

## Ending Gender-Based Violence: A Long Way to Go

### November 25th: International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women

#### BACKGROUND

The United Nations General Assembly observes November 25th as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, in order to raise awareness of the enduring epidemic of gender-based violence. This day also begins 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence. Between November 25th and December 10th (Human Rights Day), this global campaign highlights the connection between women, violence, and human rights.

Though officially established by the U.N. in 1999, November 25th had been observed throughout Latin America for years prior as the day the three Mirabal sisters were assassinated in 1960. Patria, Minerva, and Maria Teresa Mirabal became outspoken political activists against the brutal Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. The three sisters and their husbands were repeatedly imprisoned and persecuted, but continued their resistance. After the failed June 14th plot to overthrow the dictatorship, Rafael Trujillo moved swiftly to punish all involved. On November 25th, 1960, the sisters were beaten to death in a cane field, though their assassination was made to look like a car accident. The deaths of “las Inolvidables Mariposas” (the “unforgettable butterflies”) shocked the nation and strengthened the anti-Trujillo movement; the dictatorship ended one year later.



Violence against women and girls – from domestic violence, to female genital mutilation, to rape and sexual harassment, to political violence – remains the most prevalent human rights violations. It is estimated that one in three women throughout the world will experience physical or sexual abuse in her lifetime. November 25th was chosen as a way to honor and commemorate the Mirabal sisters, who continue to live on as global symbol of courage and resistance in the face of gender-based violence.

## CALL TO PRAYER

**Leader:** Daily we are reminded that violence strikes women in epidemic proportions worldwide, crossing every social and economic class, every religion, race, and ethnicity. Daily we hear the cries of women of all ages, from the youngest to the oldest, as they sustain brutal beatings, female genital mutilation, spousal abuse, rape as a weapon of war, human trafficking, and acid attacks. Some survive the cruelty of these crimes carrying with them lasting memories that linger throughout their lives. Then, there are those who are no longer with us. Their voices silenced. Their steps forward into a tomorrow filled with hope, frozen in time. The wounds inflicted on their bodies and souls, forgotten. As we join the global community in demanding an end to gender-based violence, let us walk with a few of our sisters, from the four corners of our world, whose days begin and end with violence inflicted on them by those who should be their protectors and life companions. Let us dare to enter into their world of suffering and to hear their cries for justice.



**Reader 1:** As morning tiptoes into dawn, we are mindful that in **Afghanistan**, decades of violence have left millions of women and girls displaced or widowed. Despite the 2009 landmark law, Elimination of Violence Against Women Act, violence and brutality against women have increased significantly in recent years. Today, the crisis is being described as “pandemic.” With their perpetrators at large, many victims do not speak out for fear of reprisals, leaving them to suffer in silence.<sup>1</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 2:** As a new dawn arrives with the whispering winds of a new day, we are mindful that the civil war in **Angola** has produced over four million internally displaced persons—mostly women and children. Today, Angolan women experience sexual violence and rape at the hands of soldiers and rebels, and are forced to do manual labor. Some are branded as “witches” and burned at the stake. Domestic violence and sexual abuse against women and young girls are a daily reality. The traditional view is that the woman is the guilty party and the man has a right to punish her. Sexual violence extends to the school system where girls are required to provide sexual favors in order to pass a grade.<sup>2</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 3:** As our alarm clock screams at the crack of dawn, we are mindful that in **Bolivia**, intimate-partner violence against women is pervasive. 53 percent of Bolivian women report experiencing physical or sexual violence at the hands of a partner. Bolivia's high rate of domestic violence is attributed to a constellation of causes, including a culture of machismo, in which men have a proprietary sense of control over their families, and a long-standing acceptance of aggressive behavior.<sup>3</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 4:** As we begin our day with hot water cascading over our bodies, we are reminded that in **China**, about a quarter of all married women suffer violence in their marriages. Rape myths shift blame from perpetrators to victims, and Chinese culture considers rape a woman's fault and a private family matter.<sup>4</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 5:** As we wrap our hands around a cup of the morning's fresh brewed coffee, we are mindful that in **Colombia**, women of all ages have endured 50 years of armed conflict. Sexual violence is widespread, a silenced practice that has enjoyed the highest levels of impunity. One woman is reportedly killed by her partner or former partner every six days. Every day, 245 women are the victims of some type of abuse, though 90 percent of cases go unpunished.<sup>5</sup> Violence against women is attributed to gender inequality and unequal power relations between men and women. In addition, femicide, a term for the murder of a woman based on her gender, stems largely from Colombia's patriarchal and 'macho' culture, which tends to blame women for the violence inflicted on them and condone it. Acid attacks have also become a major concern in Colombia over the past decade.<sup>6</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 6:** As we marvel at the frosty artwork etched on the window glass, we are mindful that in **Democratic Republic of Congo**, violence against women is prevalent on many levels from domestic to community to the state. Approximately 1,100 rapes are reported each month, with an average of 36 women and girls raped each day. Over 200,000 women suffered sexual violence during the armed conflict. Traditionally, women are seen as second-class citizens. Women who are victims of sexual violence are further ostracized from society and condemned as damaged goods. A woman who is raped, and therefore no longer a virgin, will receive no dowry and will not be able to find a husband.<sup>8</sup>



