

Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural): The Advancement of Women



JPHMUN 2011 Background Guide



1. Introduction

The advancement and empowerment of women in the world is hindered with multiple road blocks. Although women make up half of the world's population, they are often treated like second class citizens. Women have the same intellect and potential as any man even if their country does not recognize it. Women are repeatedly held back by discriminatory policies, practices and customs, alongside pervasive systems of poverty and violence, those resources and that potential remain unrealized.

In this guide, we will go over two major topics that limit the achievement of equality for women. These include the relationships between violence and women as well as poverty and women. "The United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women; including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."¹ Poverty and women is also known as the "feminization of poverty". Following this discussion, we will look at various agencies that are dedicated to the advancement of women, and see what actions the United Nations Women has undertaken for the advancement and empowerment of women.

Some important definitions to this topic are:

-Gender: the state of being male or female (typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones)²

-Sex: the difference genetic make-up, two X chromosomes or one X and one Y chromosomes

-United Nations Gender Mainstreaming: a strategy for promoting gender equality which defines "Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration – recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men."³

2. Violence and Women

Violence against women happens in different forms and for different reasons. It is a clear violation of the victim's human rights and is against the law in many counties. Violence against women is not simply an accumulation of random, unrelated acts; it is also the manifestation of gendered power imbalances and entrenched structures of gender inequality. The official UN

definition of gender-based violence is set forth in the General Recommendation No.19 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. It states that gender-based violence is “violence that is directed against a women because she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately” and encompasses “acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats or such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty.”⁴ For example, in 2006, between 40 and 50 percent of women in Europe have reported some type of sexual harassment at the workplace, which demonstrates how violence does not have to be physical.⁵

There are a variety of different forms of violence against women, the first of which can occur within the family. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence defines domestic violence as “a pattern of behaviour used to establish power and control over another person through fear and intimidation, often including the threat or use of violence, when one person believes they are entitled to control another.”⁶ Violence in traditional practices constitutes a second form. For instance, early marriage, dowry-related violence, genital mutilation and other crimes committed against women in the name of “honour” fall into this category. A third form is violence against women in the community, such as school aged girls getting sexual harassed in Malawi or women and children being bought and sold in the human trafficking market.⁷ Violence against women is at times created by state agents, as indicated by China’s one-child only policy and custodial rape (sexual violence that happens in a state owned in institutions or agents, for example prisons and prisons guards). A forth form is the violence against women during armed conflict. For this form, examples can be found in the jurisprudence of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which

“recognizes rape and other forms of sexual violence by combatants in the conduct of armed conflict as war crimes. When rape and sexual violence are committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, they are considered crimes against humanity and in some cases may constitute an element of genocide.”⁸

Effects

The effects of violence against women can range from physical to mental effects. Violence during pregnancy can cause multiple problems to the mother and the unborn child; some problems might be a low birth rate and miscarriages. Sexual violence can put women’s health at risk for STI’s and HIV/AIDS. The effects of violence can cause multiple mental problems, depression, and isolation from their community. These women’s children are more at risk of health problems, poor school performance and behavioural problems.⁹ There is also a financial cost of the violence of women, the cost of the social services when the violence happens, the cost of justice the police officers that come to respond to the violence and the legal costs. There is also a cost to the education sector, children who need special education who witnessed the violence; the cost to the health sector, doctors’ bills and health insurance.¹⁰

Current Events

On December 16, 2010, the United Nations are stepping up the battle against sexual violence in conflicts. The UN Security Council calling for the perpetrators to be publicly listed and punished with sanctions. “...Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon [told](#) the 15-member body at the meeting where it unanimously adopted the resolution. It had been sponsored by 60 countries; including some where the worst cases of recent abuse have been perpetrated.”¹¹ On November 23, 2010, Secretary-General Can Ki-moon made a call to business leaders to help with the flight of violence against women and girls. “This year’s International Day focuses on promoting

leadership by the corporate sector in ending gender-based violence, a theme Mr. Ban emphasized in his meeting earlier today with a number of business partners.”¹²

3. Poverty and Women

“Women do two thirds of the world’s work.... Yet they earn only one tenth of the world’s income and own less than one percent of the world’s property. They are among the poorest of the world’s poor.”

