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We Must End the Deadly War Against Women

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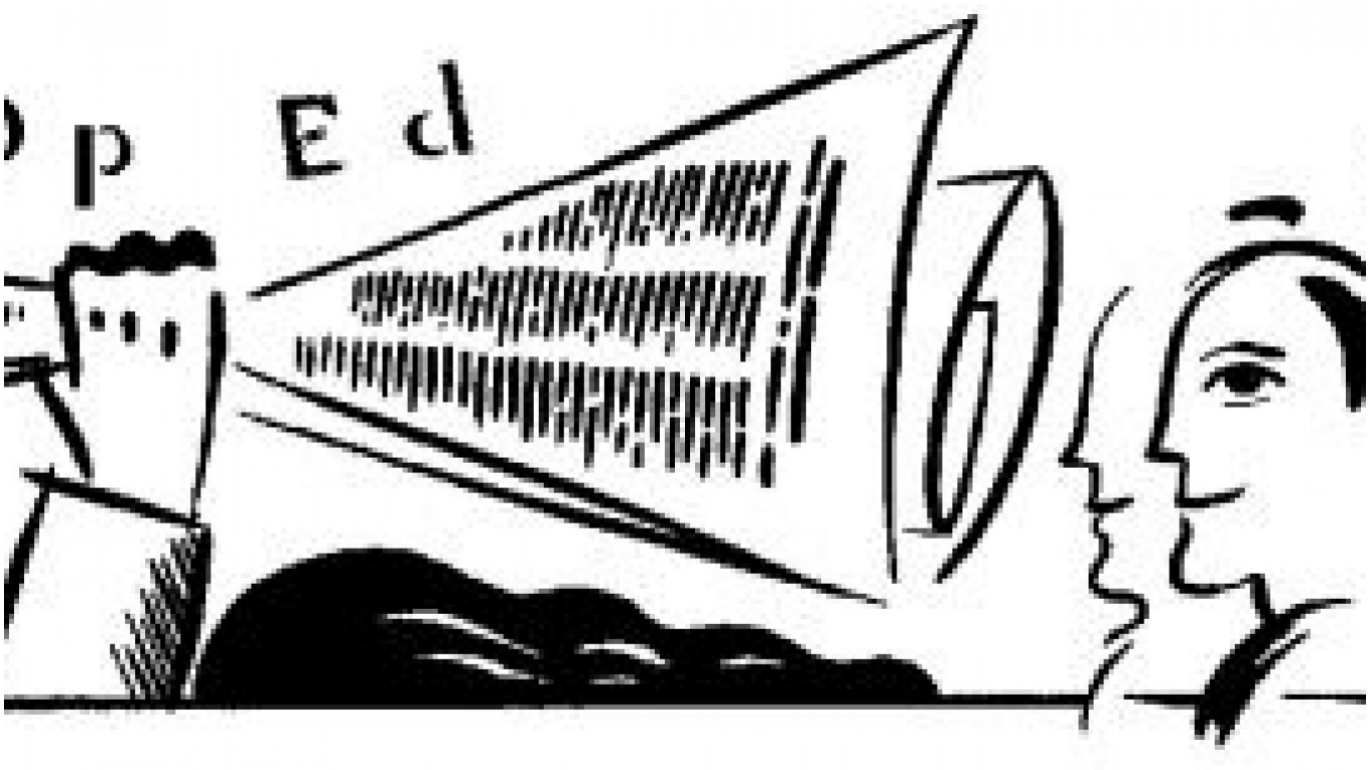

According to the United Nations, one in three women worldwide will be raped or beaten in her lifetime. In some countries, up to seven in 10 women will be beaten, raped, abused or mutilated. Often, the victims of such abuses are treated as criminals — dishonored, brutalized, ostracized, imprisoned and even executed — while the perpetrators remain free. Millions of women suffer in this way, but their stories remain untold.

