

*** ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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Statement to the 51st session of the UN Commission on Human Rights

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The Baha'i International Community welcomes the appointment last year of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women. By urging the inclusion of this pivotal issue within the UN human rights framework, women's organizations have made a critical contribution to the promotion of human rights generally. For seeking to understand violence against women as an issue of basic human rights will no doubt shed light on the causes of other forms of violence and will facilitate the discovery of strategies for curbing the disturbing rise of violence across all levels of our societies.

Violence against women is a yardstick by which one can measure the violation of all human rights. It can be used to gauge the degree to which a society is governed by aggressivity, dominated by competition and ruled by force. Abusive practices against women have frequently been and are still being justified in the context of cultural norms, religious beliefs and unfounded "scientific theories" and assumptions. But whatever its political or religious system, a society patterned on dominance inevitably gives rise to such distortions of power as violence against women.

It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that all forms of violence against women degrade not only the victim but the perpetrator as well. Those who inflict violence on women are themselves among the casualties of power-based systems. When unbridled competition, aggression, and tyranny destroy the fabric of society, everyone suffers. In the Baha'i view, "the harvest of force is turmoil and the ruin of the social order" and violence against women is a grave symptom of this larger disorder.

Our challenge is to search out new strategies and adopt fresh models that will encourage a healthier, more cooperative society at all levels. We need to move consciously away from patterns of force and aggressivity and towards methods of consultation and peace-making. Because of the rise in crime and pornography, the increase in ethnic violence and the collapse of the family, more and more individuals, organizations and governments are seeking alternatives to violence in managing conflict.

One of the essential ways to encourage more cooperation is through education. While economic disparity and legal inequality are known to contribute to incidents of violence against women, it is obvious that violence arises from

ignorance -- the failure to understand such fundamental realities as the oneness of the human race and the mistaken notion that force is the only honorable way to resolve conflicts. Education -- moral, material and practical -- is therefore not only a fundamental right but a practical necessity in today's world. Any attempt to curb societal violence that does not educate individuals to overcome gender prejudice will certainly fall short. At a time when illiteracy is increasing among women in the developing world and levels of learning are falling for both sexes in industrial societies, it is vitally important to reemphasize the role of education everywhere if violence against women is to be controlled.

Ironically enough, the place where women and girls are most subject to violence and neglect is within their own homes, at the nerve center of the family. If families educate their daughters, and the community systematically encourages the education of girl children, both the family and the community benefit. Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, has emphasized that mothers are the first educators of the next generation, in the broadest interpretation of those terms, and that where resources are limited priority must, therefore, be given to education of girl children.

But the problem of violence cannot truly be resolved unless men are also educated to value women as equal partners. Any effort to protect women against male aggression which does not involve the early training of boys will necessarily be short-lived. Likewise, all attempts to understand the causes and consequences of violence against women which do not involve men are bound to fail.

The Baha'i International Community, therefore, warmly welcomes the inclusion of a full analysis of violence against women in the mandate of the Special Rapporteur. It also welcomes the invitation by the Commission on Human Rights to "recommend measures to eliminate violence against women and its causes, and to remedy its consequences."

Since the Baha'i International Community has invested considerable effort at the grass roots in the education and training of both men and women in partnership, we would gladly offer to share our experience. For example, our recent collaboration with UNIFEM in three projects using traditional media as a change agent in society has drawn the attention of UNICEF because one result of the project was a decline in family violence. In this respect, we look forward to further collaboration with the Special Rapporteur.

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