

How can we end violence against women and girls?

Arguably violence against women and girls is one of the most important issues that face humanity. While this may seem like hyperbole, I would posit to you that when we break down the problem into a basic equation, which is that men are roughly 50.3% of the world's population while women are 49.7%, the impact is remarkable. Women are nearly half the world's population and according to a recent report in *The Economist*, more than half the world's workforce. A world with 50% reduced manpower would be inefficient and a world without "women-power" would be impossible. It is undeniable that the human rights as well as the contributions of women need to be respected and protected on a global scale.

A frightening statistics is that if even 1 in 10 women in the world, although the number is sadly much higher, faces some form of violence once in her life, that is 650 million crimes against women; more than half the population of China, nearly two times the population of the USA. And even though we must remember that violence takes many forms, I would argue that even one crime against women is one too many. This might just be a cold estimated statistic, but we must remember that each one of those figure has a face, a dream and right to a life free from violence.

As cycles of violence get ingrained in individuals, they become established patterns increasingly difficult to break. Retraining these pathways becomes of paramount importance for the healthy continuation of both men and women on this planet. Unhealthy and uneducated women, physically, mentally or socially, translate into unhealthy and uneducated children. As children are our hope for the future, we need to be cognizant of the fact that our policies and attitudes towards women are de-facto policies towards our children and our future.

I do not claim to be able to solve this problem but I feel that there are two relatively basic ideas that if implemented, would help to stem the tide away from the perpetuation or blind acceptance of violence towards women and girls. First is that we need to encourage the development of international law to protect and uphold women's liberties. The ruling of rape as a war crime is one example of how international bodies such as the UN can help women. The recognition that targeted abuses toward women in war time, whether in Rwanda, in Serbia or Sudan, constitute crimes against humanity proves that respect for a woman's right to a violence-free life is paramount. I propose to you that international law is a way to move forward in ending the cycle of violence against one of our planets most valuable resources. Everyone in this room can do their part to lobby for increased awareness and publicity towards violence against women. Keeping the dialogue in the public eye will help leaders to show an unending vigilance towards protecting women's rights.

Secondly, the most valuable tool we have towards ending violence is education. I mean it the traditional sense of using education to empower women, give them self confidence and a way to improve themselves, as well as in a more revolutionary sense of using it to educate men about women's rights and the unacceptability of violence. While the process can seem insurmountable we must remember that one generation passes its knowledge to the next. If we can focus on helping this generation of men and women to see that violence helps no one, we will have set in motion a process, a new culture of awareness, that can continue on its own with little help from outside organizations. We have to respect the societies in which we work as well as help them to respect women. While the education of men about women's rights is essential to ending violence against women in girls, the education of women about their rights is just essential.

We need to once again remind ourselves of the millennium goals that each and everyone of us can help to meet; whether politically, socially or economically, our help is vital in making this goal a reality. MDG goal number three, "to promote gender equality and empower women" is one goal that by 2015 must be met because of the long term tangible and intangible impacts on the other seven goals as well as our ability as a world community to meet them.