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## **PAKISTAN: Pakistan arrests suspect in highway gang rape case amid protests**

***One of two suspects arrested amid demonstrations over handling of probe into attack on mother travelling with children.***

Al Jazeera (13.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3kfZNGp> - Pakistani police say they have arrested one of two suspects in the rape of a woman who was dragged from her car and attacked after her car broke down on a desolate highway in central Punjab province.

The woman, who police say is in her early 30s, was driving late on Wednesday night outside the eastern city of Lahore with her two children when her vehicle ran out of fuel.

She phoned the police for help, but before they arrived, two men took her and her children out of the vehicle at gunpoint and raped her in a field along the highway.

The suspects are also accused of stealing cash and jewelry from the woman before fleeing.

Chief of the criminal investigation wing of the Punjab police, Atif Nazeer, on Sunday said the arrest of one of the men was made after they tracked phone records and collected forensic evidence from the scene.

Nazeer said the suspect denies any involvement in the rape. Local media reported that the suspect turned himself over to police to plead his innocence.

The arrest came after protests continued across Pakistan for a second day on Saturday over the handling of an investigation into the assault.

Inam Ghani, Inspector General of Punjab province had told reporters on Saturday night that police had identified the two suspects through DNA tracing.

"I am hopeful very soon we will reach them and arrest them," he said.

Musarrat Cheema, a spokesperson in the eastern Punjab province, said raids were being conducted to find the culprits.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's office said the protection of women is a first priority and responsibility of the government, adding that "such brutality and bestiality cannot be allowed in any civilised society".

But protesters are not satisfied, and called for the sacking of the lead police investigator assigned to the case, Omar Sheikh, who has reportedly pointed out what he felt the victim had done wrong.

Sheikh is reported to have said the woman should have taken a different, busier, highway, not travelled at night, and made sure her vehicle had enough fuel.

He also said she appeared to be under the impression Pakistan was as safe for women as France, "her country of residence". Requests for comment to the French Embassy in Islamabad went unanswered

In Islamabad, several hundred protesters gathered, some waved French flags, and others held signs saying "hang the rapists".

"It's very simple, these sort of incidents are not very new the issue is that rather than catching the criminals or catching the perpetrators, we always blame the victims," said Aleena Alvi.

"I think the laws have also changed around the rape victims, there was a law of women's protection act, instead of this act, there has now been no protection that has been given to victims."

Hundreds, mostly women, also gathered in Lahore, Karachi, and the northwestern city of Peshawar. "Shatter the silence, stop the violence," read one placard in Peshawar.

Global rights watchdogs have pointed out that Pakistan has not done enough to stem violence against women, including ensuring perpetrators are held accountable.

The attack has especially angered women who say public space in the country was already limited.

"And now the police are telling you that you are responsible for your own safety," said Yamna Rehman at the Islamabad protest, organised by the Women Democratic Front collective.

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## **TURKEY: Turkish human rights lawyer dies after hunger strike**

OHCHR (02.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/32fP1qF> - The death of Turkish human rights lawyer Ebru Timtik after a long hunger strike was entirely preventable, UN human rights experts\* said today, calling on Turkey to release other human rights defenders.

"No one should have to die in pursuit of a fair trial; it is a fundamental human right," they said. "This is an utter waste of a human life, and we are greatly dismayed at the death of this, courageous woman human rights defender, as well as the circumstances that led to her death."

Ebru Timtik died on 27 August 2020 after three years in detention and a hunger strike lasting 238 days. Along with other lawyers from the People's Law Office, she was arrested in September 2017 and sentenced to 13 years and six months in prison under the charges of belonging to a terrorist organisation. She went on a hunger strike on 02 January 2020 claiming her right to a fair trial.

Shortly after the lawyers were arrested, the UN human rights experts formally asked the Turkish government to explain the legal basis for their arrest and the accusations against them.

"We asked the Turkish Government in 2017 to explain how their arrest and conviction were compatible with the State's obligations under international human rights law", said the experts, highlighting allegations of unlawful detention, unfair trial and restrictions on the freedom of expression and of association. "While we acknowledge and appreciate the engagement of the authorities with us on the issue, we regret that little was done to prevent this tragic outcome."

The experts called for an effective investigation into her death. "We call on the authorities to establish an accountability process for the victim and to uphold fair trial principles by reopening the cases of arrested human rights lawyers. The Government of Turkey must also take immediate action to release individuals detained and sentenced contrary to international law."

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## **NETHERLANDS: Netherlands wants to punish silence on sex abuse in closed communities**

By Karolin Schaps

Thomson Reuters Foundation (28.08.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3gQumR3> - The Dutch government wants to prosecute members of private groups and communities who fail to report sexual abuse in their organisations, a move that comes after Jehovah's Witnesses rejected demands to tackle the under-reporting of abuse.

A 2019 report commissioned by the government to investigate sexual abuse involving Jehovah's Witnesses found few cases were being reported to police, but group leaders dismissed calls for change and said they were being discriminated against.

They were not immediately available for comment on the latest government plans.

Minister for Legal Protection Sander Dekker said the reluctance to change had spurred him to analyse how a law that punished organisations for failing to report sexual abuse could be structured.

"This makes it clear to me that the leadership (of the Jehovah's Witnesses community) does not see or does not want to see the gravity of the situation. The leadership is leaving vulnerable victims out in the cold," he said in a letter to parliament published late on Thursday.

"Victims of sexual abuse in the Netherlands have the same right to access help, care and justice, regardless of which community they belong to," he added, promising a progress update on the potential legislation later this year.

The 2019 report, carried out by the University of Utrecht, found that about 80% of the 751 members who came forward to speak with researchers had reported abuse to leaders within the community. Three quarters said the response was inadequate.

Only 28% of them made an official report to the police, the research found. Almost half of the cases involved incest.

In order to provide more urgent support to victims, Dekker said he had allocated government funding to the Reclaimed Voices foundation, a charity supporting sexually abused children within the Jehovah's Witness community.

The government has also requested that support network Slachtofferhulp Nederland (Victim Support Netherlands) broadens its services to specifically help victims of sexual abuse from closed communities.

Iva Bicanic, director of the Dutch-based Centre for Sexual Violence, said establishing a reporting point within communities for victims to come forward was a good initiative, but was unlikely to have an immediate and far-reaching impact.

"It's too simplistic to think that abuse within closed communities will immediately be reported," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Much more is needed from within the community itself, it needs to agree to a whole new code of conduct."

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## **BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: Petition calls on Google to remove Bosnia 'rape camp' from search**

***Vilina Vlas spa, where Serb forces raped 200 Bosniak women, girls is listed on international travel and booking sites.***

By Mersiha Gadzo

Al Jazeera (25.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3gZ51xP> - There is not a room or spot in the Vilina Vlas hotel where women were not raped or people were not killed, according to Bakira Hasecic, president of Bosnia's Women Victims of War (WVW) association and a rape survivor from Visegrad.

It is estimated that Serb forces captured and raped at least 200 women and girls, mostly Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), in 1992 in the hotel in Visegrad, eastern Bosnia.

Some of the victims were as young as 14. Fewer than 10 made it out alive.

Their husbands, brothers and sons were also tortured and killed in the hotel.

Over the years, the few survivors have testified to media about what took place there.

One survivor, who wished to remain anonymous, told Balkan Insight how Bosnian Serb strongman Milan Lukic, head of the Serb paramilitary White Eagles - also known as



Avengers - raped her at her home in Visegrad after killing her 16-year-old son in front of her with a knife.

Lukic then took the woman to Vilina Vlas, where she lost count of how many times she was raped.

She said: "There were many women held in the hotel and there was blood everywhere".

"All the rooms in the hotel were locked. Every day they threw us bread which we had to catch with our teeth as our hands were tied. The only time they untied us is when they raped us," she said.

### ***A tourist attraction***

Yet, the hotel has been promoted this summer as a tourist attraction by Republika Srpska, Bosnia's semi-autonomous Serb-run entity created under the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the country's bloody conflict in early 90s - and also promoted by Visegrad municipality's tourism organisation as part of an overall campaign.

The campaign, with its disquieting slogan, "We're waiting for you in Visegrad", distributed gift vouchers to attract visitors to the town. Vilina Vlas is among the participating hotels.

The Republika Srpska tourism website advertises the rehabilitation centre as an "aerial spa" due to its "altitude and natural environment" and boasts of its thermal waters.

Under the same tourism campaign, Visegrad municipality has been promoting its Andricgrad (Andric city), a mini-town theme park, which is financially supported in part by the Serbian government.

Part of the Andricgrad complex was built at the site of a former sports centre, which Serb forces had used as a detention camp for Bosniak civilians in 1992.

There is no mention of the war crimes that took place at Vilina Vlas or elsewhere in town, an example of the denial that can be common among Serbs in Republika Srpska, including its political elite.

But the hotel also remains listed on many international booking sites, including Trip Advisor, with photos showing a spa nestled in the forest, with no mention that the hotel was used as a rape camp and killing site.

### ***Online petition***

As soon as it became apparent that Republika Srpska authorities were promoting Vilina Vlas as a tourist spot, an online petition was launched, calling on Google to remove the hotel as a tourist site from Google search and Google Maps. The petition has so far gathered 25,000 signatures.

"Dear Google, if somebody decided to turn Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps into a wellness retreat perfect for a 'relaxing weekend getaway', would you let them promote this on Google? Would you allow it to appear on Google maps as a tourist facility?" the petition launched by Bosnian Amela Trokic read.

"Since the Bosnian war in the 1990s not much has changed in the hotel and guests can choose to sleep in one of the many rooms or 160 available beds; the same rooms and beds where women were raped and men were tortured, beaten and killed as the furniture remains the same.



"Though we cannot stop mentally deranged people from knowingly visiting and staying at this disgusting building, we can stop the active promotion of it," the petition read.

Google did not respond to Al Jazeera's request for comment.

Trokic told Al Jazeera that a friend of hers had contacted Trip Advisor last month, informing them why the hotel should be removed from its listings, but the booking website responded saying it was not "in the position to provide comments regarding the past histories of the property in question" and as such, would "not remove accommodation listings if they are still operational".

Many foreign tourists have stayed at the hotel, oblivious to the torture that took place at the site, including Australian actress Kym Vercoe in 2008.

### ***'Where women were raped'***

WVW President Bakira Hasecic told Al Jazeera that the Serb paramilitaries that committed brutal mass rape of women and girls for four months in the hotel in 1992, where the victims were also killed. Five of the victims took their own lives.

One of them, 24-year-old Jasmina Ahmetpahic, took her own life by jumping from the third floor of the hotel after being tortured and raped repeatedly.

"All guests who stay in the rooms in Vilina Vlas - if they didn't know, they know now ... They're sleeping in beds where women were raped and swimming in a pool where people were killed," Hasecic said.

"Authorities of Visegrad, Republika Srpska don't want to talk about the topic of torture in the hotel and hotel staff don't want to tell guests the truth of what happened in these rooms."

Hasecic also said that a memorial should be added to the site and the street that leads to the hotel should be renamed to honour Jasmina Ahmetpahic.

