

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

Symposium – Launch of the Publication: **Bringing Security Home: Combating Violence Against Women in the OSCE Region. A Compilation of Good Practices**

Vienna, June 8th, 2009

The Role of Men in Eliminating Violence Against Women

Text for remarks by Todd Minerson,
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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished fellow speakers,

It is an honour to be in Vienna today to address the OSCE at the Symposium – Launch of the Publication: **Bringing Security Home: Combating Violence Against Women in the OSCE Region.**

It is also an honour to address this group on the issue of men's roles and responsibilities in eliminating violence against women, for this is a concern that has become both my professional and personal passion.

I would like to take the opportunity today to challenge some of our conventional assumptions about the need to include men in this effort, and suggest to you we urgently need a paradigm shift in our collective thinking.

However, before I get ahead of myself, it might be useful to bridge the credibility gap, and share with you the reasons why I have been invited here today to challenge these assumptions. And to do that, I must start with the story behind the White Ribbon Campaign.

This story begins on December 6th, 1989, when a man walked into the École Polytechnique, an engineering school in Montreal, Canada. He was carrying a garbage bag under his arm. It was early afternoon, the last day of winter exams,

and he calmly sat outside an administrative office for about two hours. Several people asked if he needed any assistance, or was looking for anyone specific, and he quietly declined their approaches.

The tragedy that unfolded forever changed the way Canadians understand the issue of men's violence against women.

Over the next 45 minutes, 14 women were systematically murdered; separated from their male colleagues, and shot in their classrooms and common areas. Dozens more were injured, in a rampage methodically targeting women.

As if to ensure his horrific message was perfectly understood, the killer screamed "I hate feminists" throughout the ordeal, and left a manifesto listing some 20 other well-known Canadian women he planned to kill, if "only he had the time". After turning the gun on himself, and once the details became clear, Canadians began to ask challenging and difficult questions about our nation, and more specifically the question of men's violence against women.

Of course, many of these questions had been raised for some time by the dedicated and courageous women's groups who had been working to end men's violence against women for decades. Few people could comprehend the gravity and urgency with which we needed to address these issues like the tireless advocates, support, and intervention workers in this field.

It should never take a tragedy of this magnitude to force us to examine the fundamental relations between men and women, but out of this tragedy, there also emerged hope – in the form of the White Ribbon Campaign.

In 1991, as the second anniversary of what came to be known in Canada as the Montreal Massacre approached, several men in Toronto determined that there must be both a role and a responsibility for men to work to end violence against

women. They came up with the symbol of the White Ribbon, and a vow that we still use today.

It is a man's pledge to never commit, never condone, or never remain silent about violence against women.

What started as an idea on some scrap paper in a Toronto kitchen 18 years ago is now the world's largest effort of men and boys working to end men's violence against women. We now support campaign activities in over 60 countries around the world, including many under the OSCE umbrella.

At home in Canada our work is largely focused on violence prevention and gender justice work with young people, with a strong focus on directly engaging youth in exploring gender, violence, relationships and equality. We accomplish this in large part through partnerships in the education sector, and with local and national women's groups across Canada.

In addition, as the first White Ribbon Campaign, one of the few with a full-time staff, and as the only one with an international mandate to support emerging campaigns around the world, we are also heavily involved in international collaborations, advising and providing technical assistance for governments and UN institutions, and as a part of the leadership group of an emerging global alliance called MenEngage.

MenEngage is an alliance of over 400 NGOs and UN Institutions such as UNDP, UNFPA, UNIFEM and WHO – with the shared intention of working with men and boys on gender equality issues. Together we are working on building the evidence base, sharing promising practices, collaborative research and programming around working with men and boys on a wide range of gender equality issues; from HIV/AIDS prevention, to fatherhood, to the prevention of men's violence against women.

The White Ribbon Campaign operates on a very de-centralized operational model. Fundamental to our guiding principles is the belief that communities themselves need the freedom and authority to identify the issues and strategies that facilitate grassroots activism and community mobilization in their local context. In order to be effective in engaging men, to be responsive to diverse issues of gender inequality, and to be culturally relevant on a global scale, these priorities and strategies must resonate in local contexts.

