

Table of Contents

- [*Want gender equality? Let's start with ending child marriages*](#)
- [*Exploiting women for prostitution a crime against humanity says Pope Francis*](#)
- [*The women who fear saying #MeToo*](#)
- [*Violence against women and girls*](#)
- [*Global attitudes towards rape culture*](#)
- [*A leap forward for gender equality in global health*](#)
- [*Ten things you need to know about the hijab*](#)
- [*Enforcing gender roles on kids has consequences, but education can help*](#)
- [*Family planning is key to a healthy society*](#)
- [*UN rights chief urges all states to outlaw discrimination against LGBTI people*](#)
- [*World leaders don't understand women—and that's hurting gender equality, study finds*](#)
- [*Dignity kits distribution begins for Barbuda women and girls impacted by Hurricane Irma and Jose*](#)
- [*Child marriages: MEPs discuss how to put an end to this scourge*](#)
- [*Discrimination against women isn't unique to any one religion*](#)
- [*'Double suffering' when women targeted not only for gender, but also religion*](#)
- [*Forthcoming report on women's rights and freedom of religion or belief*](#)
- [*Women's rights are human rights, period*](#)
- [*Jasvinder Sanghera: I ran away to escape a forced marriage*](#)
- [*Why 'Medicalization' of FGM is a serious threat to women*](#)
- [*The legal age you can get married around the world, mapped*](#)
- [*Antonio Guterres selects women for three top UN positions*](#)
- [*Top 10 moments for women's rights in 2016: Inspiration for the year ahead*](#)
- [*Sex, honour, shame and blackmail in an online world*](#)
- [*How to empower women and girls*](#)
- [*How Muslim women bear the brunt of Islamophobia*](#)
- [*Islamic inheritance laws and rural women, new issue of ILC Framing the Debate series is out*](#)
- [*Sexual health gets little attention in a crisis, with devastating results*](#)
- [*'Completely failing women': Why the Zika epidemic is really a women's rights crisis*](#)
- [*Is there a sexist data crisis?*](#)

- [UN welcomes ICC's first conviction for rape as war crime](#)
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Want gender equality? Let's start with ending child marriages

By Megan E. Corrado

The Hill (12.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2OjZnTS> – Each Oct. 11th the global community pauses to recognize and celebrate the [International Day of the Girl Child](#). However, girls continue to face unique challenges simply for being young and female.

The mere fact that they are born female often results in a [devastating series of consequences](#), which inhibit girls from attaining gender parity, equal protection under the law, the free exercise of their human rights and the ability to realize their full potential.

The 2018 theme, "[With Her: A Skilled GirlForce](#)," aims to ensure girls have the skills necessary to attain financial viability. One major obstacle preventing girls from achieving these goals is child marriage.

Worldwide, around [15 million – or one in three – girls](#) are annually subject to child marriage, often forced or coerced. [Married minors are more likely to experience](#) poverty, domestic violence, lack of access to education, sexual abuse and emotional and physical health challenges. Child marriage frequently leads to adolescent pregnancy and childbirth, which pose dramatic risks due to a girl's biological immaturity. Moreover, [pregnancy is the leading cause of death](#) of girls aged 15-18. Those that survive often grapple with pre-birth complications, fistulas, stillbirth and other physical ramifications to themselves and their children.

Child marriage is [recognized as a human rights violation under international law](#) because it adversely affects the rights of girls and women. It bars them from being able to consent to marriage, receive an education, have healthcare and live without fear or exploitation. These rights are explicitly enumerated under [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), [the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), [the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) and other international instruments.

Decades of advocacy culminated when the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council adopted [its first substantive resolution](#) distinguishing child/forced marriage as a human rights abuse in 2015. The international community has since committed to eliminating child marriage by 2030 per the UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

While the practice is prevalent in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Chad and Niger, a lack of laws and law enforcement ensure its existence across social, economic, religious and geographical spectrums. Even in the United States, 24 states have no statutory minimum age for minor unions and 48 states provide for [judicial and/or parental exceptions](#) to child marriage restrictions.

In Afghanistan, [well over half](#) of all Afghan women are married before 18. Afghan law, however, prohibits marriage before 16 for girls and 18 for boys, although a court or girl's father may consent to her marriage at 15. Despite this law, the deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes and attendant [transactional perspectives](#) towards marriage often give rise to the deployment of child marriage as a bartering mechanism, frequently before the child brides hit puberty.

The practice of "badal" results in the exchange of daughters between two families for marriage, while "ba'ad" involves marrying off a girl to pay a debt, bring peace, or serve as recompense for murder, sexual assault, or other perceived crimes/wrongs committed by one family or community against another.

Poverty, insecurity, gender discrimination, lack of access to health care and education are the [key drivers](#) of child marriage. Poor families, particularly in rural areas, [sell their daughters](#) to wealthier families in exchange for large dowries, often to men who are significantly older and have additional wives.

The practice of child engagement, wherein two families commit a son and daughter to each other for marriage, remains rampant. Rates of child marriage [increase dramatically](#) in internally-displaced person and refugee returnee camps, where extreme financial hardship, illiteracy and lack of educational and economic opportunities are even more common.

Child brides are most often unwittingly thrust into arranged marriages. The power dynamics of these marriages, particularly with significant age disparity, render girls vulnerable to physical, sexual and psychological abuse from their husbands and families. [In order to escape these challenges](#), many brides run away from home, subjecting themselves to imprisonment for committing "moral crimes," while others choose suicide.

Women's full participation in decision-making and society is [imperative to eliminating](#) gender inequality, discrimination, violence and poverty. Restricting child marriage is a critical first step to ensuring girls can continue their education, freely exercise their rights, effectively participate in political, social and economic life and enter the "[GirlForce](#)."

Governments must both enact and enforce appropriate laws, devoid of discriminatory legal loopholes, to unleash the cultural change necessary to achieve the [gender equality goal](#) of the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda and give girls the opportunities they deserve.

Exploiting women for prostitution a crime against humanity says Pope Francis

By Philip Pullella

Reuters (19.03.2018) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2IdXxMO> - Pope Francis branded exploitation of women for prostitution a "crime against humanity" on Monday and asked forgiveness from society for Catholic men who use prostitutes.

The pope made his frank comments in a remarkable, freewheeling question-and-answer session with young people from around the world who came to Rome to prepare for a bishops' meeting scheduled for October at the Vatican.

Blessing Okoedion, a 32-year-old Nigerian who was once a victim of human sexual trafficking, told the pope she was troubled that many clients of prostitutes on the streets of Rome were Catholic.

"I ask myself and I ask you, is it possible for a Church that is still too male chauvinist to be able to question itself truthfully about this high demand by clients?" she said.

Francis responded that in Italy it was likely that some 90 percent of male clients of prostitutes were baptised Catholics.

"I would like to take advantage of this moment to ask forgiveness from you (exploited women) and society for all the Catholics who carry out this criminal act," he said.

"I think of the disgust these girls must feel when men make them do these things," he added.

Prostitutes, most of them victims of human trafficking from Nigeria, other African countries and Eastern Europe, are found at night on the streets of Rome's periphery and around parks.

At the meeting with the some 300 delegates at a university in Rome, Francis said sexual exploitation of women stemmed from a "sick mentality" embedded in many people. He added that feminism had still not be able to remove it and asked the young people to fight against it.

"(It says) women are to be exploited in one way or another. And that is what explains this ... it is a sickness of humanity, a sickness of looking at society in a certain way, a crime against humanity," he said.

Francis rejected the idea that going to prostitutes could be considered harmless.

"Who does this is a criminal. This is not making love, this is torturing a woman. Let's not confuse terms. This is criminal, a sick mentality," he said.

Francis also heard some tough talk from Angela Markas, 22, of Australia. "There is a tendency in the Church to avoid matters that are not-so-easy to talk about. This includes same-sex marriage, our sexuality, and also, the role of women in the Church," she told the pope.

Earlier this month, Catholic women led by former Irish president Mary McAleese demanded a greater decision-making role for women in the Church, urging the pope to tear down its "walls of misogyny".

The women who fear saying #MeToo

By Michele LeVoy

Al Jazeera (11.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2zEpf2m> - The revelations that Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein sexually harassed and assaulted women finally put sexual misconduct and abuse of power in the media spotlight.

We have known for a long time that violence against women is endemic and it has much to do with inequality and discrimination. While women in all social strata face the risk of being victimised, some are particularly vulnerable. That is the case with undocumented women.

The laws and policies governing irregular migrants reduce their control over their own lives, deny them public assistance, and isolate them from society. The consequences of these policies for women are detrimental.

Take the case of Maria, a domestic worker from the Philippines. She arrived in Germany to work in the home of a diplomat from the United Arab Emirates. She says the Emirati man repeatedly raped her and eventually returned to his country, leaving her behind, pregnant and undocumented.

She gave birth to a daughter but the diplomat never recognised her as his child, and was never held accountable for the rape because Maria did not report it for fear of being deported. When her daughter Hanna was three years old, Maria found out about one of our member organisations, Agisra, which assisted her in filing a complaint with the police in Germany. Maria received legal help and was able to have her deportation suspended.

Just like Maria, millions of other undocumented women who experience sexual harassment or abuse risk getting arrested, being deported and/or losing their livelihood if they speak up about it. Their abusers are well aware of this fact and exploit it fully, often intentionally misinforming them about what may happen if they leave or report an abusive situation. Few undocumented women like Maria are able to escape this vicious circle and seek help from the authorities.

Research carried out by the University of Illinois in four major urban centres in the United States in 2013 showed that 70 percent of undocumented migrants were less likely to contact law enforcement authorities if they were victims of a crime, due to their status.

A 2010 survey conducted in France, for example, found that one in three police stations would arrest a migrant woman and initiate deportation proceedings if she tried to file a complaint.

The failure to treat undocumented women as victims plays into the hands of their abusers. In their efforts to curb immigration through tougher policing and deportations, the authorities simply enable criminals to abuse undocumented women with impunity.

Research by UK-based black feminist organisation Imkaan found that 92 percent of surveyed women and children experiencing gender-based violence, who had immigration issues, reported being threatened with deportation by their abuser. Sumanta Roy, one of the authors of the report, told the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) that migration status "has a profound impact on women and their ability to leave a violent relationship".

Indeed, nothing will change for women until international human rights frameworks are reflected in local practice. In the past few years, there has been some limited progress in this direction.

In Spain, legislation enacted in 2009 on gender-based violence exempts undocumented women who are victims of violence from deportation, at least for the period of criminal proceedings, and provides them with an immediate right to access domestic violence shelters. Under the law, undocumented women who were victims of gender-based violence can also apply for a residence status and work permit.

In 2016, the Netherlands rolled out a policy called "safe in, safe out", that promotes the ability of all victims of crime to report to the police, without fear of immigration consequences.

The policy began as a modest initiative in Amsterdam in 2013, where the police realised that building trust with local communities was a prerequisite to safe neighbourhoods and effective policing.

The police organised sessions to inform members of local communities about the right to report crimes in a safe environment, which led to more victims of crimes reporting them.

A number of cities across the US have come to a similar conclusion, and have refused to let federal immigration authorities outsource their work to local police and service providers. This means that in these cities, undocumented migrants can access healthcare, report crimes and get other services without the risk of being arrested.

Undocumented victims of crime and abuse, including survivors of gender-based violence, can obtain special status in the US if they testify and support investigations. Yet, according to recent reports, the Trump administration's anti-immigration policies and stance have led to an increasing number of undocumented women choosing to endure violence and abuse over reporting it to the police.

All women and girls deserve to live a life free of violence. Achieving this requires us to understand how society's written and unwritten rules and practices create vulnerability and increase violence directed at women.

The ongoing #MeToo debate about sexual harassment is indispensable, but it also requires solidarity with all women, regardless of their status.

Violence against women and girls

The World Bank (08.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2BfaVhc> - Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a global pandemic that has or will affect 1 in 3 women in their lifetime. Violence is not only a personal struggle for the victims, but also has severe consequences on social and economic outcomes. As a leading development institution, the World Bank is uniquely positioned to address violence against women and girls around the world, and currently supports \$128 million in development projects aimed at addressing the issue.

Context

The numbers are staggering:

- Nearly 1 billion women will experience intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.
- Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner.
- 125 million women have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting.

One characteristic of VAWG is that it knows no social or economic boundaries: gender-based violence is a reality in both developing and developed countries, affecting women of all socio-economic backgrounds.

While terms like "violence against women and girls" put the focus on women as victims, and "domestic violence" masks who commits those acts, the overwhelming majority of

this violence is perpetrated by men, which makes gender-based violence a quintessential male issue. Therefore, we cannot unravel the causes of VAWG without first trying to identify what leads men to use violence.

What is known is that there is not a single causal factor, but rather a number of risk factors that include:

- **Social Norms.** Norms related to male authority, acceptance of wife beating, and female obedience affect the overall level of abuse in different settings. The expectations that society places on men play a key role. Men who fail to provide for their family's financial needs, for instance, tend to be socially sanctioned and may try to exert power over women and children in frustration, or to prove their manhood.
- **Exposure to Violence in Childhood.** Exposure to violence in childhood is a contributing cause of violence later in life. Boys who are subjected to harsh physical punishment, who are physically abused themselves, or who witness their mothers being beaten are more likely to abuse their partners later in life. For example, men who witnessed violence against their mothers growing up are approximately 2.5 times likelier to commit violence against a female partner.
- **Alcohol Use.** Excessive alcohol use, especially binge drinking, increases the frequency and severity of partner violence.
- **Poverty:** even though gender-based violence permeates all socioeconomic groups, evidence suggests that men who live in poverty or are socially excluded are more at risk of perpetuating violence because they can't find jobs or earn an income, which can lead to anger, frustration and violence. Conditions are most extreme in conflict, war-affected, or fragile states where economies have collapsed, whole populations have been displaced, and insecurity prevails.

The costs of violence against women are high. The trauma caused by VAWG often has long-term emotional impacts on the victims themselves, but can also lead children growing up in violent households to perpetuate the cycle of violence once they become adults, either as victims or perpetrators. Aside from psychological repercussions, gender-based violence has been shown to have dire economic consequences, costing an estimated 3.7% of GDP due to lost productivity which is more than double what most governments spend of education.

Strategy

Violence against women is a men's issue: it is mostly men who are abusing women. So men are integral to ending violence against women.

Evidence suggests that the initiatives that showed most impact in decreasing violence against women were community-based, used several approaches, and engaged with multiple stakeholders over time (men and women of diverse ages and ethnic background). They also addressed underlying risk factors for violence, including social norms regarding gender dynamics and the acceptability of violence.

Specifically, the most effective approaches included

- Directly engaging men in the spaces they occupy, sports for example, and having them reflect on how social norms affect them.
- Targeting men's peer groups and entire communities that establish and reinforce norms and behaviors through, for example, *Community Driven Development (CDD)* programs.
- Engaging broad-based alliances locally and nationally to change the discourse on men and manhood. The biggest of these is [MenEngage](#).