Hikmet Karcic, author and genocide researcher, told Al Jazeera that sites where mass atrocities took place, such as Vilina Vlas, have been "hijacked by the Republika Srpska authorities and normalised for everyday use".

### ***'Rape as genocide'***

Edina Becirevic, genocide scholar at the University of Sarajevo, told Al Jazeera that what happened at Vilina Vlas was one of the examples of the "rape as genocide" that took place during the war, and part of the pattern of ethnic cleansing against Bosniaks that was carried out throughout the country for almost four years.

"Genocide denial is pervasive in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian entity Republika Srpska and promoting Vilina Vlas as [a] touristic attraction with financial support by the Serbian government additionally confirms their complicity in genocide in Bosnia" during and after the war, Becirevic said.

Serb forces had killed so many Bosniaks in the summer of 1992, that their bodies which were thrown into the Drina river sometimes clogged a hydropower plant in a border town in Serbia.

It prompted the director to write to the Visegrad police inspector, requesting that "whoever was responsible please slow the flow of corpses down the Drina", The Guardian reported at the time.

In 2009, the ICTY sentenced Lukic to life in prison, convicting him of war crimes including murder, cruelty, persecution and other crimes against humanity committed from 1992 to 1994.

Hasecic said it is "incomprehensible that following such horrible crimes, authorities have the bravery to offer rooms to guests".

"For us victims who survived, Vilina Vlas hotel was and will remain a hotel with a dark past and we will not give up," Hasecic said. "We will always speak the truth about what happened and fight for truth and justice to win."

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## **IRAN: Iran's #MeToo moment: Women's tweets highlight alleged sexual abuse, rape by prominent figures**

By Golnaz Esfandiari

RFE/RL (25.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/32EJNGV> - For 14 years, former Iranian journalist Sara Omatali kept quiet about the time she says a prominent painter sexually assaulted her.

Last week, the U.S.-based educator broke her silence on Twitter, detailing the alleged abuse that took place in the summer of 2006.

Omatali is one of many Iranian women who have in recent days taken to social media to tell their stories of sexual harassment and rape, breaking years of silence about an issue that remains taboo and is often swept under the rug in Iran.

Omatali said she had decided to interview the painter about an exhibition at the National Museum in Tehran. He insisted that she come to his office first, saying they would go to the exhibition together. After hesitating, she went to his office to find him naked under a brown cloak.

He then assaulted her, she said.

"He held me tightly, squeezing my body and trying to kiss my lips; I struggled as hard as I could to get rid of him," she wrote on Twitter.

Omatali managed to escape into the street. The painter later came out and acted as if nothing had happened.

"He came toward me and said: 'Shall we?'"

"It was as if I had no will of my own. I went," Omatali said, adding that she still becomes full of "hatred, fear, and helplessness" when she recalls that day.

### **Spotlight on abuse**

The outpouring of accounts about alleged sexual abuse, rape, and unwanted sexual advances and the number of women who have joined the movement, some anonymously, appears to be unprecedented in Iran, leading to comparisons with the

global #metoo movement that has occurred around the world in recent years and putting a spotlight on such abuse.

One woman said she was raped by a friend after she visited him at his apartment. She had a glass of wine and woke up the next morning in his bed, naked, she said.

Others came forward claiming they had been raped by the same man, accusing him of drugging them beforehand.

Tehran police chief Hossein Rahimi said on August 25 that the man identified by the initials "KE" had been arrested after several women said they were raped by him.

Several others accused a known visual artist, as well as a popular writer, while at least one spoke of past sexual misconduct by a prominent filmmaker.

Some named their abusers publicly, others alluded to their identities. Several men also joined the campaign, tweeting about their experience with sexual abuse.

Fashion photographer Reihaneh Taravati said she had been sexually harassed by "one of the pioneers of Iranian photography" when she was 19, while artist Leva Zand wrote how her friend had been raped by a man whom she described as a well-known, New York-based, Iranian human rights activist.

At least one woman recounted how she sought legal action against her perpetrator that resulted in the punishment of her offender.

Several lawyers offered tips and legal advice to Iranian women who face discriminatory Islamic laws enforced following the 1979 Islamic Revolution that often favor men.

The global #metoo movement led to the downfall of a number of prominent figures, including the famous Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein, who is now in prison in New York.

The Iranian #metoo movement, which has resulted at this time in the arrest of one alleged rapist, appears to have empowered abuse survivors who had remained silent for years and, in some cases, blamed themselves for the predatory behavior of their abusers.

Omatali told RFE/RL she decided to publicize her alleged sexual harassment after reading some of the anonymous accounts of abuse that have been posted on social media in the past two weeks.

"I thought to myself, 'you're in the United States and have more freedom and protection than those in Iran to raise the issue publicly, why are you silent?'"

"I didn't find an answer that would satisfy me, and so despite the pressure and anxiety I knew I would face, I decided to write about my experience, hoping that it would be a starting point for the publicizing of similar incidents," Omatali said.

### ***Absence of education***

She expressed hope that the ongoing campaign will lead to increased awareness among people about the problems of sexual abuse and harassment.

"In the absence of systematic education about sexual issues in Iran, this group movement improves the atmosphere for a public discussion and creates a precious opportunity for education," Omatali said.

Sexual abuse is believed to be widespread in Iranian society, where women often complain about being sexually harassed on the streets in the form of catcalling and groping.

Many women have also recounted in past days about being sexually assaulted at work while having no choice than to stay in contact with the offender, who is quite often the boss or a colleague.

Tehran-based sociologist Saeed Madani told RFE/RL's Radio Farda that in Iran, like other countries, many victims of sexual abuse and rape are reluctant to speak out.

"They aren't usually inclined to seek legal action, therefore the number of cases that are referred to the [authorities] is very limited and those very limited cases are not publicized," he said.

Madani referred to rape figures reported by the media as "the tip of the iceberg," saying the majority of the cases are not being reported.

"One report said that the highest incidents of rape are in Tehran, with about 1,600 sexual crimes being registered annually, but it is estimated that some 80 percent of rape cases are not being reported," he said.

One reason is the taboo surrounding the issue while victim blaming is also preventing women from coming forward.

"In a patriarchal society, it is assumed primarily that the woman has done something wrong," Madani said.

Veteran women's rights advocate Susan Tahmasebi told RFE/RL that the current movement against sexual abuse and rape is likely to encourage more survivors of abuse to seek legal action.

"Already we see that the recounting of these stories has brought about change," Tahmasebi said. "Besides raising awareness among women survivors of rape and sexual assault, sending them the message that they are not to blame and that they will be safe in coming forward."

"It tells men that they can no longer continue their violent behavior against women with full impunity," she added. "At least in the eyes of the community they will lose face and this has already happened in the case of some high-profile men."

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## **ECUADOR: Protecting Ecuador's students from sexual violence**

***Government should fully implement Inter-American Court ruling.***

By Elin Martínez

HRW (20.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3aTt1rg> - The Inter-American Court of Human Rights last week ruled against Ecuador in its first ever case on school-related sexual violence in the Americas.

In 2001, a public school vice principal in the city of Guayaquil began raping a 14-year-old pupil, Paola Guzmán Albarracín. The abuses continued for over a year, with the knowledge and complicity of school officials. Yet the school did nothing to protect her, and in December 2002, Paola took her life. After her death, Paola's mother, Pepita Albarracín, filed complaints with the school and the local prosecutor's office. The judicial proceedings suffered serious delays.

Paola's case is unfortunately not unique: since then, many children and teenagers have suffered sexual violence in Ecuador's schools, and few receive justice.

Eighteen years after Albarracín first sought justice locally, the Inter-American Court has found Ecuador responsible for violating Paola's rights to life, to study free from sexual violence, and to sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy, as well as her family's right to a fair trial and respect for their moral and psychological integrity. It ruled Ecuador did not comply with its obligations to protect children from sexual violence and prevent and respond to any acts of violence – especially those perpetrated by government officials in state institutions.

Human Rights Watch filed an amicus brief before the court, explaining the close relationship between sexual violence against girls and the lack of comprehensive sexuality education. The court recognized that Paola lacked necessary information about her sexual and reproductive health, concluding that the right to adequate sexuality education is an integral part of the right to education. It gave the government one year to guarantee that children are safe from sexual violence in its schools.

In a welcome departure from previous governments' longstanding failure even to recognize this problem, in 2017, President Lenín Moreno committed to zero tolerance for school-related sexual violence. This week, he reaffirmed his government's commitment and its plan to comply with the court's ruling.

The government should now publish a clear timeline for implementing measures ordered by the court, including by consulting young survivors of sexual violence. Ecuador should also back up this commitment by deploying resources to prevent sexual violence in schools and ensure that all child survivors have the access to justice that Paola's family was denied.

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## **PAKISTAN: Pakistani female journalists face 'coordinated' campaign of online threats**

RFE/RL (19.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3j4Lx2A> - Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is calling on Pakistani authorities to take immediate action to stop online harassment against female journalists that puts their professional duties and lives at risk.

The call from the Paris-based advocacy group on August 19 came in response to a joint statement signed by some 50 women journalists in Pakistan condemning a "well-defined and coordinated campaign" of harassment on social media, including abusive language and threats of violence.

"We regard the highest levels of the Pakistani government as either responsible or complicit in these recent cyberharassment campaigns against certain women journalists who don't toe the official line," said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk.

"This tactic, which clearly aims to intimidate all government critics, is a flagrant violation of article 19A of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan's constitution. We call on Prime Minister Imran Khan to ensure that this unacceptable use of hate speech is brought to a stop," he said.

The joint statement, issued on August 12, outlined online social media harassment of women journalists and commentators, alleging that the attacks are "instigated by government officials" and then amplified by pro-government Twitter accounts and trolls.

"The target of these attacks are women with differing viewpoints and those whose reports have been critical of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government, and more specifically its handling of the coronavirus pandemic," the statement said.

### **Gender-based slurs**

Types of harassment include threats of rape and physical violence, releasing personal details of women journalists and analysts, and gender-based slurs. The online-bullying also seeks to discredit and intimidate journalists, referring to them as peddlers of "fake news" and an "enemy of the people."

"These have the potential to incite violence and lead to hate crimes, putting our physical safety at risk," the journalists wrote.

Women in the media, especially those on social-media platforms, are now reportedly finding it untenable to engage on social media, depriving them of their right to free speech and providing information to the public.

"Many now self-censor, refrain from sharing information, giving their opinion or actively engaging online," the statement said.

Pakistan is ranked 145th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

In 2019, four journalists and bloggers were killed in connection with their reporting.

Among them was Arooj Iqbal, who was shot dead in Lahore in November in a case that has gone unpunished.

Iqbal wanted to be the first woman journalist to launch her own newspaper in Pakistan, RSF said.

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## **POLAND: Istanbul Convention: Poland's plan to quit domestic violence treaty causes concern**

By Shona Murray & Natalie Huet

Euronews (27.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3ibpCq9> - Poland's plan to withdraw from an international treaty on combating violence against women is causing serious concern across Europe.

The right-wing Polish government argues the Istanbul Convention does not respect religion and promotes controversial ideologies about gender. Human rights advocates say exiting the treaty would deal a major blow to women's rights.

