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A human rights scandal: Violence against women

**Speech delivered by Irene Khan
Secretary General, Amnesty International
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Whenever I think of violence against women, what immediately comes to my mind are the faces and stories of women, some too painful to repeat, others too inspiring to forget.

I know we must speak of treaties and laws, policies and practice, implementation and evaluation, but for me first and foremost must come the women themselves, their courage, commitment and conviction.

Who is affected?

I remember the young Vietnamese girl who I met in Thailand and Malaysia 23 years ago when I was working as a lawyer for UNHCR. I heard their stories of how they escaped Vietnam by boat but were attacked, abducted and raped by pirates. Hundreds of girls disappeared. The ones I met were lucky -- they had been accepted for resettlement in western countries. They wanted to put their pain behind them and begin a new life -- but when they spoke to me months after the pirate incidents, their eyes were still downcast, their voices broken with trauma, their faces turned away from me as though in shame and guilt, although they had nothing to be guilty or ashamed about.

I remember Jamila, a 16-year-old Afghan girl whom I met in the women's prison in Kabul in July this year. The prison was full of women accused of adultery, of running away from brutal husbands or of wanting to marry the men of their choice. Jamila was abducted from her home in Kunduz a year ago when she was just 15, forced into marriage, abused and raped. Caught by the police, she was sent to prison for deserting her husband. Jamila told me that she would like to go home to her parents. But she is afraid that her father will kill her because, according to him, she has soiled the family honour - or if not her father, the man who had abducted her certainly would.

In 2003, President Karzai granted amnesty to 20 such women, but on their release four of them were instantly killed by their own families - victims of so-called honour crimes - and several others have "disappeared".

I never met Paloma. I heard about her from her mother, Norma, whom I met in Mexico last August.

Paloma was one of over 370 young women murdered in the city of Ciudad Juárez, just across from El Paso, Texas on the Mexican/US border. These women, between the ages of 11 and 28 years, were abducted, brutally tortured, raped and murdered over a period of ten years without the authorities doing much to investigate, prosecute or stop the crimes. The state and federal authorities had failed them totally because they were poor, powerless women without any political clout. Yet, they were hardworking women who were essential not only to the economy of the town but to the global economy. They had come to Ciudad Juárez to work in the *maquiladoras* -- the assembly plants that multinational companies have set up on the US/Mexican border to exploit tax breaks and cheap Mexican labour. What an awful irony that young women like Paloma fuelled the global economy -- but in that process became a victim to a process of globalisation that fails to protect the vulnerable. When I first raised the cases with President Fox, he said that his Federal authorities could not interfere with the state police authorities. I am happy to tell you that within months, President Fox changed his position and sent the federal investigative authorities in, as a result of the pressure that AI and others had put on him. Unfortunately, the killings still continue.

In Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, last month I met Francine, a 28-year-old teacher of French. She was attacked and raped by armed groups who act with total impunity in a region that has been torn by war for years. Ever since that incident, her husband has refused to live with her because, in his view, she has been "tainted". Her ten-year-old daughter asks her if she will die of HIV/AIDS -- she is afraid she may have contracted the disease but is too afraid to find out. During my visit to Goma and Bunia in eastern Congo, I met dozens of women and girls, the youngest only 4-years-old, who had been attacked, assaulted and raped as a tactic of war. Many of them came from far away to speak to me -- and one of the women said to me: "We want to tell you what has happened to us so that you can carry our stories to others and they can stop this happening."

A year ago, when I was in Moscow to launch AI's campaign against human rights abuses in Russia, a journalist told me that one evening as he was walking home he saw a man beating a woman some distance away on a street corner. He rushed into a police station nearby and told the policeman what was happening. The policeman ran out and then came back a few minutes later. "What happened?" the journalist asked. The policeman replied: "No problem, the man was not beating a woman, he was just beating his wife." I do not know whether that story was true -- what I do know is that 14,000 women die in Russia every year at the hands of their partners.

I do know that every two minutes in the United Kingdom there is a call for help from a woman threatened with violence. In the United States, one in three women faces the threat of sexual assault. In France, out of an estimated 25,000 rapes only 8,000 are reported because of the stigma attached to rape. In Switzerland, a woman is at greater risk of violence in her own home than she is on the streets.

In a 1994 study using data from a 1993 World Bank modelling exercise, of ten selected causes and risk factors for disability and death among women between the age of 15 and 44, rape and domestic violence rated higher than cancer, motor vehicle accidents, war and malaria [Lori L. Heise, Jacqueline Pitanguy and Adrienne Germain, 1994, *Violence against Women: The Hidden Health Burden (World Bank Discussion Paper 255)*, World Bank]

Let's not forget another horrendous statistic: over 60 million women are 'missing' from the world because of female infanticide and selective abortion.