Two months after Pakistan's Taliban shot a 14-year-old girl because she advocated education, a gang of Indian men raped and murdered a 23-year-old woman, triggering large-scale public protests. This outcry should mark the start of a global movement to lift the veil of silence that shrouds violence against women, which often begins at home and protects the perpetrators.

From "honor killings" to child marriages, from date rape to sex slavery, crimes against women are prevalent in every society. But when women are courageous enough to report abuse, doctors are often unhelpful, police are hostile and the justice system fails them.

For example, one in three women in the U.S. military is sexually assaulted, usually by a colleague, yet very few attackers are convicted. Likewise, in Britain 473,000 sexual offenses are reported annually, 60,000 to 95,000 of which are classified as rape. But in each of the past three years, only slightly more than 1,000 offenders were convicted of rape.

In the 1970s, feminists identified the connection between rape, male privilege and female sexual vilification. Today, readily accessible Internet pornography is teaching boys and men that sexual acts involving degradation and even violent abuse of women are acceptable.

Meanwhile, many privileged women, instilled with a strong sense of entitlement, dismiss feminism as passe. But gender discrimination continues to pervade all aspects of society, with most social and political institutions continuing to foster "glass ceilings" if not outright female subordination. Women receive equal pay and equal opportunities in very few countries.

Feminism thus has a crucial role to play in the 21st century. After all, as Michelle Bachelet, executive director of UN Women, put it, "Violence against women is ... a threat to democracy, a barrier to lasting peace, a burden on national economies and an appalling human rights violation." Governments must continue to advance women's rights through legislation, while civil society must promote a cultural shift that rejects women's marginalization or mistreatment. Only by enabling women to realize their potential can countries ensure economic and social progress.

This potential was evident during the Arab Spring uprisings, when women, empowered by recent advances in literacy and education, organized and led demonstrations that toppled decades-old regimes. In Egypt, even as female political activists and reporters were being sexually harassed in Tahrir Square, they continued to contribute to the revolution.

But gender equality remains a distant goal in the region with women being left out of the political process, exerting little influence in governing bodies or in drafting new constitutions. In fact, on the Egyptian revolution's two-year anniversary last month, when thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Cairo to protest President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, at least nine female protesters were sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square.

In March, government and civil society leaders will gather in New York for a meeting of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women to agree on a plan to eliminate violence against women. Global leaders should take this opportunity to pledge to adopt the policies and devote the resources needed to end pervasive violations of women's human rights.

But without the political will to enact legislation and enforce it effectively, promises are meaningless. Although 187 countries signed the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women, statistics show little progress.

Consider Afghanistan, which ratified the convention in 2009. A 2012 Action Aid survey found that violence against women has never been more prevalent, with 87 percent of women suffering domestic abuse. In the same year, President Hamid Karzai's government upheld a husband's legal right to beat his wife. If an Afghan man murders his wife, he can expect to pay a fine.

Change is possible, but it requires collective action by the international community to challenge the attitudes that lead to violence, oppression and inequality. Five steps are particularly important:

1. Ratify and enforce all relevant regional and international treaties and implement laws that prohibit violence against women and ensure effective punishment of offenses.

2. Enhance women's economic and political empowerment by such means as directing international aid toward their health, education and welfare.

3. Increase public awareness of the problem through traditional media, social media and other electronic channels.

4. Mobilize men and boys against violence through educational programs.

5. Improve support for survivors of violence and their families, including legal assistance, psychological counseling and health care.

Many international movements and organizations, such as Women Under Siege, V-Day, and Stop Violence Against Women, are already working to deliver justice and security to women. Governments and political parties should support such initiatives.

All people deserve justice, equality and freedom from violence. Women and men worldwide should support One Billion Rising, a global call for people to show their support for the 1 billion women who have survived violence and abuse. Whether you choose to strike, dance, speak out or simply stand up, your involvement will bring the world closer to ending this deadly war against women.

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