

Statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay,

International Women's Day

8 March 2010

Domestic violence and killing in the name of "honour"

"It has been estimated that as many as one in three women across the world has been beaten, raped or otherwise abused during the course of her lifetime. And the most common source of such violence comes from within the family. Amongst the most extreme forms of abuse is what is known as 'honour killing.'

"Most of the 5,000 honour killings reported to take place every year around the world do not make the news, nor do the other myriad forms of violence inflicted on women and girls by husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, uncles and other male – and sometimes even female – family members.

"In the name of preserving family 'honour,' women and girls are shot, stoned, burned, buried alive, strangled, smothered and knifed to death with horrifying regularity.

"The reasons for these murders vary. They may be committed because the victim is considered to have breached family or community norms with respect to sexual conduct, or simply because a woman has expressed a desire to pick a husband of her own choice, or wishes to divorce or claim inheritance. Most perversely, rape victims are sometimes viewed as having 'dishonored' their families and are killed by them as a means of erasing the stigma, while the men who raped them often escape lightly.

"The problem is exacerbated by the fact that in a number of countries domestic legal systems, including through discriminatory laws, still fully or partially exempt individuals guilty of honor killings from punishment. Perpetrators may even be treated with admiration and given special status within their communities.

"Honour killings are, however, not something that can be simply brushed aside as some bizarre and retrograde atrocity that happens somewhere else. They are an extreme symptom of discrimination against women, which – including other forms of domestic violence – is a plague that affects every country.

"For many women and girls, the family life that is supposed to be productive, protective and harmonious is little more than a myth. Instead, for such females, family life means physical, sexual, emotional or economic violence at the hands of an intimate partner or other family members. Domestic violence typically involves punches, kicks and slaps, or assaults with objects or weapons. It also frequently involves persistent belittlement and humiliation, and often includes the isolation of women from traditional supporters such as other family members and friends. Sometimes it may involve forced participation in degrading sexual acts, rape and homicide. Some women, who resist an arranged

marriage, are locked up by their families for long periods until their will is broken and they agree to marry the man who has been chosen for them.

“It is often argued that economic independence and empowerment of women in general are the best way to combat domestic violence – and rightly so. The main reason cited by women for not leaving abusive relationships remains the lack of financial autonomy and access to a safe home.

“However, too much reliance on these solutions disguises the depth and complexity of the problem: domestic violence has also been on the rise in countries where women have achieved a considerable degree of economic independence. Successful business-women, and female parliamentarians, lawyers, doctors, journalists and academics have all been known to lead double-lives – applauded in public and abused in private.

“The reality for most victims, including victims of honor killings, is that state institutions fail them and that most perpetrators of domestic violence can rely on a culture of impunity for the acts they commit – acts which would often be considered as crimes, and be punished as such, if they were committed against strangers.

“Traditionally, there has been some debate around the issue of state responsibility for acts committed in the private sphere. Some have argued, and continue to argue, that family violence is placed outside the conceptual framework of international human rights. However, under international laws and standards, there is a clear State responsibility to uphold women’s rights and ensure freedom from discrimination, which includes the responsibility to prevent, protect and provide redress – regardless of sex, and regardless of a person’s status in the family.”

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