~ Barber B. Conable Jr., President of the World Bank, to the 1986 Annual Meeting of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund

The feminization of poverty is the increased prevalence of poverty among women and female headed households as compared to men and male-headed households. The term was coined in the 1970s by Diana Pearce. As one of the causes of poverty, the feminization of poverty does not result from households lacking a dual income for if that was true, we would see single male parents in the same situation. In fact the poverty rate for single-male heads of the household is 17.6 % while for single-female heads of household was 36.9% in 2005.¹³ By the U.N.’s understanding poverty denotes more than a low income and an inability to meet basic and essential needs (food, fuel, housing, etc.). As the UN Economic and Social Council reminds us, poverty also has significant social of resources, it entails a curtailment of “the capabilities, choices, security, and power needed for an individual to realize an adequate standard of living and to enjoy her full entitlement of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.”¹⁴ Poverty occurs in all countries - as mass poverty in many developing countries and as pockets of poverty amidst wealth in developed countries.

The “feminization of poverty” should be considered a legitimate foreign policy concern. Because women are increasingly economic actors and heads of households as well as mothers, their poverty slows global economic growth. Moreover, in poor countries, their disadvantage feeds a destructive spiral of poverty, population growth, and environmental degradation. Women are repeatedly being discriminated in the work force. For example in Honduras, coffee and tobacco framers prefer to hire girls and women as labourers because they are willing to accept lower wages. “Especially in poor countries, female labour is primarily sought for low-paid positions in services, agriculture, small-scale commerce, and in the growing, unregulated manufacturing and agribusiness industries, which pay their workers individual rather than family wages, offer seasonal or part-time employment, and carry few or no benefits. Hence, this explains the seemingly contradictory trend of women’s increased economic participation alongside their growing impoverishment.”¹⁵

Effects

The effects of the poverty and women are less educational and vocational opportunity, women were meant to be a housewife and take care of the children, so when the breadwinner leaves the family, the women is left unskilled to enter the work force. Women have greater family commitments that lead to lower-paying jobs. The lack of social programs to help women get into the work force and to train women to get a well-paying job. Poverty also leads to violence because of stress that it puts on people. For instance, there is a higher rate of health problems among those living in poverty compared to people in a higher income levels. The health of the children of families that live in poverty is also affected.¹⁶

Current Events

In September the General Assembly of the United Nations discussed “Keeping the promise: United to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals.” In this follow up, some points about women and poverty were brought up, including these two clauses:

“12. We recognize that gender equality, the empowerment of women, women’s full enjoyment of all human rights and the eradication of poverty are essential to economic and social development, including the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. We reaffirm the need for the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action¹⁷. Achieving gender equality and empowerment of women is both a key development goal and an important means for achieving all of the Millennium Development Goals. We welcome the establishment of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)¹⁸, and pledge our full support for its operationalization.

72. We commit ourselves to accelerating progress to achieve Millennium Development Goal 3, including through:

(d) Ensuring that women benefit from policy measures to generate full and productive employment and decent work for all, . . . , access of women and girls, including mothers and pregnant women, to formal and non-formal education, equal skills development and employment opportunities, closing wage gaps between women and men and recognizing women’s unpaid work, including care work.”¹⁹

4. Agencies for the Advancement of Women

UN Women

On July 2, 2010,²⁰ the United Nations General Assembly created [UN Women](#), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. This would bring together all the UN’s agencies for the promotion of gender equality. The four key agencies are the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSSTRAW), the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The main purpose of UN Women is to support inter-governmental bodies, help Member States to achieve these standards and “hold the UN system accountable for its own commitments on gender equality.” This group will begin work in January 2011, and their main focus will be to promote the “elimination of discrimination against women and girls, empowerment of women and the achievement of equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights, humanitarian action and peace and security.”²¹ There have also been some controversy in relation to UN Women. On November 10, 2010, Iran sought a seat at the UN Women board but western countries were upset at the idea of having a country with a horrendous human rights record, particularly in regards to isolating women from mainstream society. Human rights groups thought that if Iran got a seat it would “. . . send the wrong signal anticipated new agency, called UN Women, began its work.” Countries like Saudi Arabia and the Congo also did not receive a seat on the UN Women board because of poor record of women’s rights²²

