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International Women's Day 2006: Opinion piece by Irene Khan

"Surviving an abusive relationship is like surviving torture -- the future narrows down to getting through the next few hours, the next day."

- A family counsellor describes violence against women in the family

In January, Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson of Liberia became the first woman head of state in Africa, and Michelle Bachelet the first elected woman President of Chile. Just a few months before that Angela Merkel was chosen as the first female Federal Chancellor in Germany.

For two years running, in 2003 and 2004, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to women: Shirin Abadi, a lawyer from Iran, and Wangari Matthai, an environmental activist from Kenya. The New York Stock Exchange is now headed by a woman, as is the London Business School – as indeed, is Amnesty International!

Women around the world are breaking social and economic barriers. Yet despite these remarkable achievements, women and girls are still being subjected to violence at shocking levels.

Unlike the so-called "war on terror", the "war on women and girls" is not on the global political agenda. It takes its toll in battlefields, bedrooms and backstreets -- the greatest hidden human rights scandal of our times, made all the more scandalous by being present in every part of the world and in almost every aspect of life.

It starts before birth with sex-selective abortions, which has reached worrying proportions in countries like India. It is followed after birth by female infanticide and the sexual, emotional and physical abuse of girls -- including through child prostitution, forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

In adulthood, violence takes the form of stalking, rape, intimate partner violence, sexual abuse and harassment by colleagues and relatives, "honour" crimes, and dowry and bride-price related abuses. At home or at work, women are not safe.

In some communities, a woman's "honour" is seen as a commodity to be used to settle family debts or as a means of punishing a family. In Afghanistan, for example, rape and forced marriages are often used as a means of settling disputes between families or tribes.

Traditionally, human rights discourse has focused on how to protect citizens against the unreasonable and unlawful use of violence and coercion by the state, not on what the state can or should do to prevent violence by private actors. The private sphere, especially the family, was excluded -- considered outside the reach of the state.

In fact, the kinds of confinement and regimes of terror that occur behind the closed doors of some homes can be as terrifying and destructive as any torture or ill-treatment in prisons run by repressive regimes.

Family violence affects every country in the world, including even the most developed. In Sweden, assaults against women have been increasing in recent years, with 22,400 reports filed in 2003. In Spain, the number of women killed by their partner or ex-partner has continued to increase since 2001. In France, a woman is killed by partner every four days. Ironically, it is often women in the richest and poorest strata of society find it most difficult to escape violence -- the poor because they have no means to do it, and the rich because they have too much lose by it.

And yet, the family is widely perceived as a place of safety and a haven of privacy -- and therefore accorded a privileged place in national and international law -- despite the fact that for many women and girls the family can be an extremely dangerous place if state and society fail to protect them from violence at the hands of its members.

International declarations continue to nurture this paradox. On the one hand, they recognise violence against women in the family as a form of gender discrimination and human rights abuse. On the other hand, UN documents and treaties repeatedly call for the family to be strengthened as the basic unit of society.

The solution? For society and the state to create an environment in which women's human rights are respected and upheld. For discrimination against women to be stamped out and equality of women to recognized. These are the ultimate answer to violence against women.

Sadly, there is instead, a backlash against women's human rights, fed by conservative forces around the world. In Iraq important gains that women had made in the past decades have been rolled back by the government. In the US, foreign funding has been banned for birth control programmes, jeopardising women's rights as well as work against the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Governments cannot escape their responsibility just because violence against women is often perpetrated by private actors -- such as intimate partners -- rather than state officials. The obligation of the state to protect women's human rights does not disappear when a woman steps into her own home.

This is not to say that the government is responsible for every violent crime against a woman. What it means is that the state has an obligation to take all reasonable measures, through law, policy and practice, to ensure that a woman is not exposed to violence -- and that she can obtain protection if she faces risk and redress if she suffers violence.

It means not using culture, custom, or religion as an excuse for turning a blind eye to human rights abuses against women or for failing to protect them. Four years ago this month, fourteen girls died and dozens more were injured in a fire at their school in Saudi Arabia. Religious police had preventing them escaping the burning building because they were not wearing headscarves and there were no male relatives to escort them.

It means holding the police and judiciary accountable for really tackling family violence, rather than viewing it as a private matter between a woman and her partner. Even in western countries many local authorities, police and magistrates often do not do enough to prevent and follow up cases of family violence.

It means recognizing the existence of marital rape and criminalizing it. Fewer than 30 countries had laws against marital rape by 2000. Over 70 countries still have no laws against domestic violence. Over 120 countries have no laws against sexual harassment, and over 50 countries have laws that actively discriminate against women.

It means providing women survivors of violence with adequate and appropriate shelter, support and other services.

Society too must take its responsibility and stop being complicit through its apathy, tolerance and silence. The taboos are still strong. The tendency by family, friends, neighbours and religious leaders is to tolerate, condone or turn one's eyes away.

In the words of one woman survivor of violence, living in Spain, "My husband tried to kill me twice... My family still didn't get it. They said things like: well deep down, he's a good person, you need to learn to put up with it."

In the face of such tolerance towards violence, women survivors of violence have shown astonishing courage in speaking out. Rania Al-Baz, a Saudi television presenter, shocked her country when she published photos of herself after having been beaten brutally by her husband in April 2004. This one woman did more to put the issue of domestic violence in the public sphere than anyone else.

Mukhtaran Mai has become a symbol of courage and hope for survivors of violence across the world. She filed a complaint and testified in court against six men who gang-raped her in Pakistan in 2002. A village council had ordered the men to carry out the rape as punishment after her brother was accused of having an affair with a woman from a higher-caste tribe.

In Mexico, the mothers of Ciudad Juarez have drawn attention to the killings of hundred of women and girls in their area and demanded justice in the face of official apathy and inaction.

The voices of women like these are sharp calls to shift state and society from apathy to awareness -- to break social and cultural barriers and build the political will for concrete change.

Huge steps forward by women in the public sphere should not lull us into complacency about the struggle of women in live in safety and dignity. We must not allow the great space taken by the "war on terror" on the international political agenda to distract us from violence against women in our homes and communities everyday.

Violence against women is a threat to human security and its eradication must be given greater priority by all of us -- whether as political leaders, police officers, judges, religious and community leaders, family, friend or neighbour.

-- Irene Khan, Amnesty International Secretary-General

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