The World Bank's involvement in this issue is relatively recent, but it has a unique role. In October 2016, the World Bank launched a [Global Gender-Based Violence \(GGBV\) Task Force](#) to strengthen the institution's response through its projects to issues involving sexual exploitation and abuse. It builds on existing World Bank and other work to tackle violence against women and girls, advising on strengthened approaches to identifying threats and applying lessons in World Bank projects to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.

In November 2017, The World Bank released an [Action Plan](#) outlining administrative and operational measures being undertaken to help prevent and respond appropriately to incidences of sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) in projects the World Bank supports. The Action Plan addresses the [recommendations of the GGBV Task Force](#) released in August to strengthen the World Bank's capacity to identify, prevent, and mitigate against GBV in World Bank-supported projects.

As a financier of development projects, the Bank has supported \$128 million in development projects aimed at addressing VAWG. To implement these projects in an evidence-based, safe, and ethical way, the Bank, along with key global partners, has created a series of tools to provide operational guidance for staff to include VAWG prevention and response into their programs, which span many different sectors –from health and education to infrastructure and public services.

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Launched in December 2014, [the guide](#) provides IaDB and WBG staff and member countries with basic information on the characteristics and consequences of VAWG, including the operational implications that VAWG can have in several priority sectors of these organizations. It also offers guidance on how to integrate VAWG prevention and the provision of quality services to violence survivors within a range of development projects. Lastly, it recommends strategies for integrating VAWG into policies and legislation, as well as sector programs and projects.

As a leader in research on development issues, the Bank supports analytical work on violence against women and girls, which is a topic on which there is limited empirical evidence. An example of this is the [Violence against Women and Girls: Lessons from South Asia](#) report, which was the first of its kind to gather all available data and information on this topic in the region. The Bank has also produced a [systematic review of reviews](#) that examined the global evidence for effective interventions to prevent or reduce violence against women and girls.

And finally, as a convener, the Bank is uniquely placed to bring together a range of development stakeholders to discuss VAWG issues.

Results

The World Bank is a new actor in this area, but as a global development bank it is uniquely placed to support projects aimed at reducing gender violence.

The Bank finances projects directly, such as the [Great Lakes Emergency Sexual and Gender Based Violence & Women's Health Project](#). In 2014, the Bank approved \$107

million in financial grants to **Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Rwanda** to provide integrated health and counseling services, legal aid, and economic opportunities to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

The Bank also plays a leveraging role for larger operations, such as in Brazil. The Bank provided **Brazil** with a \$500 million Development Policy Loan for [a major infrastructure project](#) to update and connect Rio de Janeiro's urban transport system. The project takes advantage of the urban network to deliver a range of economic and legal resources to women. Now all stations will have women's restrooms and improved lighting. A similar transport-led initiative is now under way in Ecuador.

The Bank's **analytical work** looks at what works. The area of VAWG is a relatively new field in development, and most of the studies done to date have been in the developed country context. More needs to be invested in impact evaluations of interventions and regional research, such as the Bank did in South Asia to inform policy and programming. And using media and digital media provides an unprecedented opportunity for transformational change by affecting social norms and behavior. In 2015, Bank established [the WEvolve Global Initiative](#), which aims to empower young women and men to challenge and break through prevailing societal and cultural norms that underpin gender violence, as well as identify and address factors that lead men to use violence.

Global attitudes towards rape culture

Op-Ed by Mia Haas-Goldberg

HRWF (25.10.2017) - Last week, Saudi preacher Ahmed Bin Saad Al Qarni declared via Twitter that ["women instigate men to rape and assault them."](#) Commenting first on a video of a veiled woman getting into a car with men, [he writes](#): "Women are the cause of adultery and sexual harassment" because they "[make] the men go mad. Don't blame the men."

To his 66,000 followers, Al Qarni then [tweeted](#): "A woman who leaves her house wearing make-up and perfume is an adulteress. A good woman who's wearing a kitchen apron will never leave her house looking like that."

Saudi women may have gained the right to drive but many still retain their subordinate status and are viewed as objects for male satisfaction. According to a [2014 study](#) by a female Saudi researcher, nearly 80% of women in Saudi Arabia aged 18 to 48 have experienced sexual harassment. This past March, The Institute for International Research released [a report](#) documenting an 11.4% increase in sexual harassment rates in 2016, compared to 2014.

But the control and objectification of females is not exclusive to Saudi society. Women around the world face different amalgamations of patriarchy and regional comparisons should not devalue their individual experience.

While people may shake their heads at Al Qarni, male guardianship, and the prevalence of the burqa and niqab, the struggle for women's rights is not solely tied to religion or region. When Western pundits classify sexist statements, laws, and abuses in other countries as "barbaric" or "traditional" they suggest that sexual harassment and patriarchy are problems rooted only in non-Western culture.

As evidenced recently by the #MeToo social media campaign, sexual harassment and assault associated with male privilege is an international norm, not an exception.

Originally a response to the outpouring of sexual harassment allegations against American producer Harvey Weinstein, the #MeToo hashtag has been used [more than 1 million](#) times in the US, Europe, and the Middle East to share individual stories of abuse. The French used [#balancetonporc](#), the Spanish [#YoTambien](#), and [#ارضاوانا](#) across Arab countries. [Facebook said](#) that within 24 hours, 4.7 million people around the world participated in the #MeToo conversation, with over 12 million posts and comments.

In the United States, lack of appropriate legislation and legal channels to address sexual harassment and assault reinforce a rape culture founded upon victim blaming. Offering a space for both abuse and resistance, college campuses remain at the center of a national debate addressing violence against women.

In early September, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos [announced](#) that the Trump administration would replace the current government policy on campus sexual assault under Title IX. Her plan would allow schools to use a [higher standard of evidence](#) for reviewing complaints than the previous rules allowed, making it more difficult for survivors of assault to report abuse and seek support. DeVos sends a clear message to students and to the American public that survivors are unreliable, furthering the cultural taboo associated with prosecuting one's rapist.

Targeting women as instigators of sexual harassment undermines their fundamental human rights and ignores the early development process of boys and men. The lack of attention allocated to staunching male masculine honor ideologies and the hyper-obsession with controlling female sexuality is a result of societal structural inequalities.

From Saudi Arabia to the United States, hegemonic masculinity permeates both social and political spheres around the world. Regardless of whether offensive statements are expressed blatantly by Al Qarni or subtly by DeVos, rape culture is when we teach women how to avoid rape instead of teaching men not to rape.

--Mia Haas-Goldberg is a human rights activist specializing in the Middle East and North Africa. You can contact her at haasgold@gmail.com.

A leap forward for gender equality in global health

By Nicole Schiegg

Huffington Post (03/10/2017) - <http://bit.ly/2km4Jj0> - Women have been making sizable contributions to global health for decades. We have influenced advocacy, policy, technical and programmatic issues. However, as a global health community, we still battle conundrums like "all male panels" and not seeing enough women in the top leadership positions. In that respect, today was a game changer. Dr Tedros announced his senior leadership team at the World Health Organization (WHO). Not only do leaders represent 14 countries, including all WHO regions, **60% of the appointments are women**. This is monumental moment for gender equality in global health leadership.

WHO serves as the guardian of health for all people. However, if we are being honest, the organization has lagged behind when it comes to achieving gender equity and indoctrinating this issue into its leadership, governance, and programs. In announcing his team, Dr Tedros said he was "reflecting my deep-held belief that we need top talent, gender equity and a geographically diverse set of perspectives to fulfill our mission to keep the world safe."

It should be no surprise that Dr Tedros kept his promise on gender parity. Throughout his campaign, Dr Tedros reaffirmed his belief that “gender equality brings sustainable development – that investments in girls’ and women’s health and rights are investments in a healthy and more prosperous future.” He consistently pledged that as Director-General (DG), he would “encourage bolder and more sustainable investments and partnerships to advance girls’ and women’s health and rights.”

Dr Tedros has also said that women, children and adolescents are “the center of gravity of universal health coverage.” In that spirit, I am proud that women were the center of gravity during his campaign for DG. Led by the incomparable Dr Senait Fisseha, campaign chair and now transition chair who spearheaded WHO’s senior leadership recruitment, there was a dedicated and hard-working team of women pushing the campaign across the finish line. This is a moment to take stock and reflect on the determination and drive that contributed to today’s advancement. There are so many women to thank. I would like to give a shout out to the following amazing team: Joy DiBenedetto, Elizabeth Bird, Claire DeLancey, Christy Feig, Meron Feleke, Jessica Freifeld, Anjali Nayyar, Kathleen Omollo, Jill Sheffield and Zain Verjee.

Today we must also credit the Women in Global Health movement. Women in Global Health is a multi-stakeholder, inter-generational dialogue that brings together leaders at all career-levels in conversations about furthering gender equality in global health leadership across the globe. They stayed vigilant during the campaign – asking the important questions on equity and staying visible throughout the process. In fact, to make the case, Women in Global Health conducted an online survey at the end of 2016. Regardless of which DG candidate one preferred, universal health coverage along with the gender equality and empowerment of women were the top ranked priorities by respondents. I am optimistic about the future of this movement and encourage everyone to support their agenda – our common agenda.

So, what’s next? I am excited to see how these new WHO leaders will shape the organization. As I have said before, a strong WHO benefits us all. And we all have a role to play in WHO’s success. The same is true on advancing gender equality in global health - men and women alike. Follow and engage with #WomenInGH to help keep these issues at the forefront and to encourage more leaps forward in equality.

Ten things you need to know about the hijab

By Jessica Ham

Culture Trip (01.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2hFecRI> - The hijab, which is the Islamic expression of modesty and devotion, is more often than not misunderstood and misinterpreted in both society and mass media. What is the hijab, why do people wear it, and why should we care? Here are 10 things you need to know about the hijab before making an assumption about Islam.

The hijab is not just the scarf

Contrary to popular belief, the hijab is not just the physical scarf that many Muslim women choose to wear over their hair. The hijab in its entirety is the belief that as a Muslim, one must try to diligently live every day in respect of God, with modesty, and show devotion to the religion as a whole. By wearing the physical scarf, it is one way of expressing one’s love for Islam. In this way, hijab can also be the way one acts, thinks, and treats others, aside from wearing the physical scarf.

There are many different forms of hijab

The hijab comes in many forms, and in many levels of covering one's body as well. The shape of the scarf over the head differs from person to person, some choose to cover their faces as well, and some only choose to dress modestly while still showing their hair. These are all forms of hijab, even if it does not look like the stereotypical one sees in the media.

The hijab also applies to men

Because the overarching meaning of hijab is to live one's life modestly with love for God, the hijab also applies to men. While not as well known outside the Muslim community, men also strive to wear the hijab both physically and mentally every day, the same as Muslim women. The men's physical hijab however focuses more on covering the lower body and not the hair or upper body.

Who can Muslims take off the hijab for?

The hijab, once worn as a scarf covering one's hair and covering the body, can only be taken off in front of family members or women. A Muslim woman wearing the hijab will therefore usually refrain from showing her hair to any man not related to her by blood.

The hijab is a choice for the majority of Muslims

Putting aside extreme countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, Muslim women are not always forced to wear the hijab. In fact the majority of them choose to wear it and are in love with their hijab, and are completely free to choose when and how to wear the scarf.

There will never be one uniform reason on why Muslims choose to wear hijab

Although there may be some general similarities to why Muslim women choose to wear the hijab, there will never be one overarching specific reason why that satisfies all. Muslim women choose to wear the hijab for countless different reasons, from personal to religious purposes, from interpretations of the Quran to fashion; the reasons behind every single person's choice to wear the hijab will differ. But that is the beauty of it, that it is not a universal object that conforms everyone. In fact, it can express every person's unique strength and belief system.

What the Quran says about the hijab

Although there are many interpretations to what the Quran actually says about the hijab, the most common understanding comes from these verses:

"Say to the believing men that they restrain their eyes and guard their private parts. That is purer for them" (Quran 24:31)

"Oh you Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and the women of the believers to lengthen their garments. This is better so that they will be recognized and not harmed. God is the Forgiver and the Merciful" (Quran 33:59)

The hijab is not oppressive or restraining

Although this misconception is slowly changing, the hijab is still too often equated with oppression. The hijab is in no way oppressive or restraining to the majority of the 1.6 billion Muslims around the world, and does not prohibit them from pursuing their dreams, acting the way they want, dressing how they like, or marrying who they love. The hijab is far more often than not a freedom of expression.

Why the hijab is empowering for millions of Muslims across the globe

The important thing to understand about the hijab is that it is in fact extremely empowering for millions of Muslim women. The hijab empowers them with the pride and love for their religion, and the power of modesty also helps many feel stronger. Being modest means forcing people to

judge you based on your mind and your heart, and less so on your face or body. This gives courage and self-esteem to many who choose to wear the hijab.

Understanding the hijab is understanding another form of feminism

Finally, because the hijab can be so empowering to so many people, wearing the hijab has become an expression of feminism. Wearing the hijab can mean to many that they have the freedom to choose how to self-express. Because a woman is using self-expression and not being forced to dress a certain way by societal pressures, many women then feel empowered and more equal to men because they are forcing people to judge them on their capabilities and not on how sexualized their bodies can be.

Enforcing gender roles on kids has consequences, but education can help

New studies show how, across the globe, kids are being forced to conform to gender roles.

By Zack Ford

Think Progress (29.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xfObKT> - A collection of new studies published in [next month's Journal of Adolescent Health](#) takes a deep dive to explore the impact of gender norms on adolescents across the globe. It turns out that even though gender norms might vary in small ways from country to country, there are consistent themes, and adolescents suffer real consequences when they're enforced.

Some of the studies' findings aren't surprising. Girls are taught to feel vulnerable and that boys are predators, and boys are conditioned to be strong and independent. What it looks like when these norms are violated looks somewhat different across cultures, like boys not playing sports in Baltimore or Ghent, or helping their moms with household chores in Delhi, or employing female gestures in Shanghai. But there were also some very consistent behaviors that were nearly universally seen as violating gender norms: boys wearing nail polish, girls playing football/soccer, and any kid wearing clothes stereotypically worn by the other gender.

Moreover, the studies found that gender norms lead to consequences for all children, both in the immediate and long-term. Children who violate gender norms, especially transgender and gender nonconforming youth, are often bullied and harassed by their peers, and they may be corrected by their parents in shaming ways as well. And conforming to the norms isn't much better, as the researchers explain:

"Gender norms and beliefs have significant implications for both girls and boys. The consequences for girls in many parts of the world include child marriage, early school leaving, pregnancy, HIV and sexually transmitted infection risk, violence exposure, and depression. But despite popular perceptions boys are not unscathed. As a result of these hegemonic norms, they engage in and are the victims of physical violence to a much greater extent than girls; they die more frequently from unintentional injuries, are more prone to substance abuse and suicide; and as adults their life expectancy is shorter than that of women."

Despite the seeming universality of these norms, they are not determined biologically, the researchers say, but socially. Children can be taught that they don't have to conform to those norms and that they don't have to pressure each other into doing so. Such changes "have the potential to improve the well-being of adolescent boys and adolescent girls in the short and long terms."

