



# 2018-19 Background Guide Global Classrooms Madrid

Human Rights Council (HRC)

Joining Hands for Women's Rights:  
Combatting Violence Against Women

## **Description of the Committee**

In March 2006, the General Assembly voted to create the Human Rights Council, which would replace the much-criticized Commission on Human Rights. The Human Rights Council, like the Commission before it, addresses human rights violations around the world. The Human Rights Council is composed of 47 countries, which are elected by a majority of the General Assembly through a secret ballot. In an effort to remedy the controversy surrounding the Commission on Human Rights, member states of the Council are required to uphold human rights in their own countries and policies. Council members with “gross and systematic violations of human rights” may have their membership suspended. The Council meets at least three times a year.

## **History of the Topic**

Violence against women is a human rights concern that affects millions of women around the world in developed and developing nations alike. Women are especially vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, often because their social circumstances enable or excuse such violence. Violence against women occurs both in families and intimate relationships and in public. It crosses social, cultural, and religious barriers. According to large-scale international studies, between 10 and 50 percent of women report having been physically abused by someone close to them at some point in their lives. Between 12 and 25 percent of women have been the victims of rape or attempted rape by someone close to them.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, a World Bank Study reports that women between the ages of 15 and 44 are more likely to die from rape and domestic violence than from war, cancer, malaria, and motor accidents. It is important to remember, too, that these statistics come only from violence that is reported to authorities, and only in countries with the means to conduct large-scale studies. Countries that cannot or do not maintain statistics on violence against women may have similar or higher rates of abuse.

Violence against women takes many forms. Women can be abused in domestic situations or because of social or cultural trends. Women are particularly vulnerable in times of conflict when gender-based violence may be used as a tactic of war.

## Detailed Description

### *Traditional Forms of Violence*

Violence against women often occurs as part of a cultural practice or belief. Traditional forms of violence include female genital mutilation (also called female circumcision), honor killings and early marriage. All of these practices have deep cultural roots. Some of these practices are considered necessary rituals for a girl or woman to be an accepted member of society. In some cultures, traditional forms of violence are not considered to be “violence” at all.

Early marriage, the exchange of a dowry, and female genital mutilation are all thought to be important ways to celebrate a girl’s transition into adulthood or marriage. In fact, female genital mutilation is most often performed on girls by other women who believe the ritual is important for preserving their cultural identity. Tradition and culture do not excuse violence. While it is important to respect the traditions of a society, it is also important to recognize a woman’s right to safety, health and dignity. The integrity of these cultures can be protected while at the same time ensuring its women’s safety and respect.

### *Female Genital Mutilation*

In some parts of the world, especially in Africa and Asia, an operation is performed on female babies and children to remove parts of their genitalia. This operation, called **female genital mutilation** (FGM) is believed to promote hygiene and ensure “purity,” and is sometimes performed to celebrate a girl’s transition into womanhood. FGM is also believed to prevent women from having sexual desires that would make her unfaithful to her husband. FGM is very damaging to the girl’s body. The procedure is often performed in unsanitary conditions and can result in infection (including HIV transmission). It can cause lifelong pain, difficulty in childbirth and may even cause sterility—the inability to have children.

Women can die because of infections or because of complications during childbirth. According to UNITE to End Violence against Women, more than 130 million girls and women have undergone FGM and suffer from its damaging effects.

## *Honor Killings*

In many societies, women accused of engaging in illicit sex, including those who have been raped, are murdered by their male relatives. These women are accused of damaging their family's honor by behaving shamefully; their deaths are believed to redeem their families' reputations. These murders are called "**honor killings**," and they occur in Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Guatemala, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Pakistan and many other countries where a woman's "purity" is linked to her family's honor. Over 1,000 women in Pakistan are victims of honor killings every year. Because honor killings often occur in societies that believe a woman's death will repair her family's reputation, the murderers are often not punished. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that as many as 5,000 women are murdered through "honor killings" each year.

## *Early Marriage*

In many parts of the world, girls are forced into marriage at a very young age. This practice, especially when it takes place without the consent of the bride, is a human rights violation. Parents often believe that they are ensuring their young daughter's security later in life by making her marry a wealthy man or a man with high social status. The worst cases of forced marriages can entail kidnapping, threatening behavior, physical violence, rape, and sometimes even murder. In some countries, a rapist is not punished if he agrees to marry his victim. Contrary to what some believe, Western countries also have a problem with forced marriages. The Forced Marriage Unit was established by the government of the United Kingdom intervenes in over 300 forced marriage cases a year. **Early marriage** poses many risks to girls. Being forced into marriage before they are old enough to make an informed decision about their lives or families is psychologically harmful. Having a sexual relationship at a very young age can be both emotionally and physically damaging. Young girls who marry and become pregnant may be hurt, or even killed because their bodies are not mature enough for pregnancy.

