PRESS RELEASE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY 2012: Much work still to be done

International Women’s Day (IWD) is intended to remind us all that the challenge of creating conditions in which all women have opportunities to fulfill their potential and develop their talents remains unfinished business. It is illuminating to note that the theme chosen by the United Nations for IWD 2012 is: “Empower Women – End Hunger and Poverty” while the European Parliament’s theme is “Equal Pay for work of equal value”.

Most of the progress achieved by women has followed expansion of opportunities notably in education, sports, careers and the arts. Women flourishing in these areas has not entailed reduction of opportunities for males. More importantly, women have flourished in these areas on terms set by men., most notably the importance assigned to competition. Greater equality in these areas has been achieved essentially by extending to women opportunities men already enjoyed.

However, the real and literal battleground over women’s equality is in those areas where equality is not defined by comparing women to men, or enjoying what men already have, but starting at the point of what women need in order to flourish as women. The traditional way of not addressing this area of women’s rights (which include bodily integrity, security and access to personal and family resources) has been to declare them to be in the ‘private’ sphere and, therefore, beyond the reach of the law. This technique of defining a world still dominated by men as public space and what occurs there as the business of the State and what occurs to women as ‘private’, remains the biggest challenge for women’s progress.

The issue here is that the underlying inequality of women, most prevalent in the home and personal relationships, is sustained by traditional religious and cultural values. Any attempt to disturb these values is seen as an abusive interference by the State in our private lives.

The extent of the subordination of women is reflected in the epidemic of domestic violence, the commercialization of sex engulfing young women and girls and the continued ineffectiveness of sexual offences legislation. Internationally, the extensive pornographic industry and backlash against abortion and termination of pregnancy attest to the vibrancy of this resistance to women asserting their rights to fulfill their potential and promise on their own terms. This response is predictable in all areas where enjoyment of women’s right require a reduction in male dominance or power in relationships. Indeed, sexual offences, for example, are not even seen or discussed in terms of women’s right to equality in the sense that if women had greater access to resources, authority, and power, sexual crimes would be more effectively addressed.

The daily abusive practices oppressing women are directed at women and seldom suffered by men, not because of any inherent gender or God-given differences between men and women, but because women do not have the power or resources to confront the abuse effectively.

Some success has been achieved by civic and political efforts to eradicate the technique of distinguishing between public and private spheres as a way of justifying abusive practises, even though this still remains to be translated into effective remedies. Domestic violence can no longer be excused as a matter for the couple alone.

While legal remedies for abuse of bodily and sexual integrity are slowly taking hold in Guyana, the vigor and vitality for real transformation is nowhere close to effectively challenging the commercial, religious and traditional forces that sustain pervasive inequality in this area. Effective remedies must start from positive strategies to keep women safe in intimate relationships; from concepts of the family based on mutual respect and the equality of both parties; from a concept of children as persons with rights rather than parental possessions.

As a society, we need to make links between daily papers reporting the latest domestic or sexual outrage and television commercials in which every fete and ‘bashment’ is projected as an opportunity for sexually abusive and irresponsible behavior. Resources available to the commercial forces committed to the degradation of women far outstrip those available to reformers. More than the lack of resources, however, the latter is hampered by lack of conviction and awareness that the male beating and stabbing his partner is not the cause but the consequence of values and forces that have a vested interest in sustaining the subordination of women.

Executive Committee, Guyana Human Rights Association, March, 8, 2012

c/o Guyana Human Rights Centre, 56B Austin Place & Hadfield St, P O Box 10653, Georgetown, Guyana. Tel: 226-1789/227-4911