



## Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls

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### 1. Overview

Violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world. It knows no social, economic or national boundaries. Worldwide, an estimated one in three women will experience physical or sexual abuse in her lifetime. Gender Related Killing (GRK) is the worst of this.

Gender-based violence undermines the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. Victims of violence can suffer sexual and reproductive health consequences, including forced and unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, traumatic fistula, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and even death.

Although commonly associated North Africa and the Middle East, the problem is global. No region is immune. All countries have a problem with killing women. The killers of women and girls are overwhelmingly male in all countries, including in China, Europe, Russia and the United States.

When Reeva Steenkamp was murdered in South Africa on Valentine's Day in 2013, much of the focus was on the murderer, the Olympic athlete Oscar Pistorius, a man who overcame overwhelming odds after the amputation of his lower legs, gaining fame in a sport where the supreme use of one's lower limbs is paramount. Advocates note that lost in this debate and subsequent investigation was the focus on the victim, his girlfriend and model Reeva Steenkamp. The questions surrounding too many of killings and murders of females should not

just be the legal and statutory reasons and/or motivational factors for murder. Investigations should focus on why a female was targeted. The focus was not just an investigation of guilt or innocence, or even motivation as to why the action happened.

The Gender Related Killing perspective stresses why a female was targeted, not just why a person was targeted. Mapping out, mitigating, and eventually eliminating the murder of females, based on or because of their gender, is the goal of the United Nations. Gender-related killings are those killings that have as a main motive or cause gender-based discrimination. Terms such as *femicide* and *gendercide* have been used to define such killings. The most obvious examples of gender-related killings include: rape-murder, intimate-partners violence escalating into murder, dowry-deaths, so called *honour killings* and deaths arising from harmful practices or neglect. While this form of violence can fit into certain kinds of categories and its perpetrators often share characteristics, it is not specific to any particular region, peace time or war time.

Honor killings, it is important to note, may be the most notorious forms of gender related killing, but there is no statistical evidence to show they are the most common. In much of the world, honor killing is fascinating because it restricts the problem to other people and other cultures, while making it easier to overlook equally serious problems that affect all people and cultures. Husbands and partners killing their wives and girlfriends, parents killing female children, are problems without borders or distinct causes.



## Honour Killings - Why do they occur?

- In many places it is believed that to regain the family honor the person who shames it must be killed
- Sharia = forbids sex outside of marriage for women + forbids homosexuality = if those rules are disobeyed (even if the person was raped) → considered dishonored + shame the family
- Honor killings are said to not be linked to religion : "Honor killings are part of a culture, not a religion" (quote by murderer) but sharia is technically part of their culture
- Quotes from murderers : "The only way to rectify the family's honor is to have wife, daughter, sister killed.", "Blood cleanses honor"...
- Usually happens because of sex outside marriage whether it be rape, an affaire or premarital → in all cases the girl must die
- Studies have shown that almost half the boys and 1 out of 5 girls believe that honor killings are morally justified

### 2. Previous UN action

On 13 October 2015, the United Nations adopted *Resolution 2242*, the eighth resolution on women, peace, and security.<sup>1</sup> This resolution was the most popular resolution to date, as it was approved unanimously. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon praised Member States for their effort to advance gender equality for women. He said "At a time when armed extremist groups place the subordination of women at the top of their agenda, we must place women's leadership and the protection of women's rights at the top of ours", he said. "Let us heed the call for action and work together to empower women and girls, protect their human rights and advance world peace for everyone".

<sup>1</sup> 'Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2242 (2015) to Improve Implementation of Landmark Text on Women, Peace, Security Agenda', *UN News Centre*, 15 October 2015, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12076.doc.htm>

Some important themes from a discussion following adoption of Resolution 2252:

- 1) Femicides are reaching alarming proportions and present in every region of the world: underline the urgency to act as International Community more decisively – state representatives, international organizations and civil society in unison.
- 2) Femicides are the ultimate act of violence, experienced in a continuum of violence.
- 3) About half of all femicides occur in intimate and family settings.
- 4) They are preventable – thus more focus on prevention is necessary, learning from the analysis of concrete cases.
- 5) Fight impunity – impunity due to prevailing gender inequality.



## Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls

6) Thus there is need for societal change, to create awareness, where the role of men is crucial (perpetrators also mostly men); femicide is not a women's issue but an issue of society as a whole.

7) Concrete follow-up in short run: pass draft resolution in 3rd committee by consensus, ideally anchoring a follow-up role for the Special Rapporteur on violence against women.

8) Normative and policy framework are not enough, crux – like always – in implementation, changing things on the ground to the better. That necessitates a continued joint push in across-regional and inclusive effort.<sup>2</sup>

The source of gender-related killing is multi-layered, they are a continuum of violence that presents its own difficulties in stemming. The solutions will require cooperation between states, various agencies within states, and cooperation with the communities where the causes and occurrences of gender-related killings are most prevalent. Gender-related killings tend not to be isolated incidents that arise suddenly and unexpectedly, but rather they often are ultimate act in a continuum of gender-based discrimination and violence. While manifestations differ, they all have in common the socio-political and economic disempowerment of women and systematic disregard for the equal enjoyment of human rights by women. As Rashida Manjoo, special rapporteur of violence against women said, women subjected to continual violence are always on “death row, always in fear of execution.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Resolution 2242 (2015), United Nations Security Council, 13 October 2015,.

<sup>3</sup> “Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls”. Women's Rights and Gender Section, OHCHR Research and Right to

### 3. Mitigating Gender Related Killing

*Employment and Empowerment:* Employment and Empowerment Employment is the state of having paid work. Empowerment refers to the economic, political, social and educational strength of women.

Empowerment Throughout much of the world, women's equality is undermined by historical imbalances in decision-making power and access to resources, rights, and entitlements for women. Either by law or by custom, women in many countries still lack rights to:

- Own land and to inherit property
- Obtain access to credit
- Attend and stay in school
- Earn income and move up in their work, free from job discrimination

In Saudi Arabia, for example, women's rights are defined by Sunni Islam and tribal customs. They were previously forbidden from voting or being elected to political office. However, King Abdullah declared that women will be able to vote and run in the 2015 local elections. Kuwaiti women also won right to vote:

As of 31 January 2013, the average share of women members in parliaments worldwide was just over 20 per cent.

*Employment:* In general, women earn substantially less than their male counterparts. This does not apply just to LEDCs but also to MEDCs. In the UK, women earn on average less

Development Division Rule of Law, Equality and Non-Discrimination Branch. August, 2013.



## Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls

than 80 % of men's average annual salary. This is for the same work and time as men. 44 top firms who employ almost a quarter of finance sector workers were questioned. The sector's age profile is 25-39, when women have childcare responsibilities. Women earned on average £2,875 annually in contrast to £14,554 for men. Women's education in Middle Eastern countries is rising rapidly but these women do not work for salaries. It is estimated that household incomes could rise by 25% if women in these countries worked. In middle income countries like Mexico, women with high levels of education are largely unemployed. This leads to a negative impact on growth as the economy does not use half its resources. In Mexico, women earn 15-20 % less than men. By introducing schemes to help women in the workplace, the economy grows as more women are able to work. In Mexico, the National Institute for Women developed a program to certify companies with gender equal policies and practices. Women are also encouraged to work by the introduction of family-orientated work schemes such as part-time or job-sharing.

### 4. Honour Killings

What are they? An ancient tradition still sometimes observed; a male member of the family kills a female relative for tarnishing the family image Action of killing a member of the family or community for having shamed or dishonored the family and disobeyed the honor code of the family (usually linked to sexuality and relationships) Usually targeted against women (generally young) and homosexuals Killings are mostly done in public in broad daylight by members of the family → considered normal + no shame or guilt in killing them.

#### Honor Killings

Women are put to death at the hands of their own family members because they are thought to have dishonored the family.



Dowry Death



The killing of a wife by her in-laws if the wife's parents fail to pay additional dowry.

Why do they occur? In many places it is believed that to regain the family honor the person who shames it must die. "Honor killings are part of a culture, not a religion" is a common refrain, but it also is widely attributed to local interpretations of Islamic law (sharia). To be sure, gender-based murders often cite religion in an effort to justify their actions, although the actual role of religion ideas in their crimes is harder to determine and very controversial.

