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It is a great honour for me to be here in Doha at the invitation of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs and the Doha Foundation, International Institute for Family Studies and Development to discuss violence against women and its impact on the family.

It has been sixty years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and fifteen years since the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women by the United Nations General Assembly. These and many other milestone developments, which have resulted in a comprehensive human rights framework for women, is the product of an international consensus that demonstrates the commitment of Member States for a better life for all.

In this respect, I would like to make reference to the countries belonging to the MENA region who have engaged actively in these developments at the international level. One of the earliest manifestations of the importance of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was the establishment of an 18 nation Arab Women's Commission of the Arab League in 1971, which used DEDAW as its terms of Reference. Today's meeting is also significant as it brings an international campaign home, which no doubt will be instrumental in motivating respective governments of the countries in the region to undertake new measures in their effort to combat violence against women and ensure women's rights.

In the coming days, women of the world will be initiating a series of activities in the context of 16 Days of activism, which is an innovative campaign that connects 25 November - the International Day on the Elimination of Violence against Women - with 10 December - Human Rights Day, firmly establishing that women's rights are human rights. Equally innovative is the Secretary General's campaign to end violence against women, which will continue until 2015 to coincide with the target date for the Millennium Development goals. The insight behind the campaign builds on the recognition that a life free of violence is a fundamental human right for women but at the same time it also acknowledges it as an important benchmark for development and peace within the family, the community, the nation and the world at large.

Despite the many significant developments towards realizing universal human rights what remains universal today is the widespread prevalence of violence against women in all societies, resulting in devastating consequences for women who experience it, traumatic impact on those who witness it, de-legitimization of States that fail to prevent it and the impoverishment of entire societies that tolerate it. A brief overview of the current situation in the world with respect to the fundamental goals set forth over half a century ago is revealing of the poor state of rights with respect to women in particular and humanity in general..



The world is more affluent and integrated today than ever before. After more than two centuries of industrial development, there have been many improvements in basic socio-economic indicators, such as life expectancy, health etc. Ironically, at the same time, inequalities between nations, regions, classes and the sexes have deepened. The distance between the incomes of the richest and poorest countries has grown over the years, which was about 3 to 1 in 1820, 35 to 1 in 1950, 44 to 1 in 1973 and 72 to 1 in 1992. There are more people dying of hunger in a single day than political killings over the course of a year. Of the world's more than 6 billion people, almost half live on less than \$2 a day, and 1.2 billion on less than one dollar a day. Of the 1.2 billion people living in abject poverty, 70 percent are women (UNIFEM 1996).

The ending of the Cold War, contrary to expectations, witnessed a shift in threats of armed conflict from the global to the local, national and regional levels, thus heightening human insecurity, especially of women and children. The number of major armed conflicts peaked at 55 in 1992. Between 1946 and 1989 the UN Security Council adopted 646 resolutions (an average of 15 per year), between 1990 and 1999 it adopted 638 resolutions, averaging 64 per year, and strikingly between 2000 and 2006 it adopted 453 resolutions, averaging 75.5 a year. Today, while security is a number one issue on the agenda of governments and the international community, insecurity due to displacements, deaths, rape and torture characterize the everyday lives of many people in the world. Women experience these in a particularly disproportionate and distorted manner.

In short, this brief depiction demonstrates that the international community has failed in realizing the fundamental goals of human rights, in universalizing the conditions for human well being and ensuring security. Access to the universal human rights mechanisms is distributed unevenly, so that some of the neediest —such as the illiterate rural poor, trafficked and refugee women, among others —are the least likely to receive either domestic or global redress.

However, the fact that the human rights paradigm has captured the aspirations of people everywhere and that there is a growing convergence around its core values- inherent human dignity, justice, non-discrimination, equality, fairness and universality is encouraging. All member states of the UN are a party to at least one, if not more, of the human rights instruments; wars are now fought in the name of human rights; neo-liberal economic policies are opposed by citizens groups on ethical grounds on the basis of this or that 'rights-based' approach; many multinational corporations find it indispensable for their long term interests that they are perceived as respectful of human rights.

As well known, CEDAW, women's bill of rights, enjoys one of the highest levels of ratification, including in the MENA region, with the exception of Qatar. Perhaps this conference will be an occasion for the State of Qatar to reconsider its policy regarding the ratification of the Convention. The situation, however, is not as encouraging when it comes to the MENA region's ratification status of the Optional Protocol of the Convention. I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to voice an appeal to all the governments of countries in the region to consider ratifying the protocol.

Although ratification of human rights instruments is in itself important, their proper implementation is the real measure of commitment to women's rights. With the exception of Yemen, all countries in the MENA region have put reservations to the entire treaty or to several of its Articles. The articles to which these states have made reservations deal with States' obligation to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women through legislative and other means (Article 2), equal rights with respect to acquiring, changing nationality and defining their children's nationality (Article 9), equality of women and men before the law, including with respect to property and freedom to choose one's residence (Article 15), the elimination of discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations (Article 16), and the possibility to settle any dispute between states over the Convention through arbitration (Article 29(1)).

Reservations to CEDAW are not limited to the countries in the MENA region or those with a Muslim majority population.

A recurring theme in the CEDAW Committee's concluding observations with respect to states parties reports, is the concern about the persistence of stereotypes regarding the role and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society at large.