The Council of Europe (COE), a human rights organisation distinct from the European Union, called Poland's intentions "alarming".

"If there are any misconceptions or misunderstandings about the convention, we are ready to clarify them in a constructive dialogue," Marija Pejčinović Burić, COE's secretary-general said in a statement.

"Leaving the Istanbul Convention would be highly regrettable and a major step backwards in the protection of women against violence in Europe."

MEPs have also slammed the Polish government's move.

Iratxe García Pérez, the Spanish leader of the Socialist group, called it "disgraceful". Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt labelled it "scandalous", adding that "violence is not a traditional value". Dacian Cioloş, the head of the liberal Renew Europe group called the move "pitiful" and "pathetic".

Hundreds of people marched in Warsaw on Friday to protest against the government's plan.

### ***Using EU funds as leverage***

The treaty, which was drafted by the Council of Europe, obliges nations to ensure that "culture, custom, religion, tradition or so-called 'honour' shall not be regarded as justification" for acts of violence against women.

It came into force in Poland in 2015, under the previous centrist government.

"The convention on violence against women is one of the most comprehensive laws to combat violence against women in the world," said Iverna McGowan, a human rights expert in Brussels.

"So this is really a very worrying signal that the government is sending that it does not wish to provide this protection for women's rights in Poland," she told Euronews, urging the European Union to put "serious pressure" on the country to stick to the convention.

Poland and Hungary have drawn the ire of Brussels in recent years over moves seen as undermining the independence of the judiciary, media freedom and the rights of LGBTQ people.

Poland's move comes after the EU agreed on a €1.8 trillion budget and coronavirus recovery package, after four days and four nights of tense negotiations over the conditions that member states would have to meet to receive the funds.

In their final compromise, EU leaders mentioned tying the handouts to "the respect of the rule of law" – but they have yet to detail the "regime of conditionality" envisioned.

For McGowan, Poland's move on the Istanbul Convention is a fresh reminder that the EU needs to be much more firm when countries stray away from liberal values.



"If the European Union really wants to live up to its commitment to human rights and democracy, I feel that it's very important that we do make recipients' receipt of EU funds conditional on compliance with the rule of law and human rights," she said.

"We need to get serious about human rights in Europe (...) This is a concern not just for women in Poland, it's a question for women's rights everywhere."

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## **KASHMIR: Nowhere to turn for women facing violence in Kashmir**

***The threat of violence against women is escalating amid coronavirus lockdowns around the globe. But one region that has lived through a military clampdown for nearly a year – Indian-administered Kashmir – could have foretold the surge.***

By Safina Nabi

The New Humanitarian (09.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3095xcz> - Being shut in by government order is nothing new in Kashmir, nor is the resulting spike in gender-based violence, women's advocates say.

The region has seen decades of conflict, militarisation, protests, and violent crackdowns. Kashmir has essentially been on lockdown since August 2019, when India scrapped the region's semi-autonomous status, bringing the former state of Jammu and Kashmir under direct control of the central government. Authorities imposed a communications blockade and security forces patrolled the streets, shut down public transportation, and closed markets.

Though some restrictions continued to ease in early 2020, India-wide coronavirus lockdowns beginning in March extended clampdown conditions in an already militarised region – and kept survivors of domestic violence shut in with their abusers.

Cases of domestic violence and general violence against women surged tenfold to more than 3,000 a year during a previous clampdown in 2016 and 2017, according to statistics from the Jammu and Kashmir State Commission for Women, a now-defunct government institution established to protect women and children's rights and ensure quick prosecutions.

Today, Kashmir's women face both the military lockdown and the pandemic, but there's little help available for survivors of gender-based violence.

There are no domestic violence shelters in Kashmir. Blockades on mobile phone connections are frequently re-imposed, while movement restrictions hamper NGOs from doing their work. And India disbanded the women's commission last year along with Jammu and Kashmir's statehood – axing a government body that advocated for survivors of gender-based violence.

### ***Locked in with abusers***

Rafiq, 39, says the military clampdown and the coronavirus have pushed her to a crisis point with her husband.

She spoke to The New Humanitarian on condition that her and her husband's names be changed to protect her safety.

Rafiqa said her husband, Mushtaq, started hitting her a year after they were married, in 2006.

"He would often beat me with a leather belt," she recalled. "Even an argument would lead to serious beating and abuse."

The violence grew more intense after Mushtaq lost his job last August. Rafiqa said he started demanding that she turn over her salary from her government job.

"I handed over my salary to him. Now, he was asking me to get money from my father," she said. "I refused. He picked up a cricket bat and beat me."

Kashmir's transportation shutdown and a mobile phone blackout that lasted until early 2020 kept Rafiqa from reaching her parents. Finally, she turned to a local religious leader for help.

Her husband was persuaded to stop hitting her, but he retaliated by pushing their children to distance themselves from her, Rafiqa said. The children are no longer allowed to sleep near her, or help with the twice-weekly dialysis treatments she has depended on for four years. She remains in her home with her husband.

Attorney Vasundhara Masoodi Pathak, who headed the Jammu and Kashmir women's commission when it was disbanded last year, said she is now flooded with calls from women in need amid the coronavirus lockdowns. She said she rarely received urgent calls directly from women while the commission was operating.

Shops have largely stayed closed and security forces still patrol the streets; an overnight curfew is still in effect as COVID-19 cases rise. Military crackdowns on suspected insurgents, as well as escalating border tensions with China in neighbouring Ladakh – formerly a part of Jammu and Kashmir state – have kept the region on edge.

"In this lockdown, the tormenting husbands and in-laws have got an opportunity to harass women," Pathak said. "Working women, who before the lockdown would somehow vent their pain and grievance either with peers, family, or friends, now find it very hard to spare even a jiffy to speak out, as they are under continuous and unwanted surveillance."

### ***Nowhere to turn***

Since the women's commission was shut down, victims of domestic violence no longer have a dedicated avenue for reporting abuse. There is only one women's police station in the entire Kashmir valley, and male officers aren't trained to handle domestic violence.

Unless a woman has severe injuries, most male police officers decline to take such reports, telling victims instead that the assaults are a family matter, said Shah Faisal, state director of the Human Rights Law Network, a collective of Indian lawyers and activists who provide legal support to vulnerable populations.

"Since most of the state machinery is engaged to fight COVID-19, there is no quick respite for the victims," Faisal said. "With [the] women's commission no more, women have no access to the justice system and are more vulnerable than ever."

Women who have been attacked also lack access to medical facilities, because many out-patient departments in public and private hospitals have closed.

The government's social welfare department reported 16 rape cases and 64 molestations in Jammu and Kashmir during the first month of coronavirus lockdowns, 20 March to 29 April. But Pathak said that government data is almost certainly an undercount, as there has been confusion about how to report gender-based violence during the full military lockdown that followed the region's August shutdown. The same department reported zero allegations over the six months before the pandemic.

Nighat Shafi Pandit, a women's advocate and chairperson of the Srinagar-based Help Foundation, said that "COVID-19 has impacted women badly."

Nighat, who runs a resource centre for domestic violence survivors, said she never feared venturing out to help during the military lockdown last year, but she has restricted herself to her home during the pandemic.

"One cannot meet the need in person and can't know their needs virtually," she said. "Even if women complain, we cannot help or reach them because there is no shelter in the entire Kashmir valley where women can take refuge."

With few resources for survivors, women like Sameena, a 29-year-old Kashmir resident, are trying to break the cycle of violence on their own.

She said her husband started beating her days after their wedding in September.

The abuse continued through the start of the coronavirus pandemic, when she suffered a miscarriage after her husband raped her.

She spent two days in an emergency ward before a doctor discharged her early, fearing COVID-19 infections.

With nowhere else to turn, she went home to her parents – even though they pushed for the arranged marriage in the first place.

"My parents will tell me to compromise, but I have made up my mind" to divorce, Sameena said. "If he can kill our child, he can kill me as well."

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## **SWEDEN: Rape conviction rates rise 75% in Sweden after change in the law**

By Emma Batha

Thomson Reuters Foundation (22.06.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3keOe3a> - Rape conviction rates in Sweden have risen 75% in two years following a major change in the law, spurring calls on Monday for other countries to revamp their legislation.

Sweden changed the legal definition of rape in 2018 to sex without consent. Unlike in many countries, prosecutors do not have to prove the use or threat of violence or coercion.

The National Council on Crime Prevention (Bra) said the rise in convictions - up from 190 in 2017 to 333 in 2019 - showed the change had had a greater impact than expected.

"We were surprised there was such an increase," Bra senior researcher Stina Holmberg said on Monday.

"It's a good sign. This has led to greater justice for victims of rape," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, adding that she hoped the law would encourage discussions on the issue of consent in schools and homes.

Women's rights campaigners called on other nations to follow Sweden's example.

"This shows an urgent need for other countries to follow suit," said Katarina Bergehed, senior policy adviser on women's rights at Amnesty International in Sweden.

"Sexual activity must be consensual. Anything else is rape."

Britain, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland and Luxembourg already define rape as sex without consent, while Denmark, Finland, Spain and Portugal have promised similar reforms.

### **'Shockingly low'**

Bergehed said most people still thought of rape as an attack by a stranger, but a review of court cases in Sweden showed almost all victims knew their assailant.

"These stereotypes are not helping victims to step forward - it makes them unsure of whether they really experienced rape or not," she added.

Bergehed said many women also blamed themselves for what happened, particularly if they had frozen and not fought back.

Police and courts often query a victim's story if she did not retaliate, but there is growing evidence that many victims experience temporary paralysis when raped.

Bergehed said a study by a Swedish emergency clinic for rape victims showed 70% had experienced a "frozen fright" reaction.

While Bergehed welcomed the rise in convictions, she said the overall number remained "shockingly low".

Reports of rapes rose to 5,930 in 2019 from 4,895 in 2017, but Bergehed said this was the tip of the iceberg. She said sexual crimes were not prioritised and investigations often flawed, meaning few cases went to trial.

Police said last year they would recruit new staff to focus on sexual crimes and domestic violence.

Sweden's 2018 rape law also introduced a new offence of negligent rape for cases where courts found consent had not been established, but that the perpetrator had not intended to commit rape.

The Bra review showed 12 people had been convicted of this offence.

Holmberg said senior judges needed to provide clearer guidance to courts on the offence.

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## **EU: Online child sex abuse rises with COVID-19 lockdowns**

***Sexual abusers are trying to exploit children's growing exposure to the internet during the pandemic.***

By Francesco Guarascio & Nick Macfie

Thomson Reuters Foundation (18.05.2020) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2LIXRHq> - Online sex abuse of children in the European Union has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, the head of EU law enforcement agency Europol said on Monday, warning that more cases could emerge when schools reopen as teachers' monitoring resumes.

Cybercrime has spiked during the epidemic with many people forced to work and shop online.

"What is most worrying is the increased online activity by those seeking child sexual abuse material," Europol director Catherine De Bolle told a hearing in the EU Parliament.

De Bolle, a former head of the Belgian police, said the rise in paedophile activities was reported by national law enforcement authorities from the 27 EU states who saw higher access to illegal websites and shut more online platforms for the exchange of child sex material.