### *Dowry Murder*

In some cultures, it is traditional for the family of a bride to pay a certain amount of money or goods, called a **dowry**, to the family of the groom. Sometimes when a woman's family is unable, or refuses to pay the dowry, she may be injured or killed by her husband or his family. Many countries, including India, have outlawed traditional dowry payments to discourage dowry-related killings. In spite of these laws, both the tradition of dowry payments and murders for refusing to pay a dowry persist.

### *Victims in Conflict*

Women are especially vulnerable to violence in times of war. Soldiers sometimes use rape as a tactic of war, in order to humiliate women and their families. Women who are displaced by war and must live in refugee camps are also vulnerable to attack and abuse. During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, nearly half a million women were raped.

### *Prenatal Sex Selection*

Violence against women and discrimination can also start before a child is even born. In many South Asian countries, **prenatal sex selection**, or aborting a child based on their gender, is a common practice despite laws that have been passed to ban the procedure. Daughters are often seen as less of an economic asset to a family because they are expected to contribute less to the family income, and often require large dowries for marriage. In largely-populated countries like India and China, pressure to have only one or two children causes many parents to resort to prenatal sex selection in order to ensure they will have boys.

In many countries sex selection has become a very profitable business for doctors, and it is even easier for people to access cheap ultrasounds and other methods to determine the sex of their child. The National Fertility and Family Health Survey reported that in the Republic of Korea, 90 percent of pregnancies where a male fetus had been identified resulted in a normal birth, where as 30 percent of identified female fetuses were aborted. Abortions are also very inexpensive, such as in Vietnam where a walk-in abortion at a state hospital costs only 10 dollars. According to UNICEF, in India easy access to ultra sounds and abortions has led to 7,000 less girls

being born each day. In some of the most prosperous areas of China, the boy-girl ratio is as skewed as 135 boys to 100 girls.

### ***Trafficking***

Many women are trafficked, or transported, from one country to another in order to put them into situations where they are powerless. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, there are 127 countries of origin and 137 destination countries for human trafficking. Women are then forced to work as sex workers, forced to work in unsafe labor conditions in factories or exploited in other ways. Sometimes women are deceived into believing they will find a safe job in another country, only to find themselves in a situation resembling slavery. Most often, these women are forced to become sex workers. It is estimated that as many as two million girls under the age of 15 are trafficked as sex workers worldwide.

Many of these women have no protection once they arrive in their new country. If they seek help, they may be arrested for illegal immigration. Because prostitution is illegal in many countries, women who are forced to work as prostitutes are often afraid to go to the police for help.

### ***HIV/AIDS and Violence***

Women's inability to protect themselves from unwanted sex as well as their lack of education has also been linked to higher rates of HIV/AIDS. Sexual assault and rape lead to higher risks of bleeding and abrasion, leaving women more vulnerable to the transmission of the HIV virus and other sexually transmitted infections. Women who are victims of violence are 48 percent more likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS. Lack of knowledge also leads to higher rates of HIV/AIDS because many women are unaware of diseases that can be spread through unsafe or unwanted sex. In Bangladesh only 1 in 5 women had heard of AIDS, and in Sudan only 5 percent of women knew HIV transmission could be prevented through the use of a condom. Violence not only makes women more prone to HIV/AIDS, but it also leads to the lack of treatment of women who know they are infected. Women who make their HIV-positive status public are often abused by their families and are driven from their homes to be left alone on the streets. This fear of violence has caused 60 percent of eligible women who are HIV-positive in Zambia to not seek treatment. In South Africa in 1998, Gugu

Dhlamini went public about her HIV status on the radio and television and was stoned to death by the men in her community afterwards.

Armed conflict has also left women more vulnerable to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In many war-torn countries where sexual violence is used as a weapon of war, soldiers purposefully infect women with HIV to pit one ethnic group against another. This was the case with the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

### *Causes*

Violence against women can be caused by a number of factors, such as war or traditional beliefs about women's role in society. Misconceptions about masculinity, or what it means to be a man, can also contribute to violence against women. Studies have shown that men are more likely to become abusive when they believe that "real men" never show signs of weakness or that men should be controlling and forceful.

