

Rejecting ‘cultural’ justifications for violence against women

Strategies for women’s rights advocates

A Strategy Paper
by the Research Programme Consortium on
‘Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts:
Gender, Poverty and Democratisation from the Inside Out’ (WEMC)



Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts
gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out

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For further information about the Research Programme Consortium on Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC), see <<http://www.wemc.com.hk>>

A. Rejecting ‘cultural’ justifications for violence against women

On 25 Feb 2008, the UN Secretary-General’s Campaign to End Violence Against Women¹ was launched to support the implementation of the UN Secretary-General’s *In-depth Study on All Forms of Violence Against Women* (July 2006).² This *In-depth Study* led the General Assembly to adopt on 30 January 2007, a very significant Resolution called *Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women*.³

These recent events of the last three years culminate a series of international agreements, going back more than a decade, on the global need to end violence against women.⁴ In addition to these agreements, concerted efforts have been made by:

- The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women – namely, Radhika Coomaraswamy (in office from 1994 to July 2003), and Yakin Ertürk (in office since August 2003) – whose work has greatly advanced international awareness of the causes and consequences of violence against women⁵
- UNIFEM, which manages The Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence against Women, and which runs the Internet campaign ‘Say NO to Violence Against Women’⁶
- The Division for the Advancement of Women, which provided the *Background Documentation for the Secretary-General’s Study on Violence Against Women*
- The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which has been making recommendations since 1989 on violence as a serious issue affecting women⁷

But despite these international agreements and efforts, women and girls continually face violence in every country and every corner of the world. This Strategy Paper argues that a structural cause for the persisting violence is the use of ‘culture’ to legitimise it.⁸ So a crucial step is to reject the ‘cultural’ excuses that are used to justify and thereby perpetuate such violence. Without taking this crucial step, no significant advance can be made, because even as international bodies call for an end to violence against women, such violence is occurring on the ground as an everyday ‘cultural’ norm.

The aim of this Strategy Paper is to contribute to the implementation of the UN General Assembly’s Resolution A/RES/61/143³ and to the Secretary-General’s Campaign to End Violence Against Women¹ by focusing on how to reject ‘cultural’ justifications for violence against women. This Paper discusses two ways of doing this:

¹ The Campaign launch occurred at the 52nd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. See <http://endviolence.un.org/>

² A/61/122/Add.1, 26 July 2006. Report of the Secretary-General: *In-depth study on all forms of violence against women*. United Nations General Assembly, Sixty-first session, Item 60 (a) of the preliminary list*, Advancement of women: advancement of women

³ A/RES/61/143, 30 January 2007. United Nations General Assembly, Sixty-first session, Agenda item 61 (a), Resolution adopted by the General Assembly [on the report of the Third Committee (A/61/438)], *Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women*.

⁴ The most important of these landmark agreements are listed in the Appendix.

⁵ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/women/rapporteur/>

⁶ <http://www.unifem.org/campaigns/vaw/>

⁷ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/committee.htm>

⁸ WEMC Consortium members who have contributed to the writing of this Strategy Paper include Vivienne Wee, Khadija Zaheer, Farida Shaheed, Samina Choonara, Lin Chew, Edna Aquino, Maria Jaschok, and Kausar Khan. The paper was first presented as a Consultation Paper at the WEMC Forum on ‘Culture’, Women, Violence in Istanbul and Ankara (26 and 27 November 2007). It was then uploaded on the WEMC Web site at <http://www.wemc.com.hk> and circulated among members of the Research Programme Consortium. This finalised version of the paper incorporates the comments of diverse stakeholders who provided inputs.

- (1) By strategizing around key opportunities that have emerged in the UN system
- (2) By countering ‘cultural’ justifications for violence against women at micro, meso and macro levels.

B. Strategising around opportunities that have emerged in the UN system

The international community is increasingly aware of the need not to allow violence against women to be excused by reference to ‘culture’, ‘tradition’, ‘values’, ‘customs’, ‘religion’ or some other supposedly sacrosanct norms. Speaking at the launch of the Campaign to End Violence Against Women, Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon said:

...There is one universal truth, applicable to all countries, cultures and communities: violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable.⁹

But how do we alter recurrent patterns that we find in many societies of accepting, excusing and tolerating violence against women? To answer this, we must first understand how ‘culture’ is being interpreted and used to legitimize violence against women, and then strategise to reject such interpretations and usages.

