

Towards the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls

Bahá'í International Community's contribution to
the 57th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

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The epidemic of violence and discrimination against women and girls is once again on the global agenda. The efforts of governments, civil society organizations, and individuals at the local, national and international levels have led to the development of legal and institutional frameworks to protect the rights of women and girls and have called attention to the culture of impunity within which violence against women is often tolerated and even condoned.

Women and girls in territories throughout the world are enmeshed in a culture which enables and sustains violence against them. This affects not only women and girls; such violence is ultimately an act of aggression against society as a whole. It degrades victims, perpetrators, families and entire communities. As such, the eradication of violence requires not only changes in law and policy, but more fundamental changes at the level of culture, attitudes and beliefs. Such changes must be grounded in the conviction that the equality of women and men is not only a goal to be achieved, but a truth about human nature to be acknowledged and embraced. The soul has no gender. The very essence of what make us human is neither 'male' nor 'female.' Conceived in this way, equality goes beyond a tally of resources or a set of social norms. It reflects the nobility inherent in every human being.

Viewed in the broader context, violence and discrimination against women and girls is one of the symptoms of a social order characterized by conflict, injustice and insecurity. Its structures and processes—constrained by particularistic agendas—prove themselves incapable of serving the common good. As we seek to eradicate violence against women and girls, we must not lose sight of the broader, long-term goal: namely the creation of conditions in which women *and* men can work shoulder to shoulder in constructing a more just and equitable social order.

We offer the following recommendations for consideration by the Commission:

Prevailing conceptions of power and empowerment need to be redefined. The 2006 'In-depth study on all forms of violence against women' stated that "structural imbalances of power and inequality between women and men are both the context and causes of violence against women" (A/61/122/Add.1). Yet an improved balance of power will not suffice. The very conception of power needs to be seriously questioned and fundamentally redefined. Prevailing notions of power tend to focus on the ability to compete effectively, to dominate, and to gain ascendancy over others. These essentially adversarial expressions of power do not provide society with the tools needed to create institutions and processes that foster the progress of all members of the community. The dominant thinking of power as 'power over' must be replaced with the concept of 'power to'—power as a capacity of the individual or of the collective. We need a broadened appreciation of the sources of power available to humanity, such as power that comes from the bonds of solidarity and mutual concern, and power that emanates from unity of thought and action, and the promotion of such qualities as justice, honesty, and integrity.

The Commission has repeatedly noted that the empowerment of women and girls is key to protecting their human rights and breaking the cycle of violence. Empowerment is a process of recognition, capacity building and action. Individuals become empowered as they come to recognize their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings, and their ability to improve their own condition and that of the wider society. At the collective level, empowerment involves the transformation of relationships of dominance into relationships of equality and mutuality.

The role of men in addressing this violence and exploitation has been recognized as a key aspect of prevention. Men and boys must be encouraged to speak out strongly against violence and exploitation and not to protect perpetrators. They must make a conscious effort to understand fully the principle of the equality of women and men and its expression in both private and public life. At home, men must come to understand their role in modeling healthy relations and respect for male and female members of the family. It is often in the home that boys and girls first learn about the nature of power and how it is expressed. Distorted expressions of power and authority promote in children attitudes and habits that are carried to the workplace, to the community, and to public life.

The international community and the State must shift from reactive approaches to ones that focus on prevention of violence. Prevention must begin by identifying and addressing the underlying causes of the violence rather than its symptoms. Efforts aimed at prevention must consider the prevailing conceptions of gender identity and of power, and the forms of discrimination and disadvantage that place women and girls at risk of violence. While States have initiated various prevention programs, these have been hampered by an overall lack of societal transformation. Such transformation involves changes at the level of attitudes, culture, community life, as well as in the structures that sustain and normalize violence and exploitation. To date, the majority of prevention activity has been carried out by civil society organizations, with limited resources. States need to assume greater responsibility for the implementation of policies and programmes that such transformation requires and support the initiatives of civil society. In addition, more research is needed to determine strategies to prevent violence against girls and women in States that are fragile or in the midst of conflict or post-conflict recovery.

One approach towards social transformation is through the education and training of children and youth in a manner that cultivates in them a sense of dignity as well as responsibility for the well-being of their family members and for the wider community. Drawing on the experiences of the worldwide Bahá'í community in promoting social transformation, we note a number of elements in educational endeavors that support such transformation: a conviction that happiness and honor lie in integrity; the ability to act with moral courage; the ability to participate in non-adversarial decision-making; a degree of excellence in a productive skill through which one can meet one's needs with dignity; the ability to analyze social conditions and understand the forces that shape them; the ability to express ideas eloquently and wisely; the capacity to foster collaboration; and an emphasis on service to the community. While emphasis must continue to be placed on girls' access to quality education, due attention must be given to the education of boys particularly with respect to issues of gender equality.

No custom, tradition, or religious interpretation that sanctions any form of violence against women and girls should be allowed to outweigh the obligation to eradicate violence against

women and girls. The regrettable practice of hiding behind cultural and religious traditions that permit violence against women perpetuates a climate of legal and moral impunity. The responsibility of States to protect women and girls from violence must take precedence over any such customs. Religious leaders, who play an instrumental role in shaping attitudes and beliefs, must also support unequivocally the principle of the equality of women and men. Practices and doctrines which condone or promote violence against women and girls need to be eliminated. It must also be remembered that all religions contain the voices of women. Too often, due to ignorance, lack of education or lack of opportunity to be heard, the views of women have been absent from the definition of what religion is and how its teachings bear on public and private life.

States must take comprehensive measures to eradicate the culture of impunity. The individual, her family and her community are under the protection of the State. Yet, a culture of impunity persists in many territories: perpetrators of violence against and exploitation of women and girls go unpunished (or inadequately punished). The victims of such acts have little or no means of redress and or access to support services. More needs to be done to prevent the violence and exploitation of women and girls. All too often, for example, inadequate resources are allocated to implement laws that protect women and specialized services for victims do not exist. In many cases of violence and abuse, the web of actors is extensive and the pressures to remain silent about the abuse are strong. Penalties for perpetrators must be accompanied by measures to ensure the security of victims, who often need protection from retribution. The incorporation of commitments made in Security Council resolutions related to women, peace and security, into national action plans has been a positive step in this regard.