

United We Stand

by Tyna Vayalilkollattu (Kingston Law School alumnus and current UK President of the United Nations Youth Association), 27 October 2011

Gender-based violence is one of the longest running shames of humanity, with practices of gender based discrimination and particularly domestic violence reaching every part of the world and harming, killing or maiming millions of women and girls every year. The statistics reflecting the severity of the issue are incomplete and even then they are astonishing. The facts go beyond past cultural, ethnic and geographical boundaries- proving that divisions of economic, social and political progression between nations have no regard for the issue of gender based violence.

In recent years the international community has made concerted efforts to correct the issue. After hearing about millions of 'missing' girls in South East Asia, the thousands of girls trafficked across Europe's eastern borders for sexual exploitation, the use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war in African civil conflicts, and the millions of girls denied education in the developing world, the global community can clearly no longer ignore the stifled cries of women calling out for justice.

UNiTE

In 2008, Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon launched *UNiTE* a campaign to end violence against women. The campaign looks to address and correct the global pandemic of violence against women and girls by 2015. The campaign aims to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls in all parts of the world by achieving the 5 following goals:

1. Adopt and enforce national laws to address and punish all forms of violence against women and girls.
2. Adopt and implement multi-sectoral national action plans.
3. Strengthen data collection on the prevalence of violence against women and girls.
4. Increase public awareness and social mobilization.

5. Address sexual violence in conflict.

The campaign differs from most other anti-violence campaigns as it tries to discover the rudimentary causes and perpetuating factors and then correct them through a top down approach. Much progress has already been made by international charities, NGOs, and government programmes in fostering women's rights from a grassroots level through education or awareness training. *UNiTE* focuses at the national level and seeks to achieve its goals through the action of the legislature, judiciary and executive. It is an ambitious step as many governments lack the essential tools necessary to build on such initiatives. Funding to implement action plans, data collection, police and departmental training, forming inquiry groups, and sound reporting and recording methods all amounts to a very large budget that many nations struggling with this issue cannot afford. Beyond that, overcoming cultural norms and traditions pose a potential opposition to government led initiatives and can aggravate existing tension between the people and governments.

Adopt and Enforce National Laws

The first goal is ambitious to say the least. Considering in particular that the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, an international agreement encompassing some of *UNiTE*'s very same goals, has one of the greatest number of reservations submitted by signatories, rendering it ineffective in some UN Member States. This fact brings to light questions about the efficacy of a top down approach altogether and the pending understanding that governments that don't have a will won't make a way.

Using India as an example, which has recently adopted and begun implementing anti-violence and domestic violence legislation, the path to achieving such legislation was long and laborious. Some articles within the legislation, though applicable to many cases, are yet to be used effectively. Most notably the Indian Supreme Court shows reluctance to fully utilize Domestic Violence Legislation in lieu of earlier Penal Code articles which act similarly. In many countries, legislators are hesitant to adopt new legislation especially when they are already slow to implement existing laws which provide recourse for violent acts of a physical, sexual, psychological and economic nature against women and girls.

Multi-Sectoral Action Plans

Besides the obvious obstacles of sustainable funding, multi-sectoral action plans require the cooperation of many parts of government and the community. *UNiTE* encourages governments to work interdepartmentally and create institutional mechanisms such as guidelines for police, social workers and educators on particular topics concerning violence against women; courtroom procedures to ensure victim safety; creating health services for victims of domestic or sexual violence; and providing access to helplines and shelters. In many countries, notably developed nations, such mechanisms are possible as funding and budgets are already in place for victims' services. However, in the developing world, where basic judicial rights are often contentious, police are misguided by corruption, and general health services are inaccessible to many making, this renders multi-sectoral action plans easily out of reach for those who need it the most.