She said that Europol investigators had also intercepted offenders claiming easier access to children in conversations on the dark web, a part of the internet which is accessible only with specific software or authorisation.

Sexual abusers are trying to exploit children's growing exposure to the web, as throughout lockdowns they turn to online lessons, sometimes through platforms that are not adequately secured, De Bolle said.

"We expect to have more and a better view on the situation when children will be able to go to school again and they will have the possibility to talk to teachers," De Bolle told lawmakers.

In many European countries, schools are still shut to contain the pandemic.

Hot lines for reporting abuse also received more calls as children were locked down, De Bolle said. In March, these alerts rose in Spain to a record level for that period of the year, a Europol report showed.

"Using the internet to sexually exploit children today is easier than ever," said ECPAT, a network of civil society organisations against the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

It said that it was now simpler for paedophiles to get in contact with children and to find like-minded offenders, "which also makes it easier to access, download, produce and share child sexual abuse material".

# **AFGHANISTAN: Women with disabilities face systemic abuse**

## ***Barriers, discrimination in health care, education.***

HRW (27.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Yzlda3> - Afghan women and girls with disabilities face high barriers, discrimination, and sexual harassment in accessing government assistance, health care, and schools, Human Rights Watch said today.

The 31-page report, "[Disability Is Not Weakness: Discrimination and Barriers Facing Women and Girls with Disabilities in Afghanistan](#)," details the everyday barriers that Afghan women and girls with disabilities face in one of the world's poorest countries. Decades of conflict have decimated government institutions, and development efforts have failed to reach many communities most in need. The Afghan government should urgently reform policies and practices that prevent women and girls with disabilities from enjoying their basic rights to health, education, and work. Afghanistan's donors should support and advocate for the rights of all Afghans with disabilities.

"All Afghans with disabilities face stigma and discrimination in getting government services, but women and girls are the 'invisible' victims of this abuse," said Patricia Gossman, associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch and author of the report. "The Covid-19 crisis will make it even harder for women and girls with disabilities to get adequate health care."

Afghanistan has one of the world's largest populations per capita of people with disabilities. More than four decades of war have left millions of Afghans with amputated limbs, visual or hearing disabilities, and depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. The under-resourced Afghan health services are failing to meet the needs of this population, and women and girls with disabilities are far less likely to obtain any assistance.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 26 women and girls with disabilities and their families in the cities of Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e Sharif, and 14 health and education professionals in these cities.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates the problems faced by many people with disabilities. For Afghan women with disabilities who live in rural areas far from medical clinics, the absence of transportation, lack of paved roads, and long distances to clinics can create insurmountable barriers to obtaining health care. The Afghan government should undertake a comprehensive review of health services for people with disabilities, particularly in rural areas, to improve outreach and access.

A young woman whose family moved to the city because of her disability said: "I know people who are in remote districts, but since they have no one [to bring them], they cannot benefit from [healthcare] services."

Government officials have sexually harassed women with disabilities, including when they visit ministries to claim disability benefits. The stigma associated with reporting abuse of this kind means that few women, especially those with disabilities, report those responsible. A woman in Kabul said: "I went to the ministry to get this certificate [for assistance]. They asked me whether I am married and when I said no, they told me that they can find me a husband. When I refused, the ministry employee told me that I can get this certificate only if I agree to be his girlfriend."

Entrenched discrimination means that people with disabilities face significant obstacles to education, employment, and health care, rights guaranteed under the Afghan constitution and international human rights law. For example, many people with disabilities in Afghanistan have not been able to acquire the national identity card (taskera) needed to obtain many government services.

An estimated 80 percent of girls with disabilities are not enrolled in school. Resistance from schools to accommodate children with disabilities, lack of dedicated transportation, and families' reluctance to send children with disabilities to school are major factors preventing children with disabilities from attending school. The Afghan government should develop sustainable solutions to increase access to quality, inclusive education for children with disabilities, particularly girls.

Girls with disabilities are far more likely to be kept home from school because of compounded socio-economic barriers and violence. An official with a humanitarian group said that children with disabilities "cannot go to regular schools due to lack of ramps. In some cases, the school principals do not want to enroll them, because they need to be taken care of."

Afghan women and girls with disabilities are frequently socially isolated, humiliated in public or within their own families, considered a source of shame for the family, or denied access to public spaces and community or family social events. "I'm supposed to get married, but my future in-laws think I cannot now," said a woman injured during fighting in 2017. "I have no hope for the future, but if I get treatment, I would have hope."

"In preparing for possible peace talks, Afghanistan's leaders have generally ignored the large population of Afghans who have disabilities, many as a direct result of the conflict," Gossman said. "The government needs to ensure that anyone with a disability gets the assistance they need, now and in the future."

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## **WORLD: Displaced and stateless women and girls at heightened risk of gender-based violence in the coronavirus pandemic**

UNHCR (20.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XTxKVi> - Around the world COVID-19 is taking lives and changing communities but the virus is also inducing massive protection risks for women and girls forced to flee their homes, the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, Gillian Triggs, warned today.

"We need to pay urgent attention to the protection of refugee, displaced and stateless women and girls at the time of this pandemic. They are among those most at-risk. Doors should not be left open for abusers and no help spared for women surviving abuse and violence," said Triggs.

Confinement policies, lockdowns and quarantines adopted across the world as a response to the pandemic have led to restricted movement, reduced community interaction, the closure of services and worsening socio-economic conditions. These factors are significantly exacerbating the risks of intimate partner violence.

"Some may end up confined to their shelters and homes, trapped with their abusers without the opportunity to distance themselves or to seek in-person support."

"Others, including those without documentation or those who have lost precarious livelihoods, as a result of the economic devastation that COVID-19 has inflicted, may be



forced into survival sex or child marriages by their families. Within the household, many women are also taking on increased burdens as caregivers.”

For survivors of violence and those at-risk, the consequences of COVID-19 also mean limited access to life-saving support, such as psycho-social, health and security services. Imposed mobility restrictions and containment measures make it difficult for women to access help while some services, including safe shelters, have been temporarily suspended, re-purposed or closed.

“Globally, our network of UNHCR protection staff are on high alert. Our life-saving programs for women and girls subjected to violence are being adapted where possible. In some locations they are now being managed remotely by social workers with the support of trained community volunteer networks,” said Triggs.

Displaced women themselves remain involved at the forefront of the response, informing their communities about the risks of violence and providing information on prevention and protective health measures. They are also supporting survivors to access available, specialized support.

UNHCR is also distributing emergency cash assistance to support survivors and women-at-risk. Action is also being coordinated across the humanitarian sector to ensure the risks of sexual and gender-based violence are mitigated throughout all sectoral interventions, including but not limited to the emergency health response.

“To preserve lives and secure rights, Governments, together with humanitarian actors, must ensure that rising risks of violence for displaced and stateless women are taken into account in the design of national COVID-19 prevention, response and recovery plans,” said Triggs.

This means ensuring critical services for survivors of gender-based violence are designated as essential and are accessible to those forcibly displaced. These include health and security services for survivors, psycho-social support services and safe shelters. Access to justice for survivors must also not be diminished.

Given the deteriorating socio-economic conditions now facing many refugee host countries, support from donors will be critically needed to preserve the operations of essential gender-based violence prevention and response services, including those provided by local, women-led organizations.

“All women and girls have the right to a life free from all forms of violence. We must stand with displaced and stateless women and girls as we reiterate the Secretary General’s message and urge all governments to put all women and girls’ safety first as they respond to the pandemic.”

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## **SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi women are speaking up online**

***Male guardianship, sexual harassment amongst major concerns.***

By Hiba Zayadin

HRW (14.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2VvXnsp> - Over the past two weeks, Saudi women have taken to Twitter, using pseudonyms, to share their experiences with sexual harassment, the reasons behind their hesitance to report these abuses to the authorities, and demands for the abolition of the discriminatory male guardianship system.

It is a remarkable show of courage at a time when Saudi authorities – under the de facto rule of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman – have maintained a sweeping campaign of repression that included dismantling and silencing the country's women's rights movement. Prominent women's rights activists like Loujain al-Hathloul and Samar Badawi languish in prison nearly two years since their arrests, while other women since released face travel bans and outstanding trials.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia introduced reforms for which these women had long advocated. Today, Saudi women can drive; those over 21 years old can obtain passports and travel without permission from male guardians; and recently introduced laws are meant to protect them against sexual harassment and employment discrimination.

But, as some of the anonymous Saudi women have revealed on Twitter, the road to equality is long.

Using two Arabic language hashtags which translate to "why I didn't report it" and "down with remnants of the guardianship system," Saudi women pointed to persistent elements of the male guardianship system that continue to keep women trapped in abusive situations.

Saudi women complained that if they attempt to flee abuse, they can still be arrested and forcibly returned if their male family members bring a legal claim based on uquq (parental disobedience), inqiyad (submission to a guardian's authority), or leaving the marital or guardian's home. They also spoke of how when they report abuse, they are often referred to closed shelters, which they are typically not allowed to leave unless they reconcile with family members or accept an arranged marriage.

The world is being told that Saudi Arabia is modernizing on women's rights. But the reality is that with no organized women's rights movement or environment in which women can safely and openly demand their rights, there is little room for further advances. The international community should call for the release of all women's rights activists, the safeguarding of women's right to freedom of expression and association, and for the complete abolition of the male guardianship system.

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## **EU: COVID-19: Stopping the rise in domestic violence during lockdown**

***Cases of domestic violence rose by a third in some EU countries following lockdown; member states should provide victims with flexible tools to report abuse; places in violence protection facilities and shelters must be increased; women will be hit much harder by the post-coronavirus economic crisis.***

European Parliament (07.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eiMcMx> - Women's Rights committee Chair, Evelyn Regner, urges the EU and member states to increase support to victims of domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis.

Both globally and in some EU countries, it has been reported that cases of domestic violence rose by a third in the week after lockdown was put in place. Women in violent relationships are stuck at home and exposed to their abuser for longer periods of time. This makes it very difficult for them to call helplines, as the perpetrator is always around.

Reacting to this situation, Evelyn Regner (S&D, AT), Chair of the EP Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, declared: "These days and the weeks ahead are especially dangerous for women. We are all facing major psychological challenges

through isolation or quarantine, but women and sometimes children in unsafe homes are facing a particularly gruelling stress test. We, therefore, must now pay particular attention to this issue and expand our actions to stop violence against women."

"We won't leave Europe's women alone"

"I urge all EU member states to tackle this problem with determination and to communicate actively where and how those affected can get help. This must also include simple ways to contact and to alert the police, such as text messages or online chats, and the use of code words with doctors or pharmacists. In addition, more places in violence protection facilities and women's shelters must be made available. Wherever possible, the EU must support member states' measures financially and by helping them to communicate about these measures", she added.

"The COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlights gender inequality in all its shapes and forms. As OECD figures show, 70% of the health care workforce are women, a large part of unpaid care work is done by women and the upcoming economic crisis will hit women much harder. It is our job to sustainably strengthen the physical and mental health of women and their economic independence, beyond the COVID-19 crisis. We will certainly not leave Europe's women alone", she concluded.

