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, crimes committed in the name of "honour," domestic violence and other forms of abuse. They may be prohibited by law, but legal protection is bound to have little impact if victims lack the means to seek justice or are too scared to expose perpetrators. Laws are of even less consequence when those responsible for their enforcement refuse or fail to do so.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Whether perpetrated in conflict or in peace, the root causes of violence against women are deep-seated inequalities and discrimination. We certainly recognize that since the adoption of the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, much progress has been made to eliminate discrimination against women. Obligations have been set forth in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other treaties. Far reaching commitments were also made by States at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and the subsequent reviews of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. However, whether in law or in fact, discrimination facing women and girls is still the rule rather than the exception. As a result, full equality for women, in law and practice, has yet to be achieved in any country.

A recent study, commissioned by my Office, underscores the persistence of laws and customs that make women second-class citizens, and that, consequently, expose them to undeterred and unpunished violence and inequality. Laws that restrict women's freedom of movement, property and inheritance, and practices such as male guardianship put women at the risk of being subjected to abuse, violence and oppression, both inside and outside their homes.

A concomitant denial of basic rights, such as access to health services, housing, education, food and water, overwhelmingly affects women, depriving them of the means needed to claim their equal rights and obtain their fair share of public goods and services. This inequality may also condemn women to poverty which, in turn, exposes hundreds of millions of girls and women to continuous abuse.

Responding to requests from States and civil society, my Office has organized a side event on June 9th, in order to provide further details to duty bearers and stakeholders regarding the findings of the study. These also include the views of stakeholders on the possible avenues, such as the establishment of concrete mechanisms, through which the Human Rights Council can stimulate responses and measures to help stem violence and discrimination against women. This should be achieved in a manner that complements and builds upon the work of existing human rights mechanisms.

Distinguished Participants,

Discriminatory laws and practices are also at the root of many cases of maternal mortality. Early marriage, female genital mutilation and the disrespect of women's safe reproductive rights, all of which are incompatible with the obligations set forth in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, are key contributors to the millions of deaths and disabilities resulting from pregnancy and childbirth annually. It is no surprise that the most marginalized and poorest are also the most adversely affected. But there is often nothing inevitable about maternal mortality. Many of these deaths could be prevented by making women's welfare and the realization of all their rights a matter of priority.

The Human Rights Council, alerted by today's discussion, can play a ground-breaking role in clearly defining maternal mortality as a human rights issue and articulating the indivisibility and interrelatedness of rights in this respect. A cursory analysis of the outcome of the first rounds of Universal Periodic Reviews indicates that, while the overall share of interventions relating to women's rights reached an encouraging level, the issue of maternal mortality was virtually absent from State reports, reviews and recommendations. Today's discussion should lead to greater attention being brought to this issue in future UPR sessions.

Mr. President,

To conclude on a positive note, it is very encouraging that several States made commitments with respect to women's rights in the context of the UPR, including pledges to remove far-reaching and longstanding reservations made to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Council and the international community should hold them to those pledges through follow-up assistance and monitoring.

I sincerely hope that today's debate and the June 9th event will illuminate ways in which the Human Rights Council can make a real contribution with respect to women's rights in general, and violence against women and maternal mortality in particular, as well as stimulate States' implementation of their obligations, pledges and commitments.

In particular, the Council has the task of shedding light on laws that can facilitate, rather than impede, women's equal enjoyment of rights. Having worked with law throughout my professional life, I am a firm believer in the power of laws, codified or customary, to foster or compel change and to transform societies.

As I prepare to wind up my duties as High Commissioner and move to a new phase in life and work, I have every hope and expectation that the Council, in this, the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, will take forceful action to accelerate the full realization of equal rights between women and men, girls and boys, to our greater collective benefit.

Thank you.

From:<http://www.unhchr.ch/huricane/hurricane.nsf/view01/2A31CC2A496615CAC125745F00349664?opendocument>