

7 March 2007

HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS CALLS FOR ACTION AGAINST
IMPUNITY FOR VIOLENCE AFFECTING WOMEN AND GIRLS

Message of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour on the occasion of International Women's Day, 8 March 2007:

I am honoured to convey this International Women's Day message to the billions of women around the world who struggle daily in the home, the workplace and the community for a life of dignity and freedom. As with other commemorations of its kind, there has always been a tension about whether International Women's Day is a time for celebration or a day for protest. It should be all of these things: a time to reflect on the progress achieved in claiming women's rights through much sacrifice and the occasion to reject continuing inequality and the denial of rights. This year, we are putting the spotlight on a denial of women's rights of pandemic proportion: violence against women and girls and the impunity that makes it possible.

Violence against women is rightly termed the most common but least punished crime in the world. A recent World Health Organization study found that 23 to 49 per cent of women suffered violence at the hands of their intimate partners in most of the 71 countries surveyed. UNICEF has reported that 130 million girls and women alive today have undergone female genital mutilation. According to the United Nations Population Fund, 5,000 women die every year in "honour" killings perpetrated by family members. And it is estimated that less than 5 per cent of rape prosecutions lead to convictions globally, partly because the majority of cases place emphasis on the conduct of the woman and not on that of the perpetrator.

These figures paint only part of the picture, as comprehensive information on violence and abuse against women is hard to collect. To this day women are stigmatized when they speak out, or they face retribution. Often, violence against women is widely accepted as an ordinary and even inevitable occurrence, and thus deemed unworthy of action and remedy. And while rape, genital mutilation, spousal and domestic abuse, and certain traditional punishments, such as stoning and burning, grab the occasional headline and provoke outrage, female infanticide, and systematic neglect of girls all too frequently go unnoticed or are left unaddressed.

The paradox is that most States have largely accepted the international normative framework aimed at preventing, tackling and punishing discrimination and violence against women. Crucially, they recognize that women's equality and entitlements are human rights, thus empowering women to become active right-holders and claimants, rather than passive beneficiaries of discretionary policies. Many countries, however, have not matched this progress in international law with implementation, policy and practice, particularly where it matters the most, that is, in the daily lives of women around the world.

There is nothing inevitable regarding violence against women. In contrast, ample evidence confirms that promoting and defending women's human rights advances society as a whole. What we need now is decisive leadership and a sustained commitment to put an end to this intolerable violence and bring those who perpetrate it to justice.

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