

International Panel of Faith Leaders Outline Spike in Violence Against Women

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United States -- On June 29, 2020, the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations held a web conference titled "Violence Against Women in the Time of COVID-19." The Zoom conference had 178 viewers from 38 countries.

Thomas Walsh (Co-chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) gave the opening remarks. The Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations is a broadly based multifaith coalition of leading representatives of the world's great religious traditions, along with interfaith and civil society leaders, academics, and practitioners actively engaged in criminal justice and crime prevention. The Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations supports the work of various UN agencies, most notably the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as well as the Vienna-based Alliance of NGOs for Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.



Panelists

Michael Platzer (Co-chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) served as the moderator for the panel.

Dubravka Šimonovic (UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women) spoke first. Her role is to conduct visits to countries to seek and receive information on the state of gender-based violence, reporting results to the UN Human Rights Council; these visits have halted due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Like COVID-19, violence against women is a pandemic without borders. People are stuck at home during lockdowns, and, for many people, the home is a dangerous place. Many UN agencies have discussed this problem, and this has resulted in its "Peace at Home" initiative, which seeks information and relief for victims of domestic violence. This initiative has led states to set up alternatives to crowded shelters in hotels, emergency help lines, and other means of making up for the response deficits created by the crisis.



Shahin Ashraf (Head of Global Advocacy for Islamic Relief Worldwide) spoke next. Spirituality and social justice advocacy are more intertwined than ever in this era, she noted. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities along ethnic, gender and economic lines. Viruses do not discriminate, but societies do; caregiving, which is often primarily conducted by women and has become more vital and more dangerous in the COVID-19 era, is consistently undervalued and underpaid. Faith-based organizations have taken an important role; for example, Islamic leaders have issued fatwas backing up the call to observe lockdowns. In low-and-middle-income countries, women's access to education, health care and food is severely compromised, creating further vulnerabilities to violence. Violence against health-workers has risen as well. Ashraf concluded with a call for more resources and training to combat violence against women.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

COVID-19 and Violence Against Women

- So far, in total 21 Countries provided data related to VAW
- The data cover the period October 2019 – April 2020
- Data comes from official records except helpline data
- Mainly countries from Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean
- UNODC is constantly working on expanding the data coverage

Sakena Yacoobi (Director of the Afghan Institute of Learning) followed with her remarks. In Afghanistan, violence against women has skyrocketed, and homes are not safe. Afghanistan has very few jobs that can be done online; many men have no ability to work and are taking their frustrations out with violence against their families. Dr. Yacoobi's organization has been responsible for developing resources to prevent domestic violence and child marriage, but the crisis has stretched their resources thin. Refugees are pouring into Afghanistan from Iran and are not finding food, shelter, or health care. Afghan Institute of Learning has collected food, masks and other goods to distribute to these refugees. Dr. Yacoobi

reiterated the vital role that faith-based organizations play in this crisis.

Ugoji Eze (Founder of the Eng Aja Eze Foundation) observed that violence against women is severely underreported during this crisis. In Africa, there is a saying "Ubuntu," which emphasizes the interconnectedness of humankind. Gender equality concerns must be embedded in the post-pandemic recovery.



Fatma Ismetova Usheva (Researcher, UNODC) followed with a data-driven report on violence against women during the pandemic. Without data, we cannot measure the severity of the problem or the effectiveness of our responses. The data are primarily sourced from official records, so far from 21 countries primarily in Europe and Latin America. In some countries, there is a significant discrepancy between police reports for sexual and domestic violence and calls to emergency helplines; while police reports have fallen, calls to helplines have skyrocketed. This is suggestive of a severe underreporting problem. In other countries, data show little change from before the lockdowns. What is clear is the need for more data from more countries to better understand what is going on.

Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović (Belgrade University; Director of the Victimology Society, Serbia) gave her remarks next. There is still much ambiguity with regard to the state of domestic violence in Serbia, she reported. Instead of lockdowns, Serbia instituted a curfew, which has allowed citizens to leave their homes regularly. The consequences of the pandemic for women are not limited to violence; many women have lost jobs.

Anna Alvazzi del Frate (Chair, Alliance of NGOs for Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice) was the last to speak. She reported that the pandemic has worked as a "magnifying glass" for many social issues. The fragility of communities and the difficulty of fulfilling the mandates of UN Agenda 2030 have been exposed. We must strengthen our communities and ensure that all stakeholders are represented.

Dubravka Šimonovic concluded the panel with a call for a more coordinated, data-driven international response to violence against women.