**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 1:** As we watch mountains in the distance, dressed in a morning haze, we are mindful that in **El Salvador**, a country where violence is so visible, violence against women remains the elephant in the room. The problem is large in scope but overlooked in public dialogue. Worldwide, El Salvador has the highest rate of femicide. Domestic violence has increased in El Salvador, fueled by a culture of impunity and machismo. The profound root cause of violence against women is inequality. Women are considered human beings of lesser value.<sup>9</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 2:** As we prepare our minds and bodies for a long day's work, we are mindful that in **Egypt**, men's domination over women is widely accepted. Cultural practices and traditions entrench the subordination of women in Egyptian society. The practice of early marriage of girls under 16 (which is against the law) is common due to traditional, religious, and even economic reasons. Amnesty International paints a devastating picture of the systemic violence that Egyptian women experience in all spheres of life—on the street, in the home, in state custody, and in the “culture of impunity” that lets perpetrators walk free. It is estimated that an average of two women are raped every hour. In general, most cases of sexual violence are not reported due to the reputation and honor of the victim being compromised, and because the perpetrator is often someone the victim knows.<sup>10</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 3:** As we reflect on the Scripture readings of the day, we are mindful that in **Ethiopia**, violence against women is a common problem, where abuses such as wife beating and marital rape are pervasive social norms. Women enjoy little independent decision-making on most individual and family issues, including the option to choose whether to give birth in a health facility or to seek medical assistance from trained providers. Trafficking of women and children is also prevalent. Young women from all parts of Ethiopia are trafficked for domestic servitude, primarily to Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Djibouti, Egypt, and Somaliland are reportedly the main transit routes for trafficked Ethiopians.<sup>10</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 4:** As we listen to National Public Radio or Democracy Now reporting on the top stories of the day, we are mindful that in **Germany**, violence against women and girls remains widespread. One in five suffer physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partner. In recent years, several hundred women have been accused of witchcraft by members of their communities and banished to live in isolated camps with minimal access to health care, education, sanitation, and other services.<sup>11</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 5:** As we set out on life's road, unsure of the path we are to walk, we are mindful that in **Guatemala**, acts of violence against women are among the most commonly reported crimes. Throughout Guatemala's history, violence against women was not seen as a crime. In many parts of the country, law enforcement, and the general public continue to view such crimes as issues that should be resolved within the family setting rather than through the legal system. Femicide continues and according to official figures, over 5,000 women and girls were killed with impunity between 2008 and 2015. Over half were minors.<sup>12</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 6:** As we explore ways in which activism and cultural change can affect public policy and reduce racism in our communities, we are mindful that in **Haiti**, since the January 12, 2010 earthquake, women and girls living in the internally displaced persons camps face alarming rates of rape and other forms of gender-based violence. In many camps, the rate of violence has exploded to three times pre-earthquake levels. Victims range in age from 5 to 60. Along with the stigma of rape in Haitian society, weak governance and uncertain rule of law contribute to impunity for sexual violence.<sup>13</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 1:** As we seek to spark the curiosity of students in our classrooms, we are mindful that in **Honduras**, a country with one of the highest femicide rates in the world, rampant impunity perpetuates gender violence as acceptable. Violence against women is widespread and systematic. One woman is killed every 16 hours. Trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation purposes is also under reported mainly due the hidden nature of the crime and the prevalence of organized crime.<sup>14</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.



