

Submitted to the Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-seventh Session, 4-15 March 2013

**Priority Theme: Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.**

**Mental Health and Violence Against Women**

Statement submitted by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities, International Council of Women, International Association of Applied Psychology, International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Federation for Parenting Education, International Federation of Women Lawyers, International Federation of Women of Legal Careers, International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, National Council of Women/USA, World Council of Psychotherapy, Communications Coordination Committee for the United Nations, International Federation of Social Workers\*, Brothers of Charity\*, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues\*, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.

We, the international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and are members of the NGO Committee on Mental Health, working under the auspices of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO) in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, are committed to the promotion of mental health, psychological and societal well-being, the prevention and treatment of mental illness and emotional distress, and improvement in the delivery and quality of mental health services through advocacy and education at the United Nations.

Historically, issues of mental health have been minimized or overlooked in discussions at the UN, but this trend is changing, as evidenced by the inclusion of mental health in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declaration on non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The importance of promoting mental health for all people is recognized in the World Health Organization in its Constitution when it states that “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity; the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition; and the health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent upon the fullest cooperation of individuals and States.” This new direction of inclusion of mental health is further developed in the World Health Organization’s *Global Mental Health Action Plan, 2013-2020*.

There is perhaps no more significant theme for addressing global mental health concerns than that of the elimination and prevention of violence against women and girls. The harrowing fact is that depression already accounts for the third highest burden of disease on the planet. Since depression is 50% higher for females than males, WHO (2008) reports that it is already the leading cause of disease burden for women across all countries and income levels. Further, recent models of male depression indicate that aggressive acting out and substance abuse are symptoms of a “male pattern depression.” The interaction of these gendered forms of depression has especially deleterious effects when substance abuse and violence affect families and communities. WHO projects that depression will be the number one burden by 2030. Thus, it is of urgent importance that the interaction of mental health issues with violence against women and girls be effectively addressed in global policies and health programs.

Family violence and neighborhood sexual assault are the most commonly experienced causes of trauma, and the cause of daily suffering for the greatest number of people. We call attention to the fact that emphasis on the special horrors that accompany natural disasters and war should not overshadow the most common behavioral causes of mental suffering, specifically that of violence against women and girls. Kristof and WuDunn (2009, *Half the Sky*) provide strong evidence that gender-based violence is ubiquitous in most developing countries and creates far more casualties than any war. Most women, aged 15 to 44, are more likely to be maimed or die from male violence than from physical disease, accidents,

and war combined. The most devastating consequence of rape is the frequent suicide by the victims who mistakenly believe that they are bringing great shame on their families.

Also frequently overlooked are the intergenerational effects of violence against women and girls. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the safety and mental health of mothers directly impacts healthy infant development. Because a victimized and traumatized mother is in a state of chronic biological stress, she cannot support the subtle and crucial non-verbal and embodied self-regulation of her children, the basic biological conditions for resilience later in life. Keeping mothers of young children mentally healthy and physically safe is perhaps the single most powerful intervention to turn the tide of mental illness currently and for the future.

### **Recommendations:**

- There have been numerous statements and conventions on the status of women and recommendations to remediate and eliminate major problems. What is key is the need for the development of agreed upon benchmarks and timetables by all nations to measure improvement and accomplishment of desired goals, such as listed below. Without such accountability and implementation, the problems merely continue to be repeatedly pointed out without effective solutions.
- Girls and women must be educated to reject all forms of violence that are culturally sanctioned, including honor killings, bride burnings, acid attacks, rape as punishment or as a male right, genital cutting, human trafficking, wife-beating as discipline, and the overall devaluing of females especially prior to birth and in old age.
- Economic opportunities and development for women and girls must be a priority to eradicate poverty, which is a major contributor to violence against women and girls.
- Males must be educated to alternatives to violence and encouraged to honor the unique contributions of females to their economy and cultural dignity. Underlying male depression must be addressed.
- Continue to support the development and implementation of global legislation for the protection of women and girls from all forms of violence. Prosecution of violent crimes against women and girls must be strengthened and supported and documented accurately and in detail. The safety of women who come forward to report crimes must be insured.
- Promote the use of traditional and social media and technology to disseminate information about successful efforts such as those of Equality Now, based in New York, who prevailed upon Ethiopia to change its laws so that a man is liable for rape even if his victim agrees to marry him. Media and technology is also a powerful tool to educate and inform women and girls and help foster future community participation and government leadership.
- Research and the compiling of reports on the laws of all nations pertaining to all forms of violence against women and girls and the subsequent criminal prosecution and economic sanctions of all forms of violence against women and girls must be given a high priority by all nations as the first step to accountability.

\* NGO co-sponsorships received shortly after November 2012 deadline submission and not on original submitted statement.

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