Different women from different countries, from the wealthy north, as well as from the poor south, speaking different languages, rich and poor, educated or illiterate, from diverse religious, cultural and social backgrounds, living in the midst of war or in times of peace -- but bound by the common thread of violence at the hands of the state, the community and the family.

That picture is truly tragic when one considers that violence is not only physical or sexual but also psychological.

We say human rights are universal. Violence against women has unfortunately made human rights *abuse* universal.

Why does it happen?

What causes violence against women? What allows it to happen on such a scale, and with such persistency?

In too many countries, laws, policies and practices discriminate against women, denying them equality with men, politically, economically and socially. Too many governments turn a blind eye and allow violence against women to occur with impunity.

In too many societies, gender roles reinforce the power of men over women, their lives and their bodies.

In too many communities, religious leaders reinforce roles, attitudes and customs which seek to subordinate and subjugate women. A woman in Pakistan is killed in the name of honour. A woman in Ireland is denied reproductive rights in the name of religion. A girl in Mali is genitally mutilated in the name of custom.

In too many parts of the world, poverty traps women in a cycle of violence. Poor women are exposed to many sources of violence and less able to defend themselves, both from crime, from the state, from danger in the work place or from violence in the home. This is why those who worry about violence against women worry about the feminisation of poverty -- the growing numbers of poor women in our world today. Women work 66% of the world's working hours, produce 50% of the world's food. Yet they earn only 1% of the world's income and own *less* than 1% of the world's property. What could be more telling than that inequality?

Violence against women is about power and prejudice, it is about failure to tackle impunity and inequality. Above all, it is about the absence of political will.

What has been done about it?

But despite all that is dreadful and disappointing, I would say in recent decades, there have been two major changes that have given us hope.

First, the way in which women have organized themselves. It is largely thanks to the efforts of women that the abuses no longer occur in the dark. It is women who have broken taboos and forced violence into a spotlight where it cannot be ignored.

Despite persecution, inequality and obstruction, it is women who have led and continue to lead the struggle of women to expose and counter violence, to bring dramatic changes in law and practice.

By doing that they have shown that women are not victims -- although they are victimized. They are agents of change. Think of Sultana Chowdhury, a woman who qualified as a lawyer in Bangladesh at a time when women were considered not to be fit to study law. She has defied tradition to fight and win court cases against repressive religious leaders, and is now a leading defender of women's human rights in the world.

Women have forced society to acknowledge violence as an issue *for* society even if it still turns its face from taking action on it. Take the project in Senegal where women designed a village level human rights education programme which brought men, women, religious leaders and traditional chiefs together to learn and work through what human rights meant for them. The project swept across a whole region of

the country and resulted in 80,000 people joining a ceremony to declare an end to the practice of female genital mutilation.

The second important change has been the recognition of violence against women as a human rights problem. This has helped to change the perception of violence against women from a private matter to a public concern which has to be addressed by the authorities.

It has enabled the development of international standards and practices, including the designation of rape during conflict as a war crime and a crime against humanity.

Most importantly, it has spelt out governments' obligations under international law to promote and protect women's human rights and provided mechanisms to hold those governments to account.

Above all, it has enabled us to argue that in the context of violence against women, we must uphold the universality of human rights over and above culture and custom.

But while these are important breakthroughs -- unfortunately reality calls for much more.

International treaties and mechanisms are only useful if they are carried back into a country and respected. Otherwise they are simply hot air.

Laws only offer protection if they are implemented, otherwise they are printed documents.

Human rights are only real if they provide real equality and equal protection.

What can be done about it?

The shift we now need is to bring real change in the lives of many more real people.

It is with that goal in mind that Amnesty International will launch on 8 March next year a campaign to stop violence against women.

Through this campaign we will call on leaders, organizations and individuals to publicly pledge to make the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- which promised equal rights and protection for all -- a reality for women.

We will lobby governments to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and its optional protocol without reservations. I hope very much that the Government of Switzerland will be one of the first to ratify the Protocol and to remove its reservations.

In some countries we will demand the abolition of laws which discriminate against women and perpetuate violence. In others we will call for the adoption of laws to protect women and criminalize rape and other forms of sexual violence. Everywhere we will seek to end discrimination against women.

We will engage communities and local authorities to support programs that enable women to live free from violence.

We will seek the solidarity of men with women. Men also suffer when the women they love are a victim of violence and many of them are part of the movement to condemn and eradicate violence against women.

Violence against women may be universal but it is not inevitable.

We can end it. But for that we must be ready to listen to the voices of women and support them to

organize themselves. We must be willing to challenge religious, social and cultural attitudes that belittle women. We must be ready to fight for the equal access of women to political power and economic resources. We must have the courage to confront those in authority and demand change. But most importantly, we can end it if we are ready to change ourselves -- to say no: I will not do it, I will not permit others to do it and I will not rest until it has been eradicated.

Thank you.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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