



## **Economic and Social Council**

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

#### **Fifty-seventh session**

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the special session of the General Assembly entitled  
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace  
for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic  
objectives and action in critical areas of concern and  
further actions and initiatives**

### **Statement submitted by Pragya, 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.



## **Statement**

### **Violence against women in indigenous communities**

For centuries, violence against women has been perpetrated as a way to establish supremacy of man over woman. Springing from the age-old concept of gender inequality, such violence is manifested in physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse and other offences committed against women. Most countries with traditional societies are steeped in gender inequality and experience high levels of related violence against women, and this persists in spite of economic and political advancement. India is one such paradox: while it is regarded as one of the worst places to be born a woman, it is among the fastest-developing nations in the world and a country in which women have held offices of power and led freedom struggles; rape, molestation, sexual harassment, bride-burning, dowry death and every other imaginable form of offence against and violation of women's dignity are common in the country and on the rise. In Kenya, a country in Africa with a rising economy, women have to endure the physical abuse and humiliation of female genital mutilation, abduction at an early age, "sanctioned" pre-teen rape and pregnancy, and conflict-based violence, and suffer from HIV/AIDS and untold trauma.

Women belonging to indigenous tribal communities in these traditional societies are especially abused. They suffer from violence twice over: that being inflicted by their own societies, and that inflicted by those outside the tribal communities, including people from non-tribal mainstream groups as well as State and non-State institutions, including those that are supposed to protect them.

### **Violence inflicted by their own societies**

Violence against tribal women is structural, stemming from social mores that place women and girls in a position that is subordinate and submissive in their relationships with men and boys. In its simplest form, this is manifested in the regressive pattern in which benefits are provided to boys while compromises are made on those due to girls. Girls are conscripted into labour to collect fodder, fuel wood and water, and discriminated against in terms of access to education, health care and even diet. These practices are accepted unquestioningly as standard, and cause damage to the psyche at an early age, in addition to ill health and higher mortality and low life expectancy rates. Particularly extreme means of subjugating women early in life constitute the various forms of violence against girls practised in Kenya, which continue despite all the legislation adopted to control them, and include female genital mutilation and pre-teen "beading" (sanctioned rape). These are frequently the cause of lifelong suffering on the part of girls.

In addition, tribal communities practise a range of forms of marriage, many of which are derogatory to women, including polygamy, polyandry and polygyny. Fraternal polyandry is practised by certain Himalayan tribes and has its roots in inadequate land or food; hence, it reflects an attempt to curtail land fragmentation and family size. Polygamy and polygyny are practised, the former by ethnic groups in Kenya, for example, and the latter by Himalayan tribes in India, usually to enable the man to display his high economic status or acquire an extra farm hand. Women are often forced to enter into such marriages, sometimes even by abduction; "abduction for marriage" is a custom regarded as a celebration of masculinity in the

Himalayas. These marriage traditions increase the levels of masculine aggression and sexual abuse and domestic violence to which women are exposed.

Women in tribal societies are perceived as key livelihood partners during the best of times and as economic resources during the worst. The result in both cases, however, is that women constitute the major part of the local labour force (90 per cent of the agricultural workforce in Africa and 60 per cent in Asia) and are grossly overworked, leading lives of intense drudgery and physical exertion, which in turn leads to poor health and low life expectancy rates. They work as much as three times more than men (and more than even local beasts of burden), both on household chores and as farm hands (although they own no land), as well as carrying water, fuel wood or fodder great distances, without any recognition for their hardship or any direct economic gain. Poverty is highest among indigenous communities, and this also contributes significantly to violence against women. Girls and women disproportionately suffer the effects of poverty in terms of diet, health and nutrition and vulnerability to environmental disasters, and often must forgo minimum dietary requirements and go hungry for the sake of feeding the family. Impoverished communities in parts of the Indian Himalayas encourage abduction for marriage, with a payment of bride money made after the abduction.

The causes and the effects of the problem constitute a vicious circle. The victimization and denigration of girls by the family and outsiders leads to low self-esteem among girls and women, social conditioning and the internalization of their lower social status, leading in turn to further marginalization and exploitation. Women become passive recipients of and submit to the discrimination and ill treatment being meted out, believing in the indisputability of the existing social mores, which renders them helpless during the perpetration of violence and voiceless against it. This is evident even in communities that have specific histories of self-assertion by women in the public sphere. An example is the case of a woman in the central Indian Himalayas, who, while she is a leader of a women's group, a vocal and assertive conservation activist and the recipient of a fellowship from a prestigious organization, continues to be subjected to domestic violence on a regular basis and accepts it unquestioningly.

### **Violence inflicted by others and institutions**

Local institutions in tribal areas, including customary law and institutions, government machinery and police, defence and legal institutions, are also steeped in a chauvinistic mindset and help to perpetuate discrimination against women. Women are rarely provided mandated benefits and rights, and rarely is justice meted out in the event of grievances. These areas are often conflict zones and are therefore allocated large deployments of protection agency staff, which also implies increased vulnerability of the women to physical and sexual abuse, committed both as a result of the conflict and by the protective forces, including rape, sexual harassment and abduction. The social structure in such cases favours the men, while placing the blame for the violence on the women. This attitude/behaviour is magnified when applied to women belonging to indigenous tribal communities, who are most often considered inferior by the dominant, mainstream communities in these countries.

Furthermore, the absence of infrastructure for support or grievance redress, such as women's cells in tribal districts, adds to the woes of the women. States have tended to neglect their tribal areas, treating them as peripheral to the nation's

business and best left to fend for themselves, with their cultures left undisturbed (or else controlled and exploited for the benefit of the rest of the population). Women in tribal areas have tended to be regarded by their countries almost as cultural objects, and their gender-based problems are ignored as key constituents of inviolable tribal culture.

### **Recommendations**

Pragya works with women belonging to indigenous communities in the Himalayas (South Asia) and in arid and semi-arid lands (sub-Saharan Africa), addressing their needs through education, nutritional improvement and maternal health care, solidarity and socio-legal support, and empowering them with leadership and livelihood development.

We urge a focus on issues involving the much-neglected and much-abused tribal woman, and call upon development actors/agents to take a genuinely inclusive stance and address her right to enjoy equality with men in tribal society, while also closing the gap between women in tribal communities and those in more privileged social environments.

What is needed is a social transformation that changes the way in which women belonging to indigenous communities respond to violence, from a stance of passive submission to one of active resistance and assertion, and that empowers them to fight against the violence perpetrated against them and to play leadership roles in the desired process of societal change. Development, empowerment and capacitating inputs need to begin with the mother and the unborn girl child and to continue throughout the child's life, with age-specific interventions being made.

There are multiple development programmes and laws/regulations that the States in which tribal areas are located, have devised for their tribal communities. We call for a gender analysis and gender mainstreaming approach to these programmes, alongside gender training and sensitization for development actors, both State and non-State. We also call for the real implementation of these programmes and the enforcement of the laws/regulations ensuring equity and justice for women in indigenous societies.

Community, non-governmental and State mechanisms for support and solidarity must be greatly enhanced for women in indigenous communities, including groups, representatives, leaders and assemblies of indigenous women as well as the counselling, protection and other special services provided by formal institutions of the police and legal sectors. Women in indigenous societies constitute the last mile with regard to Millennium Development Goal 3 and its targets, and we appeal for a commitment to working to make them stand proud, equal and unafraid.

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