

Jennifer Zanolwiak

*Impressions and notes from the
51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women*

A question posed by Dr. Yakin Ertürk, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, resonates within my thoughts as I reflect on events I attended at the 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW): *Why is the discussion of “violence against women” carried out as if we have just discovered that women live through violence?* Dr. Ertürk pointed out that it was only in 1994 that the United Nations Commission on Human Rights decided to appoint a Special Rapporteur on violence against women— “a breakthrough in redefining the notion of human rights acknowledging women” – and the mandate was extended by the Commission on Human Rights in 2003 when she was appointed. But as Dr. Ertürk observed, “The history of violence against women is the history of *women*,” and this is a history linked with well-grounded gender inequity. Dr. Ertürk argued that “a historical memory is critical” in the discussion of violence against women in order to avoid unnecessary and ineffective fragmentation in the work being done to address the pandemic.

This year’s CSW focused specifically on “The Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination and Violence Against the Girl Child” and examples of violence against women and girls were ample. The mapping of gender discrimination and gender-based violence across the female life cycle lays bare the reality that these are deeply entrenched within and persisting throughout the lives of girls and women around the world. Tremendous advances in knowledge and technology have brought with them perverse consequences for girls and women, as social advancement in human rights concepts has not kept pace and as the control over technology becomes increasingly politicized. For example, modern diagnostic tools for pregnancy have made it possible to detect the sex of the fetus early on in pregnancy. In situations of economic or cultural preference for sons, the misuse of these tools has enabled sex-selective feticide. (Of course, sex-selective infanticide is not a new practice in history.) However, as discussed in one panel, *Abortion Providers’ Attitudes toward Women*, the politicization (i.e. legality versus illegality) of abortion technologies and limited access to information leads to increased harm for the *women* as well. This panel example serves as one case to highlight the combined effects of politics, ideology, and gender inequality in causing, perpetuating, and resulting from violence against women.

In this panel, Beverly Winikoff from Gynuity Health Projects discussed the new technologies available for safer abortion, as well as the political decisions that rendered them illegal and reduced access to these technologies for women. She asked the audience to imagine what it would be like if every woman had an abortion pill in her medicine cabinet, and if she was four days late with her period, she could just take a pill and be “un-pregnant.” This pill is available; the choice (safely and legally) is not. Marianne Mollmann from Human Rights Watch commented that the combination of violence against women and policies surrounding abortion result in “crisis pregnancies” in women. Most states do not make the link between violence and reproductive health, and fail to recognize that there are no real alternatives for women in abusive relationships. In fact, the panel demonstrated that not even all *women* make this link: one woman in the audience asserted that in *her* work, she found that birth control pills are a highly unreliable

form of contraception, and touted the Billings method as the most “empowering” form of birth control available to women. She suggested that women learn to know their bodies and their menstrual cycle in order to be able to suggest sexual intimacy to their partners at the times that they are least fertile. This audience member’s use (and corruption) of the very language used to advocate for women’s rights to sexual and reproductive health (i.e. the language of women’s empowerment and control in the hands of women) was highly disturbing as she was actually advocating for less choices available to women. Marianne Mollman, in response, did not disagree that women could use the Billings method, but believed that it should not be the only method available to women. Nor did she believe that it was necessarily appropriate for all women. Certainly a woman involved in an abusive relationship would not be able to successfully fight off her partner’s demands for sex with the argument that it is the wrong moment in her menstrual cycle. Women should have *all* possible knowledge and options available to them, to enable them to make their own informed decisions. Unfortunately, abortion is highly politicized in many countries, leaving women with little knowledge and access to safe methods of birth control. Laura Villa Torres from the Youth Coalition and Ipas Mexico noted that although abortion is legal in the case of rape in Mexico, a woman must *prove* the rape in order to actually receive a medical abortion. This often leads to re-victimization in women, as their word is not enough and, often, they are forced to face cross-examination and their attackers.

During childhood and adolescence, access to knowledge and improved opportunities for girls is limited by the availability of primary and secondary schools for girls as well as by cultural norms that place less importance on the education of girls compared to boys. This violence, then, perpetuates other forms of violence in the lives of women, such as: female genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage, premature parenthood, sexual abuse, and exploitation and trafficking. In fact, UNICEF’s *The State of the World’s Children 2007* states that among the greatest threats to adolescent development are abuse, exploitation and violence, and the lack of vital knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, including *HIV/AIDS*.

The threat to girls and women in the lack of vital knowledge about sexual and reproductive health manifest itself in a (relatively) new theme at this year’s CSW: a strong and well-represented focus on the intersection between violence against women and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Mallika Dutt, the Executive Director of Breakthrough, observed that, as a human rights organization, Breakthrough hadn’t intended to work with the issue of HIV/AIDS in India, but discovered that it *had to*. Many other panelists discovered the very same thing in their work—to talk about women’s rights is to talk about HIV/AIDS and to talk about HIV/AIDS necessitates a look at the gender inequalities that are increasingly giving this pandemic a female face.

Although the connection between HIV and AIDS and violence against women is becoming increasingly more apparent, this link is continuously ignored in the policy and funding arenas. Susana T. Fried highlighted in the “Women Won’t Wait” campaign that violence against women is still an “add-on” in HIV programming, and policy effectiveness is reduced by accountability gaps and limited funding. Similarly, Lori Michau, the Co-director of Raising Voices in Uganda warned against the effects of conditions from the religious and conservative ideology that comes tied with much aid for HIV programming.

Therefore, it is important to remember Dr. Ertürk's statement that "a historical memory is critical" in the discussion of violence against women. Gracia Violeta Ross, the National Chair of the Bolivian Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS, has personal experience with the connection between violence and HIV as a survivor of rape, and in a very inspiring talk on the role this has played in her life, she said she was hopeful that the HIV/AIDS pandemic has provided the impetus for a second look at violence against women. The recognition of the link between violence against women and HIV and AIDS is an opportunity not to be missed, and it is critical not to continue to fragmentize the work being done to address these parallel-running pandemics.