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Statement by UNFPA Executive Director, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin on the death of a 23-year-old student in India

Through a Death a Nation Awakens

We do not know her real name. But she was known to some as *Nirbhaya*, the 'fearless one' who valiantly fought her rapists, or *Damini*, the 'lightning' that struck the conscience of India—and the entire world.

I share India's angst at the death of the 23-year-old student savagely violated in New Delhi on 16 December. This incident lays bare an ugly truth that is relevant not only in India but in every country, every day: the rights and potential of every young girl are at risk from gender-based violence.

Women have the same rights as men, and this means they are entitled to be safe at home, on the street or in the workplace.

Data shows that in 2011, there were more than 75,000 cases of rape, molestation and sexual harassment in India. These reported cases are the tip of the iceberg, and conviction rates are low: about 27 per cent.

In India as elsewhere, legislative and criminal justice systems have a role to play in stopping gender-based violence. But other institutions—such as public transportation and schools and universities—must also do their part. Health care systems must be equipped to recognize and respond to gender based violence, immediately, with sensitivity, respect and privacy. Protocols must be in place so that a survivor of violence receives the physical and psychological care which is her due and that health facilities have staff who are trained and equipped to gather forensic information that can facilitate the speedy administration of justice.

I speak to the people of India and every other country when I say that we need to teach boys at an early age to respect girls and women, and allow boys and girls to build relationships based on equality and mutual respect. Men and boys must become more central to processes of promoting and protecting the human rights of women. These attitudes need to be inculcated in families and in schools. Popular media must also use its reach to reinforce this message. Men of all ages are a part of this fight against violence as has already been demonstrated by large numbers in Delhi.

I call upon the leadership of India to rise to this sombre occasion and not only promise, but create a nation that is safe for every girl and every woman, anywhere, anytime, where safety is not incumbent on what women wear, what they do, or time of day.

The United Nations Population Fund stands ready to support the Government of India in this mission to take every step necessary from sensitisation to reform and time-bound administrative and legal action. Gender-based violence thrives on a culture of silence, acceptance and apathy. Therefore, the voices of people must not go unheard. Not this time.

I join India's resolve to ensure that this time intent matches action, and that the nation's response matches the invincible spirit of the 23-year old.