Additionally, with women's rights expanding in many countries, men may feel powerless and become violent to show that they are dominant in a relationship. One study showed that men in the Philippines were more likely to become violent when they were unemployed or earned less than their wives. Another report indicated that men with high self-esteem were less likely to become abusive.

Many of the factors that can lead to violence against women are found in areas that are developing or impoverished, though this does not mean that violence against women is absent in developed regions. In developing regions, traditional ideas about gender roles are more persistent than they are in developed areas. Lack of education, poverty and conflict are more likely to occur in developing areas, as well.

### *Social Consequences*

Violence against women has terrible effects on the women who are victimized. Women may contract diseases, may become disabled and may require long-term medical help. Women who are victims of violence often require psychological care in addition to medical care. Violence against women has far-reaching consequences for the whole of society, as well.

Women who are physically abused often require expensive health services. In Zimbabwe, as well as other developing nations, the high rates of abuse place a significant burden on the health care system.

In addition, violence against women affects a country's national economy. A study in Canada showed that 30 percent of women who were abused could not attend or perform work as usual and that 50 percent of abused women had to take sick leave because of their injuries.

### **Previous Action**

International acceptance of the equality of women began with the *Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women* in 1967. This proclamation of the UN General Assembly declared discrimination against women as “fundamentally unjust and...an offence against human dignity”.

The next step toward protecting women came with the 1979 adoption of the *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), which defines men and women as equals and declares that nations must take whatever effort possible to eliminate discrimination against women for any reason.

For a long time, many people believed that violence against women was a private matter for families and cultures to deal with, not an international issue. But as countries began to value women as equals—not inferiors—of men, leaders began to realize that violence against women is in fact a human rights issue. Finally, international attention was drawn to the problem. In 1993, the UN General Assembly passed the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, a document that recognizes a woman's right to equality and protection under the law. It calls for all member states to ensure that their laws protect women from violence and punish offenders of those laws. It also calls for international cooperation on programs that provide medical care and counseling to victims of violence.

In 1994, the Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, to collect information about the causes and consequences of violence against women, and to recommend ways to eliminate it. In 1996, the Special Rapporteur recommended that refugee



camps improve security for women. She encouraged states to pass laws punishing those who abuse women, outlaw early marriage, educate the public about the dangers of rape, outlaw FGM and to take legal action preventing young girls from being trafficked as prostitutes.

In 1996, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 50/166, urging the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to concentrate on ways to reduce violence against women and to focus on empowering women by helping them find jobs.

UNIFEM has held sensitivity training sessions for the government of Somaliland, teaching lawmakers about the special dangers that women face. In certain regions, they created a men's network to combat gender inequality, which makes reducing violence against women a responsibility of men as well as women. UNIFEM has also set up trauma-counseling centers in countries where many women are trafficked as prostitutes. In Peru, UNIFEM assisted rape victims as well as educated men about the emotional trauma of rape. UNIFEM also supported a program in Kenya that encouraged people to replace female genital mutilation with other rituals. To celebrate a girl's becoming a woman, communities were encouraged to use words instead of FGM.

In 2007, twelve UN entities united to form Stop Rape Now, a UN program against sexual violence in conflict. The creation of the UN action has three main pillars: learning by doing, advocating for action, and country level action. By combining these three pillars, Stop Rape Now hopes to more effectively address the problem of sexual violence against women in conflict and works to eradicate it all together.

### **Recommendations**

Violence against women is a complicated problem with many causes to address. This issue must be considered from many different perspectives. Delegates must:

- Try to encourage governments to punish offenders who abuse women and to provide assistance to victims of violence;

- Discuss ways to help women who cannot be aided by governments, such as women in war zones, refugees or women who are being illegally trafficked;
- Consider the importance of education, such as teaching people about the harms of certain cultural practices (like female genital mutilation or dowries) and teaching people that men and women have equal value;
- Show respect for the differences in cultures and the importance of local traditions; and
- Consider how to fund these measures.

### **Questions**

1. Is violence against women a major problem in your country? If so, what is your country doing to alleviate the problem?
2. Does your country have any widespread cultural practices or ideas that might be harmful to women, like early marriage or honor killings? What is your country's position on these practices?
3. How does your country respond to the global problem of violence against women? For example, does your country accept refugees who have been victims of gender-based violence? Does your country provide assistance to victims of gender-based violence in refugee camps or support initiatives to assist victims of sex trafficking?

### **Citations**

*Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,*  
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[www.who.int/svri/en](http://www.who.int/svri/en)

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