

Social, legal remedies for violence against women

NEW YORK – Violence against women, both in the United States and around the world, is on the rise and must be addressed with a potent combination of social, legal and economic remedies, said a panel of speakers Feb. 27 in New York.

“Addressing Violence Against Women” was the topic of a panel discussion at the Church of the Holy Family.

The program was the second discussion in a series called “The Human Dignity of Women in Contemporary Society,” sponsored by the Holy See Mission to the United Nations, the Path to Peace Foundation and the Vincentian Center for Church and Society at St. John’s University.

“It seems ironic that, at a time when the sensitivity for women’s issues appears stronger than ever, the world is now obliged to confront new forms of violence and slavery directed especially at women,” said Archbishop Celestino Migliore, papal nuncio to the United Nations.

“The mistreatment of women is a long-standing reality in many places and a disregard for the age and vulnerability of young girls in particular is especially repugnant,” he continued. “If we wish to engage in a sustained process to stop and reverse this phenomenon, peoples and cultures will have to find a common ground that can safely underpin human relations everywhere due to our shared dignity.”

“The overriding metaphor that leads to violence against women is that women are the property of another,” said panelist Marilyn Martone, an associate professor of theology at St. John’s University. “But this is in direct contradiction to what the church teaches. Others are gifts, not possessions.”

Candy S. Hill, senior vice president for social policy at Catholic Charities USA, said, “Except for those at war, no nation has as much violence as the domestic violence in the United States, where 50 percent of women who are murdered die at the hand of a partner or ex-partner and 8.8 million children witness domestic violence.”

She cited a 1992 letter of the U.S. bishops, "When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women," and the 10th anniversary update of the document in 2002 as examples of where the "bishops created great synergy to educate pastors and laity to arm themselves with resources to help people in need."

Hill said that the dioceses of Buffalo, N.Y., Camden, N.J., and Jackson, Miss., and the Archdiocese of Omaha, Neb., in particular, have implemented programs which underscore the church's commitment to service, action and advocacy.

On the international front, "peacekeepers have become part of the problem in post-conflict environments," according to Lisa A. Kurbiel, social affairs officer in the best practices unit of the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations. "They have taken advantage of positions of power and authority to rape, abuse, punish and harm vulnerable groups."

Although this is a "scourge on the U.N. and those who contribute to it," Kurbiel said the good news is that the United Nations has adopted a universal standard of conduct, which mandates a zero-tolerance abuse policy for all personnel, including military personnel serving under the flags of their member states.

Rectifying abuses by U.N. staff both overseas and in the United States is hampered by a morass of finger-pointing, budgetary constraints, diplomatic immunity and cultural issues, said Kurbiel.

She described domestic slavery in New York, where young girls are brought to this country on diplomatic visas and then made to work 14-hour days in the households of the people who sponsor them.

"We need to call attention to this creatively, get it out in the open and urge political pressure at the highest levels to stop it," she said.

Gender-based violence includes domestic violence, the cutting of female genitals, bride-burning, forced marriage and rape, according to Lori A. Nessel, law professor and director of the Center for Social Justice at Seton Hall University School of Law.

Rape is classified by the United Nations as torture, she said, and is punishable by death in Rwanda, where it was widely used in the ethnic conflict there in the 1990s.

When a woman's home country fails to protect her from violence, she can seek "surrogate protection" under U.N. refugee conventions and torture agreements, said Nessel.

In practice, though, hard-won, precedent-setting enhancements to international law "must go hand in hand with what women really want and need: food, economic opportunity and medical care," she said.

The panelists agreed that education is critical to preventing and addressing violence against women.

"Domestic violence is a learned behavior," Hill said, and "education should be targeted to young women in nonviolent situations and young men should be taught to establish manhood in a nonviolent way."