The UN General Assembly’s Resolution *Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women*³ ‘stresses that it is important that States strongly condemn violence against women and refrain from invoking any **custom, tradition or religious consideration** to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women’ [*our emphasis*]. However, according to the Secretary-General’s 2006 *In-depth Study* (paragraph 81), some States are indeed invoking ‘culture’ in this way:

Cultural justifications for restricting women’s human rights have been asserted by some States and by social groups within many countries claiming to defend cultural tradition. These defences are generally voiced by political leaders or traditional authorities, not by those whose rights are actually affected.²

The names of such States are not mentioned in the Secretary-General’s *In-depth Study*. It is important, however, that women’s rights advocates take note of which States these are. Such monitoring could include, for example, the comments and responses of States at UN meetings and during discussions of the reports of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.

In addition to States, ‘social groups within many countries’ are also resorting to ‘culture’ to justify curtailment of women’s human rights. In 2005, Radhika Coomaraswamy, former Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, noted in an interview:

There’s a lot of law writing, standard setting, programmes being planned, but the biggest problem...is that people are using culture and religion to deny women’s rights.¹⁰

In 2006 and 2007, Yakin Ertürk, current Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, pointed out that a solely State-centric approach limited to responding to violence when it occurs, largely neglects the responsibility of non-State actors⁵ at the local level who are utilising culture to ‘justify and excuse acts of discrimination and violence against women, thus undermining the compliance of States with their international human rights obligations.’¹¹

⁹ <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sgsm11437.doc.htm>

¹⁰ R. Coomaraswamy quoted in S. Cameron-Moore, 5 May 2005, ‘Violence against women rising in South Asia: UN’, Islamabad: Reuters, available at <<http://www.dawn.com/2005/05/05/int11.htm>>.

¹¹ E/CN.4/2006/61, 20 January 2006. Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective: Violence Against Women, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and

It is thus imperative to address the roles and responsibilities of both States and non-State actors in order to reject ‘cultural’ excuses for violence against women:

- States should not themselves perpetrate violence against women.
- States should comply with international human rights obligations.
- States should not condone acts of violence against women perpetrated by non-State actors.

On the contrary, States should ‘treat all forms of violence against women and girls as a criminal offence, punishable by law.’²³ However, as noted in the Secretary-General’s *In-depth Study* (para. 76), what we often find is a ‘culture of impunity’¹² that accepts violence against women and girls, either explicitly or implicitly, thereby perpetuating such violence:

Impunity for violence against women compounds the effects of such violence as a mechanism of control. When the State fails to hold the perpetrators accountable, impunity not only intensifies the subordination and powerlessness of the targets of violence, but also sends a message to society that male violence against women is both acceptable and inevitable. As a result, patterns of violent behaviour are normalized.²

The discussion above indicates that there is indeed increasing international awareness of the need to halt the use of ‘culture’ to legitimise and perpetuate violence against women. But the key question for initiatives, such as WEMC, then becomes: **how to hold States accountable if they use or condone the use of ‘culture’ to legitimise violence against women.**

The General Assembly’s Resolution *Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women*³ and the UN Secretary-General’s Campaign to End Violence Against Women present strategic opportunities for women’s rights advocates to organise around in holding states accountable. Of particular relevance is the call for:

- **Annual reporting on the scope, prevalence and incidence of violence** against women, and
- The development of **a set of possible indicators on violence**, based on systematic data collection and analyses by States in partnership with other actors supported by the UN.

Clearly, the Resolution seeks to develop a process of systematic reporting, monitoring and evaluation. The UN Special Rapporteur’s most recent thematic report *Indicators on violence against women and State response* is a major advance in the development of such a system.¹³ In this report (para. 67), the Special Rapporteur notes the importance of including an indicator on ‘social tolerance’:

If violence against women is to be eliminated, the need to address factors that promote or constrain it becomes critical. Tolerance of such violence creates cultural contexts in which it can continue unabated and States fail to act with due diligence. From a human rights perspective, this is a situation where the violations of rights can

consequences: *The Due Diligence Standard as a Tool for the Elimination of Violence Against Women*. United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Sixty-second session, Item 12 (a) of the provisional agenda

¹² DPI/2451, March 2007. United Nations Department of Public Information, United Nations Backgrounder, International Women’s Day 2007: *Ending impunity for violence against women and girls*.