A prominent example is the death of Anusha Zafar, a girl murdered in Pakistan on 29 October 2013 by her parents. She allegedly had turned to look at a boy driving past on a motorcycle, which her parents considered dishonorable. Her parents beat her severely and poured acid on her. They took her to hospital the morning after the attacks, but medical attention was too late. Her parents were tried and sentenced to life imprisonment, but never showed remorse. In the words of her father, "It was her destiny to die this way."

As cases like this show, the role of traditional gender ideas versus religion is difficult to disentangle, and may be beyond the reach of public policy. Also difficult to disentangle is the role of women in committing such crimes. Are they active participants sharing enthusiasm for the attacks, or are they bullied into cooperating,





## Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls



unable to resist the demands of their husbands, or are they intimidated and fearful of their own lives, afraid to resist?

### 5. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female Genital Mutilation comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. It is practiced purely for cultural traditions; a woman who has not undergone FGM is not considered by the community to be a worthy woman. FGM is criticized as a form of ownership for the men over their wife or child, but women's complicity in FGM cannot be dismissed, either. There is no positive health benefit, and the process itself often is performed in an amateurish and dangerous setting, with great risk of infection and or permanent pain. Because the procedure often is illegal, it is channeled into covert practitioners, with little training or ability to treat the consequences.

Most seriously affected are regions where up to ninety percent of girls undergo FGM, especially parts of the Middle East and North Africa and the Maghreb. These regions also tend to practice very young marriage, often emphasizing the importance of marriage by the age of thirteen, at the time of or just before puberty.

Between 100 million and 140 million women and girls worldwide have been subjected to FGM. Three million girls and women a year are at risk of mutilation, approximately 8,000 girls per day. It has been documented mainly in Africa (in 28 countries), and in a few countries in the Middle East (such as Egypt, Yemen, Kurdish communities, Saudi Arabia), Asia and among certain ethnic groups in Central and South America.

Case studies show now that it is also practiced in several European countries following the migration of people from these regions. Although the law prohibits it in such countries, it is their tradition and honor and they continue to live up to their beliefs.

### 6. Responses and Policies

Fourteen States reported to the UN that they had adopted specific policies, strategies or action plans at the national level. Some States referred to policies, strategies or action plans focusing on specific issues like trafficking in persons or specific groups like migrants or aboriginal women. Other UN Member States have more general strategies and action plans on gender equality and equity. Most Member States have established policies, strategies or action plans for reducing different forms of violence against women and girls, although these differ greatly in legal strength, enforcement and funding. Prominent examples include:

**Angola** emphasizes its National Policy on Gender Equality and Equity, requiring State, private and civil society institutions to observe gender-related principles in development programs, plans and projects. It also stresses its Executive Plan against Domestic Violence.

**Australia's** National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children was released in February 2011, bringing together the efforts of government across Australia and the community.

**Belgium** reported on its fourth national plan of action against intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence 2010-2014. Previously limited to intimate partner violence,



## Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls

its scope now included also forced marriages, honor-related violence and female genital mutilation.

**Ecuador** adopted a policy and a national plan to eradicate gender violence against women, children and adolescents. The national plan focused on the transformation of cultural patterns (by raising awareness of discrimination as the basis of unequal and violent relationships between men and women), comprehensive protection, assistance and access to justice for victims of domestic violence. It also highlighted the importance of reliable data, awareness-raising and training measures, allocation of stable and sustainable budgets, sectoral coordination, monitoring and evaluation.

**Germany** reported on the Second Action Plan of the Federal Government to Combat violence against women, which provided an overall concept and framework for tackling the current challenges in the protection of women against violence. The plan aimed at making the fight against violence more effective and at improving the protection afforded to the affected women. The Action Plan encompassed over 130 federal Government measures and programs in the form of prevention, federal legislation, assistance systems to support and counsel women affected by violence, national networking of the support system, cooperation between State institutions and non-governmental support services, work with offenders, qualification and awareness-raising, research, cooperation at the European and international levels, and support measures for women in foreign States. The Action Plan paid particular attention to the situation of women with a migrant background and women with disabilities, as well as focusing on medical care.