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## **WORLD: Statement by OSCE Special Representative for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings on need to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts in a time of crisis**

OSCE (03.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2x68Fvq> - Valiant Richey, OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, today issued the following statement, in co-ordination with Albania's OSCE Chairmanship, to the OSCE participating States on the COVID-19 pandemic. He urged that, "it is precisely when our global community is convulsed by a crisis of this magnitude that our obligation to combat the exploitation of vulnerable people becomes most acute". His full statement read:

"With the spread of COVID-19, the world faces an unprecedented threat to public health, which, in turn, poses extraordinary challenges to the economic and social cohesion of all our communities. In the fight against this common enemy, many governments have taken strong preventive measures, often combined with public interventions aimed at alleviating some of the economic losses that those measures inevitably create.

Although the COVID-19 threat is universal, the negative consequences of this crisis will be disproportionately carried by the most vulnerable in our societies. Firstly, victims of trafficking face exceptional danger as entrenched systems of exploitation are thrown into disarray and traffickers seek to maintain their revenue through greater violence or new forms of exploitation. Meanwhile, access to shelters and other support structures is increasingly limited at a time when need is at its greatest. Secondly, as resources gravitate to address public health concerns, attention is diverted from deterring criminal actors, and vulnerable persons already living in precarious circumstances are now at greater risk for being swept into exploitative situations.

The consequences of the current crisis on victims are far-reaching. Trafficking for sexual exploitation is increasingly moving online where traffickers can keep their revenue intact and enhance the isolation of and control over victims, particularly women and girls, who comprise 94% of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Children, at a time of school closures and potentially more hours spent online, face a greater risk of online

grooming. Victims of forced labour find themselves with even fewer options for survival and less legal protection. In the case of trafficking for organ removal, one of the darkest and least addressed forms of trafficking, the impacts of COVID-19 are starting to raise alarm.

In moments of crisis, traffickers will increase their recruitment as more and more people find themselves in dire economic straits. For this reason, it is essential that governments ensure equal access to healthcare, unemployment services, and other welfare services, regardless of recent employment history or legal status, to guarantee that those who need this support the most can effectively access it. Anyone without an income or other form of support is at risk of falling into the hands of traffickers. In these chaotic times, it is vital that States do not let their guard down, but instead strengthen their anti-trafficking efforts.

Human trafficking feeds off vulnerability — in particular, gender and economic inequality — and it is a symptom of frailty in our society. It is precisely when our global community is shaken by a crisis of this magnitude that our obligation to combat the exploitation of vulnerable people becomes most acute. Where trafficking goes unchecked and impunity reigns, the rule of law is undermined and the security and safety of all citizens, especially the most vulnerable, is threatened. For this reason, combating human trafficking is not just a law enforcement responsibility. It is a human, societal and security imperative, and an urgent priority.

The COVID-19 crisis will be remembered for generations, and we have just started to see its transformative impact on our lives. Today, as in all moments of historic change, we have the opportunity to steer our future in a better direction. Inclusive programmes ensuring protection to vulnerable groups can be a powerful tool to break the cycle of exploitation and strengthen exit pathways, giving a real alternative to those in need. With the necessary attention, adequate resources and the right programmes, we can start today to build a better and safer tomorrow for all."

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## **WORLD: Protection from domestic violence urgently needed for women and children under stay-at-home orders, say OSCE officials**

OSCE (02.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XdRZn2> - Noting a troubling rise in domestic violence in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and self-isolation guidelines in many countries, OSCE leaders called today for measures to be taken by governments to protect women and children. They said that unfortunately, for them home is not always a safe haven, as they are the most susceptible to abuse and need increased protection in these extraordinary times and urged to ensure that they are kept safe from abusers.

OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger said: "While dealing with the current health crisis participating States should not forget to uphold the right of women and children to live free of violence in times of families finding themselves in self-isolation. Urgent actions should be taken to address their needs and undertake measures to provide adequate protection for them."

The Secretary General of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Roberto Montella, said: "Some governments are already taking measures to counter domestic violence during the lockdown, which we hope can serve as best practices for others."

OSCE officials noted that rates of intimate partner violence can increase in times of isolation at home, while availability of support services for victims of violence has reduced.

"Far too many are subjected to mental, physical and sexual abuse, a situation that often escalates when families are under stress," said OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Special Representative on Gender Issues Hedy Fry (MP, Canada). "I urge governments across the OSCE area to increase efforts to provide safe spaces for victims of abuse, to prosecute abusers and to take other necessary measures to combat domestic violence."

The OSCE officials noted a number of steps taken to reduce the risk of domestic abuse, including public information campaigns to inform the public that women's shelters are remaining open during the coronavirus lockdown, banning the sale of alcohol as part of the effort to reduce domestic violence, and providing victims with the opportunity to report domestic violence in still-accessible locations such as pharmacies. In countries with strict lockdowns, some governments have announced that women will not be fined if they leave home to report abuse or seek safety. Governments and civil society organizations have expanded the availability of online and phone services for victims of violence.

"Combating domestic violence is the responsibility of the state. As governments seek to keep people safe from the pandemic, they need to take the potential effect of their measures on women carefully into account, and make sure that protection from both real and potential violence is a priority," said the Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir. "No one should be forced to choose between complying with the law and ensuring their own personal security, and authorities must ensure the safety of all their citizens, whether from the risk of infection or from violence in their own home."

The officials pointed to a number of OSCE resources related to gender-based violence, including an OSCE-led [Survey on Violence Against Women](#), practical guides such as the [ODIHR Guidebook on Preventing and Addressing Sexual and Gender based Violence in Places of Deprivation of Liberty](#), and [several reports](#) of the OSCE PA Special Representative on Gender Issues dealing with the topic.

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## **SOUTH KOREA: Shocked public wants Telegram trafficker identified**

By Ser Myo-Ja

Korea Joongang Daily (23.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3adU5Ap> - Following the arrest of a 26-year-old who allegedly kept dozens of women, including underage girls, in sexual slavery and offered chats showing videos of violent sex through an instant messaging app, public demands rose for the release of his full name and those of his clients.

President Moon Jae-in ordered the police Monday to expand its investigation into his clients.

On March 16, the National Police Agency arrested the 26-year-old man surnamed Cho, who they had been investigating since September.

The man was accused of sex trafficking dozens of women, producing illegal pornographic materials and distributing them for profit through the Telegram instant messaging app,

where he was known as “Baksa,” meaning doctor or guru in Korean. He has not been formally charged.

So far, at least 74 victims, including 16 children and teenagers, were confirmed. The police also tracked down 13 possible co-conspirators of Cho and arrested four of them. Investigations are ongoing into the rest.

The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency said Monday it is going after subscribers of Cho’s bizarrely violent and gruesome video service.

“We are well aware of the public furor and that the people who joined Baksa’s group chat rooms to watch videos are not simple bystanders but active accomplices in organized sex crimes,” a police official said. “We will conduct investigations to punish them based on concerned laws.”

The police estimated that Cho’s chat rooms had about 10,000 subscribers.

For months, the police investigated the creation and distribution of illegal sex crime videos through Telegram, an encrypted instant messaging service that has been used by protesters to avoid government surveillance in places like Hong Kong, but also by criminals, white supremacists and terrorists. According to the police, 124 suspects were charged with crimes including Cho.

According to police, Cho was a vicious sexual predator. He allegedly recruited women by offering part-time jobs and made them sex slaves by threatening to distribute their naked photos. He allegedly carved his nickname Baksa into the skin of some victims to claim them as his property, the police said.

According to the police, Cho also threatened to blackmail customers. He also ordered some of his customers to rape underage girls, police claim.

Cho’s service offered free previews and a range of raunchy chats that got more expensive as they got more extreme. He was paid in cryptocurrencies.

He allegedly hired employees to rape victims and launder money. He communicated with them through Telegram messages and never met his employees, the police said.

Following Cho’s arrest, the Blue House’s public petition board received several demands for his full identity. One petition demanding full disclosure of his identity was signed by over 2.3 million people as of 5 p.m. Monday. Another petition, demanding the identities of accomplices and customers to be publicly released, was signed by over 1.6 million people.

If a Blue House petition gets more than 200,000 signatures within 30 days, the Blue House is supposed to formally respond.

“President Moon offered sincere words of consolation to the victims including the 16 children and teens,” Blue House spokesman Kang Min-seok said Monday. “He said he agrees with the people’s rightful rage.”

Moon said the government will do its best to delete the digital videos and offer legal, medical and psychological support to the victims.

Noting that he takes seriously three million people signing petitions within a short period of time, Moon ordered the police to thoroughly investigate this heinous crime, Kang said.



Moon ordered the police to investigate not only the chat room operators, but all users, urging the police to create a special investigation team to do so.

The police said Monday it will decide Tuesday whether to disclose the full identity of Cho.

Meanwhile, the police are still investigating a separate but related Telegram sex crime case. The police are tracing a user nicknamed "GodGod," who is believed to be the pioneer of such sexual chat rooms in Korea.

He reportedly operated eight Telegram chat rooms from February through September last year and distributed hundreds of illegal sex videos.

According to women's rights groups, about 60 Telegram chat rooms exist to share sex videos that involve underage people or violence. In total, they have about 260,000 subscribers.

Korea has relatively mild punishments for cyberspace sex crimes. Clause 2 of Article 14 of the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes said a person who creates or distributes photographs or videos against the will of a person photographed is punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 30 million won (\$23,700).

Clause 5 of Article 11 of the Act on the Protection of Children and Youth against Sex Offenses says, "Any person who possesses child or youth pornography knowing that it is child or youth pornography shall be punished by imprisonment with labor for not more than one year or by a fine not exceeding 20 million won."

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## **SAUDI ARABIA: Continuing arbitrary detention and judicial harassment of five women rights defenders**

***The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a partnership of FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), has received new information and requests your urgent intervention in the following situation in Saudi Arabia.***

FIDH (19.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UujY8v> - The Observatory has been informed by reliable sources about the continuing arbitrary detention and judicial harassment of Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah and Nouf Abdelaziz who have been detained for their peaceful defence of women's rights following a crackdown that started in May 2018.

According to the information received, on March 18, 2020, the hearings in the trial of Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah and Nouf Abdelaziz was postponed to an unknown date following the closing of the courts due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

On March 10, 2020, the hearings in the trial of Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani, which were scheduled for March 11, 2020, had already been postponed to March 18, 2020. No reason was then given to justify this postponement.

The Observatory recalls that 2018 saw an unprecedented crackdown against women rights defenders (see background information). Dozens were detained on vague security charges for defending women's rights. Several were reportedly tortured while in



detention. The acts of torture included electric shocks, whipping the women on their thighs, rape threats and sexual harassment.

The Observatory strongly condemns the ongoing arbitrary detention of Mses. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, and Nouf Abdelaziz, as well as the ongoing judicial harassment against them as well as against Mses. Aziza al-Youssef, Eman al-Nafjan, Hatoon al-Fassi, Amal al-Harbi, Abeer Namankani and Shadan al-Onezi, who were all temporarily released between March and May 2019, as such harassment seems only to aim at punishing them for their legitimate human rights activities.