¹³ A/HRC/7/6, 29 January 2008. Promotion and Protection of all Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural, including the Right to Development, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences: *Indicators on violence against women and State response*. United Nations Human Rights Council, Seventh session, Agenda item 3, advance edited version (para. 5).

continue unchallenged. We need a deeper understanding of the ways in which violence is structured and sustains current gender hierarchies: while women are increasingly willing to name and challenge violence against them, men's perceptions and actions appear more resistant to change. This requires an emphasis on surveying these matters, either within prevalence surveys if they include male respondents, or through modules developed for inclusion in recurrent social attitude surveys. Questions probing understanding, awareness, levels of tolerance, whether respondents know someone who has been victimized, and willingness to intervene/report are the foundation of such measures.

In addition to the documentation of 'social tolerance', as suggested above, this Strategy Paper asserts that **any indicators proposed must include States' explicit rejection of 'cultural' excuses for violence against women, as evident in their policies, laws and practices.** This could include, for example, assessment of:

- (a) Whether discriminatory policies, laws and customs that inflict violence against women have been banned or modified, and when these changes have occurred
- (b) Whether policies and laws are implemented in ways that do not let off perpetrators of such violence on the basis of 'cultural' excuses, as well as when and how these policies and laws are being implemented
- (c) Whether all forms of violence against women are criminally liable and brought to court under due process of law
- (d) Whether there are non-formal practices by State bodies and agents that perpetuate such violence on 'cultural' grounds, e.g. the pretext that violence is the price that women pay for 'protection'

A case in point would be the report of the Pakistan government to the Third Committee of the Sixty-first General Assembly in October 2006. This report announced the government's policy decisions to outlaw 'exchange marriages' and bring domestic laws into compliance with international commitments, as well as the Supreme Court's 'landmark decision' banning 'the traditional practices of early marriage and *vani/wana*, which had forced women into marriage as compensation in a family feud.'¹⁴ While these reported policy decisions and the Supreme Court's legal decision are undoubtedly significant steps forwards with regards to item (a) above – i.e. the banning and modification of discriminatory policies, laws and customs – it remains to be seen (i) whether these are implemented in ways that do not 'culturally' excuse perpetrators, (ii) whether infringements of the new policies and laws are treated as criminal, and (iii) whether informal practices continue to perpetuate violence against women on 'cultural' grounds.

Recent fieldwork with women in Balochistan conducted by WEMC researchers in Pakistan during October and November 2007 has unearthed a different reality from that reported by the government to the Third Committee in 2006. An overwhelming majority of women explicitly identified practices of betrothal at birth, child marriages and 'exchange marriages' as both pervasive and ongoing. It appears that despite the laudable decision of the Supreme Court and the Government of Pakistan's policies to criminalise such regressive practices, little has been done to change the reality of women's lives. This underscores the need to move beyond policy statements regarding changes in policies and laws, to a systematic reporting, monitoring and evaluation of actual implementations and practices on the ground.

¹⁴ GA/SHC/3850, 9 October 2006. 'Violence against women not confined to specific culture or region, Third Committee told as debate begins on advancement of women', United Nations Sixty-first General Assembly Third Committee, 8th & 9th Meetings (AM & PM). New York: UN Department of Public Information, News and Media Division.

The General Assembly's call for 'annual reporting on the scope, prevalence and incidence of violence against women' is an opportunity for the systematic monitoring and evaluation of realities on the ground by women's rights advocates, as compared to what is being reported by governments to the international community.

Moreover, being able to assess 'the scope, prevalence and incidence of violence against women' is not the same as eliminating the violence. It is unlikely that reporting, monitoring and evaluation will be sufficient if there is no mechanism to ensure appropriate actions on the part of States to meet their obligations to women citizens. To help ensure this, women citizens must be empowered to speak on their own behalf.

As noted in the Secretary-General's *In-depth Study*, 'significant work has been undertaken by States, entities of the United Nations system, NGOs, women's groups and networks and researchers to address male violence against women' (para. 3), with the women's movement having played an important role 'in raising awareness about such violence' (para. 11; also see para. 23-29). The voices of women, especially those who experience 'culturally' excused violence, must therefore inform any systematic reporting, monitoring and evaluation of 'the scope, prevalence and incidence of violence against women', as well as efforts to hold States accountable for fulfilling their obligations to women citizens.

