

## **A Feminist Civil Society Response to the UN Secretary General's Campaign to End Violence against Women**

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*At the Commission on the Status of Women Session in 2008, the Secretary General of the United Nations (Mr. Ban Ki-Moon) announced his Campaign UNiTE to End Violence Against Women, 2008-2015. Its objective is to raise public awareness and increase political will and resources for preventing and responding to all forms of violence against women and girls in all parts of the world. Over the past year, key agencies inside the UN developed a Framework for Action that identifies five key outcomes as benchmarks for what the campaign seeks to achieve in all countries by 2015. These are to act as an umbrella for a multiplicity of actions by a wide range of stakeholders:*

- 1. Adoption and enforcement of national laws on VAW...in line with international human rights standards.*
- 2. Adoption and implementation of multi-sectoral national plans of action that emphasize prevention and that are adequately resourced.*
- 3. Establishment of data collection and analysis systems...on the prevalence of various forms of violence against women and girls.*
- 4. Establishment of ... campaigns and engagement of a diverse range of civil society actors in preventing violence and [supporting those]... abused.*
- 5. Systematic efforts to address sexual violence in conflict situations and to protect women and girls from rape as a tactic of war...*

*The following is based on my presentation on behalf of civil society groups at a one day international consultation on the SG's Campaign held in March, 2009 organized by UNIFEM, the Office of the Special Advisor to the SG(OSAGI) , and the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) to engage NGOs in dialogue with UN actors about the Campaign.*

### **Perspectives from Civil Society**

It is easy to be skeptical about another UN campaign and what it can achieve, but I would like to focus here on how feminists can use this opportunity to engage with governments and the UN on how they can deliver more effectively on their

promises to work toward ending violence against women. The UN continues to be an important global public space for raising awareness of issues and promoting strategies to address them as well as for monitoring government actions and seeking accountability from them. This campaign has been initiated at the highest level of the UN by the Secretary General (SG) and it can be a particularly visible and effective space because the SG has a stake in how it evolves. Therefore, civil society and particularly groups working to end violence need to be deliberate in how we utilize this potential for partnership with the UN to take work against violence against women to new levels of impact and to new communities.

Violence against women (VAW) is an issue that has come onto the global agenda from the grassroots level of the women's movement ... that is from women's lives and feminist organizing. There is no issue that better illustrates how the women's movement can and has moved a concern from local women's spaces to the tables of power. The SG's campaign can and must continue to build upon what women have done around this issue at the grassroots if it is to succeed. The strength of the work around VAW is based on the fact that it touches women's lives very deeply. As more men get involved in the SG's campaign and in working to end VAW, we must ensure that men's efforts are based upon and bring forth the voices of women with them, rather than substituting for them.

The SG's campaign must therefore be rooted in and empower women and their diverse voices. One key recommendation is therefore that the UN needs to create a civil society advisory group for this campaign that represents the diversity of concerns that NGOs, and particularly women's groups, have raised about VAW – regional as well as issue and identity diversity needs to be reflected in this body.

Violence against women is an issue that both highlights the universality of women's experiences and rights, while also addressing the particularities of the diversity of women's lives. The commonality is that almost all women experience violence, or the threat of violence, as a tool aimed at controlling us – our behavior and our bodies. But the forms and ways in which women experience such threats and acts of violence are shaped by many factors such as race, class, culture, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, etc. as they intersect with gender. Remedies and efforts to end VAW must therefore be intersectional, particular and context-driven; one-size-fits-all solutions will not work. The SG's campaign needs to build on both the universality of violence and its specificity, which requires that it be inclusive of the full diversity of women's experiences of

VAW. This is particularly important in relation to women whose lives and experiences are often marginalized – racial and sexual minorities, disabled women, refugee and migrant women, etc.

Based on an informal meeting with NGO partners in the NY area a few weeks ago and a meeting of international groups working on VAW held at CWGL in July, 2008, a few themes regarding the current state of global work on VAW keep re-emerging. These are content areas that we felt are important for the SG's campaign generally, and that are also related to the five outcomes listed in the Framework for Action for it.

**Impunity:** Quite simply, those who violate women should not get away with it, whether they are rebels in the DRC or celebrities in the USA. Yet, impunity for VAW is rampant everywhere. This is particularly related to outcomes 1, 2 & 5. Good legislation and national action plans addressing VAW must be put in place – but the emphasis needs to be on their enforcement and implementation. There are many obstacles to implementation of these laws that must be tackled straight forwardly – community attitudes, lack of resources, inadequate information, etc. Addressing these is key to holding states accountable for failure to do due diligence in seeking to implement the laws already in place. The SG has created a high powered network of male leaders who have signed onto his campaign; these men could be critical in calling for accountability and an end to community acceptance of impunity at all levels. Women's NGOS can seek to hold them and other men, such as those who have signed onto the UNIFEM "Say NO to VAW" campaign, accountable to working for what they have pledged.