**Reader 2:** As we prepare to organize our thoughts for an important job interview, we are mindful that in **Indonesia**, gender-based violence is an endemic problem, fueled by poverty, harmful gender stereotypes, and impunity for perpetrators. Domestic violence and trafficking are also widespread. Women diagnosed with HIV/AIDS report to have experienced sexual abuse and forced sterilization.<sup>15</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 3:** As we explore ways to protect the earth and reduce damage to the environment, we are mindful that in **Iran**, a series of acid attacks against women in the Iranian city of Isfahan have shocked the nation. The assaults involve unidentified men flinging acid into the faces of women with whom they have no history or personal grudges. At least 14 attacks have been reported, and eyewitnesses have stated the assailants proclaimed they were defending hijab (Islamic female dress) during the attacks. 66.3 percent of Iranian women experience violence in their lives and the children of battered women are also victims of domestic violence.<sup>16</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 4:** As we play tourist in a new city or country, marveling the work of famous painters, we are mindful that in **Iraq**, women and girls are inadequately protected against gender-based violence. Much of the violence against women is committed by state agents. The practice of honor killings continues to be a problem throughout the country. More recently, ISIL has become the primary cause of abduction on a mass scale, especially from minority groups such as the Yazidi sect and seeks to control populations, spread fear, and procure wives for its fighters. While in captivity, women are subjected to all sorts of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. In areas under ISIL control, women are forced to marry militants or are turned into sex-slaves. In the eyes of ISIL, it “is permissible to buy, sell, or give as a gift female captives and slaves, for they are merely property.”<sup>17</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 5:** As we lend a hand to those in the daily toil of life, we are mindful, that in **Italy**, high levels of gender-based violence and domestic violence continue with high numbers of women being killed by their spouse or partner. Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women are at risk of sexual violence due to their sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>18</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 6:** As we watch the sun glow through the autumn leaves and carpet the earth, we are mindful that in **Liberia**, after 14 years of civil war, women and girls continue to experience unprecedented levels of gender-based violence. There are many reports of children being raped by men who believe that this “sexual ritual” will increase their power and virility. In addition to the physical and psychological trauma of rape, including the risk of HIV/ AIDS, many survivors face rejection by their family and community. This is exacerbated, as the majority of perpetrators are known to their victims. Moreover, because rape and other forms of violence against women are perceived as private, they are often dealt with between the family of the survivor and the abuser. The abuser pays the family or husband of the survivor ‘compensation’ in the form of money or goods (such as a chicken or a bottle of cane juice), or the abuser is forced to marry the survivor.<sup>19</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 1:** As we join fellow activists and family members of gun violence stage sit-ins in government offices, we are mindful that in **Mexico**, grisly series of abductions and murders occur all too frequently. Violence is palpable not only on the Mexican capital's streets, but in different parts of the country as well, where sexual abuse and murder often go unsolved and unpunished. The murder of hundreds of women in various parts of the country have sounded the alarm on the dangers of being a woman in certain areas of Mexico. Violence continues to rise one year after the Mexican government adopted the so-called "Gender Alert" system aimed at reducing gender-based violence and femicide.<sup>20</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 2:** As we witness the crumbling of economies and concerns over security around the world, we are mindful that in **Rwanda**, gender disparities still exist. During the 1994 genocide, women and girls were victims of sexual violence, including rape as a weapon of war. This practice was intended to inflict pain and humiliation on the victims and destroy trust within the community. Rwandan women who were deliberately infected with HIV during the genocide are now dying in large numbers, leaving their children motherless. Post-conflict gender-based violence occurs and has its roots within traditional patriarchal stereotypes regarding the role of women and men in the family and in the wider community.<sup>21</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 3:** As we rest our weary bodies under the thick canopy of a giant oak tree after a long day's work, we are mindful that in **Somalia**, gender-based violence is prevalent throughout all sectors of society, but women continue to hide these abuses to prevent hostility or shame. Rape is common and fear is widespread, but perpetrators of sexual harassment are rarely punished. To safeguard the family's honor, some girls are forced to marry the men who raped them. Somali women also face considerable risk of sexual violence from a range of military organizations. Women are raped almost daily on the isolated outskirts of their towns. There are reports of girls being stoned to death for reporting rape. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is still widely performed and health crises accompanying this practice are common.<sup>22</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

**Reader 4:** As we gather to celebrate the summer harvest by transforming vibrant vegetables into savory meals, we are mindful that in **South Africa**, devastating levels of economic inequality and violence against women and children are mounting. South Africa is ranked among the 10 countries in Africa where human trafficking is worst. 100,000 people are reportedly trafficked in the country annually. Experts believe this number is not a true reflection of the level of crime, as legislative shortcomings hinder prosecutions.<sup>23</sup>

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**Reader 5:** As evening breezes bring a calming scent across the lawn in our protected neighborhoods, we are mindful that in **Syria**, even before the conflict began in 2011, sexual violence was a continuing challenge. Due to patriarchal norms, women were subjected to honor killings by their families, or pressured by their families to marry their rapist. Honor crimes also occurred prior to the conflict. Women and girls could be killed because of the mere suspicion of an affair or romantic liaison, a false accusation, or for being raped or sexually assaulted. ISIL and other armed groups perpetrate widespread acts of gender-based violence, including the use of rape as a weapon of war. The government and its affiliated militias also actively participate in systematic and widespread use of torture, including sexual violence. Refugees are susceptible to rape and abuse while in transit, in camps, or while in other areas where refugees gather. Human trafficking crimes have increased since the start of the armed conflict, although there are no official statistics to reflect it.<sup>24</sup>

