

POWER, VOICE and RIGHTS

A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific

[Embargoed until 8 March 2010, 10:30 am \(New Delhi time\)](#)

Violence against women widespread across Asia-Pacific

Owning a house or land protects women

NEW DELHI, 8th March 2010 – Women across Asia and the Pacific report violence in their own homes, yet many countries have no laws on domestic violence, finds the Asia-Pacific Human Development Report.

Few countries have adopted or implemented laws prohibiting violence against women, despite widespread evidence of discrimination and assaults in Asia and the Pacific. Nearly half of the countries in South Asia and more than 60 per cent of those in the Pacific have no laws on domestic violence.

“Across Asia many women and children experience family violence of some kind. Such violence undermines development and generates instability. It will not be eradicated until all of us – including men and boys – refuse to tolerate it,” said Helen Clark while launching the UNDP-sponsored Asia-Pacific Human Development Report, *Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific* here today. “The clock is ticking fast towards 2015, and serious challenges stand in the way of meeting the MDGs by that date. Advancing the status of women – for example through promoting women’s empowerment and girls’ education, and improving child and maternal health – is a proven way to accelerate progress toward all the MDGs.”

Prevalence of violence against women by their male partners remains high in Asia-Pacific and national surveys find the incidence varying from two in three women in Papua New Guinea; one in four in Viet Nam and; one in ten in the Philippines. “Domestic violence extracts billions of dollars from national economies, in part through greater health burdens on healthcare systems and lower productivity,” says the Report. According to a World Bank study quoted in the Report it is estimated that 5 per cent of the disease burden for women between the ages of 15 to 44 in developing countries is from domestic violence and rape alone.

Numerous forms of violence against women persist

“Domestic violence, rape, trafficking, discriminatory traditions such as ‘honour’ killings, sex-selective abortions and biases in the distribution of food that cause high rates of malnutrition among girls all remain prevalent,” stated Ajay Chhibber, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Director of UNDP’s Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, at the launch of the Report today. “But laws in Asia-Pacific have generally been slow in catching up to this reality.”

The politics of religion is also reflected in legal practices. “Too often, customs or religious beliefs have become a rationale for laws and legal systems to ignore or soft-peddle or even, in the worst cases, justify issues such as discriminatory inheritance practices and the multiple forms of violence that specifically target women,” says *Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific*.

Most countries also have little to offer in legislation on sexual harassment at workplaces, despite surveys in the region that 30 to 40 per cent women in the paid workforce report verbal, physical or sexual abuse. Women migrant workers face even greater challenges, with access to justice nearly impossible to obtain for reasons ranging from a lack of understanding of the local language to a fear of being deported.

Sexual assault laws also can discriminate against men and boys, with, for example, offenders prosecuted on lesser charges than rape, including when it happens to young boys.

Access to justice remains weak for women

Many women are prevented from accessing justice if it involves challenging their husbands, other family members or the broader status quo, the Report argues. In Cambodia, for example, one survey found that nearly one in four married women experience violence within their homes or is raped by her husband. Nearly 90 per cent do nothing, despite new national laws to protect women from violence.

In another example of impunity in crimes against women, India has strict laws against dowry, child marriages and sex-selective abortion. While public awareness has grown about the harm from these practices, and they even feature regularly in media reports, all still openly take place and remain publicly sanctioned by some communities.

Assets, legal milestones help protect women

Significant links exist between women’s ownership of a house or land and a reduced risk of marital violence. In a study in India, for instance, 49 per cent of women without property reported long-term physical violence by spouses, compared to 18 per cent of those owning land or 10 per cent of those with a house.

“Assets deter violence by visibly signaling the strength of a woman’s fallback position and tangible exit option, and also provide an escape route should violence occur,” noted Anuradha Rajivan, leader of the multinational team that produced the UNDP-sponsored Report.

The Report recommends legal reform based on changes in the law or constitution, set judicial precedents, judicial training, progressive interpretations of religious principles, in-depth analysis and mobilization of increasingly supportive public opinion, among other steps. Flexibility can be important, such as seeking to change male attitudes to what it means to “be a man”. In 2007 the Supreme Court of Nepal, responding to a coalition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and

intersex groups, ordered the Government “to formulate appropriate legislation or amend existing legislation” in order to end discrimination against these communities; the following year, the first official identity card to describe someone as “third gender” was issued.

Innovation, flexibility critical for changing attitudes

Progress is being made in some parts of the region. More than three-fourths of countries in East Asia have drafted legislation on domestic abuse. The 2002 Acid Crimes Control Act in Bangladesh aims to stop the practice of disfiguring women by throwing acid on them, providing the death penalty for perpetrators. A legal milestone in India was the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, which recognizes physical, mental, sexual and economic abuse as forms of violence.

Some innovations: India requires workplaces that employ women to set up commissions that are at least 50 per cent female to receive and act on complaints of sexual harassment. Malaysia has pioneered one-stop centers in hospitals that provide easy access to medical care, social services and specially trained police units for victims of domestic or sexual violence. One of the innovative features of Vanuatu’s Family Protection Act 2008 is the use of trained people in remote villages to provide temporary protection orders to women affected by violence.

For more information and to access the 2010 Asia-Pacific Human Development Report and the complete press kit please visit: <http://www2.undprcc.lk/ext/pvr/>

ABOUT THE ASIA-PACIFIC HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT: *Asia-Pacific Human Development Reports have become a regular series under the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific. The Reports provide continuing analyses of critical long term development issues relevant at both the regional and country levels. The Asia- Pacific Human Development Report Series offers the region a forum for furthering dialogues and structuring debates to support a people-centered agenda.*

ABOUT THE UNDP’S REGIONAL CENTRE FOR ASIA–PACIFIC: *The UNDP’s Regional Centre for Asia Pacific, Colombo Office, was established in January 2005 to serve countries of Asia-Pacific. It is a regional hub for development knowledge and expertise, providing policy advisory, capacity development and advocacy services. UNDP works in 37 countries in Asia-Pacific.*

For further information, please contact:

In Bangkok: Cherie Hart, Telephone: +66 2 288-2133, Mobile: (66 81) 918 1564, cherie.hart@undp.org

In New Delhi: Surekha Subarwal, Telephone +91 11 2462 8877 ext. 346, Mobile: +91 98 1015 3924, surekha.subarwal@undp.org;

In Colombo: Rohini Kohli, Telephone: +94 11 452-6400 ext. 122, rohini.kohli@undp.org;

UNDP is the UN’s global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. We are on the ground in 166 countries, working with them on their own solutions to global and national development challenges. As they develop local capacity, they draw on the people of UNDP and our wide range of partners. Please visit: www.undp.org