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Statement submitted by Sambhali Trust, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

For women to be full and effective participants in public life, they must be able to raise their voices with dignity and self-confidence. Discrimination against women and girls in education and economic opportunity combines with gender-based violence to silence those voices.

Research has shown that equal access to education and employment opportunities is instrumental in paving a path for gender equality and sustainable development of societies. In previous statements to this Commission, Sambhali Trust has discussed how pervasive discrimination in education and employment impact women and girls in Rajasthan, India. Here, we will focus on the role of violence and how the elimination of violence combined with other anti-discrimination efforts enable the voices of women to be heard.

Overview

When women are not afforded equal rights and their status at home and in society is not equal to their male counterparts, they cannot have full and effective participation or decision-making power in their personal and public lives. Women are often marginalized and prevented from making choices for themselves, their children, and their families – let alone for the greater society.

Rajasthan is considered one of the most patriarchal states in India. Limited access to formal education and employment opportunities coupled with an absence of decision-making and self-expression within the family severely limit the opportunities for Rajasthani girls and women. Bound by tradition, they often do not have any viable opportunities to disrupt the vicious cycle of hardship including domestic and other gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence against females begins prior to birth with sex-selective abortions and the effects of battering during pregnancy. These atrocities continue through female infanticide, child marriage, physical, sexual and psychological abuse, dating and courtship violence, acid attacks, and domestic violence. This life cycle of violence manifests in sexual, physical, and psychological abuse of widows.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau data, Rajasthan ranks third highest among Indian states in crimes against women that include rape, sexual harassment, kidnapping, dowry harassment, and domestic violence. In 2013, there were 27,933 crimes against women reported in Rajasthan. The state has gained notoriety in cases of rape and dowry deaths and has reported the second and fourth highest rates, respectively, in the country.

That such violence continues is perhaps the most obvious sign of the lesser status of women and girls as well as the most forceful effort to silence their full participation in society. While violence may be a bellwether of the extent of discrimination against Rajasthani women and girls, it is far from the only manifestation of the lower status females hold in their families and in larger Rajasthani society.

A Rajasthani family that invests in the education of their son expects that not only will that education afford him more economic opportunities than a daughter, but custom dictates that the son, his wife, and children will continue to live with and support the son's parents. In contrast, a daughter will move away and her ability to generate income will be circumscribed by both employment discrimination and by the decisions of her in-law family. In addition, child marriage obstructs access to female education. According to Rajasthani tradition, when young girls marry, they are expected to drop out of school in order to fulfil their duties as a wife, and it is highly

stigmatized for women to pursue education after marriage. This presents a significant impediment to female access to education in Rajasthan where child marriage is widespread and deeply ingrained.

Specific examples of accomplishment by Sambhali Trust

In this statement, Sambhali Trust wishes to highlight the initiatives it has taken to reduce social and cultural obstacles encountered by women and girls through education, sustainable income generation opportunities, and interventions to reduce violence against women.

Sambhali Trust is a non-profit grassroots organization that was established in 2007 for the empowerment of disadvantaged women and children, particularly those from the lowest social castes, who suffer a triple burden of caste, class, and gender discrimination. The Trust offers multi-faceted programs in the city of Jodhpur and the rural desert area of Setrawa 100km west that enable participants to gain the knowledge, skills, and the self-confidence needed to fully participate in both their private lives and in public life.

Sambhali Trust runs eight Women's Empowerment Centres providing vocational and basic education; five Primary Education Centres for non-school going children; two boarding homes in Jodhpur, providing accommodation and full-time education for girls mostly from the rural district of Setrawa; a scholarship program; microfinance groups providing women with support and access to loans to start their own businesses; a sewing centre employing graduates of the Women's Empowerment Centres; an emergency helpline for issues of child marriage and gender-based violence; and two projects in Jodhpur schools, one geared towards protecting small children from sexual abuse and the other educating adolescents about the mental and physical changes of puberty and how to protect themselves from sexual abuse and harassment. In response to the pandemic, Sambhali Trust pivoted to start two new programs: providing food, soap, and health education to rural families left with no means of support during the lockdown and utilizing the skills of graduates of the sewing centres make and distribute face masks to those in need.

What all of these interventions have in common is a goal of enabling women and girls to become their own advocates – both advocates for their own economic and social empowerment and advocates against discrimination including gender-based violence. The first step is providing children with tools to prevent and respond to sexual abuse. It is extremely powerful for girls who have been socialized to be quiet to shout the word “NO” as they are encouraged to take action for their own safety. The next step to full civic participation is the knowledge and the self-confidence that comes from education. At Sambhali boarding homes, girls from poor villages who were headed for early marriage and marginal literacy are graduating from secondary school at the highest level and moving on to college. At Primary Education Centres, children who were not in school obtain the fundamental skills needed to start school and the support to keep them there. At Empowerment Centres, women who had little to no formal education receive vocational training and the education needed to start their own business. In all these programs book learning is important, but equally important are classes in self-defence and workshops on topics ranging from legal rights and women's health to the environment and world geography. A third essential element is the sisterhood and network of mutual support that is developed among participants.

Women and girls in these programs report their status has greatly improved within their families. A father who reluctantly sent his daughters to a boarding home in Jodhpur talks with deep pride about his educated daughters. Women who are making an income as a result of their vocational training report they are treated with

respect by the members of their in-law families. For some women domestic violence ends as their status within the home rises and for others economic independence and increased self-confidence provide the means to leave abusive situations. Women, some of whom were not previously allowed to leave their homes without permission from a husband or father, join together each year on International Women's Day to march through the streets of Jodhpur where they raise their voices to proclaim their right to be equal participants in public life.

Moving forward, Sambhali Trust recognizes that women's empowerment became even more important when the whole world and its norms were suddenly upended by a global pandemic that did not spare any person or any nation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, women have suffered more economically and violence against women has increased. More effort needs to be directed toward not only supporting survivors of gender-based violence, but in preventing violence and educating women about their rights and how to access help. In response, Sambhali Trust recently began outreach and education campaigns as well as enhanced legal, psychological and social services for survivors of gender-based violence.

As exemplified by the situation in Rajasthan, discrimination including gender-based violence stands as barriers to women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life. It is through a multi-faceted approach to gaining knowledge, agency, confidence, and safety that women can raise their voices to achieve gender equality.