Nicole Cushman, executive director of the sex ed advocacy organization Answer, told ThinkProgress that sex ed can be an effective vehicle for discussing these issues. "What we would consider truly comprehensive high-quality sex ed goes far beyond the plumbing lesson," she said. Not only can it address gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation, it can equip young people with "language skills, thinking skills, and tools to state their boundaries and respect others' boundaries," addressing issues like consent and sexual assault.

As a result, young people learn to be more accepting of their peers. "At its core, what sex ed can do is really shift some of our cultural norms about sexuality and gender," Cushman explained, "because it's fundamentally about how we relate to one another."

"If we do the work of creating safe and inclusive places where it's safe for young people try on different roles and challenge those norms, [non-binary and transgender] kids might feel more comfortable coming out and getting the support they need if they want to transition."

The studies found that, though the ideas of gender norms start in early childhood, they are solidified far more rigidly upon the onset of puberty, because the goal becomes preventing the adolescents from having sex. But both because of the increased signaling and the physiological effects of puberty itself, "these issues are on the top of the mind for adolescents," Cushman noted. She thinks it's important for parents and teachers "to listen to young people and let them bring their voices into the conversation and help guide what it is they want to talk about."

Some might not see the problem with gender norms, particularly given how common they are. "We have cultural and social norms about a lot of things, and that in and of itself is not inherently a bad thing," Cushman said. But the problem with these norms is that "society has created this set of expectations that are not necessarily helpful." They're "not grounded in a biological basis," they create "unrealistic and unhealthy expectations about people's gender," and they are "really rooted in sexism."

Starting to unpack these norms has the potential to make society safer and more inclusive not only for LGBTQ youth, but for everybody.

Family planning is key to a healthy society

HRWF (26.09.2017) – Today is [World Contraception Day](#) which highlights the right to family planning and the benefits it brings to society. As part of the [UN's Sustainable Development Goals](#), family planning is important because it provides women with the means to decide if, when, and how many children they will have. In addition, unplanned pregnancies and maternal deaths are prevented, the rate of abortion decreases, the risk of STDs (including HIV/AIDS) for both men and women is lowered, teen pregnancy diminishes, girls and women are more likely to receive an education, and more women join the workforce.

"Family planning is central to gender equality and women's empowerment, and it is a key factor in reducing poverty," says the United Nations Population Fund.

You can read more about the work that UNFPA is doing [here](#).

UN rights chief urges all states to outlaw discrimination against LGBTI people

United Nations (20.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2y7Vjhe>– While many governments are moving in the right direction, too many are falling short when it comes to protecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, the United Nations human rights chief said today, urging all States to outlaw discrimination against this community.

Speaking at a ministerial event during the General Assembly's high-level session, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said that he understood that in many parts of the world this is a difficult topic to broach.

"When pressed, officials sometimes tell me their hands are tied: the public, they say, will never accept equality for LGBTI people. But surely this is back to front. If public opinion is hostile towards LGBTI people, that makes it all the more urgent for governments to act to protect them," he said.

Reports by his Office (OHCHR) frequently reveal "a landscape of brutal violence and widespread discrimination, fuelled by negative public attitudes and in many cases actively sanctioned by the State," the High Commissioner noted.

"We ask all governments to allow individuals to love whom they choose, to outlaw discrimination, tackle hate crimes and the bullying so frequent in schools, and to protect intersex children from harm – including by banning medically unnecessary surgery on intersex infants. The onus has to be on governments to protect and respect rights – and explain to the public why these measures are needed," he added.

While gay and lesbian people – and to a lesser extent trans people – have seen huge gains over the past 20 years, many of those gains are fragile and face backlash, stated High Commissioner Zeid.

"As always, when rights are rolled back, it's minorities that are most exposed – immigrants, religious minorities, racial minorities and, of course, lesbian, gay, bi, trans and intersex people. Invariably, those who lose the most are those who have the least to begin with – the least power, money and public support," he said.

He stressed that governments alone cannot end discrimination and called on all – the media, schools, faith leaders, the business community – to stand up for the human rights of LGBTI people.

Next week the High Commissioner will be launching a new set of global standards, developed by his Office, which highlight the actions that businesses can and should take to end discrimination against LGBTI people, in the workplace and beyond.

"We must push forward and overcome the obstacles to equality – in workplaces, schools, the law-courts and the streets. The time for justice is now."

World leaders don't understand women—and that's hurting gender equality, study finds

By Abigail Jones

Newsweek (20.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xm9m0X> - For years, late night host Jay Leno conducted impromptu interviews with random people on the street, asking simple trivia questions in hopes of embarrassing them on national television. "What country did we fight in the Revolutionary War?" (One answer: "France!") "What are people from Denmark called?" (One answer: "Denmartians?") "What is bipartisanship?" (One answer: "It's like, bisexual.")

The joke stops being funny when the interview subjects are leaders in developing countries and the questions are about gender equality and women's issues.

A new study released late Tuesday at the United Nations General Assembly questions whether policymakers in five countries are equipped with the basic information they need to advance gender equality. Equal Measures 2030, a global partnership of nine organizations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, conducted a survey of 109 policymakers in Colombia, India, Indonesia, Kenya and Senegal. Half were men, half were women, and they worked at every level of power—in central government and parliament, at the state and local levels, and as senior civil servants or in other influential fields. The results revealed that, when it came to key issues affecting girls and women, those in charge were "largely not confident in their knowledge of the facts."

Only about one-quarter believed they knew the maternal mortality rate in their country (the number of women who die from pregnancy or childbirth) or the percent of women in the labor force. One in eight believed they knew how many girls got married before 18. And over half were so shaky on the subject of early marriage that they weren't comfortable wagering a guess about rates in their own country. (Equal Measures 2030 was unable to provide a breakdown of these statistics by age, gender or position of power, but said those insights would be available soon.)

When policymakers did venture guesses about the challenges girls and women face, their answers revealed just how shaky they were on the facts. In Colombia, policymakers estimated that 4 to 80 percent of girls marry before 18 (correct answer: 23 percent). When Kenyan leaders were asked to ballpark the proportion of women in parliament, their replies ranged from 6 to 90 percent (correct answer: 21 percent). And in India, decision-makers believed that women represented anywhere from 20 to 70 percent of the labor force (correct answer: 27 percent).

"It's hard to cite a statistic cold, but I think policymakers would be able to make a more educated guess on other issues, like economic growth last year or your biggest export industry in your country," says Alison Holder, director of Equal Measures 2030. "You might not get it exactly right, but you'd get it in the bounds... Instead, [their answers were] consistently inconsistent."

"Even the best intentioned decision-makers can't make the best decisions if they're operating in the dark," Katja Iversen, CEO of Women Deliver, one of the Equal Measures 2030 partners, said in a statement.

The study comes two years after 193 countries adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, a set of 17 goals—from ending hunger to tackling climate change to providing quality education for everyone, everywhere—that global leaders are striving to meet by 2030. The Paris Agreement, for example, aims to mitigate global warming. Another goal focuses entirely on gender equality. "These are really game-changing promises for girls and women," says Holder of Equal Measures 2030, which works to provide decision-makers and advocates with the evidence and data they need to reach this goal. "Many policymakers [in the study] were aware of it, but we have a big job to prepare them to act."

The study also showed that men and women have vastly different views on how gender equality has changed in the last five years. While 78 percent of men thought women in

their country had achieved more equality, only 55 percent of women agreed. And more than twice as many women as men said equality had either stayed the same or gotten worse (44 percent to 19 percent).

But there is a silver lining: most leaders interviewed said that they would know where to go to access data and information on key issues if they needed to. "If we believe them on that question, that's somewhat positive," Holder says. "But the message is, they're not readily equipped with it—it's not a part of their vocabulary around policy-making, which reflects a lack of interest on these issues."

Dignity kits distribution begins for Barbuda women and girls impacted by Hurricane Irma and Jose

UN Women and UNFPA fast track funds to Antigua and Barbuda to help women and girls.

UN Women (11.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xiV5T0> - A joint effort by UN Women and UNFPA started the distribution of "dignity kits" containing basic health and hygiene products for displaced women and girls from the Caribbean island of Barbuda, as they arrived in Antigua, escaping Hurricane Irma.

The catastrophic hurricane has driven the entire population of Barbuda, a small island in the eastern Caribbean, to its twin island of Antigua. Of 1,413 people evacuated, more than 600— many of them women and girls with unique and often-overlooked needs, such as access to hygiene and sanitary products—are in temporary shelters.

Dignity kits address unmet needs of women and girls

"There was a very huge need for [dignity kits] ...because [although] there was mass distribution of different [aid] products and items, not a lot of focus and emphasis were placed on the sanitary items that women and girls needed in particular," explained Farmala Jacobs, the acting Executive Director of the Directorate of Gender Affairs, the national gender machinery of Antigua and Barbuda.

At the aid distribution centre, as Ms. Jacobs talked to relief coordinators, displaced women ran up to her, because they had overheard about the dignity kit items and were looking for sanitary napkins and other products that women and girls urgently needed.

"UN Women knew we had to pull out all stops to ensure that once the population of Barbuda was evacuated, help would be on hand immediately for the women and girls who were displaced. Regrettably, we are not strangers to disaster recovery situations, so we moved swiftly and decisively to work with our UN partners and the national gender machinery in Antigua to jumpstart our relief effort. Our primary concern was the provision of items that could restore a measure of normalcy and dignity to women of all ages who would have been ripped from their homes. It was our duty," said Alison McLean, UN Women Representative in the Caribbean.

With the first allocation of USD 15,000 from UN Women, which will be supplemented by UNFPA funds in the second tranche, 300 dignity kits were prepared by the Directorate of Gender Affairs. The kits contain basic health and hygiene products for women and girls, such as soap, underwear and sanitary napkins.

Shelter safety and security for women and girls

With Hurricane Jose still posing a threat, residents of Irma-ravaged Barbuda are being temporarily housed in shelters and private homes, some with family, in Antigua. As in most displacement settings, women and girls need protection from gender-based violence in crowded shelters.

Farmala Jacobs and her team are already on top of this, prioritizing the implementation of guidelines and protocols for sharing resources and spaces in the shelters to ensure the safety of women and girls:

“While we are distributing the kits to women personally, we are also using that opportunity to ...ensure that all of the shelters protocols and guidelines are being followed... We are hoping [that] with UN Women’s support that we can also put the proper structure in place where there is monitoring of the shelters...as well as to ensure that the information that is needed is available to all the persons within the shelters about safety and prevention [of violence].”

Together with community volunteers, the Directorate of Gender Affairs worked under strenuous circumstances, even as the risk of storm surges loomed over the Caribbean island, to distribute 165 dignity kits on Friday evening, and to distribute the remaining 155 on Saturday.

With over 90 per cent of Barbuda’s infrastructure destroyed by Hurricane Irma, it is unclear when Barbuda residents will be able to return to their island. UN Women and UNFPA will continue to work with the Government to meet the needs of women and girls of the island displaced by Hurricane Irma and Jose.

Further reading: [How climate change affects women differently than men](#)

Child marriages: MEPs discuss how to put an end to this scourge

One in every three girls in developing countries is married before turning 18, and one in nine before 15. Child marriages limit future prospects as children are usually forced to drop out of school. Girls also face dangerous complications from pregnancy and childbirth, the leading causes of death among adolescent girls in developing countries. They are also at great risk from suffering abuse. On 11 April Parliament's women's rights and human rights subcommittee discussed the issue with experts.

European Parliament News (12.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2p4VAq4> - Child marriage affects both girls and boys, but girls are most at risk, representing 82% of the children married. The child marriage rate is slowly declining worldwide, but population growth will increase the number of people living with the consequences of a child marriage: 950 million by 2030 (compared to 700 million today).

Child marriages occur on all continents but the highest rates are found in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The three countries with the highest rates of child marriage are Niger (77% of women are married before the age of 18), Bangladesh (74%) and Chad (69%). In a [resolution](#) adopted in plenary last week, MEPs called on the Bangladesh government to close the loopholes in their legislation on child marriages, allowing exemptions to the minimum age of 18 for women and 21 for men.

The factors driving child marriages

the causes of child marriages include poverty, gender inequality and parent’s fear for

their children's security. Anna Maria Corazza Bildt, a Swedish member of the EPP group, said she had spoken to parents in refugee camps who saw marriage as the best way to provide their children with a future.

A [recent study](#) among Syrian refugees in Lebanon found that 24% of refugee girls between 15 and 17 were already married. Estimates indicate that child marriage rates are four times higher among Syrian refugees than among Syrians before the conflict.

How to tackle it

Experts and MEPs stressed the importance of working directly with the children and the communities to change social norms, guarantee access to health, education and legal services and ensure a strong and legal framework.

"Parliaments everywhere should adopt laws to protect children and in particular not deny girls of their dignity and ability to make fundamental choices in their own lives," said Pier Antonio Panzeri, an Italian member of the S&D group, chair of the human rights subcommittee and co-chair of the hearing.

Professor Benyam Dawit Mezmur, chair of the UN committee on children's rights, stressed the importance of the role of regional organisations, while Fredrik Malmberg, the Swedish ombudsman for children, called on EU countries to end double standards for asylum seekers. "Our legislation and our institutions should provide equal protection from all children," he said.

Ms Vilija BLINKEVIČIŪTĒ (S&D, LT), Chair of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality and co-chair of the hearing remained that child and early marriage can be significantly lowered by education and economic empowerment for women.

"Tackling child marriage gives us an entry point to address a whole range of other issues," said Lakshmi Sundaram, executive director of the non-governmental organisation Girls not Brides. She said child marriages could hold back other development efforts, "such as ending violence against women, keeping children in school, or getting rid of HIV/Aids".

Discrimination against women isn't unique to any one religion

We must call out inequality wherever we see it.

By Graham Perrett

Huffington Post (13.03.2017) - <http://huff.to/2mIfD03> - It's sometimes difficult, looking from a male perspective, to immediately notice all of the ways that women are treated less equally than men in so many aspects of their lives. There are the obvious ones: the gender pay gap and lower levels of representation in public life, that no-one could miss, but sometimes we just don't see inequality for what it is.

Religious custom can be so embedded, for so long, that many men fail to even recognise it as inequality. That can be the problem. From insisting that women cover their heads, to refusing to shake women's hands, women have been, and still are, treated as less than men by most religions, not just Islam.

Arguably, gender inequality continues to be the basis of much religious hierarchical power, irrespective of whether you are Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist.

From the crystal clear vision of hindsight, I can now see the inequality I accepted as normal in my Catholic upbringing. When I was a very young boy, the women and girls I attended mass with on Sundays were obliged to wear a veil, called a mantilla, on their heads. This rule, derived from The Bible (Corinthians 11:2-16) and included in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, stated that men, when in a church or outside a church, should be bare headed, but women must cover their head and dress modestly. After I'd finished high school the 1983 Code of Canon Law overturned that rule.

Amazingly, until 1994 women were not permitted to be altar servers during Catholic Mass. This privilege was reserved only for boys and men.

Catholic women are still treated very differently if they choose to follow a religious life. Women cannot be ordained as priests in the Catholic Church, but they are permitted to join an Order as a consecrated religious. Nuns devote themselves to caring for the sick, homeless, refugees, prisoners and other people in need. Many Australians, including me, have benefited from the care and education delivered by these wonderful women.

