

Gender equality and women's empowerment in the new millennium

and permeate the fabric of our lives”. Those who champion equality for women rely to a large extent on the power of the law, and the protection which it can offer, to overcome discrimination and disadvantage. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the human rights treaty on the rights of women and is sometimes referred to as the international bill of rights for women. It has been used as the legal basis for furthering the rights of women in many countries.

that women continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty, is unacceptable in this new millennium. In addition, new challenges for women's empowerment and gender

Women's opportunities to exercise power are in many contexts greater at the local than at the national level. In India and France, policies to increase women's political participation in local elections led to significant increases in women's presence in local office. Since 1993, one-third of seats in local councils in India are reserved for women. Studies of women's participation in village councils report on the empowering effects for the women themselves as well as the positive impact of women's presence on local politics. Women's presence has made the councils more responsive to community demands for infrastructure, housing, schools, and health; helped improve the implementation of various government programmes; and increased the likelihood that other women also feel empowered and take advantage of state services and demand rights.

Latin America and the Caribbean has made the most noticeable progress of any region in the area of women's political participation. In only one decade, the number of countries with very poor representation of women went down from 20 to seven. The Latin American experience highlights the importance of quotas, although it is necessary to keep in mind that quotas do not automatically ensure women's equal representation in legislative bodies.

In some cases, the international community has played an important role in ensuring these advances. In others, women's groups within the country have been the most important actors in promoting women's empowerment and positive change in women's participation in political decision-making. By offering provisions for childcare and other forms of family support, some countries have also made the existing unequal division of family responsibilities between women and men less of an obstacle for women's participation in public life.

In 2006 the Commission on the Status of Women will consider in more detail the progress made in women's participation in decision-making. This review will take a broader perspective than participation in the executive and the legislature, but will also focus on women's participation in other key areas. We have, for example, too little information on women's participation in economic decision-making at different levels, in academia, in the media and in ministries dealing with critical areas such as health,

common cause of ill-health among women than traffic accidents and malaria combined. The disempowering effects of violence against women are enormous.

Violence against women is accepted as the norm in far too many parts of the world – a private business, a normal occurrence in the relationship between a man and a woman, where the state, community, or family should not interfere. It is a gross violation of women's human rights and is widely recognized as having serious development impacts, including but not limited to negative impacts on women's health and wellbeing. Violence against women exists on a continuum, from domestic violence in the privacy of the home, to violence as a weapon of war, where rape and other forms of sexual exploitation committed against women are now acknowledged as a crime against humanity.

Violence against women cuts across socio-economic, religious, and ethnic groups, and across geographic areas. In many countries women are at risk of violence when carrying out essential daily activities – walking or taking public transport to work, collecting water or firewood - especially when these activities are undertaken early in the morning or late at night. Adolescent girls are also at risk of violence in schools, particularly in Africa.

The health-related, economic, and social costs of violence against women - on women themselves, on their families, and on social and economic development - are substantial. Most of the data that exist on the costs of violence refer to the experiences of industrialized countries such as Canada, United Kingdom, Finland, Canada, and the United States.

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contemporary armed conflict. Women and children also constitute the majority of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons.

Women and girls are vulnerable to all forms of violence, but particularly sexual violence and exploitation, including rape, mass rape, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, and trafficking. Sexual violence has been a strategy of armed conflict in virtually all recent armed conflicts. In post-conflict contexts, women are also extremely vulnerable to rape in refugee camps. One study found that 26 percent of Burundi women in a Tanzanian camp had experienced sexual violence as refugees. Easy access to weapons increases interpersonal violence, including domestic violence, which often continues, and may even increase, in the aftermath of conflict.

The Secretary-General recently stated: "The facts on the ground point to our collective failure in preventing such violence and protecting women and girls from the horrors of gender-based violence and heinous violations of international human rights, criminal and humanitarian law". One only has to look at the newspapers or turn on the television today to understand the devastating levels of on-going sexual violence against women and young girls in Sudan.

The health consequences for women and girls during conflict are enormous, particularly related to reproductive roles. A spokesperson of the International Committee of the Red Cross recently reported that around 25 percent of women in refugee camps are pregnant, and at great risk of maternal mortality because of inadequacies in meeting reproductive health needs. He provided the distressing example that the risk that a young girl in Sudan today will die in childbirth (1-in 16) is greater than her chance of completing primary schooling (1-in 100). Gender discrimination can also lead to inequitable distribution of food to women and girls, leading to malnutrition and other health problems. Severe mental and social stress can be caused by witnessing or directly

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organized across party and ethnic lines, advocating for peace, and have been active in reconciliation efforts. They have campaigned against small arms, participated in weapons collection programmes, and disseminated information on landmines. Women's groups and networks have also begun to work at regional and sub-regional levels. For example, the Mano River Women's Peace Network, which brings together women from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and has made a major contribution to peace and security in the sub-region, won the 2003 United Nations Prize for Human Rights.