This principle has resulted in community defined goals, objectives and strategies; grassroots and policy level activism; and meaningful community engagement and mobilization.

For example. Within the OSCE, and specifically here in Austria, the White Ribbon Campaign has developed promotions that address some of the unique experiences of migrant Turkish communities in their awareness campaigns. In Italy, our colleagues have engaged professional football teams in the effort to reach men. In the UK, Latvia, Sweden and Norway, just to name a few, White Ribbon groups have all been active recently.

Globally, WRC groups in Brazil have been working to engage men and boys in violence prevention, and have declared December 6th, in honour of the Montreal Massacre, as the National Day for Men and Boys working to end violence against women and girls. In Pakistan WRC is training police officers. In Nepal, Cambodia, Australia and Namibia they are conducting impressive local grassroots campaigns. Even in refugee camps in Darfur, and Thailand, international aid groups are utilizing White Ribbon Campaign materials to work with men and boys to end violence against women.

I am pleased to share with you today, that this is but a small sample of the solution based, positive, and progressive work being conducted with men and

boys around the world. However, these approaches still do not represent the most commonly held assumptions about the role of men.

Over the past fifty years, we have greatly advanced our understanding of the importance and value of achieving women's equality in the social progress and prosperity of our world. Former United Nations Secretary Kofi Annan, I think, summarized it quite succinctly. He stated:

“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.”

Kofi Annan, Former United Nations Secretary General

In other words, where women and girls thrive, nations thrive. Most countries that rank high in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, also rank well in peace, security, economic, health, political and educational rankings. Conversely, in countries that rank low on the Gender Gap Index, there are abundant challenges in these areas.

Men's violence against women is the most extreme manifestation of a global and pervasive systemic inequality experienced by women. Even in “so-called” developed countries, rates of violence against women are shocking and frankly embarrassing. In my own home of Canada, 51% of Canadian women will experience an act of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Over 500 aboriginal and indigenous women have gone missing in Canada in the past 20 years, with less than a handful of cases ever coming to trial or being solved.

When we are talking about global statistics, violence against women is a human rights tragedy that causes more harm than malaria and traffic accidents combined. This violence, and in many cases the mere threat of violence is perhaps the most significant barrier to women's full equality on our planet. How

can a little girl in Afghanistan fully and freely participate in her right to an education with the threat of her school being gassed, or the reality of acid being thrown in her face?

I have painted a fairly demoralizing picture here, and now I will pose a question that leads directly to the kinds of assumptions I wish to challenge today.

Where in the world are the men in this picture? Are we merely perpetrators of violence? What are our roles and responsibilities in ending violence against women and girls? How do we address the complex constructions of masculinities that both perpetuate and tolerate men's violence against women?

Traditional thinking about these questions has come to fairly predictable and in many cases accurate results. I would like to challenge three of those common assumptions.

The simplest conclusion (and accurate conclusion in one way) is that men are seen merely as actual or potential perpetrators of violence, and that is how their role in this issue should be understood.

It is true that the overwhelming and disproportionate amount of violence against women, is in fact committed by men. Estimates from around the world guess that between 5% - 15% of men commit 90% of the violence. Of course there are circumstances like conflict, displaced peoples that will skew these rates; this is the best guess around the world of the disproportionate harm committed by this minority of men. It is also a fact that most men on this planet will not use violence against women.

Does that imply that those men who do not use violence are off the hook? I will argue that this is the milieu of the second urgent paradigm shift.

Please tell me if you have heard this kind of comment from a man before. “I don’t beat/abuse/violate my partner/girlfriend/wife... so go and talk to those guys who do.” This is a common tactic of those in positions of power and privilege to render their power invisible. I call this assumption the “silent witness” position, and a great many men find themselves in this camp.