The World Committee for Women

On September 4-15, 1995 in Beijing, China the United Nations hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women. The reason of the conference was to discuss ways to achieve greater equality and opportunity for women. At the conference the main focus was the advancement and empowerment of women in relation to women’s human rights, women and poverty, women and decision-making, the girl-child, violence against women and other areas of concern. The resulting documents of the Conference are The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.²³

This conference was not without controversy, the Vatican¹ attacked the position that the United States and other countries in preparatory meetings, "...saying that they promoted abortion and would undermine the central place of the family." This statement was released a month before the conference on women.²⁴

Given the complex problems faced by women today, violence and poverty; these issues are complicated by traditional roles, religious practices, and gender roles. In different parts of the world it is difficult for women to overcome these challenges to succeed. There are difference morals and attitudes about the role of the women all over the world. We see difference in attitudes towards women when countries get together for example, the UN Women Board; some countries believe that women should not vote while other countries believe that women can vote. There is a need to find a way to help all women in the world so that human rights can be enjoyed equally; so all women have the opportunity to reach her full potential.

5. Block Positions

The Western World (North America and Western Europe)

Even with advancements in women's right to vote, women in the western world still face a world of poverty and violence. In the U.S. alone in 2005, 50 percent of cities surveyed reported that domestic violence as the number one cause of homelessness.²⁵ In the European Union has promoted legislation for a dual approach to gender mainstreaming, so that gender equality would be promoted at all stages of policy making.²⁶ Europe, the Women's Business Association released a report on Center for International Private Enterprise Experiences from Around the World: Central and Eastern Europe. The report stated that "...no country in the world has yet reached equality between men and women in terms of economic participation."²⁷

The Developing World

When talking about poverty and violence against women it is hard to calculate because the figures are impossible to obtain, most these acts go unreported. There is an estimate that 10% - 15% of women have been assaulted by their husbands or male partners at some point.²⁸ "The connection between poverty and violence against women lies primarily in that dominance."²⁹ In many other cultures women are totally depended on men for their survival, for food and security. In these countries there are laws that prevent women to leave their male partners because women cannot own property or gain the means to survive. If women do not obey they are faced with exile from the community or death.³⁰

Many political leaders in the developing world are reluctant to embrace human rights ideals because they adhere to the ideas of cultural relativism. Therefore, they argue that their culture has its own morality that is fundamentally different from the Western perspective, and so each cultural context deserves to be examined in its specific circumstances. Consequently, the governments of developing countries can argue that the definitions of what is right and wrong differ and hence imposing a Western model of human rights may not be an accurate fit in their cultural context. Thus, developing states content that human rights instruments are in fact manifestations of Western cultural imperialism: they are part of the West's push to universalize its own norms and values.

Africa

¹ It is important to note that the Vatican has only observer status at the United Nations, but the article does claim that the Vatican (at the UN) speaks for millions of Roman Catholics.

Generally, the cultural norms in African societies maintain women in subordinate positions to their male counterparts, and often they are considered the property of men. This often means that they cannot own their own property and regional legal systems can deny women the right to inherit property. As a result, it is extremely hard for women to achieve economic independence for men. This is especially the case when it is harder for women to gain access to health care, and so are not able to operate to their full capacity; one major example is that preventable blindness is more prevalent among females than males in Africa. Another major issue facing women in Africa is genital mutilation, which is often carried out within communities by mothers and grandmothers who are pressured by the community to do so. If they do not, their daughters and granddaughters will be ostracized from their societies. It is prevalent in sub-Saharan, northeastern, and western regions in Africa and it is a way to control female sexuality and defend the honour of the family.

The Middle East

These countries are primarily Islamic cultures. Islamic law, especially when it is interpreted conservatively, places women in an inferior status. Despite the fact that the Islamic holy book, the Quran, states that women and men are equal, in many cases, Islamic law does not accord women this equality. Instead, women are granted fewer rights, and their independence is restricted because they should be under the protection of their male relatives. Legally, a women's evidence in court only counts for half of that of a man's evidence, and though women can inherit, they can only inherit half that a man can. When it comes to rape, women can only legally claim that rape has occurred if they have a male witness, and if a woman does not have one, she will most likely be accused of adultery. The common punishment for that is stoning. In the case of Iran, this has become so institutionalized that there is a regulated rock size for stoning. Nevertheless, these are extreme examples, and there has been some progress, for instance in the growth of women's rights movements in Middle Eastern states. However, while progress has been made, challenges remain, particularly in light of the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism.

