

National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) UK
Statement to the fifty-seventh Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

The National Alliance of Women's Organisations (UK), NAWO, is an umbrella for women's organisations – service, campaigning and lobbying, networks, single or multi-issue, working in local, regional, national and international arenas. All members of the Alliance must subscribe to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action; these international instruments hold groups together (faith groups for example) that might otherwise disagree. All in NAWO seek gender equality and women's access to their human rights globally as well as at home. With violence against women in all its forms evident and pervasive throughout the world cruelly preventing women and girls – including infants and very young girls – from accessing their human rights and leading reasonable lives, NAWO believes that the two-week session of CSW, valuable as it is, and hopeful as we are of a successful outcome, to be insufficient. Hence NAWO urges the Commission on the Status of Women to seek the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence with the addition of a new mechanism that should provide greater power and hence a more rapid achievement of the shared goal.

To this end NAWO expresses its support for the proposal for a UN Convention on Violence Against Women made by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Ms Rashida Manjoo and supported by UN Women. Current instruments have been improved over the years with the addition of CEDAW General Recommendations - especially 19 - and there are many initiatives such as UNiTE, launched in 2008 by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, bringing actors together with specific goals to deal with 'the global pandemic of violence against women', while investment in programmes in both north and south, seek to prevent and alleviate the suffering. Furthermore, since the 1990s, the efforts of women's organizations, experts and committed governments have resulted in a profound transformation in public awareness of this problem. Such violence is now widely recognized as a serious human rights and public health problem that concerns all sectors of society.

And yet, knowledge and understanding of the fundamental cause– the vicious circle of gender inequality which is deepened by the acts of violence which in turn increases gender inequality - is too often absent. This leads to fragmentation in approaches to solving the problem with a focus on specific manifestations of VAWG such as rape, or FGM, early and forced marriage, or domestic abuse, without also changing power relations between women and men by ending poverty, enabling women to have control over land and other property, improving educational opportunities and outcomes, ending discrimination in the economy, in employment, in pay and promotion, and in taking on unpopular approaches to solving the relative absence of women in political and other forms of decision making, thus empowering women. Deputy Director of UN Women, Ms Lakshmi Puri has said, 'instead [of the vicious circle]we must create a virtuous cycle by changing mindsets and stereotypes that are at the root of violence. We must provide women with access to economic opportunities, ensure their equal participation in public and political life, repeal laws and practices that continue to discriminate against women, and ensure

that environments are safe for women and girls, including in the streets and in schools. This constitutes the basis of a comprehensive prevention strategy' (Introductory statement by UN Women Deputy Executive Director, Lakshmi Puri at the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly, Item 28, Advancement of women. 15 October 2012).

A new UN Convention would make clear that the underlying cause of violence against women and girls is gender inequality and that all forms of gender based violence further cause inequality, and would encourage a more holistic approach to these grave problems. It would also be valuable in identifying, defining and recommending actions in relation to specific groups of women, and specific conditions that require different strategies within the whole – for example, women with disabilities, older and younger women, girls and infants, widows, lesbians and single or never married women of any age.

NAWO also supports UNFPA representatives who in a recent meeting called for the inclusion of violence against women in the post-2015 agenda and urged a comprehensive goal on gender empowerment, with violence against women as one of the targets with specific indicators (posted October 17 2012, UN Women web site).

NAWO has a special relationship to the European Women's Lobby [EWL]: with its sister organisations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, it forms the UK Joint Committee on Women which is the coordinating UK body for EWL. NAWO is proud to be part of an infrastructure for women (NGOs) in Europe which is engaged at UN and global level to eliminate VAWG. It is important to see different regions, including less developed parts of Europe, working together to solve this international problem and NAWO welcomes the joint initiative of the European Commission and UN Women, Spring Forward for Women, a new regional programme for the South Mediterranean Region.

Also in Europe, there have been important developments in widely accepted approaches to prostitution. For many years there has been a struggle to identify prostitution as either a free choice unfettered by emotional, mental or social scarring, 'work like any other' known as 'voluntary prostitution' and hence 'sex work', or as a transaction in which men exploit their power over women paying to use their bodies and those of girls – some very young – in a continuum with other kinds of violence against females known as 'forced prostitution'. Whether or not such a term is an oxymoron as NAWO believes, it is essential to understand force not only as coercion with a knife or by physical imprisonment but also experienced through a range of circumstances and life-events.

The Council of Europe with an overwhelming vote in favour of the view, now includes a wide range of factors beyond the personal to be acted upon by States seeking to tackle the problem: 'Personal vulnerabilities (pathological aspects such as mental health problems, low self-esteem and childhood neglect or abuse, as well as drug abuse) and structural problems (poverty, political instability/war, gender inequality, differential opportunity, lack of education and training) can have a very negative impact on prostitutes. It is important that no-one should feel "forced", even by circumstances, to engage in prostitution. This is the advantage of the neo-

abolitionist approach: it makes very clear that the demand side, and not the supply side, needs to be tackled.’(Council of Europe, PACE, Final Report, Prostitution – Which Stance to Take? - Doc. 11352, 9 July 2007)

This has led in some countries, to the decriminalization of women involved in prostitution and legislative changes to criminalize paying for sex. There is no unanimity and many different approaches continue. Yet across the world in times of austerity and conflict, younger and younger girls are being sold into brothels and forced to have sex with tens of men every day while desperate women such as widows who have already suffered from harmful traditional practices, become involved in prostitution because they must live and feed their children.

In the lead up to CSW57, 70 women’s NGOs in the UK together with expert and interested individuals, have met regularly with the objective of working towards a successful outcome at this vital meeting – the 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The UK NGO CSW57 Liaison Group, administered by NAWO, aims to liaise among ourselves and also with the UK Government and through them to influence the European Union which speaks with one voice at CSW – all in the interests of a successful outcome. Our networks are working with others across the world to this end and we will be following up post CSW to ensure recommendations made at this session are implemented. We have proposed that the emerging issue should be widows – their status and rights – and would wish to see the needs and concerns of this vulnerable and harshly treated group specifically addressed in documents and, if not taken up for the 57th session, considered for the 58th session in 2014. The work of women’s NGOs must be acknowledged and strengthened even as threats are occurring to their traditional involvement in the work of the United Nations.

Conclusions:

NAWO urges Member States present at CSW57 to:

- refrain from all attacks on text which spells out rights hard won by women and progressive governments that enable women to make decisions, lead healthier, more economically viable lives and raise healthy children
- conclude an Agreed Outcome Document that will make real progress towards the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls
- give serious consideration to a new UN Convention on Violence Against Women
- urge all governments to keep levels of funding for UN Women and for development and aid at high levels particularly in this time of global financial hardship
- build on the Council of Europe Definition of force in relationship to prostitution