



Protection of Women and Child Rights: Significant of Human Rights

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Abstract: Violence against women and girls is a fundamental violation of human rights, which stretches across nations, cultures, and classes. It is a mass phenomenon taking many different forms with disastrous consequences for women's and girls' health and survival. The social and economic costs resulting from this abuse place a substantial burden on society as a whole, significantly hampering development. Therefore, preventing violence against women and girls is also a key contribution. Women's rights have been at the heart of a series of international conferences that have produced significant political commitments to women's human rights and equality.

Key words: health and survival, violation of human rights

"Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. And it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace". - Kofi Annan Secretary General of the United Nations, March 8th, 1999.

Violence against women and girls is often perceived as an individual problem and as isolated incidents. However, a glance at empirical evidence presents an alarming picture. The World Bank estimates that violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer and is a greater cause of ill health than traffic accidents and malaria put together -World Bank, 1993.

Introduction

Attaining equality between women and men and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women are fundamental human rights and United Nations values. Women around the world nevertheless regularly suffer violations of their human rights throughout their lives, and realizing women's human rights has not always been a priority. Achieving equality between women and men requires a comprehensive understanding of the

ways in which women experience discrimination and are denied equality so as to develop appropriate strategies to eliminate such discrimination. The United Nations has a long history of addressing women's human rights and much progress has been made in securing women's rights across the world in recent decades. However, important gaps remain and women's realities are constantly changing, with new manifestations of discrimination against them regularly emerging. Some groups of



women face additional forms of discrimination based on their age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, health status, marital status, education, disability and socioeconomic status, among other grounds. These intersecting forms of discrimination must be taken into account when developing measures and responses to combat discrimination against women.¹ Viewed in this light, it becomes obvious that – besides being a fundamental violation of human rights - violence against women represents one of the most critical public health challenges and is a major factor contributing to poverty. Therefore, reducing violence against women and girls is also a key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The international recognition of violence against women as a human rights violation was the result of years of dedicated campaigning by women's rights activists and survivors of violence. In 1993, the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights finally recognized that women's rights are human rights, a position that has been reaffirmed at all subsequent world summits.

Since the Vienna conference

Since the Vienna conference, violence against women has left the private domain and became an established issue within public debates. Multiple initiatives around the world have raised awareness and contributed to legal reforms that support the survivors of abuse and punish the perpetrators. However, greater efforts and more resources need to be harnessed in order to adequately address the sheer scale and multi-dimensional nature of the problem.²

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rights, which stretches across nations, cultures, and classes. It is a mass phenomenon taking many different forms with disastrous consequences for women's and girls' health and survival. The social and economic costs resulting from this abuse place a substantial burden on society as a whole, significantly hampering development. Therefore, preventing violence against women and girls is also a key contribution to achieving most of the UN Millennium Development Goals and to reducing poverty.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most direct expressions of the power imbalance between men and women. The analysis of statistical records and surveys presented in the first section shows that violence against women in its differing forms is a worldwide phenomenon, which cuts across cultures, nations, and social and age groups. The root causes of violence against women are dominant gender norms and the unequal power balance between men and women. The international and regional human rights framework related to gender-based violence and demonstrates the disastrous impact of violence against women and girls on human development.³

Women's rights have been at the heart of a series of international conferences that have produced significant political commitments to women's human rights and equality. Starting in 1975, which was also International Women's Year, Mexico City hosted the World Conference on the International Women's Year, which resulted in the World Plan of Action and the designation of 1975–1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women. In



1980, another international conference on women was held in Copenhagen and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was opened for signature. The third World Conference on Women was held in Nairobi, with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women having begun its work in 1982.