**Prevention:** Many women's organizations that have been working on VAW for decades are moving to a greater focus on prevention of such violence. Often, the discussion of prevention becomes synonymous with discourse on "working with men & boys." There are some useful approaches to involving men (e.g. Breakthrough's "Bell Bajao" campaign in India that calls on them to "ring the bell" and intervene as VAW is occurring). These strategies encourage men and boys to be part of the solution and to address this issue with other men, but this must be done without letting them "take over the issue." The goal is figuring out *everyone's* role in ending VAW, including that of men and boys, but it is critical that men respect women's leadership and voices in defining this issue.

The most important aspect of prevention is empowering women and ending the sexual discrimination that fuels VAW. Changing the power imbalance in society

and ensuring that women have access to their human rights – including their economic and social rights to livelihood - is ultimately crucial to preventing the ways in which women are made vulnerable to violence. This aspect of prevention was highlighted as central in the UN Secretary General’s In Depth Study on VAW (UN, 2006). While it is implicit in the benchmarks of the SG’s campaign framework, and particularly in Outcomes 2 and 4, it needs to be made more explicit throughout this campaign.

**Cultures of violence:** It is crucial that we discuss how we understand the perpetuation of cultures of violence in our world in relation to VAW. No country or culture in the world is exempt from the problem of violence against women today. Community attitudes that protect perpetrators are a key aspect of how culture still feeds impunity for these acts. VAW continues to be supported by the dynamics within cultures, both traditional and contemporary. It is important that we re-examine the ways in which culture often gets discussed in relation to gender-based violence, and stop singling out and separating so-called “traditional cultural practices” from other forms of violence, which are supported by contemporary cultural attitudes. This distinction often reinforces North/South divides and feeds divisive and patronizing attitudes about “the other” as more violent toward women. Debates around culture are important to all of the Outcomes, but are particularly connected to Outcome 5 on sexual violence in conflict, because “cultural defenses” related to violence against women are often used in situations of war and conflict. We must think more creatively about how to address cultures of violence as a contemporary problem that thrives in war and militarism, but is also present in post-conflict and so-called times of peace.

**Data:** Accurate data is badly needed on the prevalence and incidence of various forms of VAW as addressed by Outcome 3. And it is equally important that data be gathered and monitored on what approaches and strategies have worked best to reduce VAW in diverse settings. NGOs have been calling on the UN and governments to collect more accurate data on VAW since the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women and its reviews - Beijing +5 and Beijing +10. Further, when the international advisory committee for the SG’s Study on VAW tried to learn what was particularly effective in working towards an end to VAW, we realized there was very little evaluative information out there. We felt compelled to change the name of that part of the study from “Best Practices” to “Promising Practices” to emphasize the point that there is a dearth of evaluative information and a critical need for it. Women’s groups and other NGOs need to have resources devoted to this in order to document our work and contribute

towards a larger body of knowledge in this field. This data is crucial to help us determine priorities in VAW work, to know what governments can and should do, and to convince funders that this work is contributing towards change.

**Resources:** No discussion with civil society organizations about countering VAW misses the importance of this point. As Outcome 2 recognizes, implementation of national plans of action depends on them being adequately resourced. It is abundantly clear that work to end VAW is woefully under-resourced both at the governmental and the civil society levels and in all areas – from service delivery to making the justice system accessible for victims of VAW to education and prevention strategies. It is particularly important that people working on the ground have access to resources for anti-VAW work since this is where the first impact must be felt. Reducing violence against women should be seen as a direct indicator for achieving development in general, and in particular for the UN Millennium Development Goal (MDG 3) on gender equality. As we move into the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Women’s Conference (2010), and in anticipation of the 2015 goal for achieving the MDGs, we should use these benchmarks to propel more resources to this work.

**UN Leading by example:** At our informal meeting in preparation for this consultation, we discussed the importance of having the SG call on the UN to lead by example in his VAW campaign. Some parts of the campaign should look inward at the UN system and the UN’s own policies and practices as they relate to various aspects of VAW. Some progress has been made in getting the UN to adopt a “Zero Tolerance” policy with regard to VAW in relation to peacekeeping troops, which is usually what we hear about, but more efforts must be made to implement this policy, including getting governments who provide the troops to abide by UN policies. Further, there is more that the UN should do to reduce sexual assault and harassment by its civilian personnel, and to improve its policies with regard to the treatment of spouses of UN employees and of diplomats, who are often left vulnerable to VAW. Addressing such internal issues in a forthright manner would be a visible demonstration of how the SG’s Campaign is ‘not just talk, but rather something the UN does in its own house as well.