

Message from Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh

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**International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the  
Commencement of the 16 Days of Activism to End Gender-Based Violence  
Campaign**

25 November - 10 December 2017

Today we join the global observance of the International Day to End Violence against Women and the commencement of the 16 Days of Activism to End Gender-Based Violence Campaign, concluding on 10 December, Human Rights Day.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive human rights violations and an important public health issue. WHO led a landmark multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women, and global and regional estimates of violence against women, which found that one in three women worldwide had experienced partner or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. At 38%, the WHO South-East Asia Region has the highest regional estimates of violence against women in the world, putting women in our region most at risk of violence. This imposes largescale costs on individuals, families and communities, and on their health and well-being. We cannot afford to pay this price.

The health impact of violence is significant. Women exposed to intimate partner violence, for instance, are 16% more likely to have a low-birth-weight baby, twice as likely to experience depression, 1.5 times more likely to acquire HIV and STI, and nearly half of them also experienced injuries as a result. The physical, emotional and financial toll of violence sets women further back from reaching their full potential.

Gender inequality is at the root of violence against women. Beliefs and practices that value women less than men are normalized, excused and tolerated – a substantial proportion of adolescent girls and boys believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife for at least one reason. While violence against women is prevalent in all demographics, most vulnerable are those who experience multiple forms of

discrimination, such as sex workers, migrant workers, women living with disabilities, women with refugee status, indigenous women, and transgender women.

The health system plays a critical role in ending violence against women. In the majority of cases, a health service provider is the first professional that women go to seek help. The health system, therefore, needs to be ready to identify and appropriately accommodate complex needs of women who have experienced violence, especially those who are most marginalized. In May 2016, the WHO World Health Assembly adopted *the Global Plan of Action to strengthen the role of the health system within a national multisectoral response to address interpersonal violence, in particular against women, girls and children*.

In South-East Asia, WHO works with national governments to implement *the Global Plan of Action*, with key components including health system leadership and governance, health service delivery and health providers' capacity to respond, programming to prevent violence against women and girls, and information collection and evidence.

To ensure that the health system is well connected with the police, justice and welfare sectors, WHO partnered with UNFPA, UN Women and UNODC to develop and implement *the Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence*. To date all the 11 Member States of the South-East Asia Region have committed resources and personnel to implement a multisectoral approach at the national level.

While progress is underway, we must increase our momentum in order to reach the farthest behind first. This is why WHO has also developed the Innov8 approach for reviewing national health programmes to leave no one behind. In the region, the approach was piloted in Indonesia and Nepal and capacity is being strengthened in other countries.

Although the issue of violence against women is multidimensional and complex, together we can combat it by speaking out and by taking action to ensure that the attention is focused on the most underserved and disadvantaged groups of women and

girls in the efforts to end violence against women. We can and we must make sure that no woman, no girl, and no one is left behind.

WHO is encouraged by the increased commitment of world leaders in tackling this issue. Recognizing that ending all forms of violence against women and promoting gender equality are critical to progress, all 198 UN Member States adopted *the Sustainable Development Goals*, with a standalone goal – Goal 5 – on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, with specific targets on ending violence against women and other such harmful practices.

In support of the 2030 Agenda, *the UN Secretary-General's UNiTE Campaign to End Violence against Women* also reiterates this principle in this year's 16-day campaign theme of "*Leave No One Behind: End Violence against Women and Girls*". Orange is the official colour of the UNiTE campaign. It is a symbol of a brighter future, free from violence against women and girls. Last year we showed our solidarity by coming to work on this day in orange and this year our resolve is stronger than ever.