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**Reader 6:** As the day slowly falls into night, we are reminded that in the **United States**, young women, low-income women, and women of certain minority groups are disproportionately victims of domestic violence and rape. Immigrant and undocumented women in the U.S. face higher rates of sexual harassment in the workplace and of battering than other women.<sup>25</sup> Women held in detention facilities face a high risk of rape by corrections officers<sup>26</sup> and there is great concern of the growing problem of sexual assaults in the military and on U.S. university campuses.<sup>27</sup>

**All:** Hear us, O God of Justice, when we cry to you for all the women and girls who are victims of violence.

## CLOSING PRAYER

**Leader:** God, Comforter of the Oppressed, as we go about living our daily lives, fulfilling our duties as parents and grandparents, as teachers and students, as doctors and lawyers, and as peacemakers and diplomats, may we never forget that every minute of each day, girls and women are being stripped of their dignity. We stand in desperate need of your mercy and confess to our deep shame of silence. With Pope Francis, we choose “not to look the other way” and we recognize that “many of [us] have blood on [our] hands as a result of our comfortable and silent complicity.”<sup>28</sup> May your love be the mold that shapes our apathy into concern, and our inaction into action. We recommit to ending the epidemic of violence against women and girls, and bringing justice and healing to survivors. Amen.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Violence Against Women in Afghanistan Peaked - <http://bit.ly/2cV1t8k>
- <sup>2</sup> Violence Against Women in Africa: A Situational Analysis - <http://bit.ly/2bTUqfF>
- <sup>3</sup> Bolivia struggles with gender-based violence - <http://bit.ly/1EFMfvC>
- <sup>4</sup> China's Domestic Violence Law Gets Mixed Reception - <http://bit.ly/2cKUbRz>
- <sup>5</sup> Now Is The Time To Speak Up About Violence Against Women - <http://bit.ly/1TXB74c>
- <sup>6</sup> Colombia's President Santos enacts tougher law on acid attacks - <http://bbc.in/1ZMQWzQ>
- <sup>7</sup> UN Women: Fast facts: statistics on violence against women and girls - <http://bit.ly/1CbfYNf>
- <sup>8</sup> El Salvador's Invisible Victims of Domestic Violence - <http://bit.ly/2c6huHX>
- <sup>9</sup> New Report Paints Devastating Picture Of Violence Against Women In Egypt - <http://huff.to/1L3JO8o>
- <sup>10</sup> Ending Domestic Violence against Women in Ethiopia - <http://bit.ly/2cK7HK9>
- <sup>11</sup> More sexual assault in Germany but fewer convictions - <http://bit.ly/2dJlgFB>
- <sup>12</sup> After 5,000 Femicides, Guatemala Creates Body to Tackle Crisis - <http://bit.ly/2bmrpG1>
- <sup>13</sup> Gender-based Violence in Haiti - <http://bit.ly/2dBoM5M>
- <sup>14</sup> Honduras Fights Growing Femicide as 1 Woman Killed Every 16 Hours - <http://bit.ly/29CeGUI>
- <sup>15</sup> UN Women Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women - <http://bit.ly/2djYhDV>
- <sup>16</sup> Vigilante Violence: The Acid Attacks against Women in Iran and the State's Assault on Women's Rights <http://bit.ly/2dj5Xpe>
- <sup>17</sup> Iraq: ISIS Escapees Describe Systematic Rape - <http://bit.ly/1JVKGww>
- <sup>18</sup> Persistent high level of violence against women in Italy - <http://bit.ly/2dyAkWo>
- <sup>19</sup> In-Depth Study On Reasons For High Incidence of Sexual and Gender based Violence in Liberia <http://bit.ly/2dvmrvU>
- <sup>20</sup> Female rappers take a stand in Mexico's capital of violence against women - <http://bit.ly/2crgG2t>
- <sup>21</sup> Rape and HIV as Weapons of War - <http://bit.ly/2dJZ9Zh>
- <sup>22</sup> Gender in Somalia - <http://bit.ly/2dhYGJL>
- <sup>23</sup> Human Trafficking in the Spotlight - <http://bit.ly/1ujbgYN>
- <sup>24</sup> Violations Against Women In Syria And The Disproportionate Impact Of The Conflict On Them <http://bit.ly/2dweuXf>
- <sup>25</sup> Violence Against Women Has No National Borders - <http://huff.to/20ffhw4>
- <sup>26</sup> Bartered sex, corruption and cover-ups behind bars in nation's largest women's prison <http://hrld.us/1Mb xoIs>
- <sup>27</sup> Rape on U.S. university campuses reaches 'epidemic' levels - <http://reut.rs/2d5W7oG>
- <sup>28</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium (Joy of the Gospel)*, 21 November 2013, 211 - <http://bit.ly/1QpSFUd>