

Celebrating International Women's Day United to End Violence against Women and Girls



Victims of acid attacks speak out in Bangladesh.

Uma Devi ran for election to serve in one of the seats reserved for women on her local village council (panchayat) in Bihar, India in 2006. A man in the village, who wanted to retain his power, offered her money and threatened to kill her family to stop her from contesting the election. He wanted his wife to be elected unopposed. When Uma Devi did not back down, a group of people came to her house and her one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Kajal, was brutally murdered in front of her father and uncles. The villagers came to see the commotion and the killers ran off with two of Uma Devi's other children: four-year-old Mukesh and seven-year-old Vikas. They were taken to the nearby fields and were killed. Even after losing three children, Uma Devi persevered and continued her campaign. She won the elections, and in doing so, courageously stood against violence and corruption in her village.

Uma Devi's story shows us the harsh reality of the violence that women throughout the world face on a daily basis. Statistics show that at least one out of every three women in the world has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime (United Nations General Assembly 2006). The catalog of gender-based violence is staggering:

- physical or sexual violence by intimate partners;
- female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM);
- dowry murder - a brutal practice when a woman is killed by her husband or in-laws because her family is unable to meet their demands for her dowry;
- acid attacks due to dowry disputes;
- "honor killings" - when rape victims, women suspected of engaging in premarital sex or accused of adultery are murdered because it is viewed as an affront to the family's honor;
- early marriage - when young girls are forced into marriage and sexual relations, jeopardizing their health and education;
- trafficking;
- rapes and abduction in the context of war; and
- sexual harassment, often leading to girls dropping out of school or parents pushing their children into early marriage.

And each one of these violations is all too common. Moreover, women who have experienced such violence are at a higher risk of HIV infection (UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNIFEM 2004). The subordination of women prohibits them from protecting themselves from infection (UNAIDS 2005). And for many women, the fear of violence prevents them from seeking help, treatment or declaring their HIV-positive status. More than 60 percent of HIV-positive youth ages 15-24 are female (UNAIDS 2008).

And because women are the primary caregivers, we know that this violence, as Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon indicates, takes a devastating toll on their families, communities and society as a whole. It is clear that violence against women lies at the very heart of the problem of hunger and poverty.

This is why The Hunger Project has placed empowering women at the very heart of our strategy. As our work and countless studies show, when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. Families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, communities become more resilient. It is, therefore, not only imperative to end violence against women from a human rights perspective, but it is absolutely essential to achieve the end of hunger and poverty in our world.

- In India, The Hunger Project supports the **political participation of women through capacity-building workshops** and educating women about their rights and responsibilities. We record instances of violence, like that of Uma Devi, to shed light on such stories for government officials, media and police so all can recognize that reserving seats in the council for women will not suffice unless a safe environment is ensured.
- In Bangladesh, our trained village leaders (or "animators") run **campaigns against dowry, early marriage and violence against women**. In one reporting period alone (April-October 2008), animators in Bangladesh organized 50 workshops and 235 courtyard meetings on these issues. The animators stopped 108 early marriages, arranged 51 dowry-free marriages, provided legal support to 99 women and settled 117 family disputes through arbitration.
- In Africa, more than **600,000 people** have participated in The Hunger Project's **HIV/AIDS and Gender Inequality Workshop**, which is conducted in local languages and combines clear, accurate information on HIV/AIDS with a campaign of action to transform gender roles and end harmful practices that sustain the epidemic. As a result, gender relations are being transformed, leading to fewer instances of domestic violence, more girls in school, and the abolition of harmful local practices, such as those that require a young widow to have sex with a village elder.

Call to Action

- Inform yourself about the prevalence of violence against women and girls and the costs of this violence, to individuals and to the world-at-large.
- [Financially invest](#) in The Hunger Project, which works to shift the mindset of women being inferior to men (a major cause of the persistence of violence against women and hunger) to a new mindset of mutual respect and cooperation.
- Examine your own actions and relationships and look to change behaviors that may in some way contribute to the persistence of violence against women or other manifestations of gender inequality.
- Talk to your friends, family and colleagues about how violence against women is thwarting development and is taking a huge human and financial toll on our world. Encourage them to learn more about the issue and support organizations, such as The Hunger Project, which work to build communities based on equality.
- Urge elected officials to support programs and initiatives that seek to empower women and girls and end violence against them.