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PRESS RELEASE

International Women's Day focuses on Violence against Women and Girls.

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The World Organisation against Torture (OMCT), in its capacity of largest network of organisations fighting against torture and other serious human rights violations, has long documented the occurrence and the development of measures to eradicate violence against women and girls locally, nationally and internationally. We have noticed that overall progress has been made towards combating the grave human rights violations women and girls are subjected to. Studies have been conducted to analyse the causes and consequences of such violence¹. More and more countries have enacted laws that deal specifically with gender-based violence. In July 2006, it was the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Just recently, in February 2007, Mexico did the same.

While welcoming such developments, OMCT recalls that as long as stereotypes regarding the status of women in society have not changed impunity will reign supreme. Discriminatory practices such as son preference, the forced marriage of girls, dowry, among others, pave the way to the vulnerability of girls and women to violence and exploitation. Also, the fact that in several societies only fertile, married women are valued, places unmarried, divorced or sterile women, as well as widows and lesbians in a situation of marginalisation. Social constraints such as fear of repudiation, or sometimes the fear of violence on the part of one's husband, family or community, tend to dissuade women from reporting the violations they are subjected to. In many instances, law enforcement officials, who are expected to protect the population, are the ones violating women's rights, dissuading them from filing complaints, threatening them or further harassing them.

It is paramount to counter all arguments that relate to tradition, religion, social values and all other forms of relativism that could be used to justify the lack of measures to combat gender-based discrimination. The only way of doing so is to recall all States' duty to protect and promote women's human rights, as guaranteed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in General Recommendation n°19 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women², and to foster the development of assessment mechanisms to monitor States' compliance with such human rights norms.

In order to achieve this goal, OMCT calls on the newly-established Human Rights Council to place women and girls' right to dignity and physical and psychological integrity very high in the human rights agenda by thoroughly integrating it into its work.

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¹ See the UN Secretary-General's in-depth study on all forms of violence against women (A/61/122/Add.1).

² Available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm#recom19>.