

Gender – time for action

Over the next two weeks the UN is marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Such violence is an affliction still all too prevalent throughout the world, across developed and developing countries, Christian, Muslim and Hindu societies, and low and high-income families. The UN estimates that 1 in 3 women globally experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, mostly by an intimate partner. Figures, of course, vary from country to country, and in Pakistan for example, it is believed that between 60 and 90% of women have suffered some form of gender violence in their lifetime. Violence against women is a broad concept, incorporating more than just physical abuse. It can include emotional and psychological abuse, child marriage, honour killings, trafficking, and female genital mutilation. In Niger 75% of girls are married before the age of 18. In the Gambia, approximately 78% of girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation. These acts of gender-based violence cannot be ignored.

Women are particularly vulnerable to gender violence in fragile situations, such as internally displaced people camps that are sadly on the rise in many states across the world due to violence and instability. The rise in sexual violence in camps must be met with increased screening for sexually transmitted diseases, as well as improved support for women and girls in general.

The causes of violence against women are complex, and the widespread nature of these crimes make it difficult to identify specific factors that trigger this kind of violence. Nor is it always intuitive. Nordic countries, often rightly seen as leaders in gender equality and progressive rights, typically have high levels of gender violence in relation to other European countries of similar economic and cultural circumstances. Identifying the systematic features that breed gender violence is therefore no easy task. What is clear is this: in failing to educate women on the issues and on ways to address and eliminate gender violence, violence against women will endure.

A combination of cultural taboos, shame, and a lack of available options for women and girls result in a majority of cases of violence against women going unreported, leaving the crime unpunished and the girl invisible. If gender violence remains unaddressed, the abusers will likely continue to perpetrate unabated. By opening up gender violence to broader conversation it is possible to show girls and women that help is available to them. Furthermore, addressing the issue shows women that there is no need to suffer in silence, and that it is both their right and their duty to speak out against gender violence.

The responsibility to address and counter gender violence does not fall solely on women, but on the wider community as a whole. Communities have a responsibility to ensure that affected women and girls are reintegrated in to society after experiencing sexual violence, avoiding disowning or shunning victims. In many societies, women who have experienced sexual violence are deemed 'unclean', a notion that both ostracises women from societies, and deters them from coming forward. This notion must be challenged.

Operating in Nigeria and its neighbouring countries, the Wellbeing Foundation Africa advocates women's rights through educational programmes, lobbying, and an emphasis on maternal health rights. In recognition of the UN's International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, we will be launching two initiatives to tackle gender violence.

The first, which will be launched and distributed next week, is a Gender Violence booklet, to be distributed to young girls and women across Nigeria. This informative booklet gives girls insight in to gender violence and brings this discussion to the forefront of debate. Not only does it inform women on the nature of gender violence, but importantly it gives contact details for local agencies that are available to help victims of gender violence in Nigeria. It is of course no panacea, but it is a first step to showing vulnerable women that there is support and channels available to them when they are threatened or subjected to violence.

The second initiative to be launched is a gender violence toolkit, which teaches participatory justice as a system of

gender violence prevention. The toolkit will be distributed to women leaders and people of influence across Nigeria, to be adopted and practised by communities at a local level. The little-known participatory justice system has been proven to reduce gender violence, and we hope that through educating people at the top, this system of justice can trickle all the way down societies and communities to make a tangible difference. This system, which I witnessed directly in Nigeria democratises the issue of gender based violence and ensures those that perpetrate such crimes are held accountable in their community. This is not a global solution. It would not be applicable in Scandinavia or the United States. But in communities in Nigeria it can be an affective barrier to abuse. And one which can and should be utilised as part of the wider fight against gender violence. A fight, which must be won everywhere.

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The **African Development Bank** is committed to a genuine and comprehensive transformation of Africa through sustainable economic development.

Through the implementation of the High 5s – Light up and power Africa, Feed Africa, Industrialise Africa, Integrate Africa, and Improve the quality of life for the people of Africa – a new continent with revived values and a new vision will emerge.

But this cannot happen while high levels of violence continue against women and girls.

Violence against women cannot be localised, cannot be covered up or kept behind closed doors. Violence is viral – it destroys the victim, damages the community, and compromises the whole region’s economic and social development.

Without renewed efforts to reduce and eliminate gender gaps, the gender equality aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063 are at risk.

Promoting gender equality in legislative frameworks, practices and attitudes helps to create inclusive and dynamic economies, positive for the region’s development.

The African Development Bank will promote gender equality through legal reforms, via policy and with strategy development to end traditional customs and practices that damage the rights of women and girls and stop them from fulfilling their potential.

This is why we are celebrating the 16 Days of Activism campaign against gender-based violence.

The campaign calls for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls all over the world.

The Bank is also committed to its flagship programs targeting women, such as the Affirmative Financing Action for Women (AFAWA) – 50 million women speak and others to come.

With its new Development and Business Delivery Model, the Bank will strengthen measures against sexual harassment in the workplace and increase its efforts to establish gender equality in all its sites and operations.

Institutions where gender-based violence exists cannot prosper.

Households where gender-based violence exists cannot thrive.

Whenever you have gender-based violence, the potential of women and girls is decimated.

That must not happen.

That is why I am calling for an end to all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls.