

Sunita SUNA

Challenges to Overcome Violence Against Women

“A Delhi University female student was shoved into a car by three unidentified men when she was returning late in the evening with her friend from a road side dhaba (restaurant). She was then gang-raped by the miscreants for four hours inside the moving car and then thrown out on the road where she was abducted. Incidentally, the dhaba was just one hundred meters from the local police station.”¹ The much-applauded Delhi Police has yet to nab the culprits, even after four months.

Every Fifteen Seconds a Woman is Raped

One out of four women in the world is a victim of sexual abuse. One out of six girl children is a victim of incest. An estimated two million young girls undergo genital mutilation practices every year.

An estimated sixty million females ‘disappear’ due to female infanticide and sex-selective abortions. Seventy-five percent of the people who die of starvation are women. Two thirds of the illiterates in the world are women (whether in the Southern or Northern hemisphere).

Sixty-five percent of the total work in the world today is done by women, yet only fifteen percent of salaries are paid to women. Ninety-eight percent of all structures of power (political, economic and social) in the world are controlled by men.²

Around four hundred cases of rape are reported in one year (365 days) in Delhi, the capital of India. The number of unreported cases could be much higher. Incidentally, in the neighbouring state of Haryana, only one out of sixty-nine cases of rape is reported. These statistics are so drastic that Delhi has earned a tag of the “rape capital of India.”

Whether in India or elsewhere in the world, this is the reality and experience of women. Gender-based violence is a universal reality and it is widespread. Women face many forms of violence on a daily basis.

The official statistics of reported crimes against women do not fully reflect the reality, as thousands of cases go unreported or ignored.

In the following essay, we would like to raise certain issues around violence against women in order to identify the challenges for us as a student community to move towards a violence-free society.

¹ *Times of India*, New Delhi Edition.

² Concept Paper for the Women’s Programme of WSCF IRO, on *Violence against Women: Challenging Gender Roles and Power Relations between Women and Men*. 24–31 July 2005, Manila, Philippines.

Sunita SUNA is the newly appointed women’s coordinator for the Interregional Office (IRO) of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). She belongs to the Jeypore Evangelical-Lutheran Church, Orissa, India. Before joining WSCF, she was working with the Indian Student Christian Movement (SCM) as the study secretary for the Women’s Desk. Her email address is sunita.wscf@gmail.com.



Violence Against Women: A Growing Crisis in South Asia

An Oxfam Report exposes the sad state of women in South Asia:

In *Pakistan*, eighty percent of women experience violence within their homes. Despite the fact that many incidents of 'honour killing' are not reported, in 2002, more than 450 Pakistani women or girls were killed by relatives in so-called 'honour killings,' and at least as many were raped.

Every six hours, somewhere in *India*, a young married woman is burned alive, beaten to death, or driven to commit suicide. It is estimated that more than 15,000 women suffer from dowry-related violence every year. In a nation-wide survey in India, nearly fifty percent of women reported at least one incident of physical or psychological violence in their lifetime.

Forty-seven percent of *Bangladeshi* women experience some physical violence at the hands of their intimate partners. If psychological violence were included, the figure would be much higher. Every week, more than ten women in Bangladesh suffer from an acid attack that leaves them brutally disfigured and often blind and disabled. A study in Bangladesh shows that 32 percent of women working outside their homes experience disruption of their work due to incidents of domestic violence.

According to the chairperson of the National Committee on Women, violence against women is on the increase in *Sri Lanka*. Sample surveys reveal that 60 percent of women suffer domestic violence in Sri Lanka.

There is no accurate figure of the scale of sex-trafficking of women and girls from *Nepal*. Despite published figures suggesting that between five and seven thousand Nepali women and girls are trafficked for sex work each year, and that two hundred thousand Nepali women and girls are working in the sex industry in India (Human Rights Watch, 1995), the actual magnitude of women and girls who are trafficked from Nepal is unknown.

In *Afghanistan*, there is a significant incidence of rape, forced marriage, abductions, and assaults. Women are also attacked and imprisoned by armed groups without due process, for not complying with their Taliban-style edicts on dress and behaviour. Statistics are scarce, but in 2003, an Amnesty International Report indicated a high incidence of such violence.¹

Challenges Ahead: Manifestation of Patriarchy

I am sure that most readers would agree that we still live in a predominantly patriarchal world. Most of the half of humanity are treated as inferior to men and hence are not disposed to a life in dignity.

Women too have been conditioned by the system to accept their given subordinate status in exchange for protection and privilege. Their subordinate status exposes them to various forms of discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation and oppression or violence within the family, at the work place and in all spheres of their daily life.

Patriarchal influence is seen in all areas of life, namely, family, religion, education, work, culture, media, political forums and the legal system.² In fact, in most cultures the patriarchy endows men with higher status with the legitimacy to subjugate women.

Furthermore, patriarchal cultures have sanctioned men to control property and

¹ *Towards Ending Violence Against Women in South Asia*. Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2004.

² JEYARAJ Nirmala, *Understanding Gender Issues: A Move towards Gender Equality*. In *Women and Society*. Madurai, 2001.

economic resources and to pass on the same from one man to another or from father to son. Unfortunately this customary practice has prevented women from inheriting property and assets.

On account of this, in many societies daughters are considered as liabilities. Consequently, girls and women are discriminated against right through all the stages of their life, from the womb to the tomb.

Their very right to birth and existence in this world is denied. In India, China and many other places, sons are preferred over daughters. It is so much so that the Chinese are now finding it extremely difficult to find girls from the same community or country for marriage.

The reason for this is that the single child policy has encouraged them to opt for a son only. It is unfortunate that many of us, either consciously or unconsciously, have inherited the patriarchal values and mindset.

Gender Discrimination: A Human Rights Issue

Today gender-based violence is recognized as a major issue on the international human rights agenda after the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (GA) in 1979.

Though we have observed 25th November, 2005, as the day for Elimination of Violence Against Women, the discrimination and violence continues unabated for half the world's population. Women experience a wide range of violations.

In our society, women are discriminated against in the areas of education, employment, inheritance of property, freedom of expression and movement, and decision-making power in private and public life.

The growing number of sexual assaults on women corroborates the point. Moreover, massive trafficking in women and girls for sexual exploitation is one of the worst forms of human rights abuse.

Trafficking of women and girl children is rapidly increasing in Asian countries. It is reported that two million are trafficked across borders annually and every day in Asia alone, one million are abused.¹

Gender Discrimination: A Development Issue

According to the World Bank (WB) Report in 2005, "Gender inequality tends to slow economic growth and make the rise from poverty more difficult. The reasons for this link are not hard to understand.

"Half of the world's population is female, hence, the extent to which women and girls benefit from development policies and programs has a major impact on countries' overall development success.

"Research shows that women and girls tend to work harder than men, are more likely to invest their earnings in their children, are major producers as well as consumers, and shoulder critical, life-sustaining responsibilities without which men and boys could not survive, much less enjoy high levels of productivity."²

1 "Churches Say No to Violence Against Women." Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Department for Mission and Development, Women in Church and Society, Genève, 2002.

2 World Bank (WB) Development Report. 2005.

Development policies and patterns of many countries are patriarchal in their basic approach. Policymakers are insensitive to the needs and development of women, who constitute more than fifty percent of a given country's population.

Unfortunately, on account of the preferential option for male children, the gender ratio is fast changing in many societies. The male-dominated political sphere in most of the Asian countries has left little or no space for the active participation of women.

The much-debated Women's Reservation Bill (a third of the seats in the Parliament) pending in the Indian Parliament for a long time, resurfaces every year on the International Day of Women. Thanks to the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) and local self-governance, in India women have achieved the one-third reservations. But even that privilege has not been adequately fulfilled.

Playing God: The Missing Women

God has created women and men equally and it is by nature that their numbers are more or less same. Foetal sex determination tests, however, through the use of ultrasound machines have become widespread and have resulted in abortions of female fetuses, particularly in the countries of India and China.

It is shocking to know from the National Family Health Surveys in India that more than one hundred thousand sex-selective abortions have been performed annually in India in recent years.¹

The decline in the female:male ratio was sharpest in the decade of 1991–2001. There has been a drop from 945 to 927 girls for every thousand boys. This exposes the relationship between social development and sex ratio.

In 2002, only 48.4% of the populations of India and China are female in comparison with 50.1% in Western Europe. An estimated sixty million females are thus missing, mainly from the Asian countries.

Based on these comparative figures, the Nobel laureate Amartya SEN holds India responsible for thirty-two million missing women. He says: "These women ought to have been present in India if our sex-ratio were on par with the world, but some inhuman conspiracy of 'race fixing' is gradually eliminating India's females."²

Puneet BEDI, a foetal medicine expert from India, rightly points out that "ultrasound machine has become a weapon of mass destruction." For sure, today the mother's womb has become a battlefield for the girl-child.

Eliminating females just because they are females before or after birth is the ultimate manifestation of gender violence and discrimination, abuse of human rights and infringement on values of equality, justice, dignity and quality of life for all.

Countries like Bangladesh, which ranks very low on the Human Development Index (HDI), are doing much better than countries like India or Pakistan, who comparatively have a higher HDI-status, according to the Human Development Report in 2005.

Women's Bodies as Weapons During War and Conflict

In war and conflict situations, though almost one hundred percent of the combatants are male, it is also the women, who indirectly face the brunt. Women and girls are raped. Women are threatened, humiliated and finally abused to terrorise the community.

Thousands of women and girls have been raped and sexually abused and abducted as

1 KRISHNAKUMAR Asha, *Doomed in the Womb?* In *The Hindu*. 14th December 2003.

2 MERCHANT Rehamt, *Our Missing Women*. In *The Hindu*. 15th July 2002.

sex slaves in the Darfur region of Western Sudan. In East Timor, it has been estimated that at least one thousand women were raped during the post-referendum conflict of 1999.

We are all aware of the plight of the Comfort Women during World War II. Japanese troops used more than 200,000 women as sex slaves, mostly from Korea, Indonesia and other countries, and these came to be known as Comfort Women.

Patricia HYNES, a professor of environmental health at the Boston University School of Public Health) has mentioned in her article on "War and Women" that "governments on all sides of war have initiated, accommodated, and tolerated military brothels under the ægis of 'rest and recreation' for their soldiers, with the private admission that a regulated system of brothels will contain male sexual aggression, limit sexually transmitted diseases in the military, and boost soldiers' morale for war."

Governments are least concerned about the safety of women during wars and conflicts. It is of course a great shame for all of us that some governments allow sexual violence as a weapon.

Holistic Approach for Gender Justice

Our mission is the vision of the Reign of God on this Earth. As a student community, we need to play a prophetic role to protest against oppressive patriarchal systems and values of our society, which legitimise unequal power relations between women and men.

As women and men, we need to pursue gender justice. Women are involved in the struggle of women's liberation, which is an ongoing process. But it becomes futile if men do not join hands in this noble cause.

It is very important to develop a strong awareness among the public in general and political leaders in particular. As long as there is no political will for women's emancipation and empowerment, gender justice cannot be achieved in the public sphere.

We are living in this lopsided world, where women are treated too many times as inferior human beings. The role of students and of youth in this regard is of an utmost importance for the world.

The student community in the long run goes on to become the policy-makers of the future. If the student community is not provided an atmosphere of inclusiveness in universities, schools and in their families, they will not be leaders and citizens with gender sensitivity. In addition to this, school curricula need to be changed, as more often than not, these promote gender stereotypes.

Breaking the Culture of Silence

There have been plenty of books and essays written on violence against women in order to make people aware of the gross violation of the personhood of women in our times.

In addition to this, the ongoing struggles of women's movements for the emancipation of women have been striving to break the "culture of silence" that pervades our society on issues of justice and equality for women.

In spite of all these attempts, we must continue to address the issue of violence against women seriously and concertedly. We need to tell the stories again and again until and unless the world recognises that violence against women is indeed a crime.

Repatterning Our Minds

The objective of this reflection is not to draw a battle line between women and men. But, this is an appeal to introspection for women and men who form the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF); to identify within ourselves, our societies, and our churches, the presence and traces of gender discrimination.

More often than not, it has always been women who have done this. The WSCF initiative towards overcoming violence against women through different activities needs to be seen as a very positive effort.

At this point of time, we need to renew our faith affirmation as women and men are created in God's image and both are equally important as co-creators of God's good creation. Tolerating violence, therefore, is a callous disrespect of God's creation.

The values affirming life are justice, peace, sisterhood and brotherhood, love, dignity, equality and living in harmony with nature. A challenging task that lies ahead for all of us is to repattern our minds and restructure our relationships in order that we move towards a society that is guided by the values of justice, peace, equality and dignity for all.

Sunita SUNA: Vaincre la Violence contre les Femmes: les Défis

La violence orchestrée sur la base des rapports genre est une réalité universelle et est répandue, bien que rampant dans les pays d'Asie du Sud. Les femmes font face à plusieurs formes de violence journalièrement, qui sont physique, psychologique, émotionnelle et sociologique. Les statistiques officielles des cas rapportés de crimes contre les femmes ne reflète pas complètement la réalité comme des milliers de cas restent non rapportés parce que les femmes victimes se sentent inconfortables de se présenter en public même après être exposée à la violence. Dans la plupart des cas elles sont tenues pour responsables des violences infligées sur elles. L'insensibilité, une gouvernance dominée par les hommes et le manque de volonté politique pour la responsabilisation des femmes, les modèles de développement asymétriques, les sanctions religieuses contre les femmes et la marchandisation des femmes sont des défis devant nous. Une volonté politique sur la sensibilisation au genre, l'émancipation des femmes à travers d'important changement des politiques et de la législation en faveur des femmes et un effort concerté des gouvernement et de la société civile, incluant les communautés estudiantines constituent la feuille de route pour vaincre les violence contre les femmes et établir une juste des genres.

Sunita SUNA: Los Desafíos para Superar Violencia contra las Mujeres

La Violencia de género es una realidad universal y está extendida, aunque es desenfrenada en los países sudasiáticos. Las mujeres enfrentan muchas formas de violencia diariamente, incluyendo física, psicológica, emocional y sociológica. Las estadísticas oficiales de crímenes contra las mujeres no reflejan la realidad totalmente como que hay miles de casos que no se informan, porque las mujeres no se sienten cómodas al hacerlo publico aun después de ser expuestas a la violencia, porque la mayoría de las veces se considera a las mujeres y su carácter como responsables de la violencia infligida a ellas. El mindset insensible, la gobernación dominada por el varón y la falta de deseo político para el fortalecimiento de mujeres, el modelo de desarrollo desequilibrado, la sanción religiosa contra las mujeres y los commodification de mujeres es un desafío que tenemos por delante. Un deseo político en la sensibilización del género, la emancipación de mujeres a través de la legislaciones importantes y los cambios políticos en favor de las mujeres y un esfuerzo convenido del gobierno y la sociedad civil, incluso la comunidad de estudiantes es el mapa del camino a superar la violencia contra las mujeres y para establecer la justicia del género.