

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd
an NGO in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC of the United Nations

NGO input into the Study on Violence Against Women, submitted 9-2005

I would like to address, from the gathered expertise of my NGO, which is a social service provider in over 60 countries for close to 150 years, two key issues that an international study in 2006 must address if it has any hope of being a groundbreaking study that can direct real policy development.

My NGO has hope that the current study will not simply be a report used by patriarchal structures to continue to define women as victims while paying lip service to empowerment. The choice of key issues dealt with in the study can result in a groundbreaking document that can serve to change the paradigm of gender relationships in our communities, thus eliminating gender relationships characterized by violence and promoting gender equality.

Key issue #1:

Prostitution must be named as a form of violence against women.

As violence vs. women has been considered throughout history, there has been a progressive consensus developed that has named, in different eras, various forms of violence against women. The binding of women's feet in China became acknowledged as of a form of violence rather than a beautifying cosmetic practice. More recently a consensus has grown that female genital cutting is a form of violence against women; this has resulted in ongoing changes both in national laws and practices. Since the 1970 we have seen a clear agreement that gender violence in the family is a form of violence against women whereas once it was thought by society to be a private, not a political, issue.

This study in 2006 is an opportunity to unmask the reality that prostitution is not a profession (it meets absolutely no professional criteria.) Nor is it a "choice" that women aspire to. It is a traditional practice that leaves women, as a gender, in a subservient state to males. When the prostitution of women is acceptable or tolerated for some women, then the nature of gender relationships inherently assert that all girls (or any girl) are perceived as potential sexual objects for the satisfaction of the male gender. This dehumanizes women as a group.

The definition of CEDAW states: "any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women....."

The very nature of purchase of women for sexual acts puts the female gender in a subservient position, socially, economically and sexually. Yes, some men are prostituted as well but often, interestingly, they are selected to be prostituted precisely due to perceived feminine gender traits. Prostitution is not a sexual act; the prostitution of women is a statement and practice of gender domination, male over female in which the female loses her autonomy as a human person and is subjected to physical and psychological human debasement

All prostitution is an expression of domination of the male gender over the female. The very act of purchase (the purchaser group is far and away dominated by males and those females who are complicit can be regarded as identifying with the dominate societal forces, not an uncommon phenomenon in oppression.) demonstrates the nature of gender inequity in economic terms. All women who are prostituted are at high risk of physical, sexual and psychological harm. For every woman in prostitution, assaults to self-identity and self-esteem are rampant. Since the purchase of a woman for sex is more about power than sexuality, women are subjected to personal and sexual violence in private settings that remain hidden from society. Due to the tolerated nature of prostitution, the violence remains very hidden since society, not unlike the attitudes toward domestic violence pre-1970, tends to blame the victim, echoing that "she asked for it" and then refers to her status as "voluntary." We now understand that women who remain in situations of domestic violence, for whatever reasons, are still the objects and victims of gender-based violence. This parallels the situation of women in prostitution. There is greater stigma for women in prostitution not only because society regards those women who are prostituted as "other" and socially marginal but also because women who are prostituted must, in private venues, submit to whatever the purchaser requires of them.

2006 is the time to unmask this form of violence against women.

Key issue # 2:

The male gender (as it is currently constructed in societies) must be named as the primary perpetrator of using women as objects of violence.

There has been much good rhetoric in recent years about engaging men as part of the solution to the issue of gender-based violence against women. Unfortunately, such rhetoric often concurrently omits the naming of the male gender as the primary user of women as objects of violence. Often, references to violence against women barely name that Violence Against Woman is gender driven. Without naming the reality, a solution is bound to fail.

In fact, failing to name the nature of male violence against women is an act complicit with the dominant structures of gender relationships, characterized across the globe as male dominant or patriarchal. The naming of male violence against women is not to practice man-bashing. It is to clarify the nature of what we are talking about (presumably the purpose of a study) so as to change the current paradigm of gender relationships. Without such structural and systemic change, we can always elicit some men to join the cause of working against violence against women, but we will, on the whole, maintain the same structures and relationships that are the foundation of the issue. We will further dichotomize the "good men" who work with us and the "bad men" who violate us, much as society dichotomizes "good women" and those women for whom society has a whole host of demeaning names. As an aside, it can be noted that prior to the domestic violence movement in the 1970s, not so long ago, women who remained in an abusive marriage or a violent relationship, had such names applied to them. Women today who are in prostitution frequently have these same names applied to them.

How can a study be regarded as having a feminist perspective if it does not deal with the foundation of gender relationships? How is it that males use females as objects at which to vent

their violence in home, society, or at war, with impunity, and still we fail to name the reality? When we refuse to name the male gender as the perpetrator of gender driven violence then we are complicit in the dynamic and we protect the perpetrator of violence, whatever laws may be enacted.

If this study does nothing else, speaking the foundational truth of the dynamic that is being studied is most essential.

Thank you very much for your attention to and consideration of these issues.
My NGO looks forward to continued interactions with DAW on all such vital issues.

Respectfully submitted,
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♀ *an international organization whose aim is the integral development of the human person, particularly women and girls.*