As in many other parts of the world, a gender gap is observed in all spheres of life in the countries in the MENA region. While I am not an expert on the region, I have had considerable first hand experience in a number of countries. I taught at the Center for Girls, Riyadh University (now King Saud University) in Saudi Arabia from 1979 to 1982; as the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women I have conducted official missions to the Occupied Palestinian Territory (2004), Algeria (2006) and Saudi Arabia (2008); and I worked in Egypt (1988) and Yemen (1991) as a rural development expert. Therefore, I can argue, with some confidence, that gender inequality and the patriarchal norms it is embedded in pose an obstacle to the enjoyment of rights for women in the region at large.

A most encouraging development in the region perhaps is the slow but certain demystification of the taboo around violence against women in recent years. The issue is increasingly occupying the public discourse in many of the MENA countries, particularly through media reports and academic research heightening the concern and alarm about the destabilizing impact of violence on family and community life.

A number of initiatives have already been undertaken by the various States. I would like to share with you my observations in the countries where I carried out a mission. For example, in Algeria significant reforms of the Family Code of 1984 have been enacted into law. While it has not met all the needs and aspirations of the Algerian women, the reform has removed some of the critical areas of inequality for women. Sexual harassment in the work place has been recently criminalized, which is a positive first step towards addressing this problem. At the time of my visit, the Minister-Delegate for Family and the Status of Women in consultation with other stakeholders had prepared a National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women. If this strategy is adopted (perhaps it has) it will provide a strong framework to address violence against women effectively.

Saudi Arabia has recently established the National Programme for Family Safety within the National Guard Health Affairs, Social Protection Centres under the Ministry of Social Affairs, and there are also plans to establish Family Protection Centres within hospitals across the Kingdom. These initiatives offer awareness raising, referral and recording and care and protection for victims of violence, including access to shelters. Establishment of an independent national body to coordinate all work with respect to violence against women is under discussion and consideration. If this materializes it could pave the way for the creation of national machinery for the advancement of women in the Kingdom to adopt a holistic approach to the promotion of women's advancement, including prevention of and protection from violence.

With respect to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, it is more difficult to talk about positive initiatives. I cannot emphasize enough the grave and volatile nature of the situation in the OPT. Due to the occupation, Palestinian population is effectively contained in a heavily controlled environment. The degree and extent of oppression of Palestinian women due to patriarchy deepens with aggravation and intensification of the oppression of occupation. Women not only bear the combined burdens of occupation and patriarchy but due to the former their capacity to transform the unequal gender structures of the latter is seriously curtailed. The priorities imposed by the national struggle have for decades belittled and undermined the efforts of the Palestinian women to eliminate gender-based discrimination and violence within their homes and communities.

By and large while promising developments are taking place throughout the MENA region with respect to addressing violence against women, the problem is still met with denial or justified with reference to varying interpretations of culture, tradition, and religion by many stakeholders and society at large. To my knowledge, not a single country in the region has a specific law that criminalizes domestic violence. Public discourse on matters concerning women tend to be deeply divisive and the politics of change contentious. The reactions to recent legal reforms in some of the countries in the region – whether concerning family relations or women's public sphere participation – have often been emotionally charged, with the critics often claiming that the



family or religion is under attack.

Against serious odds, however, women have made significant gains in all MENA countries, particularly in areas of education and labour-force participation, and in some countries, women's agency and activism has become an increasingly recognized voice in public discourse. The challenges in this sphere are multi-faceted and cannot be abstracted from the overall socio-political dynamics of the individual countries, issues confronting the region in general, such as; colonial history, the Palestinian issue, the war in Iraq, rising Islamophobia and its twin evil of fundamentalist movements as well as the global disparities, among others.

Moreover, in the post-cold war era culture has become the new site of contestation and global conflict. This situation has adverse consequences for women globally and particularly for those in the MENA region as culture wars are often sustained through women's identities and their public sphere representation. I devoted my thematic report to the HRC in 2007 to the implications of culture based discourses on violence against women.

The issue of inequality of women and the values, norms and institutions that contribute to it, no doubt, is a challenge to the realization of human rights in a non-discriminative manner. The international human rights and gender equality agenda offer women in all parts of the world a common framework within which to advance their claims for rights, including freedom from violence. Research and practices from around the world reveals the intimate connection between violence and women's socio-economic status. While, violence against women cuts across all social classes and groups, women who have independent ownership of property, land and housing and access to fruitful employment fare better in their ability to resist violence. These women are also better equipped to care for the well-being of their children and families. My 2009 report to the HRC will address the importance of economic rights for women in combating violence.

State obligation to ensure women's human rights without discrimination is also well-established in international human rights law. The 1993 Declaration, which is the main international normative framework on violence against women, urges States in its article 4 to "exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate, and, in accordance to national legislation, punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons" and calls on states not to invoke culture, tradition or religion to avoid their obligation with respect to the elimination of the problem.

The central dilemma of the current era is that human rights represents elements of a new global reality that is perceived by many as contradicting national sovereignty and state authority. It must be born in mind that enforcement of human rights norms requires power of the state not its demise. In the new world order, state sovereignty will increasingly depend on the extent to which a state guarantees the human rights of people living under its jurisdiction and women's rights are now considered central to this obligation.

The SG's campaign to end violence against women is a renewed call upon states to comply with their obligation to ensure women's rights with diligence and this conference marks a strong and positive response to that call and a commitment to its goals.