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UN Officials Stress Need to Eliminate Violence Against Women



25 November 2004 – United Nations officials, led by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, today stressed the need for building a world in which women enjoy their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men.

“Violence against women is global in reach, and takes place in all societies and cultures,” he said in a statement marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. “It affects women no matter what their race, ethnicity, social origin, birth or other status may be.”

Noting that gender-based violence is particularly pervasive in situation of armed conflicts, when women and girls become victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence, the Secretary-General said ending the impunity for such crimes is an important step.

Referring to the Special Court for Sierra Leone, he said for the first time forced marriage would be prosecuted as a crime against humanity.

Describing violence against women as “a challenge in itself,” since it could cause HIV infection, the Secretary-General observed that sexual violence increases women's vulnerability to the virus.

“All too frequently, the threat to violence forces women to have unprotected sex,” he said. “Violence can also make it impossible for women to seek information, follow treatment or even raise the subject for discussion.”

He said the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women continued to play a dynamic role in ensuring that the issue was a high priority for the international community, noting that the Optional Protocol to the Convention “gives women the right to petition, and has the potential to become a highly effective tool for addressing gender-based violence.”

Meanwhile, the head of the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) also pointed out that systematic use of rape as a weapon of war was a violation of human rights that demands urgent attention and an end to impunity.

“The prevalence of rape and sexual violence during armed conflict is not a new problem, but it is as serious as it has ever been,” said Executive Director Carol Bellamy. “Perpetrators of sexual violence during armed conflict are violating international law. States must hold them accountable, and there must be resources for victims to seek justice.”

She saw the use of rape in wars as “one of the most disturbing phenomena” of the past two decades. “In situations of armed conflicts, girls and women are routinely targeted in campaigns of gender-based violence, including rape, mutilation, prostitution, and sexual slavery,” she said.

Referring to conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan, the UNICEF chief observed that militias had routinely engaged in rape of young girls and women of all ages. “That conflict has forced more than a million people to leave their homes and seek refuge in makeshift camps,” she said. “But even there, women and girls are in grave danger of being sexually assaulted, particularly when they go beyond the camp for firewood.”