But even religious organisations, like all powerful organisations, cannot and should not ignore inequality.

No more than we should turn a blind eye to any institution that unnecessarily permits inequality, whether it is in the hierarchical structure of the organisation itself or whether it is allowing boys to avoid politely shaking the hand of a woman at a formal function.

But it is hypocritical for people belonging to any of the organised religions to point their finger only at Islam for treating women unequally. Only he who is without sin should cast the first stone.

Often the behaviour is not intended to demean women. Nevertheless, that does not excuse the behaviour but may provide the opportunity to find a solution.

Demonising all or any particular religion is also not the answer.

Slowly, very slowly, religious tradition is aligning with modern societal norms. The treatment of women in organised religion has come a long way. However, I would suggest not yet far enough and certainly not yet quickly enough.

Signs and symbols are important. They have always been important and are especially so when powerful organisations sanction inequality.

Sensible progressives need to call out inequality wherever we see it; whether it is in our schools; in our churches, mosques, temples or synagogues; or in our workplaces. Sometimes, particularly men who are entrenched in the patriarchal hierarchy, are simply blind to inequality until someone points it out to them.

'Double suffering' when women targeted not only for gender, but also religion

By Olivia Jackson

World Watch Monitor (08.03.2017) - <https://bit.ly/2NhYomG> - On International Women's Day, one statistic you may not hear much is that 83% of global women identify with a religious faith.

Pew Research asked people in 84 countries how often they pray; in half of them, substantially more women than men say they pray on a daily basis.

And yet one of the under-reported aspects of the global Church under pressure around the world is that, when conflict comes to their local community, those same women can be subject to the double discrimination of not only being targeted for their gender, but also for their faith.

A year ago, a special conference focusing on this issue heard how women are being increasingly targeted as a deliberate strategy to rob them of their faith and their identity.

Records of women being systematically targeted in order to undermine "opposing" groups, in both armed conflict and inter-communal tension, stretch back millennia.

From dictating rules by which "other" women must live, through to sexual assault and forced pregnancy, prostitution and marriage, the power of this targeting is clear: women who survive are injured, traumatised and shamed.

Those enduring sexual violence may then be ostracised from their community. They may bear the perpetrator's child or contract infection. Existing children are left motherless, husbands without wives, and, for unmarried men, the availability of brides is reduced. So men receive the enemy's message clearly: you cannot protect your community.

While religion is not often given as the sole reason for viewing a community as "other", gender-based violence (GBV for short) does occur along religious lines.

In the recent war in the Central African Republic, women were specifically targeted both for their faith and their gender.

Despite an end to the civil war, predominantly Hindu Tamil women in northern Sri Lanka allegedly continue to be raped by Buddhist Sinhalese government forces, and young female Karen teachers in Myanmar have been raped and murdered by Buddhist Burmese Army soldiers.

ISIS abducted and abused many Christians and Yazidi women, just as Boko Haram is doing with Christians.

And records show that up to 50,000 women (and unknown numbers of men) were raped in the Balkan war of the 90s. The vast majority of these were Muslim, their attackers Christian.

Very few women who face this violence find recourse to justice. In war, chaos prevents prosecution, and, post-conflict, a combination of shame, trauma, fear of retribution and lack of access to legal structures stop women seeking redress, even where political will to prosecute exists.

Domestic laws may be inadequate and international frameworks, while valuable, are difficult to access and take years to prosecute: by September 2016, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia had only managed to convict 32 people for crimes of sexual violence during the conflict.

Humanitarian law has not traditionally treated what happens to women as seriously as what happens to (predominantly male) combatants. The Geneva Conventions term sexual violence as “outrages against personal dignity” rather than a crime of violence.

Convention IV, concerning civilians, puts the onus on warring parties to protect women “against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault”, rather than an outright prohibition of these crimes. This wording additionally implies stigma attached to women whose honour is attacked.

Recent changes to the Geneva Conventions, initiated by William Hague and Angelina Jolie, have specifically named rape as a “grave breach” – the most serious violation, obliging all Convention signatories to prosecute regardless of where the violation took place. However, grave breaches do not apply to civil war, or non-conflict zones such as refugee camps.

In peacetime, women have the remote chance to use legal “instruments” such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, if their government has ratified this. But they must primarily rely on domestic laws to be adequate and enforced.

This is particularly unreliable if a woman has been subjected to GBV due to religious reasons in countries where the overwhelming majority of the population adheres to one religion. In Pakistan, Hindu and Christian communities report that girls are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslim men.

Despite laws against forced conversion and underage marriage, few girls return home: most families are too poor or lack the education to access legal help, or have their cases overruled.

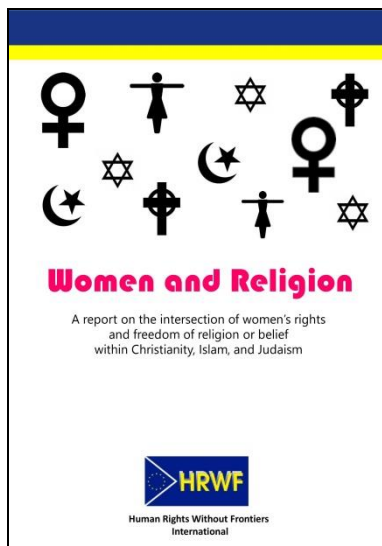
New penalties against forced conversion, passed by the Sindh state legislature in 2016, were vetoed by the Governor after pressure from Islamist groups. Some laws exacerbate women’s situations: Myanmar law bars Rohingya women from having more than two children, or any children out of wedlock.

While this paints a grim picture of the use of GBV in religious persecution, the fact that GBV itself is increasingly reported is testament to its rising status. International humanitarian law in particular has progressed since the 1990s. But the problem of inadequate, remote or unenforceable laws remains a major barrier to both deterrence and justice for such an effective instrument of persecution.

Forthcoming report on women’s rights and freedom of religion or belief

By Elisa Van Ruiten, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (08.03.2017) - This April, HRWF will release a new report analysing the relationship between women’s rights and the right to freedom of religion or belief, with a specific focus on the major Abrahamic religions and the influence of patriarchy.



Why this report?

We frequently hear discussions surrounding the topics of women's rights and freedom of religion or belief, and often the resounding conclusions remark that the two rights are fundamentally at odds with one another.

Such notions have required us to ask many questions about the intersectionality of women's rights and religion, including: Is there really no place for religion in women's rights? If feminism is about ending 'sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression', does religion, and thus the right to freedom of religion and belief, really represent these things at its core? Finally, is there an alternative discourse and approach to take so that religion can better include women's rights and vice versa?

The report explores the major Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – looking at religious text, practice, and cultural influences, as well as the presence of patriarchal systems that sustain and perpetuate social norms that pose threats to women. In particular, we have investigated child and forced marriage, violence against women, denial of reproductive rights, denial of education, and female genital mutilation, among others. The aim of this report is to reveal the misconceptions about the intersection of the two rights and try to find a way forward, together.

Women's rights are human rights, period

By Chris W. Williams

Huffington Post (07.03.2017) - <http://huff.to/2mBnsGC> - In January, millions of women around the world took to the streets to advocate for legislation and policies on women's rights and other issues. While the Women's March on Washington drew 500,000 passionate activists and the lion's share of the media attention, the march also extended to all seven continents in locations as varied as DR Congo, Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula. The message was clear and profound – women will not sit back and be designated as second class citizens. Women's rights are human rights, period.

While the sentiment is easily understood, the execution is often more complex. To improve gender diversity, employers look to balance ratios, broaden the hiring net, and ensure representation at the table. Similarly, the public and not-for-profit institutions that promote education and health and other basic services seek to reach women as well

as men. There is a tendency merely to involve women once things are already in place, let women in the room but not think critically about how the room is arranged. By confining our efforts to bringing women into the conversation without questioning the underlying power relations, we “add women and stir,” running the risk of reproducing inequality, further marginalizing women, and denigrating their roles in society.

Yes, gender balance is important; however, it should not be the goal. Transformative change can only happen when a strong movement for gender equality reshapes norms, habits and social policy. In order for this to become a reality, we need to rethink the roles of women and men, adolescent girls and boys, as well as women and men facing disability, old age, marginalization and vulnerability. This is true everywhere but especially so in geographies, North and South, where poverty is manifest and therefore where women are vital for sustaining healthier, better-educated and vibrant communities.

Sticking with the status quo will lead to a world that neither responds to the needs of women and girls, nor provides adequate and efficient services that empower women to become leaders in their communities. Globally, over 1.2 billion women lack access to basic sanitation and hygiene. This has far-reaching impact on their lives, from childhood to motherhood and on to their twilight years.

Without access to toilets, women fear assault and a loss of dignity from having to defecate in the open. They suffer urinary tract infections and other diseases from holding in their urine or feces. When they menstruate they miss work, intentionally not travel, and avoid school, thereby suffering economic losses for the family. The average woman menstruates for 3000 days in her lifetime; however, the subject is hidden by taboos preventing women from learning how to manage their periods hygienically and safely.

In a forthcoming study on women’s access to sanitation services in the West African country of Niger by WSSCC, UN Women and the African Institute of Training and Demographic Research, researchers found that less than 12% of those surveyed felt safe while using toilets. When asked why, they said that it is because they are not gender segregated. In the same study, researchers found that at least 70% of toilets surveyed could not be closed from the inside. The study will be launched 20 March during an event at the Commission on the Status of Women.

This has a huge impact on the well-being of women and girls, inducing shame, risk and fear. For the 1.2 billion women who lack access, a focus on sanitation and hygiene is an effective way to link one vital narrative (toilets) to sustain another (women’s rights).

Over the past five years, there has been a groundswell of interest in menstrual hygiene as well as in a set of tactics activists and policy makers are using to break the taboo associated with the subject. In places as diverse as Senegal, Niger, Kenya, Tanzania, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Nigeria, Malawi and Cambodia, women – and men – are openly discussing menstruation.

At the national level, governments are engaging in conversations with activists to ensure schools, health clinics, public markets, transport hubs, as well as individual households have safe, secure sanitation facilities for women and adolescent girls. Their commitment takes the form of approved policy guidelines and budget allocations, as well as retooled program interventions and systems to monitor the implementation of these programs.

At the local level, individual households, local governments and small-scale entrepreneurs are engaging in conversations about how to bring about a change of behavior in which people make connections between sanitation and health, hygiene and dignity. Their commitment takes the form of tens of millions of people stopping the

practice of open defecation, investing in sanitation and adopting hygiene practices, including menstrual hygiene, that ensure no one is left behind.

While interest in menstrual hygiene is growing, with it is a wider reflection on the appropriateness of basic services for the disabled, socially marginalized groups, the elderly and the homeless as well as for women. The discussion on menstruation is breaking down barriers, allowing for a deeper reflection on multiple forms of inequality and discrimination.

These critical, yet pragmatic tactics to promote gender equality are far from complete. Much work remains. However, the likelihood of these gaining traction is greater as a result of the commitments made by 182 Member States in September 2015 with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. The 17 "SDGs" as they are commonly referred to, provide a fifteen year (2016-2030) framework for social, ecological and economic development. Rather than being confined to one goal, the themes of gender, equality and non-discrimination run through most of the targeted actions of all 17 global goals. The attainment of one goal requires an understanding of the other goals. By improving their access to sanitation and hygiene, women can at once manage menstrual hygiene with safety and dignity, have greater mobility, attend school and take steps to realize their productive potential.

Practical action, taken to scale and reinforced by the commitments of the international community, is a decided break from business as usual. Women and men are now better placed to generate a discussion on how the status quo is leading to a world that isn't responding to the needs of women and girls. They can replace "add women and stir" by being part of efforts to improve policy, budgets and program design. They can re-think the people who execute and implement, those who are left behind, the indicators that we use to monitor progress, which together can improve the suitability of these services, so that sanitation and hygiene is a reality for everyone, everywhere.

At WSSCC, we are committed to this principle, and are applying it in all countries where we operate, thereby informing our work on policy, advocacy and the large-scale implementation of sanitation improvement programs. We recognize the importance of empowering women and men to take control of their sanitation needs, to construct latrines, and to improve their health and well being. The approach, known as "collective behavior change," builds trust, enabling women and men to promote menstrual hygiene while also contributing to efforts to end female genital mutilation and prevent child marriage.

The path of least resistance reproduces gender inequality. It is time we stop adding, and start integrating women into the work place, the policy arena and the delivery of basic services. On this International Women's Day 2017, that indeed would #BeBoldForChange.

Jasvinder Sanghera: I ran away to escape a forced marriage

Jasvinder Sanghera was locked in a room by her parents when she was 16, when she refused to marry the man they had chosen for her. Here she describes how she escaped with the help of a secret boyfriend - but lost all contact with her family as a result.

BBC Magazine (24.02.2017) - <http://bbc.in/2kUpCSe> - Growing up we had no freedom whatsoever. Everything was watched, monitored and controlled. We understood that we had to be careful how we behaved so as not to shame the family.

I'm one of seven sisters and there's only one younger than me so I'd watched my sisters having to be married at very young ages - as young as 15.

They would disappear to become a wife and go to India, come back, not go back to school and then go into these marriages and be physically and psychologically abused. And my impression of marriage was that this is what happens to you - you get married, you get beaten up, and then you're told to stay there.

My parents were Sikh and Sikhism was born on the foundation of compassion and equality of men and women, and yet here we have women who were treated very differently. My brother was allowed total freedom of expression. He was also allowed to choose who he wanted to marry. But the women were treated differently and that was reinforced within the communities. It's gone unchallenged and it's deeply ingrained.

I don't think I was smarter. I just don't know what it was within me. My mother used to say: "You were born upside down, you were different from birth."

Maybe she helped me out by saying that, because it made me question a number of things, and then when I was shown the photograph of this man, as a 14-year-old, knowing that I'd been promised to him from the age of eight and being expected to contemplate marriage, I looked at this picture thinking: "Well he's shorter than me and he's very much older than me and I don't want this."

And it was as simple as that.

But within our family dynamic we were taught to be silent.

Saying no to the marriage meant my family took me out of education and they held me a prisoner in my own home.

I was 15 and I was locked in this room and literally I was not allowed to leave the room until I agreed to the marriage. It was padlocked on the outside and I had to knock on the door to go the toilet and they brought food to the door.

My mother was the very person who enforced the rules. People don't think of women as the gatekeepers to an honour system.

So in the end I said yes, purely to plan my escape. And it was as simple as that, because then I had freedom of movement.

The only friends we were allowed had to be from an Indian community as well. And my best friend, who was Indian, it was her brother who helped me in the end.

He became my secret boyfriend. He saved some money and said, "I want to be with you and I'll help you to escape." He would come to the house at night and stand in the garden and we would secretly mouth things to each other through the window.

One day he dressed up as a woman and went into a shoe shop and pretended he was shopping. He handed me a note which said, "I'll be at the back of the house at this time - look out of the window." So I did, and he mouthed for me to pack my wardrobe and I lowered two cases down using sheets tied together, and flushed the toilets so my mother wouldn't hear.