Women's work in informal peace processes is seldom reflected in formal processes. Women are often excluded from formal processes because they are not decision-makers or military leaders or because it is assumed that they lack the necessary skills. If peace agreements do not explicitly address the importance of gender equality there can be difficulties in getting attention to the concerns of women in the reconstruction phase, for example in relation to human rights provisions in new treaties in new

around the world. The prevalence of HIV infection is highest in women aged 15-25 years, while it peaks in men between five to ten years later. A new epidemic appears to be emerging in some countries amongst older people (over 50 years), and particularly amongst women, with numbers increasing 40 percent in the last five years.

In addition to increased representation among victims, women are also disproportionately affected by the pandemic in many areas because of their caring roles. Women are often left with the sole responsibility for providing for the sick and dying. Women must, however, not be seen only as vulnerable. Women and girls are also actors and change agents. The active mobilization of women and support to their efforts can enhance more effective preventative strategies and appropriate approaches to address the consequences of HIV/AIDS.

The vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS is directly related to the relations between women and men and to the attitudes and behavior of men and boys, as well as to persistent stereotypes about masculinities and about what is appropriate and acceptable behavior for women, particularly in relation to reproduction and sexuality. The factors driving the epidemic are embedded in the power relations that define male and female roles and positions, both in intimate relations and in the wider society.

Male violence against women – based on existing inequalities and power disparities in societies – is one of the critical stumbling blocks in the development of effective prevention strategies for HIV/AIDS. In violent relationships, women and girls have little means of protecting themselves from infection.

Ideologies of masculinity and ‘manliness’ which encourage men to display sexual prowess by having multiple partners, by stressing aggressiveness and dominance and lack of responsibility in sexual relationships put men themselves, as well as their partners, at risk. In many parts of the world, for example in Brazil and South Africa, men’s groups and networks are challenging existing stereotypes and addressing men’s roles and responsibilities in sexual relationships as well as in the promotion of gender equality. Equitable and responsible behavior of men and boys will only increase if they can access appropriate information and support.

UNAIDS recently established a Global Coalition on Women and HIV/AIDS comprised of the United Nations and civil society partners to address the specific concerns of women and girls, and particularly their caring roles, as well as to develop ways to engage men and boys.

This brings us to the important question – why has there been so little change in some critical areas and very slow progress in others – particularly when we are increasingly aware that promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment is not just important for women themselves, but is critical for effective development in all areas. Leaving out half the population will of necessity have negative impacts on development outcomes.

world and the potential that exists for changing values, attitudes and behavior during this transition phase into adulthood, illustrates the importance of identifying their concerns

A second major opportunity will present itself early next year with the ten-year review of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to be which will focus on implementation at national level. The programme of work contains a number of high level panels and roundtables for the exchange of experience and good practice. A Secretary-General's report on implementation at national level will be prepared, on the basis of responses to a questionnaire, as well as other information submitted by Member States. To date a total of 123 responses to the questionnaire have been received, a roughly 60 percent response rate. The review and appraisal provides an excellent opportunity to exchange experiences on achievements, gaps and challenges and required action and to renew commitments. It will be critical that the outcome of this review feeds into the high-level event to be held in 2005 to review progress in achieving the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals.

In conclusion, I would like to say a few words on the role of women's organizations focused on religion and spirituality. As has been the case in most secular organizations, women in religious bodies have historically had to struggle for equality within these bodies. We are all aware of the efforts of individuals, groups and networks to bring gender perspectives to bear on the agendas of their organizations, for example the networks of women working for a feminist interpretation of the Koran. Women's have also worked actively to promote

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In the face of the enormous discrimination and disadvantage women still face in most parts of the world, and the serious consequences for women themselves and for development trends, it would be easy to become discouraged. However the strength, courage and hope of women around the world, and their determined efforts against all odds, should inspire our continued commitment and action. Each one of us has to deal with the challenge of inequality we face in our daily lives and to find ways, however small, to work in solidarity to eliminate the discrimination and disadvantage suffered by women in other parts of the world.