Strengthen Data Collection

Amongst leading charities and UN agencies conducting research on violence against women and girls, gathering data is one of the most difficult tasks facing them. It is often incomplete through under-reporting, failure to follow up, inaccuracy in recording or having a lack of information to assess and evaluate violence against women. In countries like the DRC, collection of data is particularly difficult as many places are inaccessible to external actors and national collection has systematic failures and pitfalls that prevent accurate data collection. In countries where much of the female population suffering from violence live in rural and poorly developed areas or may even be nomadic or displaced, collecting data is especially difficult without sufficient manpower or training to local health authorities, police and NGOs. One major hurdle faced by many women's charities is the societal pressures placed on women by families or the community to underreport or avoid reporting at all the extent or existence of violence against them. In Afghanistan, this takes the form of family members speaking on behalf of women, or being present in the room where a statement is taken following cultural, religious or traditional guidance that prevents them from being alone with another person when talking about these issues.

Public Awareness

Public awareness and education has proved useful and deeply impactful in the past. However, in many places in the world publicity and government initiatives are heavily focused in urban and developed areas with limited resources reaching rural communities. Access to information is often hindered by terrain or simply because populations lack basic education that would enable them to read literature or signage. Some governments and law groups have allied to host teaching sessions and open air gatherings to let women know which laws exist to prevent and punish violence, the adverse effects of female genital mutilation and projects to engage men and boys in preventing violence against women. But manpower, organisational time, and access to remote locations make it especially difficult to reach a large group of disadvantaged women and girls (some repetition). In Rajasthan (India), the national and state government have expressly outlawed child marriage, and regularly conduct raids to prevent them. Despite these efforts thousands of girls below the age of 12 get married every year and communities continue to encourage such acts unhindered by the public awareness and executive actions taken by the government. In Burkina Faso, despite government initiated anti-FGM (female genital mutilation) legislation and coordinated efforts with NGOs to dissuade it, there was an increase of incidents of FGM between 1998 and 2003; To this day, FGM continues to be practiced culturally and religiously throughout the country.

Sexual Violence in Conflict

As evidenced by recent discussions at the International Criminal Court and subsequently at the UN Security Council, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war in conflict is growing at an unprecedented rate. Many nations involved in non-international armed conflicts face the use of sexual violence by militia or rebel groups to destroy, intimidate, or displace ethnic groups in the process of conflict. The difficulty in correcting this problem is the scale and complexity of it leading to implementation gaps and failure to provide any solution. The logistical intricacy of correcting the problem can be overwhelming for broken national governments; and implementing international conventions and Security Council resolutions, though desirable, can be simply unachievable because of the dynamics of the issue itself. In the DRC, it is reported that 40 women are raped daily in the Eastern Congo and efforts are either ineffective or non-existent. Like the DRC, *UNiTE* relies

on women campaigners and activists to provide redress to the situation, in hopes that their activism will bring more permanent change.

The *UNiTE* campaign is needed, to that there is no doubt. Without government cooperation, inter-governmental coordination, and greater executive and judicial enforcement of the international and national laws, perpetrators of violence against women and girls will continue to face impunity for their crimes. The campaign has made great strides to include men and boys in the process and bring awareness to the general public and not just women and girls affected by the violence. The greatest hurdles that this campaign faces are common to most progressive campaigns: time and money. The 2015 deadline is soon approaching and little ground has been covered. Many governments are awaiting the introduction of new legislation. Many more are yet to begin coordinating efforts among departments and NGOs. Data collection in many parts of the world will take several years of training and reorganization before it reaches acceptable levels. Public awareness is making slow progress, and discussion on the impact of sexual violence in conflict is only beginning to scratch the surface. With limited funding available to UN agencies and NGOs to conduct the levels of capacity and resource building necessary to reach these goals, and national governments stretched to provide basic health, social and economic stability to its populations, there is no doubt that financial limitations will grow the difficulty of the situation. Even in the United Kingdom, government cuts to health care have resulted in reductions to support services and domestic violence prevention programmes which could have effectively deterred the incidence of domestic violence in the UK by half.

The *UNiTE* campaign is a strong and necessary step forward to ensuring that the violence against women and girls is eradicated. However, the mounting obstacles only contribute to the complexity of the issue. Perhaps by 2015 if *UNiTE* has not yet reached its goals, it will have made a loud enough impact to finally listen to the stifled cries for justice.