

The United Nations today marked the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women with calls for states to take legal action against the global scourge, for societies to change a mindset that permits such abuse, and for women themselves to stand up and speak out against a culture of shame.

Violence against women remains pervasive worldwide, Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in a message. It is the most atrocious manifestation of the systemic discrimination and inequality women continue to face, in law and in their everyday lives, around the world. It occurs in every region, country, and culture, regardless of income, class, race or ethnicity.

Noting that leaders at September's UN World Summit pledged to redouble efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and the girls, he stressed that this required a change of the mindset, still all too common and deep-seated, that violence against women is acceptable.

That means leadership in showing, by example, that when it comes to violence against women and girls, there are no grounds for tolerance and no tolerable excuses, he declared.

The UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) said violence against women is both a cause and consequence of rising rates of HIV infection: a cause because rape and sexual assault pose a major risk factor for HIV transmission, and a consequence because HIV-positive status makes women more likely to be targeted for abuse.

Violence against women is the most pervasive violation of human rights, occurring every day, in every country and every region, regardless of income or level of development, UNIFEM Executive Director Noeleen Heyzer said, citing a UN World Health Organization (WHO) estimate that nearly one in four women will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime, sometimes with fatal consequences.

She called for three major actions to break this vicious cycle of violence: countries must pass and enforce laws to deter acts of violence against women and reduce the spread of HIV; women who have suffered abuse must speak out to break the culture of shame and stigma; and awareness must be raised on the links between violence against women and HIV/AIDS, especially by the media.

Together we must prevent and punish violence against women, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) Executive Director Thoraya Ahmed Obaid said. Social norms and attitudes that condone discrimination and violence against women and girls can be changed. This is the first step, which requires awareness raising, behaviour change and social mobilization.

She, too, called for strengthened legal protections as well as the provision of health information and services.

Urging stronger efforts to fight violence against women, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour also called for a change of mindset.

We urge States to challenge societal values that support discrimination against women and legitimize violence against them, adopt specific legislation addressing domestic violence and end impunity for crimes committed against women, she said in a message co-signed by the

Special Rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertrk.

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