C. Strategies for countering 'cultural' excuses for violence against women

This Paper explores ten strategies for countering 'cultural' excuses used to justify violence against women. Such strategies are particularly relevant at this moment. As stated by Yakin Ertürk, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women:

Today, culture is used as a tool of new forms of oppression of women, whether in its orientalist or occidentalist guise. Such approaches present culture as static, homogeneous and apolitical, overlooking its diverse and ever-changing character. I emphasized that compromising women's rights is not an option; the challenge before us is to respect our diverse cultures while developing strategies to resist oppressive practices in the name of culture and to uphold universal human rights standards while rejecting ethnocentric rulings.¹³

The strategies discussed below are aimed precisely at resisting oppressions perpetuated in the name of 'culture' and at upholding human rights standards that connect directly with progressive cultural roots in diverse contexts. These strategies may be used by various stakeholders, by themselves or in alliance, at micro, meso and macro levels. Each of these strategies has different possibilities and limitations, thereby necessitating a combination of strategies.

1. Argumentation within the 'cultural' framework

Those who use 'culture' to excuse violence against women usually claim that their usage represents the only true interpretation, while denying the validity of other, more gender-equitable, interpretations. This strategy challenges the singularity of the patriarchal version by making visible more gender-equitable alternatives and questioning cultural discourses and frameworks.

As noted in the Secretary-General's *In-depth Study* (para. 78):

While some cultural norms and practices empower women and promote women's human rights, customs, traditions and religious values are also often used to justify violence against women.

In this context, while it is important to launch arguments in support of women's rights within existing 'cultural' frameworks, it should be noted that most, if not all, 'cultures' are currently shaped by dominant patriarchal interests. Therefore, those using this strategy need to be aware that certain 'cultural' frameworks may not afford the space to establish women's freedom from violence as a right to which they are entitled, as opposed to a privilege granted, which is thereby inherently challengeable.

An example of the limitation of this strategy may be the mobilisation of Muslim religious scholars (*ulama*) to speak out against 'cultural' practices that violate women, such as female genital mutilation. While this may help as a short-term tactic, in the long term, does this not reinforce the *ulama's* position of authority in defining 'cultural' norms? How many women and women's rights advocates do we generally find among *ulamas*?

One way of transcending this limitation is to include principles and values from other sources, especially international agreements that the governments themselves have agreed to.

2. Argumentation on the basis of women's rights as human rights

The strength of this strategy is its reference to the universal human rights framework and to international conventions agreed upon by member States of the United Nations. This is indeed the strategy embodied in the General Assembly's Resolution A/RES/61/143, which urges States:

- a. 'To consider ratifying or acceding to all human rights treaties,... limit the extent of any reservations that they lodge and regularly review such reservations with a view to withdrawing them so as to ensure that no reservation is incompatible with the object and purpose of the relevant treaty.'
- b. 'To review and, where appropriate, revise, amend or abolish all laws, regulations, policies, practices and customs that discriminate against women or have a discriminatory impact on women, and ensure that provisions of multiple legal systems, where they exist, comply with international human rights obligations, commitments and principles, including the principle of non-discrimination.'

One constraint of this strategy is that it may be labelled by 'cultural gatekeepers' as being externally derived and, furthermore, driven by the metropolitan North's agenda of global domination. Such accusations deny the universality of the human rights framework, instead particularising it as a product solely of the metropolitan North. These accusations become even more serious when it is bolstered by cultural relativists, who collude in these attempts of States and non-State actors to exempt themselves from complying with the universal human rights framework.

It is strategically necessary to combine Strategies 1 and 2, thereby locating the principle of rights **within** specific cultures. Women's assertions of their right to have rights is particularly important at micro and meso levels, where there is an opportunity to advance indigenous concepts of justice and rights from within local communities. At the same time, efforts should be made to bridge indigenous concepts of justice and rights with the international rights discourse, to ensure that women's rights are ultimately integrated within the universal framework of human rights.

3. Refuting cultural relativist condoning of violence against women as 'cultural' practice

Cultural relativists usually accept, out of supposed political correctness, the version presented by dominant groups claiming ownership of a particular 'culture', ignoring the

internal diversities.¹⁵ They thus collude, wittingly or unwittingly, in disenfranchising the rights of dissenting members who try to dispute with or disengage from the impositions of the dominant group.

This strategy takes issue with cultural relativists who see only the ‘group’, rather than individual members, as having the right to difference.¹⁶ Cultural relativist interpretations of violence inflicted on women as ‘group’ members generally accept such violence as dictated by ‘cultural’ norms of the ‘group’ that must be respected. Women’s rights are seriously threatened when cultural relativist positions become the basis of policies or laws.