And then one day I was at home with my dad, who was at home because he worked nights, and the front door was open, and I just ran out.

I ran all the way, a good three-and-a-half miles, to where my boyfriend worked and hid behind a wall and waited for him to come out. He went and got my cases and then picked me up in his Ford Escort and got me to close my eyes and put my finger on a map, and it landed on Newcastle.

I sat in the footwell of the car all the way so no-one would see me and then when I saw the Tyne bridge I was absolutely amazed by it because I had never been anywhere outside Derby.

My parents reported me missing to the police and it was the police officer who told me I had to ring home to let them know I was safe and well.

My mother answered the phone and I said: "Mom, it's me. You know, I want to come home but I don't want to marry that stranger."

Her response has stayed with me for the rest of my life. She said: "You either come back and marry who we say, or from this day forward you are now dead in our eyes."

It was only later on when things settled down that I begin to think, "I've done it but where's my family? I want my family." I was missing them terribly. You feel like a dead person walking.

My boyfriend used to drive me to my hometown at 3am just so I could see my dad walking home from the foundry.

What changed how I felt was the death of my sister, Robina. She was taken out of school at 15 for nine months, married to a man in India, and then came back and put in the same year as me and nobody questioned this at all. But he treated her terribly and when her son was around six months old she severed the relationship.

She then married for love and my parents agreed to it because he was Indian - Sikh and from the same caste as us. She again suffered domestic abuse but my parents made it clear that because she had chosen him she had a duty, doubly, to make it work.

She went to see a local community leader - they have a lot of power, my parents would have seen his word as the word of God - and he told her: "You need to think of your husband's temper like a pan of milk - when it boils it rises to the top and a woman's role is to blow it to cool it down."

When she was 25 she set herself on fire and she died. When she was - I say - driven to commit suicide, that was the turning point for me.

I've learned to live my life with no expectations of family whatsoever. I've never had a birthday card in 35 years and neither have my children. For my children it's a total blank on their mother's side when it comes to family. I've got nephews and nieces that I'll never meet because all of my siblings sided with my parents.

I have actually stipulated in my will that I do not want any of my estranged family to be at my funeral because I know the hypocrisy that exists within them. They will want to show their face, but if they couldn't show it when I was alive, I'm not going to give them that privilege when I'm gone.

I have three children - Natasha who's 31, Anna who's 22 and Jordan who's 19.

You almost live vicariously through your children because you want them to have everything you never had.

My daughter married an Asian man and I was worried - I didn't want this family to take it out on her that her mother was disowned and had run away from home. But thankfully for me my fears were completely unfounded because here was an Indian family that did the exact opposite of what my family did.

Starting a charity, Karma Nirvana, in 1993 from my kitchen table allowed me for the first time to start talking about my personal experiences and what had happened to my sister. My family wanted us to never speak about Robina again.

Sometimes at Christmas my children would meet these different women at the dinner table - survivors disowned by their family - and they had no idea who would be the next person at our table, but they understood why.

The charity will be 25 years old next year. We have helped make forced marriage a criminal offence, we have a helpline funded by the government which takes 750 calls a month - 58% of callers are victims and the others are professionals calling about a victim.

We do risk assessments, offer refuge and help plan escapes.

We still don't have enough responses from professionals and we've got to try to increase the reporting, but we're getting there. This is abuse, not part of culture where we make excuses - cultural acceptance does not mean accepting the unacceptable. Abuse is abuse.

I'm a grandmother now - my daughter's expecting her second child in March. And you know when I look at them I think to myself, 'they're never going to inherit that legacy of abuse because of that decision I made when I was 16.'

And that really makes me feel a lot stronger.

Other reading:

[U.N. General Assembly adopts resolution to end child, early, and forced marriage worldwide](#)

Why 'Medicalization' of FGM is a serious threat to women

By Emma Batha

Global Citizen (06.02.2017) - <http://gblctzn.me/2k5UsXE> - A growing trend for midwives and nurses to carry out female genital mutilation (FGM) is undermining global efforts to eradicate the internationally condemned practice, experts have warned.

Morissanda Kouyate head of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices called for courts to get tough on health workers convicted of carrying out FGM.

He also urged professional medical and health associations to expel members who repeatedly perform FGM.

"Medicalization is one of the biggest threats against the program to eliminate FGM," Kouyate told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Rome ahead of international FGM awareness day on Monday.

He called for countries to revise their laws on FGM to make clear that health professionals convicted of offences should face the maximum sentences allowed under the legislation.

An estimated 200 million girls and women worldwide have undergone FGM, which usually involves the partial or total removal of the female genitalia and can cause a host of serious health problems.

Speaking at a global conference on FGM in Rome last week, Kouyate said medicalization was an unfortunate result of early efforts to tackle FGM, which had focused on the health risks.

The ancient ritual – practiced in at least 27 African countries and parts of Asia and the Middle East – is usually carried out by traditional cutters, often using unsterilized blades or knives.

In some cases, girls can bleed to death or die from infections. Later on, FGM can cause fatal childbirth complications.

Kouyate said growing awareness of the risks had lead parents to take their daughters to clinics.

The trend had been encouraged by "the open arms approach" of many health workers who saw FGM as a source of income.

Medicalization is widespread in Egypt, Sudan, Guinea, Kenya, Nigeria and Yemen, according to U.N. data. In Egypt and Sudan, FGM is also carried out by doctors, Kouyate said.

Laws flouted

Campaigners and officials at the conference repeatedly voiced concerns over medicalization which they said served to legitimize the practice.

Kouyate, a doctor from Guinea where FGM is almost universal, described FGM as "the greatest violation of a woman's rights".

"The time has come to call a spade a spade – it is mutilation," he told the conference.

Unlike traditional cutters, he said health workers fully understood the implications of cutting the genitals.

"Whatever the size of the cut it's wrong. It has to be stopped and it has to be prosecuted," he added.

Most African countries affected by FGM have banned the ritual but laws are usually poorly enforced.

"We have a law, but everything else is missing," Senegalese parliamentarian Aminata Diallo said. "The problem is nobody reports the situation."

She said she was pushing for a law that would make it a crime to fail to report FGM.

Many judges were scared of handling FGM cases, Diallo said, following a trial in 2004 in which a judge was attacked and left paralyzed.

Campaigners said families often circumvented laws by crossing borders to have their girls cut.

Parents were also carrying out the ritual in secret late at night and increasingly getting their daughters cut as babies or toddlers to minimize the risk of detection.

The head of Kenya's FGM prosecution unit, Christine Nanjala, said they had handled 76 cases since 2014.

But she said there were ethical dilemmas, particularly where adult women had asked to undergo FGM. "Do you treat them as victims or criminals?" she asked.

The legal age you can get married around the world, mapped

Around the world, children are taken from their families and married off against their will, often at the behest of their families.

Indy100.com (January 2017) - <http://bit.ly/2juD7r5> - Despite many nations introducing legal minimum ages for marriages, many have exemptions when "parental consent is given", undermining national legislation.

Often there is inequality when it comes to the age at which girls and boys are respectively allowed to be married off.

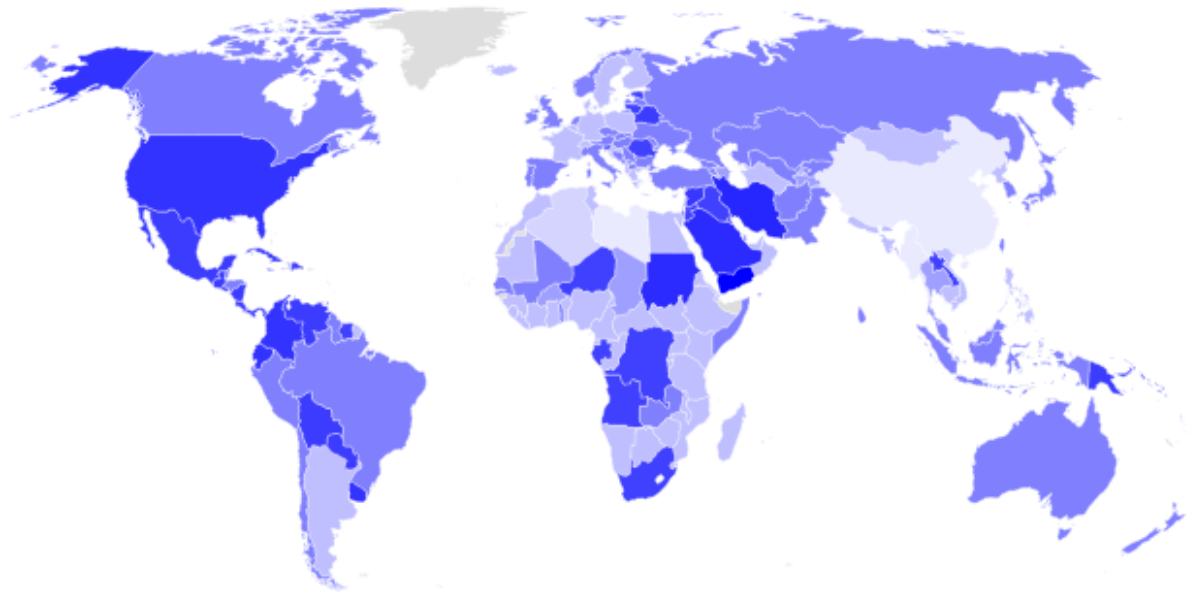
Girls Not Brides is a campaign group committed to ending child marriage in the world.

Using their data, compiled from 2015 with updates from 2016, indy100 has created this series of maps.

Isis-controlled territory in Iraq and Syria has not been featured on these maps, but the age of marriage consent differs within those territories.

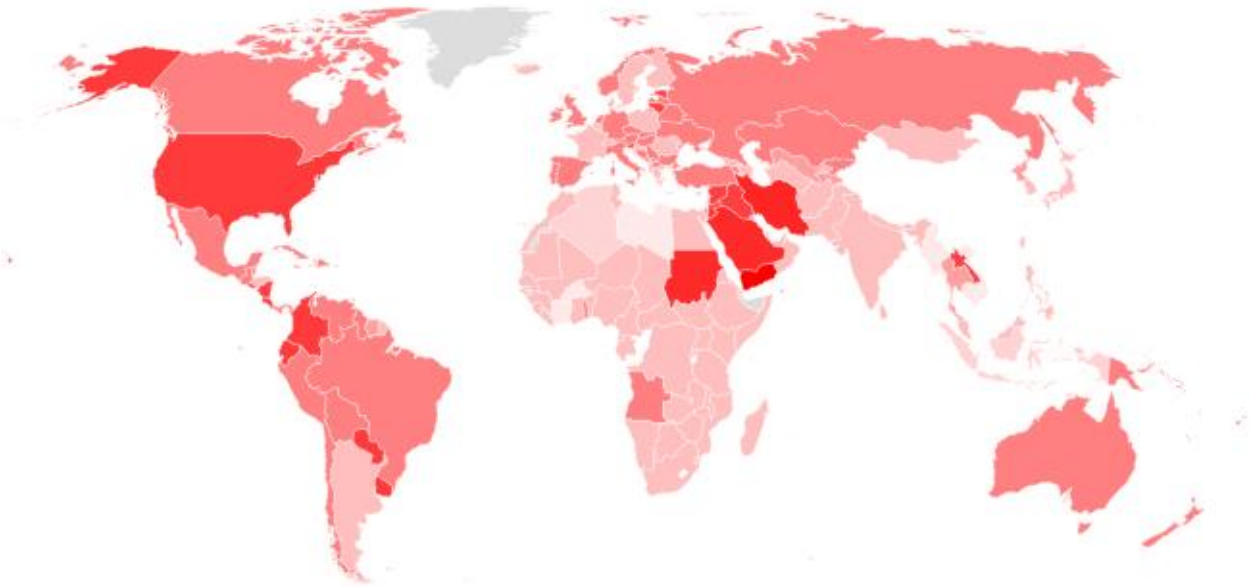
Women and girls

Legal age of marriage (with parental consent).



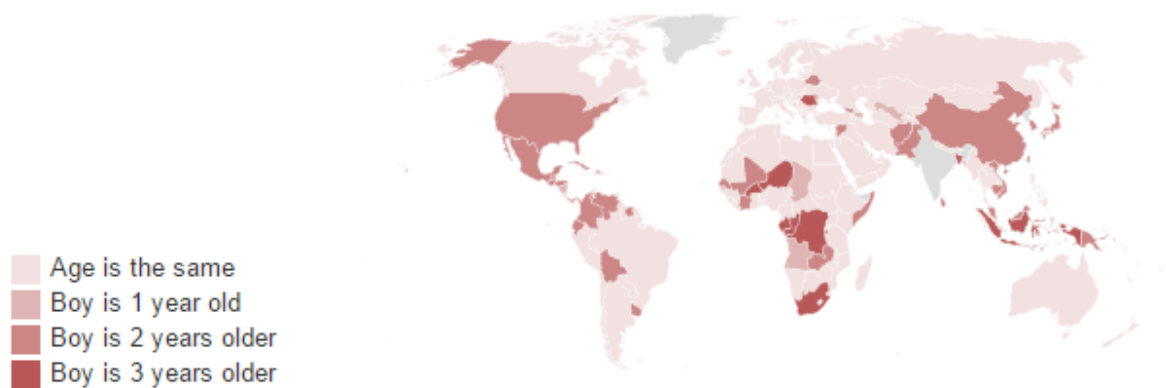
Men and boys

Legal age of marriage (with parental consent).



Age gaps

Age differences (gender) for legal marriage with parental consent.



NB. In North Korea and India, the age for girls is older than boys, by 1 and 3 years respectively.

Raising the age in 2016

In July 2016 Tanzania's high court ruled that the country's Law of Marriages Act must be revised to eliminate inequality between the minimum marriage ages for boys and girls.

Both are now set at 18.

The decision followed a tightening of marriage laws, introducing tougher punishments for men who marry school girls or impregnate them.

In January 2017 Georgia will bring both ages to 18, following the abolition of an exemption in the George Civil Code that allowed for adolescents to marry "in special circumstances".

The 2013 constitution of Zimbabwe rules that the age for both genders must be 18, yet the Marriage Act contravenes this, stipulating 16 for girls. Two former child brides Loveness and Ruvimbo, along with ROOTS, a constituent member of Girls Not Brides, lobbied the country's supreme court. In 2016, the court ruled that the Marriage Act was unconstitutional.

Proposed laws

Legislation has been proposed in Malaysia that will increase the minimum age to 18 for Muslim girls.

Gambia is set to outlaw marriage by any person under 18 with a 20 year prison sentence for those involved, and 10 years for anyone who had knowledge about the marriage but did not attempt to prevent it. The legislation is expected to reach Gambia's National Assembly by July 2017.

Reducing the age

In late November the cabinet of Bangladesh proposed to lower the legal marriage age 'to preserve a girl's honour'.

According to Human Rights Watch, 52 per cent of girls in Bangladesh marry before they 18, and 18 per cent before they turn 15.

