

Eliminating violence against women is a profoundly political challenge

By Claire Courteille

On 9 October 2012 in Swat Valley, Pakistan, 14-year-old Malala Yousufzai was shot in the head. She had dared to challenge the Taliban's edict that girls should not be educated.

On 28 October 2012 in Galway, Ireland, 31-year-old dentist Savita Halappanavar died of septicaemia arising from complications during pregnancy. Doctors had refused to perform a termination that might have saved her life, for fear of breaking anti-abortion laws.

On 16 December 2012, six men brutally beat and raped a 23-year-old trainee physiotherapist on a bus in Delhi, India. She died 13 days later from her injuries.

On 25 January 2013, date of the second anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution, dozens of women's rights activists were beaten and sexually assaulted; at least two of them were cut with blades on their genitals.

And on 2 February 2013, 17-year-old Anene Booysens was gang raped and disembowelled at a construction site in Bredasdorp, South Africa. Less than two weeks later, sporting icon Oscar Pistorius shot dead his model girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp on 14 February – a date that not only marks Valentine's Day but also One Billion Rising, the protest movement opposing violence against women.

These horrific events have become international symbols of the violence that women and girls face on a daily basis; a violence that runs through every thread of daily life, and through every society on our planet.

The statistics are shocking: half of the world's female population has been the victim or survivor of rape, sexual assault, murder, slavery, mutilation or emotional torture.

Eliminating violence against women requires recognition of the systematic way in which it forms a part of human societies and institutions. Where violations of women's rights are promoted or enshrined in formal or customary law, or where the legal system routinely fails to protect women, violence against women is systematic.

Where labour laws are intentionally left unenforced at highly feminised workplaces, it is not only systematic it is also an intrinsic component of the economic system.

Where army troops or militia commit sexual atrocities as part of their war tactics, violence against women is a strategy.

Where police officers consistently refuse to register reported cases of domestic violence, it is a policy.

Redressing the imbalance

Violence against women and girls maintains male dominance over resources and decision making at all levels. Eliminating it is a profoundly political challenge, because it requires redressing the unequal social, political and economic power held by women and men, and the ways in which this inequality is perpetuated through formal and informal institutions at all levels of society.

It is no coincidence that women involved in challenging these unequal power relations become targets of male violence.

The global economic model has a direct impact on violence against women and girls. Neo-liberal policies not only have distorting effects in individual countries, but they have led to the commodification of gender differences, exacerbating the undervaluation of women's work which became necessary to fuel the quest for cheap labour that global competition imposes.

Overall, women are overrepresented in low-paid, informal and insecure jobs. Women working in supply chains – be it in the garment, food-processing or agricultural sectors – have been at the forefront of anti-labour tactics.

The erosion of workers' rights and protection which was induced by the global economic model, created in an environment in which the State is no longer capable or even willing to uphold a woman's right to a life free from violence.

Tools

Yet tools to eliminate violence against women do exist. These include the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, ILO Convention No 111 and the new Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women. What is desperately lacking is the political willingness to tackle the issue and to utilise these instruments.

For the trade union movement any comprehensive strategy to eliminate violence against women and girls must be closely linked to an anti-poverty agenda that includes the creation of livelihood for women: decent work and access to a social protection floor at the very least. Of course, poverty is neither a direct cause nor consequence of violence but it strongly limits a woman's economic options and alternatives to marriage. Eventually poverty reduces a woman's ability to respond to situations of violence.

Today, in the middle of many global crises, women's rights are under serious attack. When governments fail to protect, peoples' movements and organisations carry the collective

responsibility to demand justice and rights both at the national and international levels. International cooperation and solidarity are indeed crucial in garnering the political will needed to bring about change.

No more words. It's time for action.

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Excerpt: Eliminating gender violence is profoundly political because it challenges the unequal power held by women and men