The Observatory calls on the Saudi authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all women rights defenders currently detained in Saudi Arabia, and to put an end to the judicial harassment against them.

### **Background information [1]:**

In September 2017, immediately after the announcement of a Royal Decree authorising women to obtain driving licences, the services of the Ministry of Interior contacted women's rights defenders to ask them not to comment on the new decree in the media. Mid 2018 repression took an unprecedented turning point with the arrest of dozens of women's rights defenders.

On May 15, 2018, Ms. Loujain Al-Hathloul, who had been involved in campaigns on the right of women to drive, was abducted in the United Arab Emirates, brought to Saudi Arabia against her will, and detained.

On the same day, Ms. Aziza al-Youssef, a key figure of women's fight for their political rights and a supporter of the campaign to abolish male guardianship, and Dr. Eman al-Nafjan, founder and author of the Saudiwoman's Weblog, who had also been involved in the driving campaign, were arrested and detained.

On June 6, 2018, Ms. Nouf Abdelaziz, a journalist, TV producer and women's rights defender, was arrested at her home.

On June 27, 2018, Ms. Hatoon al-Fassi, a prominent scholar and associate professor of women's history at King Saud University, was arrested. She was advocating for the right of women to participate in municipal elections and to drive, and was one of the first women to drive the day the ban was lifted on June 24, 2018. She was set to be interviewed by French media France 2 to talk about the lift of the driving ban shortly after.

Ms. Amal Al-Harbi, a woman human rights defender and the wife of prominent activist Mr. Fowzan Al-Harbi, co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), was arrested by State Security on July 30, 2018 while on the seaside with her children in Jeddah.

Ms. Shadan al-Onezi, Ms. Mayaa al-Zahrani, and Ms. Abeer Namankani were also detained later in May 2018.

On July 30, 2018, security forces arrested Ms. Samar Badawi and Ms. Nassima Al-Sadah.

On March 13, 2019, Riyadh Criminal Court summoned Mses. Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Youssef, Eman al-Nafjan, Amal al-Harbi, Hatoon al-Fassi, Shadan al-Onezi, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Nouf Abdelaziz, Abeer Namankani along with a 10th woman human rights defender.

### **Actions requested:**

Please write to the authorities in Saudi Arabia, urging them to:

- i. Guarantee in all circumstances the physical integrity and psychological well-being of the above-mentioned women human rights defenders, as well as of all detained human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia;
- ii. Ensure Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Nouf Abdelaziz, Samar Badawi, Nassima Al-Sadah and the other prosecuted women human rights defenders have unhindered access to their families and lawyers and respect in all circumstances their right to a fair trial;
- iii. Immediately and unconditionally release Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Nouf Abdelaziz, Samar Badawi and Nassima Al-Sadah as well as all human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia and drop all the charges against them, as their detention is arbitrary since it only aims at punishing them for their legitimate human rights activities;
- iv. End all forms of harassment, including at the judicial level, against Ms. Aziza al-Youssef, Eman al-Nafjan, Amal al-Harbi, Hatoon al-Fassi, Abeer Namankani, Shadan al-Onezi, Samar Badawi and Nassima Al-Sadah and the other women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia,
- v. Comply in all circumstances with all the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, in particular its Articles 1, 6(c) and 12.2;
- vi. More generally, ensure in all circumstances the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and instruments ratified by Saudi Arabia.

### **Addresses:**

- His Majesty, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, King of Saudi Arabia and Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, Fax: (via Ministry of the Interior) +966 11 403 3125; Email: info@moi.gov.sa; Twitter: @KingSalman
- His Excellency, Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Fax: (via Ministry of the Interior) +966 11 403 3125; Email: info@moi.gov.sa
- H.E. Waleed bin Mohammad Al Samaani, Minister of Justice, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Fax: + 966 11 405 7777; Email: info@moj.gov.sa
- His Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz Bin Saud Bin Naif Bin Abdulaziz, Minister of Interior, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Fax: + 966 11 401 1111 / + 966 11 401 1944 / + 966 11 403 1125; Email: info@moi.gov.sa
- H.E. Adel bin Ahmed El Jubeir, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fax: + 966 11 403 0645 ; Email: info@mofa.gov.sa
- H.E. Abdulaziz Alwasil, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland. Fax: +41 22 758 00 00. Email: saudiamission@bluewin.ch
- H.E. Abdulrahman bin Soliman Al-Ahmed, Ambassador, Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Brussels, Belgium. Fax: +32 2 6468538. Email: beemb@mofa.gov.sa

Please also write to the diplomatic missions or embassies of Saudi Arabia in your respective country as well as to the EU diplomatic missions or embassies in Saudi Arabia.

Kindly inform us of any action undertaken quoting the code of this appeal in your reply.

[1] See Observatory Urgent Appeals SAU 003 / 0518 / OBS 073, SAU 004 / 0718 / OBS 093 and SAU 005 / 0818 / OBS 103, published on May 24, 2018, on July 6, 2018 and on August 14, 2018.

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## **CHINA: Chinese social justice activist 'disappeared'**

***Li Qiaochu's last tweet: 'Let's go through the tough time together'.***

By Yaqiu Wang

HRW (11.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dcZwS6> - Li Qiaochu, a Beijing-based women's rights and labor activist, tweeted on January 24 about the Chinese authorities' attempted coverup of the COVID-19 outbreak: "Wish everyone a peaceful [Lunar] New Year. Let's remember the pain... and the lives that left us without even being tallied... Let's use civic engagement to pursue those responsible for trampling lives."

Early on the morning of February 16, Beijing authorities took Li into custody. It is unclear where she is now and with what crime she has been charged.

Some international media have reported Li's enforced disappearance in relation to the recent arbitrary detention of her partner, Xu Zhiyong, a prominent and previously imprisoned legal activist. But what has often been overlooked is Li's own tireless work on social justice issues, and the repeated police harassment and intimidation she has endured.

During the freezing winter of 2017, when Beijing authorities forcibly evicted tens of thousands of migrant workers from their homes during a citywide "clean-up campaign," Li worked with other volunteers to find free or cheap housing for the newly homeless. Since 2018, she played an active role in China's #MeToo movement, collecting cases of sexual harassment and publishing reports online.

As the coronavirus crisis unfolded, Li joined a volunteer team that handed out free masks to sanitation workers in Beijing. She also helped pregnant women in quarantine areas to find doctors, and organized volunteers to help those who suffered domestic violence – instances of which rose markedly while households across the country were under quarantine or other forms of restriction.

"Let's go through the tough time together." This is the last tweet Li posted before her disappearance, in reply to a tweet by Luo Shengchun, the wife of the arbitrarily detained human rights lawyer Ding Jiaxi. In the past several years, despite the government of Xi Jinping's ever-tightening grip on civil society, countless people have chosen to embrace one of China's toughest life paths – challenging the powerful authoritarian government. Let's remember the pain they endure in the struggle for human rights in China.

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## **PAKISTAN: Several injured as conservatives throw stones at Women's Day March in Pakistan**

RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal (08.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cJf9Aj> - Several people were reportedly injured as social and religious conservatives clashed with International Women's Day demonstrators in Islamabad on March 8.

RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal reported that participants in a conservative demonstration called Modesty Walk threw stones at demonstrators holding a march to mark International Women's Day.

Ismat Shahjahan, head of the Women's Democratic Front, which organized the march, said four participants suffered head injuries, while three others were less seriously hurt.

Police intervened to stop the violence.

About 1,000 people participated in the Islamabad Women's March.

The Women's March was being held under the slogan, "My body, my choice." Conservative groups, including the Jamaat-e-Islami political party, criticized the initiative as threatening traditional Muslim values.

Many women participating in the rival Modesty Walk wore burqas and chanted, "Our bodies, Allah's choice."

Women's March events were also held in Quetta, Lahore, Karachi, and other cities.

Much of Pakistani society is strictly patriarchal and dominated by strict codes of "honor" that control women's choices regarding marriage, reproduction, education, and other issues.

About 1,000 Pakistani women each year are murdered in so-called "honor" killings, often by their own relatives.

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## **SPAIN: Spain toughens law against sexual violence**

***All non-consensual sex will be regarded as rape, with tougher sentences available to judges.***

By Graham Keeley

Al Jazeera (03.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/39xBhf0> - Spain is set to toughen legislation against sexual violence in the wake of a notorious alleged gang rape at the world-famous bull-running festival in Pamplona.

The left-wing coalition government, comprised of the Socialists (PSOE) and the far-left Unidas Podemos (UP), on Tuesday, approved a draft bill to change the penal code to classify all non-consensual sex as rape.

Under Spain's current legislation, the perpetrator must have used intimidation or violence against the victim for the offence to be classed as rape.

Under the new Sexual Freedom Law, sentences for rape will be increased from between four and 10 years to up to 15 years if there are aggravating factors.

Judges will be able to pass tougher sentences if violence or drugs are used to incapacitate the victim, or if she is the wife or a former partner of the rapist.

Under the terms of the legislation, special courts will hear cases involving sexual violence cases. This is already the case with domestic violence cases.

After the bill's cabinet approval on Tuesday, it must be examined by two state commissions before being voted on by Parliament. It is not expected to become law for at least six months.

### **'Wolf-pack'**

The ambitious law was the brainchild of Irene Montero, the minister for equality who is a leading member of UP, and its introduction comes just days before Spain marks International Women's Day on March 8.

Calls to reform the criminal law concerning sexual offences have been mounting after a series of high-profile trials, including the so-called "Wolf Pack" case, in which an 18-year-old woman was gang-raped during the Pamplona bull-running festival in 2016.

In 2018, the conviction of five men on the lesser charge of sexual abuse - not rape - sparked protests across Spain and demands to change the law.

The men, known as the "Wolf Pack" after the name of the WhatsApp group in which they shared a video and images of the attack, had their sentences increased from nine to 15 years in June last year after prosecutors appealed to the Supreme Court.

In a separate case in November, five men were cleared of raping a 14-year-old girl, but jailed for the lesser charge of sexual abuse in a case which reignited protests against Spain's controversial sex offence laws.

Those men, aged 18 to 21, were jailed for between 10 and 12 years, but avoided conviction for the more serious charge of sexual assault or rape because the court ruled that the men did not use violence against the child.

The men had taken turns to have sex with the girl after a party in Manresa, about 45 miles north from Barcelona in October 2016.

After this case, a survey for La Vanguardia newspaper found 97 percent of respondents wanted tougher laws regarding sexual offences, while 3 percent were content with the current legislation.

Maria Alvarez, of the commission for International Women's Day in Spain, said the law change was a first step towards combating sexual violence.

"This is an important move to change the criminal law, but more must be done in education to teach boys and girls to respect each other," she told Al Jazeera.

"Courts have also handed down some shameful sentences which have reflected whether women were drinking or what they were wearing. That must stop."

However, the law change has prompted criticism from the conservative right in Spain.

Cayetana Alvarez de Toledo, spokesman for the conservative Popular Party in the Spanish parliament, said: "In reality, are we going to convert sexual relations into a process of interrogation? A 'no' is a no, obviously. But is a silence also a 'no' or a 'yes'?"