While the draft legislation sets the age for girls at 18, it also contains provisions for marriage below age 18 being permitted in "special circumstances, such as accidental or unlawful pregnancy."

Human Rights Watch claims that the draft does not set any minimum age for such "exceptional" marriages.

Girls Not Brides in 2017

The current Girls Not Brides strategy will end in 2016. A spokesperson for Girls Not Brides told indy100 about their plans for the coming 12 months:

"Our efforts are going to be focused on supporting our members re: implementing national strategies aimed at ending child marriage (or working with different government ministries to develop one), securing funding for the sector, advocating for different sectors (especially health, education and humanitarian responses) to embed child marriage into programming."

Antonio Guterres selects women for three top UN positions

First Post (16.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2h9VW09> - UN Secretary-General designate Antonio Guterres has selected women representing Asia, Africa and Latin America for three top jobs as the foundation of his pledge to promote gender parity and geographic diversity at the world body.

In his first personnel appointments, he nominated Nigeria's Environment Minister Amina Mohammed to be the deputy secretary-general.

Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti of Brazil is to be his chef de cabinet and Kyung-wha Kang of South Korea his special advisor on policy, a new position.

Guterres told reporters after his swearing in on Monday that his priority would be to appoint more women to top jobs in order to achieve gender parity at the world body.

"I am happy to count on the efforts of these three highly competent women from different regions of the world," he said on Thursday.

"These appointments are the foundations of my team, which I will continue to build, respecting my pledges on gender parity and geographical diversity."

The three appointments of women comes after the failure of the UN to elect a woman as the secretary-general despite a strong campaign on their behalf and the emergence of several strong women candidates.

Women are under-represented at all levels in the UN bureaucracy. Only 17 of the 79 under-secretaries-general are women.

Mohammed was Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's special advisor on post-2015 development planning before returning to Nigeria as environment minister.

The daughter of a Nigerian father and a British mother, her entire career was spent on development and related issues.

A career diplomat, Viotti is now Brazil's ambassador to Germany. Before that she was at the UN as her country's permanent representative.

Kang, who was once a broadcast journalist, works for the US as an assistant secretary-general and deputy emergency relief coordinator. Earlier she was the deputy high commissioner for human rights.

Top 10 moments for women's rights in 2016: Inspiration for the year ahead

Global Fund for Women (13.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2gHKCcU> - When you look back on 2016, what will you remember? It's been a year filled with extreme highs and lows for women's rights around the world. There have been rollbacks and new challenges for women and girls in countless countries, from the [United States](#) to [Turkey](#) and [Brazil](#). As we look back on the past year, we are reminded of the [undeniable power of women's movements](#)—because when women and girls come together, they are stronger, more effective in driving sustainable change, and better able to resist injustice, fear, and hate. Join us in celebrating just a few of Global Fund for Women's highlights for gender equality from the past year—including legal wins, major breakthroughs, and moments of resilience and strength. Let's carry forward this inspiration into 2017 to make women's movements more powerful than ever.

1. 21 girls returned home in Nigeria, with call to #BringBackOurGirls

In October 2016, 21 of the more than 200 girls who had been kidnapped from their school in Chibok, Nigeria in April 2014 by extremist group Boko Haram [were released and returned home](#). Women and women's groups, including Global Fund for Women partners, have been instrumental in leading the Bring Back Our Girls movement in Nigeria and have remained steadfast in their hope and determination. Women's groups around the world have carried out protests outside embassies and have helped keep up pressure on the Nigerian government to ensure the return of all the girls, women, men, and boys kidnapped by Boko Haram. We will continue to fight for the release of the remaining Chibok girls and of all those who remain in Boko Haram's captivity, and will continue to invest in girls' education and rights.

"Boko Haram sees girls' education as a threat simply because they are aware of the tremendous potential and power of an educated girl," said Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi, a longtime Global Fund for Women advisor in Nigeria, after the girls were released. "Those who seek to maintain the status quo see it as a threat, whereas those who know that the development of any country is boosted by educating girls, invest in girls' education."

2. Historic ruling for rape survivors in Guatemala

In the first successful prosecution for sexual violence committed during Guatemala's military conflict from 1960-1996, a Guatemala court sentenced two former members of the military to a combined 360 years in jail in February 2016 for crimes against humanity. The two men were found guilty of holding 15 indigenous women in sexual and domestic slavery at the Sepur Zarco military base in northern Guatemala in the 1980s, and were also charged for murder and forced disappearance. Global Fund for Women grantee partner Unión de Mujeres Guatemaltecas, one of the oldest women's rights

organizations in Guatemala, helped the 15 indigenous q'qch'is women survivors of sex and domestic slavery win this landmark case.

The trial marked a significant step toward ending widespread impunity for sexual violence in conflict around the world. "We the judges firmly believe the testimony of the women who were raped in Sepur Zarco," said Yassmin Barrios, chief judge of the court. "Rape is an instrument or weapon of war. It is a way to attack the country, killing or raping the victims. The woman was seen as a military objective."

3. Making strides for women leaders in Asia Pacific

This year, Global Fund for Women concluded the [Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women \(FLOW\) fund](#), a four-year \$5.9 million initiative. With funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, we supported 139 organizations in 26 countries to empower women to tackle gender-based violence, increase their economic potential, and [engage in political life](#). As a result, over 200,000 women developed leadership skills and over 5,000 were prepared to run for local office.

4. Women prevent a total ban on abortions in Poland...again

When a total ban on abortions was proposed by the government in early 2016, Global Fund for Women supported Federation for Women and Family Planning and ASTRA Network to help them build a powerful movement defending women's reproductive rights. With crisis support provided in April, they built a broad coalition of women's groups and other grassroots organizations across Poland to raise awareness about the threat to women's health and human rights, and launch effective media campaigns to put pressure on the government throughout 2016 leading up to massive "Black Monday" strikes that led Poland's parliament to withdraw the proposed legislation in October.

Hundreds of women and men wore all black, boycotted work and school, and took the streets in Warsaw, Gdansk, Wroclaw, and across the country to fight against the law that would make abortion illegal in any instance, with violations bringing a prison sentence of up to five years for women and their doctors. Just days after the mass protests, legislators voted against the proposal.

However, Polish women's fight for control over their own bodies is far from over: since 1993, Poland has had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, with abortion only legal in cases of rape, incest, or life of the mother, and only within the first 12 weeks of a pregnancy. And this is not the first time a complete abortion ban has been proposed and rejected in Polish Parliament, most recently happening in 2015, 2013, and 2011—with the women's movement there every step of the way.

5. Nothing can stop women activists in Egypt

Over the past year, Egyptian women's resilience has been tested time and again amid [an escalating crackdown on human rights and feminist spaces](#). Just last week, Azza Soliman, a bold Egyptian woman human rights defender and the founder of [the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance](#), was arrested by police officers with an arrest warrant signed by one of the judges overseeing the investigation of Egyptian human rights organizations. After hours of interrogation, Azza Soliman was released on bail—the best possible outcome, though far from the end. Her arrest came three weeks after authorities froze her personal and organizational assets, without a court hearing, and not long after she was banned from traveling.

In June, Mozn Hassan, Founder and Executive Director of Nazra for Feminist Studies in Egypt and a Global Fund for Women [board member](#), was also officially banned from

traveling by the Egyptian government—a common tactic used as part of judicial harassment against human rights defenders.

In April, El Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Violence and Torture—one of the only clinics in Egypt providing critical services to survivors of violence and torture—was raided by security forces for the second time in two months. The two bold directors, Dr. Magda Adly and Dr. Aida Seif El Dawla, refused to leave the premises while the police tried to evict them without showing an official closure order. And, the latest: Egyptian president al-Sisi is poised to sign a new bill on associations, which, if enacted, would give the government extraordinary powers over NGOs and would effectively end independent civil society in Egypt.

Despite the escalating harassment and government threats, women and women's groups in Egypt remain more determined than ever to advance women's rights.

In November, Mozn Hassan [accepted the 2016 Right Livelihood Award on behalf of Nazra for Feminist Studies with a passionate speech](#). "This award is not only a recognition of Nazra's work, it is a recognition of a century of feminist activism in our country that has inspired us and that we have sought to carry on as much as we can," she said.

6. Women on the front lines of resistance in Brazil

"The message I want to get across from the women's movement is that we have a goal for 2018: to have a feminist, progressive political agenda and to have women in leadership. And in order to get there, we all need to support the women's movement." – KK Verdade, Executive Director of ELAS Fund, the only women's fund in Brazil and a longtime Global Fund for Women grantee partner.

[We spoke with KK Verdade](#) before the Summer Olympics in Rio to better understand the political and economic crisis in Brazil, following the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and interim president Michel Temer's conservative push and all-white, all-male Cabinet. The [latest polls show growing disapproval of Temer's leadership](#) and, as KK Verdade pointed out, women are on the front lines, leading protests in Rio and throughout Brazil, and the women's movement continues to fight against rollbacks in women's rights proposed by the government.

The [outbreak of the Zika virus in Brazil has put a spotlight on the country's strict abortion laws](#). Global Fund for Women's grantee partner SOS Corpo in Recife—the epicenter of the outbreak—is a leader in driving a national movement for sexual and reproductive health and rights. The crisis has opened a rare window of opportunity for the group to challenge religious fundamentalists and push for legal reform allowing women to decide over their bodies.

7. Haitian women lead recovery after Hurricane Matthew

"Women and girls are in a very difficult situation, catastrophic, almost apocalyptic. But the Haitian people, especially Haitian women, are very courageous. We know how to keep our head above water and we will continue to fight. For us, life is a perpetual struggle." – (Marie) Michelle Vernet, Collectif Feminin Haitien pour la Participation Politique des Femmes (FANM YO LA), Global Fund for Women grantee partner.

In the face of severe destruction after Hurricane Matthew made landfall as a Category 4 storm in Haiti in October, [women took quick action to lead recovery](#). Global Fund for Women's grantee partners began to fill gaps in immediate relief and planned how best to meet the unique needs of women and children.

More than 200 people around the world met our call to support women in Haiti, raising nearly \$40,000 for women-led groups in Haiti who have deep roots in their communities and are focused on driving sustainable change and empowering women. With money in the hands of Haitian women, though the need remains great, we feel hopeful for the rebuilding and recovery process, and for the future of Haitian women and girls.

8. Progress in Palestine to end violence against women

In June, the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Palestine announced plans to establish the National Observatory on Violence Against Women in 2017, which will collect and document cases of violence against women for the first time—a significant step forward for Palestinian women. Global Fund for Women's grantee partner Palestinian Working Women Society for Development, which has been working to advance women's rights for 35 years, advocated for this new observatory to help curb disturbing rates of violence against Palestinian women. With the data collected by the observatory, Palestinian Working Women Society and other women's groups are hopeful they will be able to better advocate for changes in laws and policies, raise awareness about violence against women, and help empower women survivors of violence.

"Having accurate information on violence against women will allow us to build up support to pressure Israel at the international level," said Amal Khreisheh, general director of the Palestinian Working Women Society, [in an interview with Al-Monitor](#). "At the regional level, we could use such information to launch a systemic advocacy campaign to place pressure on decision-makers to amend laws and policies and ensure protection for women."

9. A small light of hope after deadly LGBTQI violence in Pakistan

Across the globe, people are being killed for being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex (LGBTQI), or gender non-conforming; the deadly mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida in June was just [one of many, mounting instances of violence against LGBTQI people around the world this year](#).

Violence is especially prevalent against those who are activists for the LGBT community. Twenty-three-year-old Pakistani transgender activist Alisha was shot nine times on May 23rd and died a week later because medical staff at one of the largest medical facilities in the northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Lady Reading Hospital, refused to provide medical attention and delayed treatment for more than 17 hours while they debated whether or not to place her in the ward for male or female patients.

Following Alisha's death, Global Fund for Women's grantee partner Blue Veins Pakistan joined with the TransAction Alliance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to carry forward her work for trans* rights—and achieved a critical policy win. "For the first time in the history of Pakistan, there will be government development schemes for the transgender community in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," Qamar Naseem, a gender equality and LGBTQI activist in Pakistan who is Program Coordinator of Blue Veins Pakistan, explained. "The government has announced that there will be separate wards in hospitals for the transgender community. This access to health care as well as to housing and protection in the new policy, we see as a great achievement."

10. U.S. Global Strategy on Adolescent Girls carries promise for girls' rights

In March 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry released the U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls, which is a critical policy to empower girls around the world and protect their health and rights. Global Fund for Women partnered with the team behind the powerful film *Difret* in 2015 on a petition asking President Obama and the U.S. State Department for the release of the Girls Strategy and a comprehensive plan to

address and end child marriage. Throughout the campaign, we generated 156,320 signatures on the petition, and delivered the petition and signatures to Ambassador Catherine Russell in September 2015—helping to drive the eventual release of the Global Strategy.

The next Administration must fully fund and implement this strategy in order for it to make a difference in the lives of girls and young women globally. We know that [girls and young women are incredible changemakers](#) with potential to change their communities and countries.

As we look back at these major breakthroughs for women’s rights around the world, we are determined not to go backwards. We know that social change and advancements in rights take time and courage. We must draw from the resilience of women’s movements around the world to move the needle on gender equality and stand up, get loud, and fight back in the face of harassment, hate, and rollbacks in rights. Let’s continue to work together to build women’s movements that are thriving, unified, and fearless across borders—so that at the end of 2017, we have even more to celebrate.

More reading: [There is good news on gender equality – if you look to the developing world](#)

Sex, honour, shame and blackmail in an online world

A BBC investigation has found that thousands of young women in conservative societies across North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia are being shamed or blackmailed with private and sometimes sexually explicit images. Daniel Silas Adamson looks at how smartphones and social media are colliding head-on with traditional notions of honour and shame.

BBC (26.10.2016) - <http://bbc.in/2eDrNpv> - In 2009 an 18-year-old Egyptian girl, Ghadeer Ahmed, sent a video clip to her boyfriend's phone. The clip showed Ghadeer dancing at the house of a female friend. There was nothing pornographic about it, but she was wearing a revealing dress and dancing without any inhibition.

Three years later, in an act of revenge after their relationship had ended, the boyfriend posted the video to YouTube. Ghadeer panicked. She knew that the whole situation - the dance, the dress, the boyfriend - would be utterly unacceptable to her parents, to their neighbours, and to a society in which women were required to cover their bodies and behave with modesty.

But in the years since she had sent the video, Ghadeer had also taken part in the Egyptian revolution, taken off her hijab, and started to speak out about the rights of women. Outraged that a man had attempted to publicly shame her, she took legal action. Although she succeeded in having him convicted for defamation, the video remained on YouTube - and Ghadeer found herself attacked on social media by men who sought to discredit her by posting links to it.

In 2014, sick of the abuse and tired of worrying about who might see the film, Ghadeer made a brave decision: she posted the video on her own Facebook page. In an accompanying comment, she argued that it was time to stop using women's bodies to shame and silence them. Watch the video, she said. I'm a good dancer. I have no reason to feel ashamed.