At the same time, patriarchal forces find cultural relativism a useful tool for justifying their oppressive practices. As noted in the Secretary-General’s *In-depth Study* (para. 81, 82):

Cultural relativist arguments have been advanced in national contexts and in international debates when laws and practices that curtail women’s human rights have been challenged. The politicization of culture in the form of religious ‘fundamentalisms’ in diverse geographic and religious contexts has become a serious challenge to efforts to secure women’s human rights. Tension between cultural relativism and the recognition of women’s human rights, including the right to be free from violence, has been intensified as a result of the current heightened attention to State security issues. The resort to cultural relativism has been made worse by the policies adopted since 11 September 2001 by many groups and societies that feel threatened and under siege. This tension poses a notable challenge in ensuring that violence against women is kept firmly on the international and national agendas with the priority it requires.

To refute cultural relativists who accept patriarchal oppressions as ‘cultural’ practices, this strategy requires constant emphasis of internal diversity and power contestations within ‘groups’, challenging those who claim to speak on behalf of supposedly homogeneous entities.

4. De-legitimising those who set themselves up as sources of moral authority

This strategy exposes the vested interests of those who are pushing particular agendas of control over women, as well as the collusion of different interests – e.g. ‘cultural’, military, political, patriarchal. Research and documentation should be undertaken to expose the self-serving interests of non-state actors, such as local and patriarchal elites who are seeking political control over state resources, and how these interests are using ‘culture’ (including religion) to legitimise themselves.

The limitation of this strategy is that while it de-stabilises the basis of authority of those who are in power, it may simply help to open the way for new authority figures who may be no less patriarchal. A combination of Strategies 1, 2, and 3 would be useful to affirm principles of gender equality and women’s rights as values that transcend vested interests, based on which those posing as sources of moral authority will be constantly evaluated, regardless of who they may be.

¹⁵ Shaheed, Farida, 2007, ‘Violence against women legitimised by arguments of “culture”: thoughts from a Pakistani perspective’, paper presented at the International Symposium on *Due Diligence: the Responsibility of the State for the Human Rights of Women*, 21-23 September 2005, Berne, Switzerland, p. 1.

¹⁶ Wee, Vivienne and Shaheed, Farida, 2007, ‘Indigenous feminisms: resistance to culturally embedded patriarchies’, paper presented at the Conference on *Reclaiming feminism: gender and neoliberalism*, 9-10 July 2007, Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex.

5. Highlighting alternative sources of authority that support women's rights

This strategy is linked to the strategies above. It seeks to identify, document and amplify indigenous struggles for women's rights and alternative sources of authority supportive of women's rights in historical and contemporary contexts located within 'culturally' defined entities, including local communities, nation-states, and cross-border networks. The value of this strategy is that it provides women (and men) with alternative reference points within broader 'cultural' entities. These alternative reference points are important, sometimes critical, in situations where patriarchal forces are imposing their particular version of 'culture' as the one and only true 'culture'. Another strength of this strategy is that it enables linkages to be forged between multiple voices located within diverse local contexts and more global campaigns to end gender-based violence.

The limitation of this strategy is the contextual specificity of the alternative sources of authority, which sometimes leads to a misconception that struggles in one 'cultural' context are not relevant to other contexts. To overcome this limitation, it is important to build a broad base of understanding that the patriarchal oppression of women is not unique only to particular contexts. Therefore, resistance to such oppression is also not unique, but is relevant for mutual learning across contexts.

6. Strengthening women's voices in the face of attempts to silence them

Attempts to silence women and women's rights advocates are occurring at multiple levels. At the micro level, individual women are being silenced, including victims of violence. At the meso level, women's rights advocates are being silenced, individually and collectively. Women's assertion of their rights, either on their own behalf or on behalf of other women, is being suppressed by threats or acts of violence, ostracism and accusations of betrayal of family, community and nation. At the macro level, even multilateral agencies working for women's rights may be silenced by claims from certain States that they should not be focussing on violence against women that such States deem as a donor-driven issue that is 'culturally' irrelevant.

Such attempts at silencing often become acute among ethnic minorities and bounded communities that claim the right to non-interference from the outside. In such cases, women asserting their rights and those who support them are often silenced by perpetrators of violence who castigate all dissenting voices as betrayals of 'culture' and the 'community'. WEMC research in China and Pakistan indicates that such silencing processes are actively at work among ethnic minorities and local communities, where local power structures, rather than the laws of the country, govern the lives of women.

It is of utmost importance to ensure that women and women's rights advocates are not silenced, and that the international community does not acquiesce in this silencing process. Any such acquiescence only emboldens those who wish to suppress women's rights. A potential consequence of this strategy may be that women and women's rights advocates who refuse to be silenced often face the risk of reprisals, which may take various forms, ranging from murder to ostracism. Protective measures should be explored, including the building of alliances with mainstream institutions and finding safety in numbers.

