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Bahrain: GCC governments must wait no longer to tackle violence against women

Manama, Bahrain: Governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - must wait no longer to address inherent violence and discrimination against women in their countries, a conference for activists from GCC countries concluded Sunday.

At least 60 participants from GCC countries, including some from Yemen, agreed at the end of a two-day conference that the most imperative need to stop violence against women was for their governments to reform existing laws that discriminate against women and introduce and implement laws that offer them safeguards.

"All governments must send a strong message to those responsible for violence against women that such violence is a crime and will not be tolerated," said Abdel Salam Sidahmed, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Amnesty International. "Violence against women - whether perpetrated by state or non-state actors - must be criminalised."

The conference, held in Manama, Bahrain, was the first to bring together human rights activists from all GCC countries and Yemen to discuss violence and discrimination against women. It was organized by Amnesty International to give activists, lawmakers and human rights defenders in the region an opportunity to propose concrete measures to protect women from violence, whether perpetrated by an unjust legal system or individuals.

The event is part of Amnesty International's six-year campaign Stop Violence Against Women, launched in March 2004 and follows a research mission conducted in July-August 2004.

Participants said there was an acute need for statistics and reliable research that shows the extent of the problem. They urged the GCC to set up a regional research centre that would collate regular and comprehensive statistics and conduct studies on violence and discrimination against women in the region. This centre should work closely with institutions that deal with cases of violence against women.

GCC governments must ensure there is no impunity for those responsible for violence against women and bring them to justice, participants stressed. These governments must also provide adequate training for law enforcement officials and to anyone dealing with cases of violence against women.

The governments must review existing laws on nationality, housing, social security and other laws or introduce new legislation where appropriate to ensure equality and non-discrimination, participants urged.

It is equally the responsibility of these governments to provide appropriate housing facilities for women who face violence, and to create hotlines linked to various institutions that offer protection to such women.

Women must be allowed to play a more active role in the public and political spheres, particularly they should be enabled to take part in the process of decision-making in issues related to them, participants said.

Participants also called on GCC countries to ratify the International Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) - the main international treaty devoted for women's rights - and for those who have done so to review their reservations to this treaty.

"There is a need for additional Islamic studies to address misconceptions about what is contradictory to the Islamic Sharia. This issue must be urgently addressed because it may lead to more misunderstanding of the contents of the CEDAW," said consultant on Islamic and Legal Studies, Sheikh Sadeq Jibrán.

Human rights education has an important role to play in changing the stereotypical image of women that makes women more susceptible to violence. Participants emphasized the importance of raising the awareness of society at large on the rights and responsibilities within the family in relation to women's rights, violence and discrimination.

The conference, which provided an opportunity for the participants to exchange experiences, also concluded that building partnerships at local and regional levels is important to combat violence against women.

A copy of the recommendations will be sent to the GCC and its member countries. Participants agreed to work at different levels in their respective countries towards the materialization of these recommendations.

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