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Domestic Violence Against Women in Iran

April 8, 2005

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Criminalizing domestic violence against women in Iran is not enough. Making the way to court easier for the victims is an effort that has to go beyond state institutions, to financially and morally support these women. It also demands a focus on public education, aiming to raise public awareness of this often un-witnessed crime.

Focusing on violence against women in Iran, this meeting was hosted by the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV), an Iranian NGO, which has been active in the field of human rights for more than fifteen years. The five panelists this morning were the judges of a family court in Tehran, who are dealing with questions of divorce and are thus confronted with cases of domestic violence against women through their daily work.

Where lie the causes of violence in society? The first to address the audience was deputy judge Ms. Khosro-Shai. She stressed the point that Islam condemned violence, but that mistaken beliefs in society legitimize a custom of punishment, which is followed by the government and the laws as well. It is certain that punishment of crimes is necessary, but the right way has yet to be found, Ms. Khosro-Shai said.

Judge Moosa Karimi took a similar perspective: "The Islamic world has not been serious enough in addressing violence against women" he argued and saw the root causes in economic and social poverty and the destruction of the traditional family pattern: "The honor and value of the family have to be maintained as the basis of society".

As judge Karimi explained, in the Sharia law that rules in Iran, a man is considered the head of the family and as such needs to respect the obligation and responsibilities towards his family – if he does not take care of his wife financially or insults her through his moral misbehavior, it is her right to complain and ask for divorce.

According to deputy judge Leila Sadat Asady, 60% of the women requesting divorce have suffered violence from their husband, but as she stated: "Only five percent of them actually go to court, and before court, they often withdraw their complaints." To Ms. Asady, it is the economical dependence of women in Iran and the emotional tie to their family, which lets victims of violence remain silent and tolerate the abuses too often.

It is clear that legal criminalization of domestic violence alone is not sufficient. Not only is it likely that the perpetrator of the crime will escape unpunished, slow judicial procedures also cause unnecessary distress to the victims, as they remain financially dependent on their husbands. In this regard Judge Asady emphasized the importance of continuing to create public institutions for the victims such as women's houses where they can seek refuge; public funds to support them financially and specialized courts. Her colleague Judge Dolatabady added the importance of female police officers and judges to address domestic violence better.

However, to break the silence of the victims, Ms. Asady also sees the need for a general focus on the problem of domestic violence and education to raise public awareness. Mr. Dolatabady reemphasized the importance of public education concluding that violence against women would persist as long as people consider women to be second-class citizens and regard them negatively. For the




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first time after the revolution, he said, law obliges the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to take measures to prevent the violence against women. Let us hope they will take the necessary steps.

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