Ghadeer is more outspoken than most Arab women, but her situation is not unusual. A BBC investigation has found that thousands of young people - mainly girls and women -

are being threatened, blackmailed, or shamed with digital images from the innocently flirtatious to the sexually explicit. Obtained by men - sometimes with consent, sometimes through sexual assault - these images are being used to extort money, to coerce women into sending more explicit images, or to force them to submit to sexual abuse.

Revenge porn is a problem in every country on Earth, but the potency of sexual images as weapons of intimidation stems from their capacity to inflict shame on women - and in some societies, shame is a much more serious matter.

"In the West, it's a different culture," says Inam al-Asha, a psychologist and women's rights activist in Amman, Jordan. "A naked picture might only humiliate a girl. But in our society, a naked picture might lead to her death. And even if her life isn't finished physically, it is finished socially and professionally. People stop associating with her and she ends up ostracised and isolated."

Most cases of this form of abuse go unreported because the same forces that make women vulnerable also ensure they remain silent. But lawyers, police, and activists in a dozen countries have told the BBC that the arrival of smartphones and social media has sparked a hidden epidemic of online blackmail and shaming.

Zahra Sharabati, a Jordanian lawyer, told the BBC that in the last two or three years she has handled at least 50 cases involving the use of digital images or social media to threaten or shame women. "But in the whole of Jordan," she says, "I think the number is far higher - not fewer than 1,000 cases involving social media. More than one girl, I think, was killed as a result of this issue."

Louay Zreiqat, a police officer in the West Bank, says that last year the Palestinian police cybercrime unit handled 502 online crimes, many of which involved private pictures of women. His compatriot Kamal Mahmoud, who runs an anti-extortion website, says he receives more than 1,000 requests for help every year from women across the Arab world.

"Sometimes the photos are not sexual... a photo of a girl not wearing a hijab could be scandalous. A man could use this photo to pressure the girl to send more photos," he says. "The Gulf countries are facing blackmail on a huge scale, especially girls in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. Some girls tell us, 'If these photos are made public, I will be in real danger.'"

In Saudi Arabia, the problem is so serious that the religious police have set up a special unit to pursue blackmailers and to help women who are being threatened. In 2014 the then head of the religious police, Dr Abdul Latif al-Sheikh, told a Saudi newspaper, "We receive hundreds of calls every day from women who are being blackmailed."

Further east, Pavan Duggal, a lawyer with India's Supreme Court, talks of a "torrent" of cases involving digital images of women. "My guesstimate is going to be that we are seeing thousands of such cases [in India] on a daily basis," he says.

And in Pakistan, Nighat Dad, head of an NGO dedicated to making the online world safer for women, says "two or three girls or women every day" - about 900 per year - contact her organisation because they are being threatened.

"When women are in a relationship they share their pictures or videos," she says. "And if the relationship ends, not on a good note, the other party misuses the data and blackmails them - not only to remain in the relationship but to do all sorts of other weird stuff."

But it goes beyond blackmail. Nighat Dad is also starting to see a disturbing link between smartphones and sexual violence.

"It started from intimate pictures, but now it has a very grave connection with rape itself," she says. Before these technologies, when perpetrators used to do rape they had no idea how to silence the woman... But now technology brings another aspect to the whole rape culture, and it's to silence women by making a video and then to threaten that if they speak out, this video will be shared online."

The more devastating the consequences of public exposure, the more power the perpetrator has over the victim.

One young woman from rural Tunisia told the BBC her story from a women's prison on the country's north coast. It began when she was sexually assaulted and photographed naked by a friend of her father. The images left her at the mercy of her abuser, who subjected her to months of sexual violence, while also blackmailing her for money. It was not until the man threatened to rape her younger sister that Amal reached her limit. She invited him to her house and murdered him with a meat cleaver. She is now serving a 25-year prison sentence.

Another young woman, the 16-year-old victim of a gang rape in Morocco, set herself on fire in July this year, after her rapists threatened to share images of the attack online. The eight accused were trying to intimidate the girl's family into dropping the charges against them but instead drove her to suicide, as she suffered third-degree burns and died in hospital.

It is in India and Pakistan, however, that the use of mobile phones to record sexual assault appears to be most widespread.

In August 2016, the Times of India found that hundreds - perhaps thousands - of video clips of rape were being sold in shops across the northern state of Uttar Pradesh every day. One shopkeeper in Agra told the newspaper: "Porn is passé. These real-life crimes are the rage." Another, according to the same report, was overheard telling customers that they might even know the girl in the "latest, hottest" video.

In one example investigated by the BBC, a 40-year-old health worker took her own life after a video of her being raped by a gang was circulated in her village via the messaging service WhatsApp. The woman appealed to village elders for help but, according to a colleague, received no support from a society which saw her as not only sullied by the attack, but even to blame for it.

But the power of these images in conservative societies can cut both ways.

Some women have understood that if they can be used as weapons to shame women, then they may also be used as weapons to attack or challenge patriarchal cultures.

When Ghadeer Ahmed posted the dancing video on Facebook she was not just undermining attempts to humiliate her, but rejecting the very idea that the video was a source of shame.

In 2011, another young woman from North Africa, Amina Sboui, went even further: she posted a topless photo of herself on Facebook. Across her naked torso she had written, "My body belongs to me - it is not the source of anyone's honour." The image ignited a firestorm of controversy in Tunisia.

More recently Qandeel Baloch, who came from a village in Pakistan's Punjab region, used social media to gain celebrity by posting provocative selfies online. Known as the Kim Kardashian of Pakistan, she challenged Pakistani social norms by embracing the sexualised culture of the internet - until she was strangled by her brother in July this year for bringing shame on the family.

The power of smartphones and social media appears not to have been lost on the authorities in Saudi Arabia, who, as well as aggressively pursuing men who misuse images of women, run campaigns to educate girls about the dangers of sharing photos online. On one level this is an important measure to protect Saudi women, but the urgency of the response may also reflect a recognition that technology has the power to change patterns of behaviour and ways of thinking - and that it is already opening up a new front in the battle over what women can and cannot do with their bodies.

How to empower women and girls

The European Parliament commemorates International Day of the Girl Child

By Elisa Van Ruiten, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (12.10.2016) - Yesterday, 11 October was [International Day of the Girl Child](#). This day, established by the United Nations in 2011, is dedicated to underscoring the human rights of girls, the particular challenges faced by girls, including the ways their rights are violated. In addition, it is a day to remind us of the power of girls and women to affect positive change in the world, for everybody – including boys and men.

This week is also [European Week of Action for Girls](#) which “ensure(s) that girls’ empowerment is promoted and their rights are protected and fulfilled in the EU’s external action, through adequate policies, funding and programs.” One of the events of the week, held today, 12 October 2016, was the session hosted by MEP Ulrike Lunacek, [CARE](#), and [World Vision](#), “Investing in and Empowering Women and Girls Affected by Crisis and Fragility” Challenges and Best Practices from Yemen, DRC and South Sudan. It featured a group of experts from various international and civil society organizations, the European Parliament, and European Commission who discussed the situation of girls and women worldwide in who are affected by conflict and violence.

Some key takeaways

- 150 Million girls experience some form of sexual violence – per year. This means that in certain areas and especially those in conflict girls are afraid to leave the house or civilian camp due to fear of rape.
- Girl refugees are married by older men so that they are taken care of and, similarly, young girls (under the age of 10) become wives, which in turn leads to sexual violence.
- Girls are forced to become pregnant to give birth to future generations of child soldiers.
- The conference also highlighted the “forgotten conflict” in Yemen where civilians are hit the hardest and 82% of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance.
- There is no access to healthcare, therefore cancer patients live without treatment and half a million pregnant women have no chance of prenatal care. Estimates put

the number of women in this group that will experience complicated deliveries at 80,000.

- Gender based violence (GBV) is prevalent and girls and women experience sexual harassment on the streets and at checkpoints, with 52,000 women at risk for sexual exploitation. Sadly, this is the case sometimes in exchange for humanitarian assistance, meaning that they will not be given help if they do not give of their bodies.
- 50% of women are married before the age of 18 and domestic violence is widespread.

The above examples show why it is so necessary that we highlight the rights of girls, not only so that they do not suffer in silence but so people can help to change these daily realities and the prevailing social norms so deeply ingrained in society that enables these violations to happen over and over again.

What can we do?

- Advance social norms that protect women and girls
- Work to change the attitudes so that those who have experience sexual or gender based violence are still accepted in their communities, and at the same time also change the norm itself and the use of rape as a weapon of war. Girls should become agents for change as they have the power to be strong advocates.
- Laws and policies that are already in place or written should be enacted and implemented.
- A complaint mechanism for child led complaints should be developed.
- It is also important that the EU ratify and implement the Istanbul convention.

Women also need to be involved in peace procedures for as Marnia Marchetti, from the European Commission, said, "Stopping women from political involvement is a form of violence."

Links to further reading on the subject of girl's and women's empowerment:

[A 10-year-old girl makes her pitch to Western powers for peace in Yemen](#)

[10 Simple Words Every Girl Should Learn](#)

[Educating girls in South Sudan](#)

[U.N. Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG's\): Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls](#)

[Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)

How Muslim women bear the brunt of Islamophobia

We're treated as both villains and victims.

By Rana Elmir

The Washington Post (16.09.2016) - <http://wapo.st/2cW2wpp> - Last weekend, a 35-year-old woman was standing outside a Valentino store in Manhattan when, as she later told police, she felt heat on her left side. Her blouse was on fire, and a man stood nearby with a lighter in his hand. The woman, whose name has not been released by the New York Police Department, escaped with a hole in her blouse and no injuries. The NYPD is investigating the incident as a possible hate crime — the woman is Muslim, and she was wearing a hijab.

Almost every woman has an unsettling story about the difficulties of being a woman in public — whether it's a stranger walking behind us too closely, verbal abuse, unwanted sexual advances or physical attacks. But for Muslim women, these isolated incidents of misogyny or violence have taken on an additional, ugly edge.

Amid a surge of anti-Muslim policy proposals (including presidential nominee Donald Trump's idea to ban Muslims from entering the country), 2015 had the highest number of anti-Muslim hate crimes — five times the pre-9/11 rate. And although the venom of anti-Muslim sentiment is directed against both men and women, it is a particularly gendered crisis. Women bear the brunt of Islamophobic prejudice.

Comprehensive data on the effect of discrimination and hate crimes targeting Muslim women are hard to find. (The FBI does not track hate crimes by gender.) But studies suggest that women, particularly those who wear hijab or niqab, shoulder a unique burden. Because women who wear hijab and niqab are visible representations of our religion, they face a significant risk of exposure to discrimination, harassment and attacks.

According to one researcher, 69 percent of Muslim women who wore hijab reported at least one incident of discrimination; for those who did not wear hijab, it was 29 percent. Non-governmental organizations that track anti-Muslim incidents in various parts of the world report record numbers of hate crimes and violent incidents targeting Muslim women. In the Netherlands, 90 percent of victims reporting incidents of violence to Meld Islamofobie (Report Islamophobia) in 2015 were Muslim women; in France, the Collective Against Islamophobia reported that 81 percent of violent incidents involved Muslim women, as did more than half of incidents reported to Tell MAMA, an NGO in Britain. In each study, women who wore visible symbols of Islam such as a hijab or niqab were more likely to be targeted.

To Muslim women, these numbers aren't abstract. They are real life. Just last weekend, days after my friend who wears hijab told me about being accosted in an airport bathroom and told to "go home where they wear those things" in front of her 7-year-old son, we reflected on two women who were attacked in New York City while pushing their babies in strollers. Their attacker expressed a similar sentiment — "Get the [expletive] out of America" — as she threw one stroller to the ground and tried to rip off the women's hijabs.

Much of the focus as of late has been on France, even though Muslim women in the United States have endured prohibitions on hijab and niqab at work, in public spaces such as swimming pools or at school for decades. Muslim women have been fired or not hired, like Samantha Elauf, who took her case to the U.S. Supreme Court and won when Abercrombie and Fitch didn't hire her because of her hijab. They've been arrested, like Itemid Al-Matar, who, while trying to catch a train, was tackled, detained and later subjected to a strip search by Chicago police. And they have been pushed out of the judicial process altogether, like in Michigan, which passed a court rule allowing judges to decide whether women in niqab can appear as witnesses.

Although Muslim men and women may both suffer from a presumption of guilt, women experience the additional presumption of victimhood. We're seen simultaneously as recognizable representatives of a religion to be "feared" and passive targets of male dominance. In turn, our absurd status as both villains and victims drives not only discrimination, harassment and hate crimes, but promotes cynical policy proposals designed to help us, which actually are rooted in stereotypes and anti-Muslim bias.

Officials and news pundits have long used this tactic and the guise of "women's rights" to promote anti-Muslim ideology. This thinly concealed bias is central to the arguments of the 30 French coastal towns that banned the burkini. In a truly head-scratching moment, Laurence Rossignol, the French government's minister for women's rights, defended the bans by stating: "The burkini is not some new line of swimwear; it is the beach version of the burqa and it has the same logic: hide women's bodies in order to better control them."

Lost in this statement is the irony that these laws reinforce exactly what the minister purports to loathe.

Similarly, in the United States, when Ibtihaj Muhammad became the first American Olympian to compete and medal while wearing hijab earlier this month, Rush Limbaugh tried to diminish the historic moment by stating: "But why celebrate a woman wearing something that's been forced on her by a religion, a religion run by men? . . . She may actively agree to do it, don't misunderstand, but it's a religion run by men that subjugates and subordinates women."

Under heightened scrutiny and calls for vigilance, Muslim women have flocked to self-defense classes, some have contemplated removing their hijab to protect their families and others are wearing hijab to feel closer to faith during these uncertain times. I have experienced my own scare, when I was cornered by a man at a community dog park. After exchanging pleasantries, he snarled without warning or provocation: "Do you know what's wrong with Muslims?"

He punctuated his rant with a finger in my face and a grab at my shoulder when I tried to glance or back away. Through clenched teeth, he ranted that Muslim men are rapists and terrorists, and that Muslim women are victims of their own oppression. I listened, silent calculations running through my head — I was alone in a dog park the size of one city block, and he was unpredictable and belligerent. Anything could have happened.

We have a long road ahead to realize full and equal rights, but it's not Islam that holds us back. It's pervasive prejudice and discrimination in all facets of our lives. Just as it's intellectually dishonest to believe that four police officers forcing a Muslim woman to remove her burkini on a crowded beach is a sign of progress for women, it's immoral to continue to allow anti-Muslim bias to close the doors of opportunity to us.

Discrimination in the name of women's rights or religious tolerance is still discrimination — ask any Muslim woman, if only to finally include us in the conversation about us.

Islamic inheritance laws and rural women, new issue of ILC Framing the Debate series is out

International Land Coalition (06.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2c6r9vX> - «Land rights are particularly important for women's empowerment and gender equality (...) but they continue to be systematically denied their rights to inheritance, especially in rural areas».

The newest issue of ILC's Framing the Debate series on Islamic inheritance laws and their impact on rural women in Muslim societies finds that there are an interconnected mix of legal, religious, educational, economic, social and political reasons for discriminatory inheritance practices.

