

**Statement by
the Women Representative
of
the Kingdom of the Netherlands
Ms. Mathilde van den Brink**

**Third Committee
Items 64 and 65:**

Advancement of Women

Implementation of the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women and of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2005: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

New York, 11 October 2005

THE HIDDEN FACE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCEⁱ

July 2000, the Netherlands. A 29-year-old woman is beaten by her husband with a broom and a lawn-mower in front of her children. He threatens them with a gun, and then fires. It is a blank: she lives to tell the tale. Not so the second wife of a hairdresser in Abu Dhabi, who was beaten to death by her husband because she looked out of the window. How dare she ignore his explicit prohibition?

Mr Chairperson. In Millennium Development Goal 3, gender equality is recognised as essential to the well-being of the world's population and to combating the global phenomenon of violence against women.

Violence, in particular domestic violence, is a fact of life not only in the Netherlands and in Abu Dhabi, but all over the world. In Europe alone some 50 million women are subject to domestic violence. Globally speaking, violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity as cancer, and even more a risk to women's health than traffic accidents and malaria combined. All women are potential victims, regardless of the culture they live in, their religion or ideology, age, social or economic status or that of their partner or family. And when women are victims, so are their children. Even if they are not themselves abused, they suffer serious psychological damage through witnessing violence against their mothers, sisters and brothers. Research shows that these children run a serious risk of becoming perpetrators or victims themselves later in life.ⁱⁱ This great risk of reproducing domestic violence is especially frightening in the light of violent conflicts within and between countries.

True safety for adults and for children begins in the family environment. Those who are not safe there will not feel safe in the streets, at school, at work and in society. Consequently the never-ending cycle of domestic violence has to be stopped: by breaking the wall of silence, by putting this issue on the public agenda, and above all by adopting concrete measures and implementing them. This strategy has been recognised by the UN in a variety of ways: Beijing+10, the role of the Special Rapporteur Ms Yakin Ertürk, in various UN organisations and, of course, in CEDAW. The EU and several international organisations try to combat domestic violence through research, action plans and concrete measures.

And still, domestic violence throughout the world has not diminished. Not in countries that have adopted strong policies, such as the Netherlands, Canada and Australia, nor in countries where it has recently been put on the agenda (South America, South Africa, and now China).

Mr Chairperson. In my country, the Netherlands, we have a long history of discussing and combating domestic violence. Though we still have a long road before us and certainly need the expertise of others, we now realise there are two essential conditions which have to be fulfilled if any specific legal or policy measure is to be effective.

- First, care and support for the victims, in the form of safe houses, financial support and legal assistance.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Second, a public debate in which governments and their institutions participate.

I've just come back from Afghanistan, where I was an observer during the elections. Domestic violence is an immense problem there. But because of the secrecy surrounding the issue, change is very difficult. The message must be that systematic domestic violence is intolerable and must be fought against in all possible ways. There is no excuse for not taking a clear stand in condemning domestic violence.^{iv}

Mr Chairperson. I would like to stress five other essential factors in combating domestic violence:

First, there is a need for *more research, statistics and documentation*. I know that accurate statistical data are difficult to come by due to under-reporting by victims and under-recording by police and justice authorities. But without facts and figures, without common analyses we can't measure the success or failure of our efforts.^v

Second, domestic violence is not a private matter, not an excusable way of maintaining discipline in a family, as is still too often claimed, but a fundamental threat to the economic development and welfare of people and countries. Combating domestic violence is crucial to achieving the MDGs if only because of the millions of dollars it costs in terms of health care, police and court workload, shelter and foster care, sick leave and non-productivity.^{vi} Some examples: in Canada, the physical and sexual abuse of girls and women costs the economy 4.2 billion Canadian dollars each year.^{vii} In Australia, the annual costs for refuge accommodation for victims of intimate partner violence amount to 14.2 million dollars.^{viii} In Peru, one in three women in hospital emergency rooms is a victim of domestic violence.^{ix}

Third, *increased awareness of women's victimisation can be a double-edged sword*. While this awareness is necessary in order to create empathy and greater understanding, it can reinforce old stereotypes of women as helpless, vulnerable and in need of protection. That is why we have to maintain our approach of empowering women to take control over their own lives and bodies.

Four, *violence cannot be counselled, policed, or legislated out of existence*. An important step in understanding domestic violence is to recognise it as more than just a women's issue. We need to search for methodologies for addressing men, e.g. by media campaigns, for confronting them with their own part in the process, their own responsibilities and accountabilities. Let me quote a man from a Men's Support Group: "Who will the empowered girl marry if there is no empowered boy?".

Five, there is a clear need for a greater focus on implementation and enforcement of legislation, and an end to laws that emphasise family reunification over the rights of women and girls.^x

In closing, I would emphasise that domestic violence is an obstacle to achieving the Millennium Goals. We have to include the fight against domestic violence in all our efforts to foster peace, human rights and development. I therefore strongly advocate a more central focus on the specific problems of domestic violence. *Human rights should start at home: that is where most violence against women takes place*.

I would also like to pay homage to all the brave women who, despite risks to their personal safety, openly acknowledge that they too are willing to confront domestic violence. Like the TV-anchorwoman in Saudi Arabia who recently publicly accused her prominent husband and showed the world her damaged face. Let all the women who suffer from domestic violence follow her example and step forward so we can applaud them.

Thank you Mr. Chairperson.

ⁱ The UN defines violence against women as “any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”.

ⁱⁱ Youth Survey (2002 Denmark): reports of children witnessing violence against parents show a gender difference. It seems that more girls than boys witness their parents being exposed to violence. However, this could also be due to a gender difference in what is noticed and remembered.

ⁱⁱⁱ Financial, medical and psychological help, therapies for women and certainly their children, and last but not least, legal assistance.

^{iv} We must support women’s organisations: with extra attention for those countries where the problem is ignored. NGOs must be involved from the beginning in setting up plans of action. They have, after all, the greatest expertise. Many NGOs are young organisations with few staff members; more financial help and human resources are necessary. It is important for women to be monitored once they have left women’s shelters (monitor and collect quantitative and qualitative information on their lives afterwards).

^v See also res 58/185 on the “In depth Study on all forms of violence against women”. In April last year a CEDAW expert group made important recommendations on comprehensive data collection on all forms of violence against women. WISTAT (Women’s Indicators and Statistics Database) may also be helpful here. I would plead for a focal point for domestic violence in the UN Statistical System.

^{vi} Novib report on how gender-based violence hinders development.

^{vii} American Medical Association, 1992.

^{viii} Australian Institute of Criminology, 2001.

^{ix} Paula Kantor, “Domestic Violence Against Women: A Global Issue”.

^xUnifem facts & figures on violence against women.