



United Nations, Department of Public Information, NGO Relations, S-1070 J-L
Tel: (917) 367-9380, or (212) 963-7709 * Fax: (212) 963-6914 * E-mail: section1d@un.org

DPI/NGO Briefing

“Violence against Women: 16 Days to Make a Difference”

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Summary

Eric Falt, Director of the Outreach Division, in the Department of Public Information, opened the Briefing entitled “Violence against Women: 16 Days to Make a Difference” by stating that he felt particularly committed to the issue of domestic violence because of the importance of the issue on the agenda of the United Nations. He shared with the audience some background on the topic including the statistic that one out of every three women in the world is likely to be beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. He stated that it was against this backdrop, of what the UN describes as “endemic violence against women,” that the General Assembly in December of 1999 had adopted a resolution (resolution 54/134) designating 25 November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. He noted however, that the movement to end violence against women had started before the UN day was officially designated in efforts such as the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence, originally spearheaded by the New Jersey based Center for Women’s Global Leadership. Mr. Falt concluded his introduction by introducing the newly appointed messenger of peace, Charlize Theron. Although Ms. Theron was unfortunately unable to attend the briefing, Mr. Falt was able to interview Ms. Theron, and he shared that interview with the audience.

Charlize Theron, Messenger of Peace, United Nations, noted that she was honored to be asked to become a messenger of peace, which she felt fit in with her background of advocacy on women’s issues. She indicated that she intended to travel around the world to deliver a message of peace concerning violence against women. She expressed her conviction that societal attitudes can change through education, and emphasized that men must be involved in this process in order to obtain real change. Although she noted that this process would take time, Ms. Theron remained hopeful that a difference would be seen in a few years. She concluded by stressing that gaining government support for this issue made it much easier to facilitate successful advocacy efforts.

Nanette Braun, Communication Specialist, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), addressed the UNIFEM ‘Say No to Violence Against Women’ campaign which would hand over the signatures collected during a year-long promotion to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on 25 November 2008, the International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women. The purpose of the campaign was to raise public awareness and advocacy to end

violence against women and make the issue a priority for governments worldwide. She said that UNIFEM's campaign was designed to feed into the Secretary General's campaign 'Unite to End Violence against Women'. Initially an internet based campaign asking for names of support, the campaign grew to a traditional signature drive sourcing signatures from a diverse constituency in remote countries. In addition, the campaign goal of mobilizing the public had been met by utilizing new social networking websites and collaborating with over 200 organizations who had taken the campaign on board. UNIFEM envisaged that it would surpass its goal of collecting 1 million signatures. The campaign had also evolved and a companion website was set up providing information on the issue and offering solutions by highlighting the work of the UN Trust Fund. UNIFEM provides grants to organizations that work to combat violence against women. Ms. Braun said that UNIFEM was encouraged by the fact that many high-level government representatives had signed onto the campaign, in so doing publicly expressing their commitment to the cause. This was important, because she stressed, political will, through enactment of legislation, provision of support and preventative services, was pivotal to ending violence against women. In closing, she encouraged everyone who had not signed, to do so and join in the worldwide network to stay informed on the issue.

Malika Dutt, Founder and Executive Director, Breakthrough, explained that one of the major challenges in addressing violence against women was that society did not see violence against women as the global crisis that it really is, and this was preventing the issue from receiving the urgent action it required. She noted that ending violence against women required multiple responses and services to victims, as well as interventions at the family, community, and international government level. Her organization, Breakthrough, had taken a multi-pronged approach to combating violence against women. First, it had created a multi-media campaign, utilizing mainstream media, to reach a large audience. Second, it worked at the community level, in three specific states in India. In these states, Breakthrough worked with college-age youth as well as community leaders, to create "rights advocates," who were potential advocates for women's human rights in their own communities. The purpose of this two pronged approach, Ms. Dutt noted, was to change attitudes, values, and the underlying established systems of society that lead to violence against women. She described a current campaign in India that focused on encouraging boys and men to become involved in stopping violence against women. The campaign was called "Belbajou," which means, "Ring the Bell." She illustrated this theme with two commercials shown in India. The commercials depicted bystanders intervening by ringing the doorbells of the perpetrators when they witnessed domestic violence. The campaign called on the public, particularly boys and men, to take a stand on violence against women. Ms. Dutt emphasized that, because resources are limited, partnerships between organizations are key to creating and disseminating information. In conclusion, Ms. Dutt reiterated that the symbolic action of "ringing the bell" against violence against women, was a call for everyone to take responsibility and ensure that the right to live with dignity became a reality for all people.

Laurel W. Eisner, Chief Executive Director, Sanctuary for Families, explained that her association was a twenty-five year old organization dedicated to serving women victims of domestic violence and sex trafficking. Sanctuary for Families engaged in advocacy and outreach awareness on these issues as well. Ms. Eisner's presentation centered on a holistic approach to the issue of domestic violence, which entailed discovering what each victim needed to escape the abuse and rebuild their lives. Among their many facilities, Sanctuary for Families provides victims with legal, educational, and counseling services, which enables women to either gain or regain skills needed to live independently. Ms. Eisner pointed to the organization's influence on New York State legislation as regards the issue of sex trafficking through the work they did to get the 2007, the Safe Harbor Act for Sexually Exploited Children signed by the Governor of New York. This act prohibits youth forced into prostitution from being prosecuted, and requires these