**Canada** reported on a draft justice framework intended to help federal, provincial and

territorial justice officials, aboriginal organizations, and other partners work together to address violence against aboriginal women, including missing and murdered aboriginal women.

**Japan** adopted its Third Basic Plan in December 2010, which formulated practical actions and concrete policy measures for accelerating the development of gender equality, including in the priority area of eliminating all forms of violence against women.

**Italy** referred to the envisaged adoption of an Extraordinary Action Plan against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence by its Ministry of Equal Opportunities, as mandated by article 5 of Decree Law No. 93/2013.

**Mexico** has developed a specific strategy to address gender-related killing, focusing on prevention, protection and assistance, coordination between different levels of government and civil society participation.

**Palestine** has a National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women, adopted for the period 2011-2019, aiming at enhancing social and legal protection for women victims of violence and at enhancing prevention mechanisms and legal reforms to end violence against women.

**Saudi Arabia** reported on its comprehensive national plan for the dissemination of a human rights culture, which included a focus on human rights principles and standards and aimed to address social issues linked to human rights violations and wrongful practices, taking into account all age groups (from childhood to adulthood) and the social groups in question, such as children and women.

**Slovenia** adopted a Resolution on the National Program of Family Violence Prevention, a



## Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls

strategic document stipulating the objectives, measures and bodies in charge of policies for the prevention and reduction of family violence in the country for the period 2009-2014. The document attempts to integrate the measures of different ministries in curbing family violence with activities aimed at its identification and prevention. Specific tasks and activities for the implementation of objectives and measures are stipulated in biennial action plans.

**Tunisia** made reference to the establishment of a national strategy against violence against women.

**Turkey** reported on its National Action Plan on Combating Domestic Violence for 2012-2015, which aimed at fostering improvements in the area of legislation, public awareness, delivery of protective and health services and inter-institutional cooperation, and was prepared with the contribution and participation of relevant public institutions, NGOs and academia under the coordination of the Directorate-General on the Status of Women.

**United Kingdom**, relevant measures were taken on the basis of the strategy “Call to End Violence against Women and Girls” of 2010, which applied to England and was accompanied by an annual action plan. The strategy aimed at: (i) preventing violence from happening in the first place by challenging the attitudes and behaviors which foster it, and intervening early where possible to prevent it; (ii) providing adequate levels of support where violence does occur; working in partnership to obtain the best outcome for victims and their families; (iii) reducing the risk to women and girls who are victims of these crimes; and (iv) ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice. A new national rape action plan set out clear commitments to address rape cases, focusing on prevention and responses by the criminal justice system. In Northern Ireland, a gender-neutral

“Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy” 2014-2020 was adopted to improve services and support for all Victims and witnesses, and ensure perpetrators are held responsible. The Strategy focused on social change, prevention and early intervention, support, protection and justice for victims.

Although much awareness has been raised and much action has been taken. Much more is needed. The international community must coalesce behind this heinous crime that targets a weaker and too often discriminated gender. What begins with social discrimination is too often interpreted as permission to discriminate against physically, which manifests itself in violence, punishment, and ultimately death.

### 7. Further Action

As always is the case in the United Nations, three basic issues have to be overcome:

- First is the hesitation or refusal of many Member States to permit UN resolutions that are seen as interfering in their domestic affairs, weakening their national sovereignty. They may accept resolutions that encourage or certain responses or facilitate collaboration on best practices, but they strongly oppose legal mandates seen as undermining the role of their own governments.
- Second, there is the problem of funding. Even measures that seem uncontroversial require funding, which many governments lack, or are unwilling to support through higher taxation, borrowing, or cutting other programs. Ensuring adequate funding for initiative on gender Based Killing and related problems will not be easy.



Human Rights Council

## Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls



- Third is the difficulty of challenging local norms and traditions. Democratic governments especially are often unwilling to demand strong action that is politically unpopular. If enforcement

of a measure means losing popular support, losing the right to govern, leaders may be hesitant. Leaders of authoritarian governments also may refuse to press reforms against groups they rely on for support.





Human Rights Council

## Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls



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