

**United Nations Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-seventh session
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New York**

INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

on

"Elimination and Prevention of all Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls"

Tuesday, 5 March 2013 from 3:00pm to 6:00pm

Focus: Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls

**Preventing Violence against Women and Girls by Protecting their Sexual and
Reproductive Health and Rights**

by

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Madam Chair, Distinguished delegates,

Despite decades of immense work by women's movements and organizations that broke the silence on violence against women and girls four decades ago, and despite increased efforts by governments and international organizations, gender based violence remains the most pervasive human rights violation in the world. As many as 7 in 10 women experience physical and/ or sexual violence in their lifetimes. Hundreds are killed each day, mostly by their husbands, intimate partners or families. In India, 8,093 cases of dowry-related deaths were reported in 2007; at least 100 million girls and women in the world have experienced female genital mutilation, with more than 3 million girls in Africa annually at risk of the practice; an estimated 150 million girls under the age of 18 suffer some form of sexual violence every year, according to the figures of UN Women. Hundreds of women are killed each year just because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

This meeting of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women gives us once more the chance to analyze and understand the root causes of this most widespread crime in the world, so that we can develop and implement strategies to eliminate them. As we all know, our strategies and efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls will only be effective if we can eliminate its root causes.

Unfortunately, up to our date, one of the most important and prevalent causes of violence against women and girls remains to be the most ignored and the least addressed: The historical, patriarchal mechanisms to control women's sexuality and reproduction.

The intertwining of these two most pervasive human rights violations, violence against women and girls and violations of their sexual and reproductive rights is cyclical, that is, they are both a cause and effect of each other in an exacerbating manner.

Sexual and reproductive rights of women constitute not only the least protected, but also one of the most violated of their human rights. This fact manifests in the wide prevalence of sexual violence in its multiple forms, ranging from sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual abuse of girls, rape, date rape or gang rapes, to the use of sexual violence as tool of domination and oppression in armed conflict and in war, sexual exploitation and trafficking, practices that takes place in almost every community, in every country, all around the world.

In addition, many diverse harmful customary or traditional practices that depict the link between violence against women and girls and the lack of their sexual and reproductive rights exist all round the world. These seemingly diverse practices have a common aim, namely the control of women's and girls' sexuality and reproduction, and through it, the continuation of the historical power imbalance between women and men. Examples are many: The trafficking, sale and slavery of women from the south through so-called "bride catalogues" in the north, early and forced marriages, female genital mutilation, crimes committed in the name of honor, abduction and sale of girls, forced pregnancies, dowry related violence, acid attacks among others.

Such practices actually constitute only the tip of the iceberg. In fact, much more invisible forms of control of women's and girls' sexuality violates their rights to mobility, education, participation in economic or political life, in short, they are denied to enjoy their fundamental rights. In some countries this is done in the name of "protecting their chastity," for instance, millions of girls are not sent to school by their parents because of fear that their getting an education in a mixed school setting will increase the chance of relationships with boys, or will empower them to make their own choices and therefore reject early or arranged marriages. This would then 'cost' the family its 'honour,' or in many instances, the so-called bride price.

In other countries, girls are denied any chance of making a free choice about their lives because they are denied abortion even in cases of forced pregnancy as a result of rape or sexual abuse. That is, the state has not only failed to protect them in the first instance of the rape or sexual abuse, but it also re-victimizes them by denying them the right to safe abortion. Young women who experience unwanted and early pregnancies associated with rape or sexual abuse are also prone to higher risks of sexually transmitted infections, premature labor, low birth weight, miscarriage and stillbirth resulting from abuse during pregnancy.

A recent study, carried out among 1,366 South African women shows a firm link between violence and HIV. The figures showed that women who were beaten by their husbands or partners were 48 per cent more likely to become infected by HIV than those who were not. Those who were emotionally or financially dominated by their partner were 52 per cent more likely to be infected than those who were not dominated

And all around the world, young people's, especially girls' ability to make informed, responsible and healthy choices about their lives is constrained by social taboos and norms about sexuality that prevent them from obtaining basic information about sexuality or any form of comprehensive sexuality education, which is critical to protect themselves from sexual violence, to make healthy choices about their sexuality and lives, to live free from violence and to enjoy their fundamental human rights.

