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Communiqué

Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women must be strengthened, say women's rights activists and experts during the 11th session of the UN Human Rights Council

The mandate of the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences (SRVAW) must be strengthened if the elimination of all forms of violence against women is to become a reality.

This was a key recommendation from the parallel event '15 years of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women: gains, challenges and the way forward' held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland on June 5, 2009, in parallel to the 11th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC).

Organised by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development (APWLD), together with the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and World YWCA representing the Geneva NGO Working Group on Violence against Women and Girls, the event reviewed the 15 years of the SRVAW to guide and strengthen the mandate of the SRVAW and other stakeholders, including the UN, member states, civil society and international and regional institutions in pursuing and intensifying their efforts to eliminate violence against women as well as to protect, promote and realise all human rights of women.

Ms. Yakin Ertürk, appointed as the SRVAW in 2003, spoke about her experience in the position as "incredible" and one that requires a constructive balancing of rage and courage".

Rage, contained within the word courage symbolized this balance. The rage against the enormity of violence in Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, had to be addressed through effective recommendations. "We need to develop more effective mechanisms at the international level to immediately respond. Our generation does not have the excuse of our parents'. We need to have the courage and rage to act. The [UN Special Procedures] mandates are important and need to be strengthened to make a greater difference."

Ms. Ertürk stated that at the beginning of her term there were many states who described women as 'poor victims' only. She asserted that there is no question there are victims of violence against women who need healing but the mandate is ultimately about empowerment. If we do not tackle it in that vein, it is only superficial.

Ms. Madeleine Rees, Head of the Women’s Rights and Gender Unit at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke of how state understanding and state responsibility around violence against women has evolved in the last 15 years. She highlighted that many states have a more comprehensive sense of such violence and recognise the intersectionality. “We must look at rights as part of empowerment. The special rapporteurs have met, listened and interacted with women as part of their work,” she underlined.

The significance of the mandate has also been highlighted by Ms. Renu Rajbhandari, chairperson of Women’s Resource Centre in Nepal. She stated that for the women’s movement globally the establishment of the mandate of SRVAW has been considered as an achievement of the movement itself. Ms. Rajbhandari also outlined how the mandate has fostered dialogue with the Nepali government.

Ms. Madhu Mehra, researcher and drafter of the critical review on “15 Years of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences (1994-2009)” and member of APWLD stressed the importance of the SRVAW report on the cultural discourses that justify certain forms of gender-based violence. “The report has legitimised the advocacy work of women’s rights activists to question the hegemonic cultural values that represent an obstacle to the fight against gender-based violence,” she stated.

Key recommendations for the way forward for the SRVAW included:

- The SRVAW mandate is vitally important and needs to be strengthened to make a greater difference, including by an increase in human and financial resources;
- For the purpose of implementation, there is a need to further consolidate issues dealt with across the SRVAW mandate’s reports;
- Ways must be explored to channel the recommendations of the SRVAW into concrete action at country level, including through a follow-up funding mechanism such as the United Nations Trust Fund on Violence against Women
- There needs to be a reduction in the fragmentation of human rights mechanisms. The SRVAW mandate, along with other mandates must undertake systematic cross-fertilisation and ultimately feed into the Universal Periodic Review and into the work of the UN Treaty Bodies.

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