

SPEECH ON GENDER AND THE WORK OF UNODC IN SOUTH ASIA

by Gary Lewis

Good morning friends,

Happy International Women's Day!

Every year on March 8th we celebrate a day which recognizes women for their achievements. We do this without regard to their national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural or any other dimension. We use this occasion to looking back on past struggles. And on past accomplishments. More importantly, we look ahead towards the untapped potential and opportunities that await future generations of women.

The theme of this International Women's Day is 'Ending impunity for violence against women and children'. Some of what I say will touch on this. But more broadly, I speak of what the United Nations, and UNODC specifically, is trying to do to make life a little healthier and perhaps a little happier for thousands of women across South Asia.

I should start off by saying that the work that UNODC does brings me into regular contact with much of the darker side of humanity. Every day I see what "uncivil society" is capable of doing.

But today gives us - me - cause for celebration. Why is this? I'll be talking in a little while about our work in bringing some light - some hope - to those women and girls who live in the darkness of drug addiction and human

trafficking. And there is indeed a larger story which we as a global community of human beings have to tell about how badly we have treated our "other half". But the news is not all bad. For there is also a story to be told of how our moral resources - such as humanity, compassion, dignity and respect - have also triumphed. Triumphed over our baser tendencies to exclude others and to establish hierarchies over them.

To say there is cause for celebration certainly stands in stark contrast to what many of us know as the reality for millions of women in South Asia. So let me start with the bad news. No less a figure than Amartya Sen has said the following concerning the predicament of women in South Asia:

"South Asian countries have a terrible record in gender inequality, which is manifest in the unusual morbidity and mortality rates of women, compared with what is seen in regions that do not neglect women's health care and nutrition so badly."

South Asia, like many other places on the planet, is still struggling with much of the baggage bequeathed to us by history and by culture. And what diminishes our women,



child marriages, female foeticide, civic disfranchisement, domestic brutality, honour killings - diminishes us all as human beings.

The organization which I am privileged to represent is responsible for assisting the countries of the world in their struggle against drugs, crime and terrorism - in all its manifestations. Drug abuse and human trafficking - the things which preoccupy my office on a daily basis in South Asia - are both very strongly connected to the spread of HIV in South Asia. And to women.

In this way, gender roles and gender relations have had a significant influence on the course and impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Asia. In our region, these biases have led to an increasingly "feminized" HIV epidemic. I have just returned to Delhi from a remote rural part of India where a staggering 4 per cent of housewives are HIV-positive. Four per cent! Can you imagine the impact this will have on social fabric? Most of these women are monogamous. Their only "crime" has been to trust their husbands who may have been injecting drug users or may have paid for commercial sex.

The trajectory of HIV infections in South Asia clearly demonstrates that gender inequality is powerfully linked to the epidemic. Feminized poverty and the inability to have effective choices over their bodies and social status link up with forced migration and human trafficking to increase the risk which women and girls run of contracting HIV. The situation gets worse when acts of violence get thrown into the mix.

Recent data on the spread of HIV shows how the epidemic has spread beyond the so-called "high-risk" groups and is now affecting younger women and adolescent girls.

Friends, the face of HIV in South Asia is getting younger and more feminine. The proportion of women living with HIV/AIDS has risen steadily in recent years. Today, in India, approximately 38 per cent of the 5.1 million adults living with HIV/AIDS are female.

Further, to add to their misfortune there is the dual scourge of stigma and prejudice attached to those who have contracted the virus. Many times, instead of receiving the special attention and services women and girls deserve because of their unique needs, they are discriminated against and isolated.

This is where the United Nations' role becomes important. Women and girls have special needs, and these are often lacking under existing programmes. The United Nations, both as advocates for fairness and equity and as service providers, tries to assist the most vulnerable. We try to ensure that women receive adequate prevention and treatment.

In South Asia, UNODC works a lot with women and girls who may also be themselves drug users, injecting drug users or spouses of injecting drug users as well as victims of human trafficking, and women in difficult settings such as prisons.

Women are hit hard by drug abuse in two main ways. First is when they use drugs themselves. These risks are obvious. However, secondly, even if they do not use themselves but are the wives or partners of drug users who may also be injecting, they face severe problems.



When this happens, the burdens that women are forced to bear include financial and emotional difficulties. Children are neglected. Often they themselves are beaten. Their dignity is compromised. And they face health risks - including HIV.

What are we going to do about this? Two answers. One is what UNODC is doing. Second is what we as individuals can do. On what UNODC is doing, please check out our website (www.unodc.org/india). It shows some of the things we are doing to:

- Prevent drug abuse
- Prevent the crossover to injecting drug abuse
- Prevent HIV-related risk among people who are already injectors and their sexual partners
- Support drop-in-centres and low-cost community detoxification facilities
- Provide care and support for human trafficking victims
- Train police officers to arrest the traffickers and protect the victims

The second answer is what each of us can do as men and women. I believe that each of us has a responsibility to dig deep into our moral resources and help build a society where respect for all is a reality. Where people are not treated differently on the basis of their gender or sex. Human security and justice are really only possible if we believe this. And if we act as we believe.

Despite the poverty and desperation, I see South Asia as a vibrant region, full of opportunities and strengths. I am confident and optimistic about the positive changes which our work - yours and mine - is bringing about. Let us then on this special day re-commit ourselves to continue this work. Let's keep a keen eye focused on the goals of equality and inclusion for all the women we work with and serve.

I believe that you have a strong ally and partner in UNODC. We are serious about reaching, serving and working with women.

Friends, I would like to end by sharing some personal reflections with you.

First of all, I have a message for men on this important day, which is twofold. Point number one. Self-restraint in our relations with women does not show weakness. It is a mark of strength. On the contrary, the constant posturing and demonstration of primacy is a sign that we are covering up for something. And you have to wonder what this is. Point number two. This one is more controversial in today's age, although it should not be. For it was something well known to Vatsyayana, who wrote the Kama Sutra over 2,000 years ago. His central message is this. If we - as men - place the sexual satisfaction of women at the centre of this part of our relationship with them, it does not only accord them with the respect they deserve, but it enriches the relationship and further strengthens our masculinity.

I also have a message for those who have power over the public purse. It is a simple one. And it may not resolve all of the structural elements of gender discrimination. But it is a start. Many societies already know it. Some have embraced it. But more need to "walk the talk". And it is this. Educate your girl children. Educated women are able to get better jobs. They are able to have more choice. Sometimes they will exercise this choice and have fewer, healthier children. In the end, guess what? Perhaps most important of all, they can start to complain about injustice.

And in calling for equal rights, modern women and girls join the countless millions of souls who, since the dawn of civilization, have sought and often gotten recognition and respect as human beings. Human beings who are possessed of the same amount of worth and dignity as those who - through some quirk of biology or historical happenstance - occupy positions of privilege in the social hierarchy.

This is a vision to which I am personally committed, and I am proud to work for an organization which tries to project the same vision globally. This is why, despite the often depressing nature of the job we do in UNODC, I am a happy man today. International Women's Day.

Thank you.