young people to be treated as victims instead of perpetrators. Ms. Eisner's gave a concrete example, which she said portrayed the work of Sanctuary for families in all its aspects and demonstrated the complexity of violence against women. She told the real life story of a Colombian woman named Sylvia who was lured into the United States by someone she thought was her lover and was going to marry her. He was indeed a sex trafficker who eventually brutalized and sold her. However, during this period she bore him twin girls. The abuse and prostitution continued until Sylvia was able to escape and found her way to Sanctuary for Families. They took the family in and counseled both the mother and children who were then three years old. Eventually Sylvia was able to leave the shelter and thrive on her own. She kept in touch with Sanctuary for Families, which would prove useful for her. Some months later, the trafficker went into Family Court and claimed that his girlfriend had kidnapped his children. The Judge issued a bench warrant for Sylvia who lived in a different city, and so was never served. When she went to register her children for school in New York City, she was found and arrested. Through the intervention of the lawyers working for Sanctuary for Families, she was released and a decision was reached with the Judge that she would have custody of her daughters, but their father would be allowed unsupervised visits. On one of these visits, the father decided to kidnap the children and informed Sylvia by phone call that he was going to Canada and would not be returning. She again contacted Sanctuary for Families. Six months later through a single lead—the telephone number for the batterers' mother—and with the assistance of their network of contacts not only in the United States but also in Mexico, Sanctuary was also to located the father and the girls. With the assistance of the Mexican immigration officials and a SWAT team, they surprised the father and returned the girls to the United States and their mother. Ms. Eisner said this was a good example of the overlap that existed between sex trafficking, prostitution and violence against women and showed the number of people involved on both sides of the border—including the Mexican Immigration and Police and organizations involved in domestic violence—in resolving a single case of this type.

Ms. Tanya McLeod, a domestic violence survivor and advocate, shared her personal experience of domestic violence. She told the audience that physically, socially, financially, and mentally abused by her ex-husband even when she was eight months pregnant. The abuse occurred over a period of four years, during which time she worked for Corporate America but no one on her job was aware of her situation. She reached out many times for help and finally she was able to get the assistance that she needed going into a Witness Protection Program. Her husband was prosecuted and received two and a half years jail time for the abuses he had inflicted. Now, she stressed she was finding a way to turn her pain into power by working with Voices of Women Organizing Project and assisting other battered women to find their voice.

Yasuko Noguchi also a survivor of domestic violence said that this was the first time she was sharing her experience publicly. She explained that that her scars, which resulted from the twenty-six years of marriage to her emotionally abusive husband, were unseen, which made it difficult to receive help from others. Ms. Noguchi told her story of living with a husband who constantly degraded her. She said her marriage was filled with constant conflict, distrust, and humiliation. During her marriage, Ms. Noguchi blamed herself for the actions of her husband. She described domestic abuse was a high-stake game of control, and her husband she stressed, had been an expert at it. She knew had come to the United States as an exchange student and married her Chinese-American husband shortly after meeting him so she had no family or friends of her own to turn to for help. She characterized her marriage as an "isolating nightmare." Initially, her husband had displayed a charming personality, but had gradually changed into an abuser whose main weapon was verbal abuse and humiliation. She indicated that she was the perfect candidate for his abuse because of her culture in large measure, advocated putting his

wishes before her. She also admitted to struggling with her sense of personal identity. She stressed that her silence had enabled the abuse to continue over the long period that it had; but after her husband's death from cancer, she sought help. She was now convinced that the voices of victimized women must be heard. She explained that she had turned to spirituality as her way of coping with the abuse.

During the question and answer period, participants queried as to why there were no men on the panel. Mr. Falt said that the panel was established to give voice to those people who were best able to discuss violence against women – women themselves. He said that he felt it was also important that he moderate this particular Briefing, as it was an issue he had often encountered during his work in the field for the United Nations. He also expressed his conviction that many more men should be involved in the fight to end violence against women. Ms. Braun stressed that it was essential to engage men, which UNIFEM was proactively trying to do in its latest campaigns, because otherwise the issue could not be properly addressed. A question was raised as to what kind of outreach efforts have been made to counter violence in video games and the media. Ms. Eisner noted the need to address the problem of popular culture, which in her opinion accepts the idea that women should be subjugated. Ms. Braun stressed it was also important to engage media, and explained that UNIFEM agents in the field had been training those working in media to avoid gender stereotyping in their reporting. A number of questions were also directed at Ms. Dutt, in particular one on how to educate men and boys living in countries which are patriarchal. Ms. Dutt stressed that, because each country is different, the most effective method of outreach to individual nations also had to be different. She suggested the need to begin to see men as protagonists in the fight to end this type of violence, instead of always portraying them as perpetrators. A final query was raised by a student from the United Nations International School, (UNIS). She asked what a person should do in the event that individual believed someone he or she was close to was being abused. Ms. Dutt explained that the best way to approach a friend or family member depended on how close the individual was to the person involved. However as a rule Ms. Dutt said it was appropriate to give information to the suspected victim under the guise that this was general information that was being passed on to everyone, including the possibly affected person.

The briefing was attended by about 200 representatives of NGOs, United Nations and Permanent Mission staff, students from the United Nations School, as well as interns from various UN Departments and NGOs.

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Prepared by Gail B-T Sainte with assistance from Albert Lee, Maria Vu, Tatiana Alvarado and Jennifer Danowski

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