Jorge Buxade, an MEP for the right-wing Vox party, told Al Jazeera: "This law discriminates unfairly in favour of women and against men. We want to defend women and men equally from sexual violence."

## **USA: Harvey Weinstein verdict is #MeToo milestone but changes little for world's sexual assault survivors**

***Many women still face retaliation for reporting abuse.***

By Leah Rodriguez and Pia Gralki

Global Citizen (24.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3ccQILy> - Harvey Weinstein was found guilty of criminal sexual assault on two counts in a New York City court on Monday.

During a trial that lasted more than a month, six women testified that Weinstein, the founder of The Weinstein Company — a film studio behind popular films from Halloween to Inglourious Basterds — had sexually assaulted them.

The jury of seven men and five women deliberated Weinstein's case over the course of five days. Weinstein, pleaded not guilty and denies all allegations of non-consensual sex. He was convicted for a criminal sexual act in the first degree for forcing a sex act on former production assistant Mimi Haleyi at his apartment in July 2006, as well as rape in the third degree for raping aspiring actress Jessica Mann at a hotel in 2013. He was acquitted of two counts of predatory sexual assault, which would have resulted in a life sentence.

Weinstein's sentencing is scheduled for March 11, when he will face five to 25 years in prison. He also faces separate sex crimes charges in Los Angeles.

The verdict is a major win for the #MeToo movement, founded by activist Tarana Burke and relaunched by actress Alyssa Milan when high-profile women started going public about Weinstein's abuse in 2017. Nearly 100 women have come forward against Weinstein, and the movement has inspired hundreds of thousands of other sexual survivors to speak out. Several US states have expanded workplace harassment protections since.

As the movement picked up steam, the United Nations emphasized the need to ensure no one is left behind in the fight to achieve gender equality. The social media campaign also sparked an international rallying cry for justice in developing and wealthy countries alike. Namibia launched one of Africa's first #MeToo movements. Nigeria, Egypt, and other countries followed suit, while women in Japan introduced the #KuToo campaign to protest sexist dress codes. South Africans shared personal stories of sexual assault and gender-based violence on Twitter. And Indian women started speaking out against rampant sexual harassment in the workplace.

But experts say Weinstein's case will likely not impact the treatment of sexual assault survivors globally.

"This case reminds us that sexual violence thrives on unchecked power and privilege," Burke said in a statement released to Global Citizen. "The implications reverberate far beyond Hollywood and into the daily lives of all of us in the rest of the world."

Yasmeen Hassan, global executive director of women's rights organization Equality Now, considers the verdict a victory but said it's a "drop in the ocean" in the effort to protect sexual assault survivors worldwide.

"I can't say that this has a huge impact on international legal systems that actually prevent women from coming forward," Hassan told Global Citizen.

It is estimated that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner. While the #MeToo movement has encouraged women worldwide to report sexual abuse, Hassan said many are met with defamation lawsuits or other forms of retaliation. Sexual assault and rape laws are still far behind in countries around the world, she said.

There is no international treaty on gender-based violence in the workplace. While 154 countries have sexual harassment laws, the laws aren't always enforced or they don't meet international standards. The majority of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported because survivors fear retaliation from their abuser or society, don't think the authorities would help, and don't want to be retraumatized if the justice system doesn't believe them.

On March 11, the United Nations will hold the annual Commission on the Status of Women, where world leaders will gather to discuss the state of gender equality. Hassan hopes to use Weinstein's case and the #MeToo movement to put pressure on governments to reevaluate how the justice system treats sexual violence survivors at the commission.

"It takes a key change, country by country, to get women the courage to come forward," Hassan said.

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## **LEBANON: The Syrian women and girls sold into sexual slavery in Lebanon**

***Syria's refugee crisis has shone a light on sex trafficking in Lebanon, where victims are often treated as criminals.***

By Daniela Sala

Al Jazeera (11.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2uLjXUU> - "How do I know most of the women working as prostitutes are controlled?" asked Paul, a volunteer for the Jesuits, a religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, before answering his own question. "[Because] the last time I tried to help one of them get in touch with an NGO, I got beaten and threatened by her captors."

Everyone in Lebanon's "sex trade" seems to be involved in trafficking in one way or another: Sources at both the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the General Directorate of General Security (GS) in Beirut told Al Jazeera that even pimps working further down the chain of command ultimately report to a bigger network of organised traffickers.

Paul has learned the ins-and-outs of Lebanon's trafficking world over the years. Beirut, the Lebanese capital, and Jounieh, a coastal town about 10km (6.2 miles) north of it, are where most victims of sex trafficking end up in Lebanon.

A GS officer estimated that there are at least 800 women and girls who have been forced into prostitution in these areas. But the numbers are hard to verify because of the hidden nature of the problem.

While the ISF formally identified 29 victims - 10 of whom were Lebanese and 13 Syrian - of sex trafficking in 2017, the most recent year for which there is data, other sources, including officers at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs, put the number in the thousands.



## **The law**

The plight of these women is compounded by the way the law is applied in Lebanon. Article 523 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalises "any person who practices secret prostitution or facilitates it". The punishment is a prison sentence of anything from a month to a year.

It is not illegal to work as a licensed prostitute but seeing as the government has not issued any such licences since the 1970s, those working as prostitutes are vulnerable to being arrested and punished.

Beirut is no stranger to the sex industry. Prostitution was legalised in Lebanon after World War I when the government decided that concentrating prostitutes in one area - Mutanabbi Street, which became Beirut's downtown red-light district before it was destroyed in the Civil War - would protect Lebanese women from French and Senegalese soldiers.

According to the Lebanese Prostitution Law of 1931, brothels were divided into two groups: public brothels and escort houses. The law also set conditions for those working outside the brothels, dividing them into groups of workers; cafe girls, mistresses and "artistes".

After Lebanon's Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, secret - meaning unlicensed - prostitution became a crime.

But hundreds of women enter Lebanon each year, particularly from Eastern Europe and Morocco, with an "artiste" visa, to work as dancers in clubs. "Artiste" is widely understood to be a euphemism for "prostitute".

## **Life on the streets**

It is about 8pm on a Saturday, close to the Daoura intersection near Bourj Hammoud in Beirut's Armenian district, on a crowded road full of busy shops and cafes. From his car, Paul has just spotted a woman leaning towards a black SUV. She and the driver talk for a few minutes. Eventually, she gets in the car. The transaction is quick, and people passing by do not even seem to notice.

"They found a deal," explains Paul's wife, Ray. The couple, both in their 40s, have been volunteering for the church for years. Paul first got involved 20 years ago when he discovered that one of his neighbours was being forced into prostitution. He says he considered it his "Christian mission" to help. Ray decided to join him soon after they met in 2010.

Paul and Ray are Armenian-Lebanese and asked that their real names be withheld because of the sensitivity of their work. For the past 10 years, they have distributed food and medicine once a week to "people in need", the couple's term for the homeless, drug addicts, beggars and women exploited into prostitution in Beirut.

As they drive around Doura, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, the main road is still crowded. Two policemen are patrolling the area. But right around the corner, Ray spots another woman sitting in a car with a man. They have seen her here before, waiting on the street corner.

"We meet women who are Lebanese, East Africans and, in recent years, a lot of Syrians, of course," says Paul. "In my experience, they all want to leave the job, but the only

ones I have seen leaving a trafficker - it was because they were handed to another [trafficker]."

### ***The Chez Maurice case***

It came as no great shock to Paul when, in 2016, news broke that 75 Syrian women had been trafficked and held captive in a Jounieh brothel for years.

What became known as the "Chez Maurice case", after the brothel in which they were held, only came to light because four women managed to escape.

Legal Agenda, a Lebanese NGO that collected several testimonies from survivors of the Chez Maurice brothel, described the place as a "torture chamber".

"I didn't think there was a state [law and order] in Lebanon," one of the trafficked women told Legal Agenda. "[One of the traffickers] told me that he bought the state with his money. I believed him the moment I was detained in the General Security building for 24 hours and then released scot-free."

Despite the media uproar surrounding the case, the owner of the brothel, a Lebanese businessman, was soon released on bail. Hearings into the case have been postponed multiple times and, three years on, the trial is only just about to begin.

### ***'No trust in the system'***

In 2011, the US State Department had placed Lebanon on its tier 2 watchlist of countries not fully complying with standards to combat human trafficking. Following pressure from civil groups such as Legal Agenda, Lebanon passed a new anti-trafficking law.

Since then, however, the Syrian crisis has precipitated a mass influx into Lebanon. Many of the refugees are women and children who have already suffered trauma and may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Al Jazeera heard accounts of several scenarios in which Syrian women and children ended up in the hands of traffickers. One involved marriages, either in Syria or Lebanon, where the "husband" later revealed himself to be a trafficker. Another involved groups of women and children being trafficked across the border. There are also cases of women and girls being forcibly recruited within refugee camps or even sold by their families to traffickers.

However they arrived in Lebanon, human rights groups and aid workers say not enough is being done to protect them. Ghada Jabbour, head of the anti-trafficking unit at NGO Kafa ("enough" in Arabic), which focuses on gender-based violence, explains: "There is no trust in the system. Victims do not ask for help and do not report. And, at the same time, there is no outreach programme for the victims."

### ***When the numbers do not add up***

According to Lebanon's ISF, the number of identified victims of trafficking - including those forced into begging, labour exploitation and prostitution - has remained steadily low: 19 in 2015, 87 in 2016 (mainly the Chez Maurice survivors) and 54 in 2017. Most were Syrian.

However, Dima Haddad, programme officer at the IOM, says the official statistics do not come close to conveying the magnitude of the problem.

From her office at the IOM headquarters in Beirut, she coordinates a regional taskforce to counter human trafficking in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan - the countries most affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. Sitting at her desk, surrounded by charts showing the dozens of tasks her team has planned for the next few months, she says: "Wherever there is a crisis, there is human trafficking."

"Vulnerability is increasing, hence trafficking is increasing."

Asked whether there are gaps in the system for identifying the victims, Haddad answers immediately. "Absolutely. If I have to be more diplomatic, I would say there is a lot of work to do. It is urgent, as we consider anti-trafficking a life-saving intervention."

There are also great obstacles to women being able to tell their stories. Aside from the shame and stigma that prevent victims from coming forward, it can also be difficult to access them. Approaching women on the street is dangerous - as Paul has found over the years - as they are watched by their traffickers.

In researching this feature, Al Jazeera tried to speak to survivors through NGOs, local journalists and local refugee camp leaders. However, those who were prepared to speak asked for money in exchange, requests that appeared to come from husbands and other relatives. Permission to access Baabda female prison - where many of the women arrested for prostitution are held - was not granted.

### ***Falling through the cracks***

During 2017, the ISF adopted a policy of trying to root out all cases involving potential trafficking victims through its Human Rights Unit. As of 2018, at least 108 training sessions had been given to the 37 law enforcement agents attached to the unit to help them identify and deal with suspected trafficking cases. But, according to Alef, a human rights watchdog based in Beirut, and other organisations, these training sessions are rarely given to those on the front lines and are, therefore, missing their target.