Worldwide practices that constitute human rights violations dictate what girls and women should or should not do with their bodies, sexuality and reproductive capacity; mobility - when, where and how far they can venture out of their homes and what constitutes a legitimate reason to do so; their dressing; when they can have sexual relations, with whom and how; whether they can have or insist on pleasure for themselves or not; whether they can seek health care, and where, when and from whom; and so on – These are all examples of the root causes of violence against women based on control of women's bodies, women's sexuality and women's reproduction.

Given the implications these practices have for realizing women's human rights and fundamental freedoms, I would like to give voice to the cry of a prominent women's human rights activist, a very dear friend of mine, Nasreen Huq from Bangladesh, who has contributed a lot to the ICPD plan of Action: "How could the international human rights agenda then leave out issues of sexual freedom of women and girls as it had tended to do?" (Huq 2006: 129)

In the last decade, the sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls have come increasingly under attack in many parts of the world. This is happening despite, or perhaps because of, the

success of women's movements all around the world, including the breakthroughs made in UN conferences in the 1990s, such as the international recognition of the rights of women over their bodies and their sexuality in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Fourth Women's Conference in Beijing. The Beijing Platform for Action unequivocally states that "the human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence" (A/CONF.177/20, para. 96). The inclusion of this paragraph and its accompanying vision of sexual autonomy and freedom of choice were developments in international human rights discourse, but remain far from being recognized and implemented in women's daily lives.

Given this global consensus, why is it that women's rights to autonomy over their sexuality and reproduction continues to be so vehemently challenged? Why sexuality? Why is it that particularly sexual and reproductive rights, even those recognized in international, regional and national legal frameworks and norms are being attacked? My answer is because they are the rights most closely related to shaping one's life, to one's being, to one's privacy, to one's physical, emotional and spiritual well-being and freedom, in short, to 'being and becoming.'

The former *UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women*, Radhika Coomaraswamy from Sri Lanka has made a thorough analysis of the link between the control of female sexuality and violence against women in her last report to the UN Commission on Human Rights. As she points out, "in recognizing women's sexual and reproductive autonomy rather than protecting women's sexual purity, one can tackle the roots of gender-based violence. The articulation of sexual rights constitutes the final frontier for the women's movement' (Coomaraswamy 2003: 17-18).

Her successors, Yakin Erturk from Turkey and Rashida Manjoo from South Africa have further investigated the intersections between women's sexuality and violence against women, examining how violence against women follows an "institutional logic - to delineate and sustain hierarchical social relations of race, gender, sexuality and class, and, thereby, to perpetuate the inequality of marginalized communities" (A HRC.20.16).

The UN High Level Task Force for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) calls upon international organizations, the governments and civil society to recognize how closely gender-based violence is intertwined with the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls, remaining to be an 'unfinished agenda' to put an end to this most common and universal of human rights violations.

This requires four fundamental actions:

- Respecting, protecting and fulfilling the sexual and reproductive rights of all women and girls;
- Revising laws, policies and barriers that undermine the sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls and penalizing violations of such rights;

- Making comprehensive sexuality education available to all girls and young women so that they can make informed, healthy choices about their lives to enjoy their fundamental human rights; and
- Intensifying efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls through universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, including survivors of gender-based violence.

The international commitment to end violence against women is clear. However, for our efforts to be effective, we must tackle the root causes of violence, that is, the pervasive gender inequality in many spheres, including the widespread violations of sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls. We also need the political will, financial commitments, and measures taken by those in power, whether in the public or the private spheres.

I sincerely hope that this Commission on the Status of Women sends a clear message to the world that preventing and ending violence against women is an imperative and a requirement for development and social justice.

I thank you.