Lastly there is the notion of the “disengaged bystander”. Even when we recognize that our collective silence about violence against women is not satisfactory, many men throw up their hands and say “But, what can I do about it?” In these circumstances the issue tends to get siloed (as in it is a private family matter; it is because of mental health issues; substance or alcohol use; it’s a cultural thing). Once again this is a technique used by dominant groups to distance themselves from responsibility or accountability to the issue.

Perpetrator. Silent witness. Disengaged bystander.

If we hope to achieve transformative social change on the issue of men’s violence against women, must urgently shift these understandings of men’s roles.

As I tried to highlight in my overview of the work of the White Ribbon Campaign and our colleagues around the world, we are arriving at a new paradigm for the role of men.

From perpetrator to partners in prevention. From silent witness to potential ally. From disengaged bystanders to agents of change, and dare I say leaders in the work.

Leaders in government, civil society, business, faith communities, and the military. Leaders working alongside women to create a new, more equitable and less violent dynamic between men and women.

On the policy side we need to embrace a similar transformation. While the critical, underfunded, and desperately needed efforts to realize women's full and equal participation in our world must continue, they alone will not constitute an end to violence against women.

Gender is relational, and men's violence against women is rooted in the most harmful parts of masculinity. Men's violence against women is no more a women's issue, than a men's issue, but it is a society wide issue.

Policy and legislation must be as much about women's empowerment and reclaiming safe spaces, as it is about deconstructing masculinity and dismantling male privilege. It is as much about support and intervention for women, as it is about education, awareness and prevention for men.

Most current policy around men's violence against women is around the criminal response and ending impunity for men. This is important of course, but it is risk reduction policy, not prevention policy, and we cannot forget that. Inaction is also not a policy response, for each day of inaction the costs of violence against women to our world escalate.

Real prevention work happens with policy designed to transform the existing paradigms I have noted earlier. To challenge and change the social norms of the silent witnesses and disengaged bystanders.

You will have noticed by now that I have left an important question off the table, and that is how is all of this supposed to be accomplished? You may also have missed the part where I suggested this was going to be easy, or a quick solution to a historic problem. I cannot make those claims today, but I can tell you there is hope.

The evidence base for this work is growing, promising practices are emerging and being shared and civil society capacity is developing. Governments, UN Institutions, and women's groups are increasingly receptive and supportive.

Paul Collier, the British economist and author of "*The Bottom Billion*", argues that throughout history, a specific set of circumstances has fostered transformative, progressive, social change. He describes the basic version of those circumstances as the place where compassion and enlightened self-interest meet.

In the case of men's violence against women, we must develop the compassion to understand that this is a global human rights violation writ large. It has costs to women, children, economies, peace, prosperity and our environment that last for generations.

We must also develop a conceptualization of compassion that understands patriarchy, power and privilege also come with a cost to men. A colleague of mine refers to this as the disadvantages of the advantages of being a man.

The fact that we generally live shorter lives than women, are more prone to suicide, addictions, stress related illnesses, and are far more likely to die a victim of crime, war or accident. The fact that we too are forced into violent, rigid constructions of gender that don't value our caring, supportive, and nurturing qualities.

It is in our **enlightened self-interest to view these costs along side the benefits** of ending men's violence against women.

Benefits most certainly for women and girls, in eliminating the greatest barrier to their full participation in our world, but benefits to all of us. A more highly educated, productive workforce. A massive reduction in the costs of dealing with

violence against women in our prisons, courts, health care systems and productivity. Economic parity for women, and consequently increased prosperity for families. More involvement in the lives and health of our children. Better relationships, less male to male violence... the list goes on.

In my work with young people, it is clear to me that we have reasons to be optimistic. The next generation of young men and women “get it”, they simply need the opportunity and support to explore the issues and share their stories. In my experience this is as true in Toronto as it is in Rio de Janeiro.

I hope that we will “get it” as well. I hope that we can reflect on these changes, be bold in our leadership capacities, and affect real transformative social change. If we can, I think there is a future with no violence against women.

Thank you.