7. Exposing the use of violence against some women to intimidate all women

This strategy makes visible the use of violence against some women as a means of intimidating all women collectively. It exposes the way in which punishment of some transgressors of imposed 'norms' frightens others into toeing the line, thereby instilling the self-policing idea that safety comes from obedience and that violence is the result of foolhardiness. Such self-policing is a crucial part of the 'cultural' legitimation of violence

against women, as it bolsters false accusations that the women who suffered the violence were justifiably punished only because they are so-called ‘bad’ women. The implication is that so-called ‘good’ women are safe from violence.

By exposing the way violence directed against some women is meant to intimidate all women, this strategy can spur more women to overcome their fear and to cross the artificially imposed line that they are supposed to toe. As with Strategy 5 above, one consequence of this could be to expose these women to increased risk and vulnerability, in the absence of adequate support systems. Systematic thought and planning concerning protective measures need to be combined with this strategy to help lessen the personal costs borne by women who are emboldened to cross or even erase the line. This has to include identification and mobilisation of potential allies in society.

8. Exposing media manipulations

This strategy makes visible unreported and under-reported realities that support women’s rights, thereby articulating silenced voices. One constraint is that the reportage of realities and voices that support women’s rights may be relegated to alternative media, rather than mainstream media, given the commoditisation of news as information that sells.

9. Women asserting their right to participate in the (re-)defining of culture, society, nation as full citizens

This is a long-term but necessary struggle, without which the ‘cultural’ legitimation and hence perpetuation of violence against women cannot be eliminated. As long as women are forced into a position of being passive digits manipulated in realities imposed by men, they will continue to be vulnerable to violence inflicted on them.

This strategy locates women’s resistance to ‘culturally’ legitimated violence within their entitlement to citizenship rights. It requires women and allies of women to view violence against women in the larger context of the state structures, instead of reducing it to a problem of social dysfunctionality which can be dealt with – for example – through counselling and shelters.

10. Building solidarity across cultures, societies, nations

An absolutely vital strategy is to build alliances across cultures, societies and nations, based on the shared recognition that the root cause of violence against women is patriarchy and that violence against women is not peculiar only to some ‘cultural’ guises of patriarchy. The Secretary-General’s *In-depth Study* (para. 61) recognises that ‘violence against women is not confined to a specific culture, region or country, or to particular groups of women within a society.’ The *Study* (para. 289) identifies the following as a ‘promising practice’:

Collaboration and coordination between Governments, NGOs and civil society organizations continue to be vital in the development of effective practices to eliminate violence against women. Examples include **alliances and coalitions** between Government and NGOs that draw on the experience and expertise of the most active and informed partners – women’s groups and networks – in designing and implementing programmes.

Alliance-building between different groups using different strategies is necessary. The solidarity thus forged can catalyse the necessary social momentum to reject the misuse of ‘culture’ to excuse violence against women. This will remove a key mechanism for perpetuating violence against women, while reclaiming culture from patriarchal opportunists who are distorting it for the purpose of controlling women.

Appendix 1

Key International Agreements to Eliminate Violence Against Women

1. In 1993, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly unanimously adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.¹⁷
2. In 1999, the UN designated 25 November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, with sixteen days of activism around this date, as a way of raising public awareness of this problem.¹⁸
3. On 31 October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security, which states specifically that sexual and other violence against women and girls should be prosecuted and excluded from any amnesty provisions.
4. Currently, 185 countries, over ninety percent of the members of the UN, are party to the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.¹⁹ By becoming a party to the Convention, States commit themselves to aligning their legal systems and practices with international norms and standards of equality between the sexes and non-discrimination.
5. On 30 January 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/61/143: *Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women*.²⁰

¹⁷ Resolution 48/104

¹⁸ WEMC has been organising forums on the topic of *'Culture', Women, Violence* to mark this International Day (15 December 2006 at City University of Hong Kong, 26 November 2007 at Istanbul Bilgi University, and 27 November 2007 at Middle East Technical University in Ankara).

¹⁹ Division for Advancement of Women, <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/states.htm>>: Appendix 1 lists the names of these countries.

²⁰ A/RES/61/143, 30 January 2007. United Nations General Assembly, Sixty-first session Agenda item 61 (a), Resolution adopted by the General Assembly [on the report of the Third Committee (A/61/438)], *Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women*.