The publication, authored by Frida Khan and launched online on September 6th will also be present at the upcoming 13th International Conference of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). From the 8th to the 11th of September, 2,000 participants from a wide range of movements and sectors will gather in Bahia, Brazil to collectively strategize for feminist futures, including a specific focus on women's rights and land governance. We are proud to announce that ILC members will be involved in various sessions. Landesa, a contributor to the publication, will organize a specific session on "Why land rights matter for women and how they can grow".

The publication is the result of a research project developed between 2013 and 2015 where the International Land Coalition commissioned a series of studies on women's inheritance rights in Muslim societies. The aim was to improve understanding of the barriers that prevent women from achieving tenure security, with a particular focus on inheritance laws and the practices that influence women's land rights in Asia.

The studies analysed inheritance laws and their impact on rural women in selected countries in Asia and West Africa such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Senegal, Togo, and Mali. While these countries have different demographics, they host common issues regarding discriminatory inheritance practices and laws. The comparative study in West Africa, covering two Muslim-majority countries (Mali and Senegal) and one Christian-majority country (Togo), was added in later in the process, to allow for a broader view of Islam and its interpretations relative to women's inheritance rights.

In short, the studies demonstrate that, while studied countries do indeed have legal, religious, and institutional provisions that protect women's inheritance, their implementation in the patriarchal cultural context in which they exist is weak. Countries need to institute a mix of attitudinal and structural changes to create an environment and legal framework for gender equality in inheritance.

As noted in the publication, "it is a sad irony that a religion which in its time was revolutionary in promoting women's rights, including those concerning inheritance, has now come to be associated with the worst forms of discrimination against women". So more than religion, it is overarching patriarchal practices that seek to keep women subordinate to men, socially, legally, and above all economically, by restricting women's mobility, sexuality, participation in remunerative work, decision-making, and ownership of assets, including those gained through inheritance.

Owning land is a source of power and security for both women and men, and studies show that women who own land are able to negotiate space for themselves in the household with more confidence and independence. Furthermore, studies have shown that affording women their land rights has multiple positive impacts, including reducing poverty, improving household food security, and providing access to employment and to capital, as well as having a positive effects on their own education and health and those of their children.

Download and read Framing the Debate: Islamic inheritance laws and their impact on rural women in Muslim societies [here](#).

Sexual health gets little attention in a crisis, with devastating results

By Tewodros Melesse

The Guardian (22.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1Tq4gYe> - about 125 million people are affected by crises. A quarter of those people are female and of reproductive age – and women are 14 times more likely than men to die in a crisis.

On Monday global thinkers, activists and politicians will come together for the world humanitarian summit in Istanbul to tackle some of these issues. It's time for them and us to act as the world faces the largest refugee crisis since the second world war.

One thing often overlooked when a conflict, natural disaster, or crisis strikes is a comprehensive and responsive approach to health. Sexual and reproductive health often gets little attention, with devastating consequences. That's why we will be pushing these issues during a special session at the summit.

Reproductive health issues are compounded during a crisis. About 60% of preventable maternal deaths take place in crises and fragile settings.

We know that, when a woman in need of care and protection has travelled for days to reach a shelter or camp, she will often arrive to find no doctor or sterile equipment. We also know that in times of crisis, girls are more likely to be married off at a young age, and women and girls are at increased risk of trafficking and rape.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) focuses on these issues. We make sure that the "dignity kits" we give women and girls in our care contain not only the essentials, such as underwear and sanitary towels, but also items like a sarong, so they can cover themselves while changing in the camp – crucial if they have no tent. Small things like this can protect women and girls from violence.

Longer-term, we work with women and girls to build their resilience and help them take part in decision-making processes in refugee settings. We see tackling gender norms as a vital part of the services we offer.

From experience, we know that the demand for sexual and reproductive healthcare is much higher than normal in crisis situations. These are essential services and must form part of any humanitarian response.

There is already a life-saving package for delivering sexual and reproductive health, recognised by the UN and other agencies.

We need to ensure that there is a coordinated response to provide sexual and reproductive healthcare on the ground, one which has the same status as other humanitarian responses such as those surrounding food, shelter, water and sanitation.

We urge governments to include reproductive health in their own humanitarian response delivery. Donor governments need to ensure that services are more equitably distributed between conflict zones and natural disasters.

We will continue to hold the banner for sexual and reproductive rights to be given the status they deserve to ensure that the rights of women and girls, boys and men are protected.

A comprehensive response that includes sexual and reproductive health will help people to rebuild their lives after their worlds are turned upside down.

'Completely failing women': Why the Zika epidemic is really a women's rights crisis

By Alia Dharssi

National Post (20.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/22lvAXW> - Doctor Melania Amorim works at the heart of the Zika epidemic, delivering babies in Campina Grande in northeastern Brazil. Of the 59 babies affected by Zika that have been born at the public hospital where she is an obstetrician, one was stillborn and eight died within 48 hours. Most of those that survived are extremely disabled with deformed arms, atrophied brains or other abnormalities.

"I chose to be an obstetrician because I wanted to be involved with life. Suddenly, you are involved with malformations, where the result is death," said Amorim, looking sadly into the distance as she spoke on the sidelines of Women Deliver, the world's largest women's rights conference, in Copenhagen, Denmark, on Thursday. "... But if it's necessary, I have to be (there). I have to be with the mothers."

Even as the Zika crisis has been deemed safe enough for the 2016 Rio Olympics and Brazil has been commended for responding to it swiftly, Amorim and other medical experts contend that the Brazilian government, as well as the world, is not paying enough attention to the connection between Zika, women's rights and family planning. In doing so, it may be missing a root cause of the virus' spread and its destructive consequences.

"Instead of talking about how to save women and how to protect women and how to advance women's rights, we're obsessed with killing mosquitos," said Suzanne Ehlers, president and chief executive officer of Population Action International, which promotes access to contraception and reproductive health-care for women worldwide, at a Women Deliver panel on the issue.

"We need leadership in acknowledging that girls need information about sexuality and they need access to contraceptive services," said Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli, who works on adolescent sexual and reproductive health at the World Health Organization, at another Women Deliver event.

Zika has been reported in 60 countries and WHO expects to see up to four million cases in Latin America in 2016. There were between 500,000 and 1.5 million cases in Brazil alone in 2015. The virus, which can cause deformations in newborns if contracted by their mother during pregnancy, has been linked to more than 1,300 confirmed cases of microcephaly, thousands more suspected ones and thousands of cases of other types of brain damage.

For Amorim, the Brazilian government's focus on killing the breed of mosquitos that carries the virus, as well as the Brazilian government's recommendations that pregnant women wear long, dark clothing, use insect repellent and watch their homes, is too narrow to save the majority of babies that develop microcephaly.

That's because more than three-quarters are born to the poor, according to a survey conducted by the Brazilian government. Many of the pregnant women that Amorim sees

live in shanty towns that lack basic sanitation and a regular clean water supply, but have open sewers. These settlements are a breeding ground for mosquitos likely to carry Zika.

At the same time, the women are often too poor to buy repellent or new long-sleeved clothing to protect themselves — if they get the memo saying they should do so. In the midst of Brazil's national political crises, there's been no effort to make sure that key messages about Zika get to the poorest, said Debora Diniz, a law professor at the University of Brasilia who has made a documentary on Zika.

Repellent also hasn't been made available to those who can't afford it, she notes.

Meanwhile, recommendations from Brazil and other Latin American governments that urge women to avoid becoming pregnant for up to two years fundamentally misunderstand social dynamics, according to some working on women's issues in the region.

"We're talking about my ability to decide if, when, where, how to engage in sexual intercourse," said Lucia Berro Pizzarossa, who researches sexual and reproductive rights in Latin America as a part of her doctoral research at the University of Groningen. She noted there are high rates of sexual violence against women in Latin America, while 23 million of those who are in intimate relationships and want contraception cannot access it. According to the United Nations Population Fund, the situation is so dire that if the demand for contraception were met, the region would see a decline in unsafe abortions by 64 per cent.

The Zika crisis has been accompanied by calls to liberalize abortion laws in Brazil, where terminating a pregnancy is illegal except in cases of rape, when the mother's life is at risk or if the child wouldn't survive. But some politicians are looking to stiffen them and, with the impeachment proceedings of Brazil's first female president, Dilma Rousseff, things are looking down for women. Brazil's new leader, Michel Temer, picked an all-male cabinet and eliminated the ministry of women, racial equality and human rights.

Diniz is working on taking a case to Brazil's supreme court to demand access to abortion for women whose pregnancies are tainted by Zika and raise other human rights concerns related to the virus. The demands she is making, along with others at a bioethics institute she co-founded, include that the government meet regulations that say health care is guaranteed to all Brazilians and should be within 50 kilometres of their home. Diniz met one pregnant woman who was affected by Zika and had to drive five hours for medical attention.

"Zika is a virus, but the underlying situation that is completely failing women is this public health and human rights crisis," Pizzarossa said.

Poor health-care systems, as well as the failure to include family planning in public health care, disproportionately affects women and girls, said Ehlers, adding that things stand to worsen the more Zika spreads to developing countries with poor health care.

"The world community should have learned the lessons at the time of Ebola — that when you have weak primary health-care systems, what doesn't have to be a crisis quickly turns into a crisis," she said.

As political leaders grapple with Zika, prioritizing mosquito eradication over the rights of women and access to healthcare, babies will continue to die in the arms of Amorim and the mothers she works with.

"There are a lot of funerals, a lot of funerals of little babies," Amorim said.

Is there a sexist data crisis?

There is a black hole in our knowledge of women and girls around the world. They are often missing from official statistics, and areas of their lives are ignored completely. So campaigners say - but what needs to be done?

By Charlotte McDonald

BBC (18.05.2016) - <http://bbc.in/22fVQmy> - "We believe that there is a sexist data crisis," says David McNair, Director of Transparency at the One Campaign, a group that fights poverty.

"The reason why it is sexist is that women and girls are disproportionately left out of data collection. They are uncaptured, therefore they don't matter."

Former US Secretary of State and presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton agrees.

"For too many countries we lack reliable and regular data on even the basic facts about the lives of women and girls," she said at a data conference in Washington, in 2012.

"Facts like when women have their first child. How many hours of paid and unpaid work they do, whether they own the land they farm.

"Since women make up half the population, that's like having a black hole at the centre of our data-driven universe."

Most countries collect data from labour force surveys and household surveys, but the style of the questions often date back to just after World War Two says Mayra Buvinic, an expert from the Center for Global Development, a think tank.

"These surveys were constructed, designed with a particular bias. They were biased towards formal sector employment which is work that men do," she says.

Buvinic argues that many women get missed out because they consider themselves primarily as housewives, when in reality they work on farms, do part-time jobs and seasonal work or run their own businesses.

She points to a labour force survey in Uganda in the 1990s to make her point.

One year, the survey asked people only for their "primary" activity or job. A year later they added a new question to the survey, asking people to name their "secondary" activity.

The recorded number of workers in Uganda suddenly went up from 6.5 million to 7.2 million workers.

"This means that 700,000 workers had been missed," she says, adding that most of these workers were women.

But as well as noting that surveys do not ask the right questions, she also argues that we should be measuring traditionally unpaid work such as cleaning and cooking and including it in economic statistics.

There are other problems too, Buvinic says. Not all countries collect statistics on other aspects of women's lives, such as domestic violence or maternal mortality rates, and when they do collect this data they often do it in different ways, making international comparisons difficult.

It's not only government statistics that fall short, the campaigners say. There are many statistics that are collected without being broken down by sex, which makes it hard to tell when women are not being treated equally.

"Until recently, very few banks disaggregated their customer data by sex, leading to difficulties in understanding reasons behind the persistent gender gap in access to and use of financial services," says Megan O'Donnell, one of Buvinic's colleagues at the Center for Global Development. She also says there is a problem with health experiments and statistics.

"Men have been the traditional test subjects when physicians study diseases and other health conditions. Because women have not been - and women's metabolic rates differ - we haven't had an equally clear understanding of how treatments, medications, etc are likely to affect them."

If we don't count something, we can't tackle the problem, David McNair argues.

For example, he says, it will be hard to know whether the UN's Sustainable Development Goals on violence and sexual exploitation are reached if we don't collect the right numbers.

But good statistics are also needed to help governments plan and invest, he argues. A government that doesn't count maternal mortality is not going to know the extent of the problem, and therefore how to tackle it.

It will also be less easy for journalists and civil society to hold governments to account.

McNair says that some politicians know this.

"If you have robust data then you can be held to account for your decisions. There are people who have a vested interest in not having that information in the public domain," he says.

For instance, if employment figures are going to make a politician look bad, they may not want them to be collected.

It's also easy for politicians to cut money for collecting statistics at a time of pressure on budgets. They can be photographed next to a school they have funded, but may not get much credit for funding a good statistical service.

Some progress is being made.

Recently the UN's International Labour Organisation (or ILO) held a conference, where labour statisticians agreed how to start collecting data on unpaid and domestic work, for example time spent cleaning your house.

Ten countries have volunteered to take part in a pilot to use this new framework to measure unpaid work.

So in future we may have a better idea of the work being carried out by women.

More reading: [The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announces USD 80 million commitment to close gender data gaps and accelerate progress for women and girls](#)

UN welcomes ICC's first conviction for rape as war crime

UN.org (22.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1S5GJFh> - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today welcomed the judgement issued by the International Criminal Court in the case of former Congolese vice-president Jean-Pierre Bemba.

"The judgment of the Court reaffirms that impunity will not be tolerated and sends a strong signal that commanders will be held responsible for international crimes committed by those under their authority," the Secretary-General said in a statement.

Mr. Bemba had been the commander-in-chief of the former Congolese rebel group, the Movement for the Liberation of Congo, as well as a vice president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the 2003-2006 transition.

In a ruling issued yesterday, the ICC found him guilty on five charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including rape, murder and pillage, committed in 2002-2003 in neighbouring Central African Republic. More than 5,000 victims were granted the right to participate in the proceedings.

The case was the first before the ICC to focus on sexual violence as a weapon of war, as well as on a senior military official whose forces carried out the atrocities – even if he had not directly ordered them to do so.

In his statement, Mr. Ban called the judgement "a significant step towards bringing justice to the victims of these horrendous crimes in the Central African Republic."

He also highlighted the critical need to eradicate sexual- and gender-based violence by addressing their widespread and systematic use as a weapon of war.

Mr. Ban's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Hawa Bangura, today said that the conviction of Mr. Bemba "sends a message to all that irrespective of your position in society, you will face the wrath of law."

Her office has been working with the Governments of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central Africa Republic, among other countries, to eliminate the scourge of sexual violence in conflict.

The head of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, also welcomed the landmark conviction as "a clear message that the international community will hold accountable those who fail to exercise their responsibilities as commanders to prevent and punish the use of sexual and gender-based crimes as weapons of war."

In a statement yesterday, the High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said that he hoped "this judgement will act as a powerful deterrent against future serious human rights violations and abuses not just in CAR, but everywhere they are committed."

He added that it should also help make perpetrators understand that many victims and their supporters will never abandon their search for justice and accountability.

