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Statement submitted by Center for Women’s Global Leadership, Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, Let’s Breakthrough, Inc., and OutRight Action International, non-governmental organizations 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

The focus of this statement is on the ways power relations and gendered norms existing in the private spaces extend into the public spaces, curbing women's effective participation and decision-making in public life. Breakthrough has been working in India for over 20 years, focusing on making violence against women unacceptable by challenging and flipping the gendered social norms. Our work is to inspire a generation of change-makers to advocate for the rights of women and girls by catalyzing leadership in communities.

In this regard, we wish to highlight the agreed conclusions of the 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women which recognized that women's equal economic rights, economic empowerment and independence are essential to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Two of the critical areas that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action addresses are violence against women, and women in power and decision making. This statement also reiterates Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, with its target: "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life." The statement addresses the issue of violence against women by elaborating on:

How women's effective participation in public life is restricted due to violence they face both in public and private spaces; and,

The critical role that women's leadership in decision making bodies and global governance plays in eliminating violence against women in the public realm.

It has been a consistent effort of the Government of India to establish effective systems through enacting legislation and making concerted efforts to link it with international legal agreements including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and ILO Conventions.

VAW and women's effective participation in public life

Women's full and effective participation in the different spheres of public life is fundamental to achieving gender equality. However, social norms and entrenched gender stereotypes- for example, men as breadwinners and women as caregivers- discourage women's participation in public life. Women also face violence and discrimination in public life, which is an extension of the violence and discrimination experienced in private spaces and which affects their aspirations and agency.

Violence against women is particularly endemic in India. The National Family Health Survey quotes that 30 per cent of women ages 15–49 have experienced physical violence since the age of 15. 6 per cent of women in the same age group have also experienced sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. The abysmally low figures of women's representation in the Houses of Parliament, estimated at 14 per cent in 2019, show how women are left far behind in positions of decision making and governance. In the wider economy, there are disparities as well: for every 100 economically active men, only 2 women take managerial and administrative positions, and only 1 per cent of women are found in organizational leadership (Center for Indian Industry 2010). An increasing trend of violence (4,05,861 cases of crimes against women in 2019) and lack of accountability, through legislative or punitive measures, lack of self-confidence and low aspirations in women, combined with a lack of access to education and employment opportunities, leads to a critically low participation rate for women in politics and the economy. This was further demonstrated in an independent evaluation conducted by J-PAL in 2016–17 of

Breakthrough's school-based intervention in the state of Haryana with adolescents (ages 12–14), using a gender-sensitive curriculum. The evaluation highlighted that girls have significantly lower aspirations, lack of support from family, low to no personal agency, and an inaccessibility of education and career opportunities compared to boys.

Regressive social norms that control women's mobility, an absence of decision-making power within households, and a lack of knowledge on governance and political participation have direct impacts on women's participation and decision-making power in public life. In India, these issues are compounded by a lack of gendered public services and infrastructure, religious and cultural practices, and violence and harassment in public places. 90 per cent of women had faced some form of sexual harassment in public space in Delhi (Jagori 2010), and more than 90 per cent of women feel unsafe traveling on public transport due to fear of harassment (Safetipin 2019).

Neo-public spaces and women's participation

The digital platform and the Internet have emerged as neo-public spaces and provide avenues for women and girls and other marginalized communities to voice their opinion and aspirations. The digital space is an informal, fluid and more personal medium of civic and public engagement, offering more choices and opportunities for engagement. However, women are marginalized and secluded in digital space as well. Globally, there are 200 million fewer women online than men, and the gap is widening- from 11 per cent in 2013 to 12 per cent in 2016 (ITU, 2016). Only 33 per cent of women in India are active online, compared to 67 per cent of men (in 2019), and the disparity has increased during the pandemic since men often control their families' mobile phones, computers and other sources of technology. This controlling and violent behavior has escalated during the pandemic; and as UN Women notes, there has been an alarming increase in intimate partner violence as households have been forced into self-isolation.

Recommendations: Addressing Violence against women

We need some quick measures but also explore long term interventions which transform gender norms in our communities across the board.

First, we must focus on and invest in adolescents and their potential as change-makers. Building their agency, especially that of girls, and addressing issues like early marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and sexual harassment, are a priority. The need is for greater investments along with increased participation of women and girls in planning, decision-making and implementation, drawing insights from their lived experience.

Violence against women is pervasive and exists in different forms across all levels of society. There is a strong need to strengthen the existing response and support mechanisms for women. Given existing levels of violence against women, ending it by 2030 – a promise made under Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – will require a concerted effort from national governments.

The implementation of laws and policies that promote gender equity, such as legal rights to property, land, inheritance, employment and income, needs to be strengthened with specific emphasis on the political and economic participation of women.

Making provisions for gendered public services and infrastructure is necessary to address violence against women. Creating and maintaining accessible public services for women and girls is necessary for ensuring gender equality.

The digital space should be regarded as a critical resource for increasing women's empowerment and participation in public life. Online violence should be recognized and addressed by governments as part of their larger plan to end violence against women.

Working with men and boys is critical for a more sustained transformation of gender norms and to make violence and discrimination unacceptable. Engaging men who hold power positions and take major decisions which impact the lives of women will go a long way in addressing the inequities.

Role of governance and policies to boost women's participation

Ensuring gender diversity in public institutions and especially decision-making bodies is crucial to influence the life choices and aspirations of women and girls.

We strongly encourage reserving seats for women in political parties and across all levels of government. There is concrete evidence to show that gender quotas in the electoral process not only lead to a higher number of women in elected positions, but also that such concrete examples of female leadership positively shift perceptions of women in power.

We also recommend:

Putting robust accountability mechanisms in governance structures to implement a gender equality agenda across all levels (rural, urban) and sectors – education, health, livelihood, social security, etc.

Promoting the leadership and political participation of women at a young age by creating awareness programs and an enabling environment that foster girls' agency.

With support from:

Gender at Work

Stree Mukti Sanghatana
