



Statement by Richard Bennett
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Delivered at the Conference, *WHRD National Consultation Organized to End all Forms of Violence Against Women*
Kathmandu, 29 November 2007

Namaste. Chairperson of the NHRC, distinguished guests, participants, colleagues and friends.

Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. And congratulations to the National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders for arranging this event. It is impressive to see on International Women Human Rights Defenders Day many women who are determined to play an active part in the future of their country. Women from throughout Nepal who are breaking stereotypes and traditions that bid women to be quiet and remain in the background.

This conference takes place in the framework of *16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence*. In discussions on violence against women there is always a risk that women are seen only as victims. However, even though violence against women can be viewed as one of the major obstacles against women's empowerment and full participation in society, history is full of examples of women who have made extraordinary achievements despite being survivors of violence. And I am sure that some of these women can be found among you here today.

As is stated in the invitation to this event, it is a well known fact that violence against women increases during armed conflict, going so far as to manifest itself in the use of rape as a tool a war. But violence against women continues even after a peace agreement is signed. A ceasefire may signify an end to open fighting, but for women a post-conflict situation can even mean an increase in violence. War is often followed by a wave of domestic violence as men act out war traumas they have been unable to heal. In addition, women who have survived sexual abuse during a conflict can later risk violence within their own communities, which blame women for the shame they have brought upon their families. Ending impunity for the perpetrators of sexual violence remains a major challenge in the peace process as it was during conflict.

All too often violence against women is ignored as it takes place in private houses and is not considered a problem for society. Let me therefore stress here that violence against women is in no way a private matter; violence against women has severe implications for the development of a society:

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Socially, violence against women creates an atmosphere of fear in society. It is well documented that a violent upbringing tends to start a cycle of violence for many children, both as victims and perpetrators;

Democratically, as violence against women is a major obstacle for women's participation in public and political life, including elections.

In Nepal's current transition phase from conflict to peace, it is also worth noting that research has shown that violent conflict tends to be more common in countries which limit women's decision-making power, characterize women as inferior to men, and accept domestic violence as a norm. In short, the main cause of gender-based violence is gender inequality, and any effort to reduce gender-based violence must address these inequalities, including economic and social equality. Utilizing the knowledge and expertise of women and strengthening the role of women in society should be seen as peace-promoting and conflict-preventing activities. At the same time, as is outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, all efforts must be made to ensure that women participate equally in all aspects of post-conflict states, including in peace-building and reconstruction as well as in "all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security". In other words: enhancing gender equality, one of the core principles of the UN *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*, is a fundamental tool for conflict prevention.

This is the fourth national consultation with women HRDs organized by the National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders. Over the next three days you will work to identify issues and concerns of marginalized women that should be incorporated into the draft Constitution as well as strategize on ways to strengthen the women's movement in general. OHCHR-Nepal salutes these efforts, whose aim is to enhance the participation of women in the current political process and in all State and non-state mechanisms.

It is worth noting that a series of recent Cabinet decisions approved and determined the portfolios of 35 Secretaries to 19 different Ministries and five different Committees and Offices. Only one woman Secretary was appointed. Among these appointments, 27 (77%) are Brahmin/Chettri, 5 (14%) are Maheshi, 4 (11%) are Newar, and one (3%) is Janajati/Adivasi.

I have not seen any media reporting this lack of inclusiveness. If it is to be addressed, then people like you should be aware of it.

While OHCHR is dedicated to supporting all human rights defenders and helping to strengthen their capacities, women human rights defenders are special because you are working in a society where women are largely expected to play subordinate roles. Your work is not without its risks and women human rights defenders have been attacked for their activities. My Office unequivocally condemns such attacks and urges the Government to fulfill its duty to promote and protect the human rights of women as well as of all Nepalis. I can assure you that OHCHR will continue providing support for your essential work throughout Nepal.

OHCHR-Nepal has five offices outside of Kathmandu – in Pokhara, Biratnagar, Nepalgunj, Dhangadhi and Janakpur. If you are not already in contact with the OHCHR office in your area, I would very much encourage you to make contact when you return so we can continue to support you as human rights defenders and to increase the participation of women in all aspects of Nepali society.

Thank you!

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