One of the major issues that the media addresses is the wearing of the hijab and the burka. The burka in particular has become greatly politicized, especially in the West. For instance, in 2004, the French government banned the wearing of headscarves in public schools (just as it banned the wearing of crosses). The former covers the hair and some of the face and the latter covers the entire head and body with a small lace opening through which the woman can see through. For Westerners, these garments are repressive, while for some Muslim women, they symbolize their faith, and their rejection of Western values, materialism, and consumerism. For the women that use the last three reasons, they are generally making the personal choice to don the hijab or burka.

Asia

In many parts of Asia, Women are given backbreaking jobs with little reward. Women are subjects of discriminatory policies and human rights violations. The United Nations East and Southeast Asia Region Working for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality³¹ are working to help improve the situation for women. Women in Asia are routinely subject to cultural and religious customs. These customs range from the family to laws of the countries. These customs and traditions discriminate against women, limited rights for marriage, divorce and custody over children.³² As well, such traditions are contrary to the constitutions of many Asian states which are secular in principle and mandate equality between men and women. Such is the case with India, where the constitution states that there should not be discrimination on the basis of sex. Yet, whether in Hindu or Muslim communities, there is often highly discriminatory family laws;

one of the best example is the Hindu custom of suttee where the widow is expected to throw herself on her husbands funeral pyre in order to kill herself.

Central and South America

Machismo is prevalent in Latin American societies. It is an attitude that favours masculine characteristics over feminine characteristics, and consequently men do not take as much responsibility for their actions as perhaps they should. For instance, in Cuba, machismo made it acceptable for men to have mistresses, whereas women could not engage in extra relationships. The result of this attitude is that men are frequently violent against women, especially in lesser developed regions. The Catholic nature of Latin America also reinforces male and female roles in society, particularly in terms of separate spheres for men and women, with men taking the public world, or the more powerful one, and women being relegated to the home.

Central and Eastern Europe

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of newly independent states, profound political and economic changes took place. In many cases, women bore the consequences of these changes for instability meant that men acted more aggressively towards their female counterparts. Without the communist system and the new states cutting their budgets, women also had to retreat to the private sphere to act as caregivers. As well, domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labour have persisted as problems in the region.

6. Some Questions to answer in your resolutions:

How can the UN Women be an effective voice for all women in the world?

What can national governments do to help women during a time of conflict?

What policies can be created to address the poverty that affects women?

After the past global economic recession how do can countries insure programs that are in place to help women keep funding?

What strategies can be put in place to support women with economic projects? What would be the role of the man?

7. Suggestions for Further Research

Check out the UN Women's website this committee was just launched in January 2011 so this committee is developing. WomenWatch website³³ and The Global Financial Crisis: Assessing Vulnerability for Women and Children³⁴ Keep up with the news, Globe of Mail, BBC World News, New York Times. Look on your own countries websites for your government's policies on the advancement of women.

8. A Note from the Secretary-General

The conception of human rights that is presented in this background guide and by the UN is fundamentally a Western conception. Within the feminist movement on the international stage, there has been a significant movement to recognize that the idea of "one woman" who exists in all females around the world actually stifles the women of the Global South (the developing world). Therefore, feminists from the South, like Chandra Mohanty, argue that the Western notion that all women in the world suffer the same problems and that all women in the developing world are oppressed is actually contributing to the subjection of women in the Third World. The reason for taking this viewpoint is that the majority of scholarly work in feminism is written by Western feminists who try to speak for women from the South rather than letting them

JPHMUN 2011

speak for their issues themselves. Furthermore, Western feminism often conceives women in the Third World to have the same problems; however, this does not take into account the unique cultural context of the world's diverse communities. This movement has been gaining ground since the 1970s, and some feminists in the Global North are beginning to take this view, as exemplified by the alternative Canadian magazine of *Briarpatch*, which in its April/May 2010 issue called for the next wave of global feminism to come from the South.

End Notes

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