These three world conferences witnessed extraordinary activism on the part of women from around the world and laid the groundwork for the world conferences in the 1990s to address women's rights, including the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. In addition, the rights of women belonging to particular groups, such as older women, ethnic minority women or women with disabilities, have been also addressed in various other international policy documents such as the International Plans of Action on Ageing (Vienna, 1982 and Madrid, 2002), the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (2001) and the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons (1982).⁴

Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

In 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights was held in Vienna. It sought to review the status of the human rights machinery in place at the time. Women's rights activists mobilized to ensure those women's human rights were fully on the agenda of the international community under the rallying cry "Women's Rights are Human Rights." Particularly around the issue of violence against women, civil society activists organized tribunals to put the spotlight on violations of women's rights, previously unaddressed because they

were considered part of the private sphere, taboo or simply accepted as an inevitable part of women's lives.

International Conference on Population and Development:

The International Conference on Population and Development, which was held in 1994, represented a milestone for women's rights. While the Conference was focused on population issues, the delegates meeting in Cairo agreed that population was not only about demographics but, more importantly, about people. The issues taken up in its Programme of Action⁵ are fundamentally related to women's human rights, including gender equality, the family, reproductive health, birth control and family planning, women's health, as well as immigration and education of women. Importantly, the Programme of Action is explicitly grounded in human rights and proclaims that "advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, and the elimination of all kinds of violence against women, and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility, are cornerstones of population and development-related programmes."

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action:

Adopted during the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action focused on 12 areas concerning the implementation of women's human rights and set out an agenda for women's empowerment. It builds on the results of the previous three world conferences on women, but is considered a significant achievement in explicitly articulating women's rights as human rights. The Platform for Action includes a series of strategic



objectives to eliminate discrimination against women and achieve equality between women and men. It involves political and legal strategies on a global scale based on a human rights framework.⁶ The Platform for Action is the most comprehensive expression of States' commitments to the human rights of women. Both the 2005 and the 2010 reviews of the Platform concluded that de jure and de facto equality had not been achieved in any country in the world and the 2010 review recognized that even where legal reforms had taken place, they were often ineffectively enforced.

Millennium Development Goals: In 2000, the international community agreed to eight time-bound development goals to be achieved by 2015, including a goal on gender equality and the empowerment of women, as well as one on the reduction of maternal mortality. Seven of the Goals have specific targets to measure progress.

Girl Child: The 1995 Beijing Conference was the first of the United Nations World Conferences on Women to include a specific focus on the girl-child. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), together with their Optional Protocols, as well as other conventions and treaties, provide the legal framework for the protection and promotion of the human rights of girls.

The Platform for Action set out nine strategic objectives.

1. Eliminate of all forms of discrimination against the girl-child.
2. Eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls.

3. Promote and protect the rights of the girl-child and increase awareness of her needs and potential.
4. Eliminate discrimination against girls in education, skills development and training.
5. Eliminate discrimination against girls in health and nutrition.
6. Eliminate the economic exploitation of child labor and protect young girls at work.
7. Eradicate violence against the girl-child.
8. Strengthen the role of the family in improving the status of the girl-child.⁷

The Commission on the Status of Women continues to address the situation of the girl child in its work. At its forty-second session in 1998, the Commission considered the issue of the girl-child with emphasis on adolescent girls as a priority theme, and adopted agreed conclusions that proposed actions and initiatives to promote and protect the human rights of the girl-child; provide education and empowerment; improve the health needs of girls; protect girls in armed conflict, and prevent trafficking and exploitative labour conditions.⁸ At its fifty-first session in 2007, the Commission focused on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl-child and adopted agreed conclusions.⁹

Protecting girls from early marriage

The continuing high incidence of early marriage suggests that effective national legislation or policies have yet to be developed or enforced. Technical consultations on early marriage organized by International Planned Parenthood Federation brought together participants from a various regions and



disciplines resulted in a set of recommendations for national action.

Develop multi-sectoral approaches and partnerships.

A multi-sectoral approach reflects the multiple consequences of early marriage and the different requirements of girls at risk of early marriage and young girls already married. Alliances and partnerships are needed both inside government and with other actors. The development of multi-sectoral approaches and partnerships could include efforts to: strengthen the integration of early marriage prevention and support programs with other initiatives in areas such as health, education, HIV and employment; increase collaboration between government and civil society programs to support community level action; strengthen participation; and strengthen the participation of young people and community stakeholders in prevention programmes.

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