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WOMEN ARE STILL DISCRIMINATED AGAINST IN ALL COUNTRIES, SAYS UN HUMAN RIGHTS CHIEF

GENEVA (OHCHR) – Laws that discriminate against women are still to be found on the statute books of virtually every country in the world, and repeated promises by states to revise or repeal them are not being honoured, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour said Friday.

Arbour, who was speaking on the eve of International Women’s Day, said a newly released report commissioned by OHCHR shows that “the effects of this failure to create true legal parity between men and women in all sorts of social, economic and political arenas is having a detrimental effect on women in many countries – sometimes to a devastating degree.”

Perhaps the most pernicious and dangerous discrimination involves sexual abuse that is not recognized as such under a country’s laws, or is in effect tolerated by legislation that is either vague or not enforced. “Rape is recognized as a crime in most legal systems,” said Arbour. “But, even when it is, inadequate legislation or local traditions often mean laws are not properly enforced. In addition, at least 53 states still do not outlaw rape within marriage, and men frequently enjoy total impunity for physical as well as sexual violence against their wives.”

“Efforts to combat violence against women will be severely hampered so long as the legal frameworks to protect them, ensure their rights, and grant them the possibility of economic and social independence, are inadequate,” Arbour said. “In some countries the legal disparities are blatant, in others they are much more subtle. What is clear, is that many states are failing to live up to their promises to review their laws and root out institutional discrimination, and millions of women continue to suffer grave injustices as a result.”

Discriminatory laws exist in an extraordinary range of situations and activities, some relatively minor, others extremely serious. In some countries, for example, married women are forbidden to keep their own names, whereas in others they have no right to own land or inherit property. In some countries, women do not have freedom of movement, unless they are accompanied by male guardians, and in other countries their educational and employment prospects are heavily circumscribed, and they cannot hold public office.

Some citizenship laws prevent women from passing on their nationality to their children. If the father’s nationality is also unavailable for some reason, this can result in both male and female children being condemned to statelessness. Children also suffer in other ways because of the lack of rights afforded to their mothers: in many cases, men – however abusive, violent or irresponsible they may be – retain total control over their children’s lives, and their mothers are marginalized.

The world's governments have made extensive commitments to remove and revise discriminatory laws in the context of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and its follow-up. Similar commitments have been made by the 185 ratifying states to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other fundamental human rights treaties.

“Many states appear to have simply ignored the commitments they have made,” Arbour said. “It is shameful that, in the 60th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, fundamental rights are still not enjoyed by many women around the world. In some cases, they suffer from multiple forms of discrimination, such as race, age or disabilities as well as their gender. Unless states take their commitments seriously, investing in women and girls will remain a matter of rhetoric.”

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