

**International Women's Day Statement  
by United Nations Women's Human Rights Experts**

**Confronting sexual violence, demanding equality  
Geneva, Tuesday, 6 March 2018**

**A time to pay tribute to women**

For more than a hundred years, the world has commemorated International Women's Day. Each year this Day presents an occasion to celebrate the progress on the road of women's right to equality. It is an occasion to be reminded that the road remains long and full of obstacles. It is a time to pay tribute to the countless women throughout history who have dared to stand up, to protest, and to say no to discrimination against women and girls and one of its worst manifestations: violence. Their courage and revolt have been the driving force behind the progress made.

This year we seize this moment to pay tribute to the brave women who have spoken out against sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence which they have been subjected to at the hands of abusive men who enjoyed impunity made possible by environments which normalise such violence. Through their courageous actions, these women have launched a global movement of women breaking the silence on sexual harassment and all other forms of sexual violence too often tolerated.

We also seize the moment to honour all those women who endure violence in silence because their voices are not heard, or they are threatened for speaking out. We honour the domestic workers in the confines of private homes in a foreign land, the migrant women and asylum seekers on the move, women who struggle to feed their children, and women who are deprived of liberty. We pledge our support through our respective mandates.

**A universal plague**

It is the voices of so many individual women, together, that has created this powerful movement which has swept much of the globe, building on decades of advocacy from women's rights movements demanding an end to violence against women. The individual stories of being subjected to sexual violence have painted a collective picture of our society. The question being asked is no longer whether to believe the woman, but rather what is wrong with our society. How can sexual violence exercised against women exist on such a massive and endemic scale in a time of peace and in the most ordinary places of life: work places, schools, universities, on the streets, in public transportation, and at home? From North to South, from East to West, sexual violence crosses lines of culture, religion, ideology, stages of economic development and touches women of all social backgrounds and in all professional settings, whether it is in political parties, financial institutions, or the media and entertainment industry, academic institutions and the humanitarian field. It happens in the family. It is truly a universal plague.

## **Concentration of power**

The universal nature of sexual violence against women and girls is only a reflection of centuries of domination and oppression of one sex over the other, which has kept women in a secondary place, long excluded from public life and from positions of power. The consequences of this inequality linger on today and resurge forcefully at times where we see women are scarcely represented in national and global political and economic decision-making bodies, but concentrated in precarious employment and often paid less. We see women who live in situations of dependence, economically and professionally, for existence and for advancement. Women experience life, from childhood to old age, as inferior and disadvantaged rather than as equals. They are held back by deeply entrenched but often invisible forces, be they political, economic, cultural, or religious. We see the undying will for control over women's bodies and their autonomy, and the tendency of seeing women as objects. In so many spheres of life, there is still a concentration of power and entitlement in the hands of men and the abuse of this power through sexual violence.

## **A significant moment**

History will tell what a pivotal moment this movement is for women's rights. Women, with the power of their loud and clear voices, individually and collectively, have always been the active driving forces for social and cultural change. We have a moment now where the shame and fear have shifted from the victims to the side of abusers and perpetrators of sexual violence, who have to face the consequences of their unacceptable behaviour in many cases and criminal acts in others. The all-powerful are no longer the untouchable who can enjoy impunity with peace of mind. Their ability to buy silence and cover-up is being questioned and their power of intimidation is starting to evaporate. We have a moment where the complacency of others and the indifference of our institutions are no longer accepted without challenge. Blaming the victim can no longer be the automatic response to sexual violence.

This is a transformative moment, a liberating and an empowering moment. By speaking out at this scale, women are shaking centuries-old established discriminatory norms which normalise, accept and justify sexual violence against women and have constrained women in well-defined roles of inferiority and subordination. This is what is so significant about the moment. It is no longer just about individuals, it is about society. It is not about so-called morals and honour, it is about women's rights as human rights. It is the system of the concentration of power and domination that is being challenged.

## **Making it a truly global movement**

We need to maintain the momentum to make it a truly global movement which reaches all the women and girls in places where breaking silence on violence against women is still taboo and where women have little resort to justice and no choice other than carrying the

burden of shame and blame. It is in these places, far away from the spotlights of international media, that the voices of women need to be heard and must be heard.

History has also taught us that full equality for women everywhere will continue to be a long struggle. Every step forward in the direction of women's independence and equality has encountered push-backs from an alliance of conservative forces. It has been 70 years since women's right to equality was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and nearly 40 years since a ground-breaking comprehensive international treaty on women's rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, came into existence. Waiting for another hundred years to achieve equality is unacceptable, as is rolling back our hard fought gains.

The existence of law and policy in combating sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence is important but not sufficient. Equality between women and men is a struggle of humanity, a struggle for both men and women. In the face of sexual violence and discrimination, everyone is concerned and everyone needs to act.

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