

Benita Ferrero Waldner
Commissioner for External Relations
European Commission

6 March 2009
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Dear Commissioner Ferrero Waldner,

Subject: 8 March International Women's Day, Stop Violence Against Women

On 8 December 2008 the Council of the European Union adopted the EU Guidelines on Violence Against Women and Girls. On the occasion of International Women's Day, Amnesty International calls to the EU to fulfil this commitment by raising the issue of combating violence against women and girls in all discussions with its member states, third countries and international organisations.

The attached reports highlight worrying trends of violence against women in a number of countries:

- In **Afghanistan**, the international intervention to oust the oppressive Taleban regime in 2001 was accompanied by a pledge by the Afghan government to protect women's human rights and promote gender equity in Afghanistan. Eight years on, the condition of Afghan women remains bleak. Women and girls in Afghanistan still face endemic violence, including domestic violence, abduction and rape by armed individuals, trafficking, forced marriages (including ever younger child marriages) and being traded in settlement of disputes and debts. In Afghanistan only 35 per cent of girls attend school and only 12.6% of women are literate. Afghanistan also has one of highest maternal mortality rates in the world, with an estimated 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births. The few brave women human rights defenders who dare challenge the status of women and promote human rights, frequently run the risk of intimidation and attack, which can be perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, as well as by family members.
- In **Greece**, in December 2008, "K.K.", a migrant cleaner from Bulgaria, who was also a trade union leader and Secretary General of the Attica Union of Cleaners and Domestic Workers, was attacked and acid was thrown in her face. K.K. was severely wounded. As a result of the attack, she lost the vision in one eye, and other vital organs were seriously damaged. She remained in a comatose state for several days and continues to be hospitalised in a serious condition. Many public and private companies in Greece subcontract cleaning companies to clean their grounds. This competition-based system encourages cleaning companies to offer services at low costs, which is reflected in the minimal wages offered to the workers.

According to the trade unions, companies often do not pay social insurance for their workers, many of whom are migrants. Those who demand for their employers to comply with the labour legislation are risking their lives. They are threatened and reassigned to jobs under even more unfavourable conditions.

- In **Haiti**, sexual violence against girls is closely linked with social insecurity and poverty. Widespread poverty drives many girls to become domestic servants and suffer exploitation and abuse at the hands of their employers. Girls who cannot afford to pay schools fees may have to do sexual favours in exchange for money to enable them to complete their education. Widespread sexual violence against girls, which takes place with impunity, often prevents girls from completing their education.
- In **Iran**, women face far-reaching discrimination under the law. They are denied equal rights in marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. Evidence given by a woman in court is considered only worth half that given by a man. A girl under the age of 13 can be forced to marry a much older man if her father permits it. With the increase in women's literacy in the last 30 years and the large number of female students at university, women are increasingly empowered to challenge discrimination. But their efforts are viewed with suspicion by the authorities, who have launched a campaign of intimidation and repression against them.

The activists from the Campaign for Equality from Iran are regularly detained by state authorities and their activities are banned because of their demand to reform laws discriminating against women. Over 50 campaign members and supporters have been detained by the authorities and banned from traveling outside Iran. The campaign website has been repeatedly blocked by the authorities.

- In **Iraq**, women and girls face systematic discrimination and violence. They have been attacked in the street by religious extremists who are intent on imposing gender segregation and discrimination. Women and girls have borne the brunt of much of the violence. Crimes specifically aimed at women and girls, including rape, have been committed by members of armed political groups, by Iraqi government forces, by foreign soldiers within the US-led Multinational Force and by staff of foreign private military security contractors (PMSCs).

In many cases, such crimes have been committed with impunity. Women have also reported intimidation and harassment at checkpoints by members of militias or other armed groups, including for not complying with strict dress codes or for driving a vehicle alone. Female political leaders and women's right activists, such as women who run shelters for those escaping family or other violence, lawyers who assist women to defend their rights and those who campaign for an end to discrimination and gender equality, have been threatened and killed.

- In **Liberia**, during the armed conflict that racked the country between 1989 and 1997, and then between 1999 and 2003, many women were subjected to sexual violence, abducted and forcefully made to join armed groups as combatants, or serve as spies, cooks and porters. According to some estimates, women made up over 30 per cent of the fighting force. In the aftermath of the conflict, social stigma attached to women's association with the fighting forces, and the isolation that followed, were major factors in preventing women from reintegrating into society, and from reporting sexual violence.
- In **Nepal**, More than two years on from the 2006 People's Movement, the Comprehensive Peace Accord November 2006 and the uprising of marginalized groups in the Terai district throughout 2007, there has been little delivery on promises of improved human rights protection. Crimes against women are going unquestioned and unpunished. Many women and girls are afraid to report rape and other forms of violence, not only because of hostility and stigma from their community, but also due to state inaction in ensuring the investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators through the justice system. Women working to protect women's rights are combating violence as they challenge feudal practices and face the most direct threats including beatings; threats and even death. As women defenders become more vocal, building on new political space to discuss discrimination, they fear a backlash without any protective mechanisms in place to support their work.
- In **South Africa**, high levels of sexual violence and the prevalence of HIV make women particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. At the same time, women are disproportionately affected by poverty, and transport costs sometimes prevent rural women living with HIV from reaching distant medical facilities to receive comprehensive care and treatment. Women who have survived violence in their communities or in their homes are sometimes not provided with the care that they need, such as treatment to reduce the risk of HIV infection following rape, or support services to provide protection from abusive relationships.
- In **Venezuela**, in 2005 alone, 36,777 women reported abuse by partners or former partners to NGOs – an average of one woman every 15 minutes. Local organizations estimate that only 1 in 9 women report violence to the authorities. In the first six months of 2007, 490 investigations were opened into reports of violence against women. Between January and December 2007 the majority of cases of violence against women were perpetrated by their current husband or partner (31.95% and 36.57%, respectively) and to a lesser extent by their ex-partners or other family members. The Organic law on the right of women to a life free of violence was adopted in March 2007. The law defines violence against women as a human rights violation and reaffirms the responsibility of the state and its officials to eradicate it. However, Venezuelan authorities have not yet provided adequate resources, or otherwise shown their commitment, to convert this legislation into a reality on the ground.

These recent Amnesty International reports show just some examples of the horrifying scale of human rights abuses faced by women worldwide.

Amnesty International urges the European Commission as the largest provider of development aid in the world to take effective action, both through diplomatic means and by enforcing cooperation agreements clauses. This should include implementing the commitments on tackling violence against women included in the 'Roadmap for Equality Between Women and Men 2006-2010'.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Nicolas Beger
Director
Amnesty International EU Office

c.c.:

Mr. Javier Solana, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union.