Ashraf Rifi, who served as minister of justice between 2014 and 2016, and who was ISF director-general from 2005 to 2013, says it could take 10 to 15 years before there are significant changes in how cases of human, and specifically sex, trafficking are identified and combatted.

"It is a cultural problem," he explains in his office, referring to the low numbers of women - and particularly Syrian women - identified as victims of trafficking. "It's not unusual, because of stigma and discrimination, that Syrian women are considered 'just' prostitutes."

The ISF is also responsible for investigations into exploitation networks. And yet, Rifi adds, one of the main challenges is the "high level of corruption", including within the ISF itself.

In August 2018, the head of the ISF's Human Trafficking and Moral Protection Bureau, Johnny Haddad, was arrested on charges of corruption in connection with a prostitution ring. To date, he is still under investigation by the ISF's ethics committee, meaning that all information related to the case is classified.

Meanwhile, hundreds of women continue to fall through the cracks - treated like criminals instead of victims.

In 2016, 304 women were arrested on charges of prostitution, according to the ISF's data. More than half of them were Syrian. All were placed in prison.

The only support available to these women after they are released comes from charities. Dar Al Amal, a local NGO, helps women recuperate in its sparse offices in Sin el Fil, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut.

Here, the volunteers provide emotional and practical support to women who were forced into prostitution, trying to address their legal, medical and psychological needs.

Ghinwa Younes, a social worker who regularly visits the Baabda women's prison, says: "All the women I met want to quit this life. Most of them are in fact trafficking victims - but ISF did not understand they were victims. As soon as they leave the prison, they rarely get any kind of support and they are immediately back in the network of their exploiters."

When Al Jazeera spoke to Joseph Mousallem, a spokesman for the ISF, he acknowledged that the difference between prostitution and trafficking is not well understood by police officers. "But it is a cultural issue involving the whole of society, not only the security forces," he says.

"Countering trafficking is a priority, but we do have thousands of priorities: the whole system is under pressure. We do our best, but not have the means or the resources to track the victims."

### ***'Of course they are victims'***

Lawyer Hasna Abdulreda meets dozens of these women during detention visits. For 10 years, she has provided legal support to women in jail, and she is currently the head of the legal department at the Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, a local NGO.

"In the past five years, every month at least two or three [women] reach out to me, after being arrested as prostitutes," she says. "Most of them are Syrians and, of course, they are victims of trafficking."

But there is little she can do.

"The trials are very fast and if the judge is given any reason to think that the woman is consenting to prostitution (for example because she keeps a share of the money), then he will just send her to prison without any further investigation," Abdulreda explains.

This is despite the fact that both the UN Convention on Human Trafficking and Lebanese law state that the victim's consent should be considered irrelevant.

"The only thing I can do is to give [detained women] my phone number and ask them to call me once they leave so that I can refer them to a shelter or an NGO. In prison, they do not have a phone, so I can't contact them once they are released," Abdulreda adds.

Despite many women asking for help, in 10 years nobody has called back.

For Syrian women, it is more complicated. Because they are foreigners, they are held by the GS for up to two days after being released from Baabda, Abdulreda says.

"I'm not allowed to access their files. I just lose every contact with them."

### ***'Double standard'***

Even when trafficking cases go to court, the odds appear stacked against victims of sex trafficking.

Legal Agenda analysed the 34 trafficking cases that made it to court in Lebanon between 2012 and 2017. According to lawyer Ghida Frangieh, who put that report together: "There is a clear double standard in the judges' attitude towards prostitution and begging.

"While in all cases involving forced begging, judges were quite fast in ruling that it was a trafficking case, when it comes to prostitution, they were digging deeper into the means of exploitation, asking for proof that the woman was actually forced into it. In certain cases they ruled that the woman was not to be considered a victim of trafficking as she consented, at least to some extent."

Frangieh says that as well as reflecting a general prejudice against women in prostitution, this view has also been influenced by the Chez Maurice case.

"[Chez Maurice] became the victim paradigm. If you do not fit into this stereotype, you are hardly considered as a victim of trafficking," she explains.

But this is not how trafficking works.

According to a former senior GS officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media, sex trafficking generally happens in one of two ways: through highly organised rings operating in brothels (such as Chez Maurice) or through so-called "free agents".

But, despite their name, free agents still operate under the protection and control of a trafficker. "There is no prostitution that is not linked to the main traffickers," the former officer says.

### ***'Long-term solutions'***

"Alone, we cannot do much," says Jabbour from Kafa.

Along with the Catholic NGO network Caritas, Kafa runs a shelter for female survivors of violence, mainly domestic workers who have been abused by their employers. The ISF occasionally refers trafficking victims to them.

But their resources are limited: Since 2015, Kafa has been able to offer protection to approximately 100 women, 20 of whom (all Syrians) were sex-trafficking survivors.

"These shelters are just a starting point," says Jabbour. "What we need are long-term solutions."

Some of these women were relocated overseas, some got married, but others, without a proper support mechanism, simply went back into prostitution - either forced or out of desperation.

"Countering trafficking and identifying victims is something that cannot be done by NGOs. It is a state's responsibility," says George Ghali, director of Alef.

According to Ghali, the problem is not the law but rather in the implementation of the law. "Where are the investigations? We are talking about organised crime. This is not something you can expect NGOs to deal with."

Back in Doura, Paul and Ray keep providing basic help to people in need. They do not have success stories to share.

Paul says he has not received any further threats from the traffickers. "[Why? Because] we make no change in the situation. And even if a girl manages to quit, they would have another one."

He admits that lately, he has considered stopping his volunteer work because of the emotional toll it has taken.

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## **SOUTH SUDAN: UN official welcomes release of women and children abducted by armed group**

***The expert leading UN efforts to stamp out sexual violence committed during wartime has welcomed the release of 78 women and 50 children by an armed group in South Sudan.***

UN News (04.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/31Mk1i> - They were among more than 500 women and children abducted between April and August 2018 by the pro-Riek Machar Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO RM) and subjected to repeated rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage.

"This release is an encouraging and long-awaited development, in a context of prevailing insecurity and immense operational, logistical and resource constraints," said Pramila Patten, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, in a statement issued on Tuesday.

### ***Release followed months of negotiations***

South Sudan, the world's youngest country, has been marred by years of conflict and instability following a political crisis which led to conflict between supporters of President Salvar Kiir and Mr. Machar, his former deputy, in December 2013.

The two leaders were expected to form a unity government last November, in line with a September 2018 peace deal, but the deadline was extended to this month.

Ms. Patten said the release of the abducted women and children followed months of negotiation between Mr. Machar and his local commanders and her Office, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and its Senior Women Protection Adviser.

"When I met with Dr. Machar last year, I expressed my grave concern about the plight of these women and children, many of whom were reportedly subjected to systematic and brutal forms of conflict-related sexual violence", she said.

"As a result of our discussion, he issued a command order calling for the release of all women and children held against their will and their transfer to the United Nations and its civil society partners. This order was in line with the Unilateral Communiqué on the Prevention of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, which was signed by the SPLA-IO in 2014 in the framework of my mandate".

### ***Women and children inspired to come forward***

The women and children who were freed had been held for many months in military bases in the Western Equatoria region of South Sudan.

They are currently being supported by the UN and its civil society partners and have been referred for medical and psychosocial support.

Several of the women are pregnant and also have been referred to prenatal healthcare facilities.

Ms. Patten said their release is encouraging other women and children to come forward and seek support.

Her Office will continue to advocate for the release of the remaining abductees being held in Western Equatoria.

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## **CAMEROON: 'No girl is safe': The mothers ironing their daughters' breasts**

***Cameroonian girls are enduring a painful daily procedure with long lasting physical and psychological consequences.***

By Philip Obaji Jr.

Al Jazeera (03.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2SkWG3O> - For most children, their birthday is a time of celebration. But that was not the case for Mirabel when she turned 10.

For Mirabel, a Cameroonian refugee living in Nigeria, turning 10 marked the start of gruelling daily torture - having her breasts ironed with hot stones by her mother.

Every morning, a neighbour from the refugee community where she lives in Ogoja, in Nigeria's southeastern Cross River State, holds her legs firmly in place while her mother takes a burning hot pestle straight from the fire and presses it against her daughter's chest in an attempt to flatten her breasts.

The procedure can be repeated for months, or even years, and is intended to either stop young girls developing breasts or to flatten them once they have.

"It feels like they are placing real fire on my breasts," Mirabel says. "I have been in pain since the first day."

### ***Gender-based violence***

Her mother, Angela, says the pain and discomfort her daughter is enduring worries her less than the reports she has heard of teenage girls being sexually harassed or exploited by men. She is determined to focus her efforts on making her daughter less desirable to men.

"I just don't want her to become a target of boys around her," says Angela. "I'm aware that many boys here like to chase after little girls."

Although many of the families Al Jazeera spoke to mentioned the vulnerability of young girls growing up as refugees as one of the reasons for their decision to iron their daughters' breasts, the practice has been happening in Cameroon for generations.



The origin of the practice is unclear, but about a quarter of women in Cameroon have undergone breast ironing, according to research by Gender Empowerment and Development (GeED), a non-governmental organisation based in Yaounde, Cameroon, which found that in nearly 60 percent of cases, the procedure is carried out by mothers.

The United Nations has described breast ironing as one of the most under-reported crimes associated with gender-based violence. It is thought to affect 3.8 million women globally.

### ***'No girl is safe here'***

Like many other refugees in Cross River State, Mirabel and Angela fled the southwestern Cameroonian town of Akwaya for Nigeria after fighting broke out between government forces and English-speaking separatists who complain that they have been marginalised in the majority French-speaking country. The conflict has forced some 500,000 people from their homes and created a humanitarian crisis in the region.

According to the latest figures from the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), Nigeria currently hosts more than 50,000 refugees from Cameroon, with 70 percent of these in Cross River State. Roughly half the refugees live in one of four refugee settlements, while the rest live in host communities.

Angela and her daughter arrived in Ogoja in February 2018, joining thousands of other refugees taking shelter in the Adagom and Okende host communities where women and girls have reported being sexually harassed by members of the host communities as well as by other refugees.

"These days, you cannot step out of the house without meeting a man who is demanding sex or inviting you to his home," says Queen, a 17-year-old girl who fled the southwestern Cameroonian border town of Mamfe with her parents for Adagom. "No girl is safe here."

More than 12 Cameroonian girls living in settlements in Adagom and Okende told Al Jazeera that they are regularly sexually harassed by men.

"I needed money to buy sanitary pads, so I went to ask a man [in the community] for help but he started touching me as soon as I walked up to him," says Lydia, a 16-year-old girl who lives in the Adagom refugee settlement. "I ran away as he tried to drag me to him."

Worried about the safety of their 13-year-old daughter, Helen and her husband made the decision to iron her breasts after she reported that a man whose home she cleans regularly touched her inappropriately.

"The harassment she faced made our decision [to iron her breasts] easier," explains Helen, who fled Akwaya and lives in the Okende host community with her family. "All we did was for her own good."

But, Salome Gambo, a senior protection specialist at the Caprecon Development and Peace Initiative, which is based in Abuja but works on child protection in refugee camps across northeast Nigeria, says: "This practice just ends up harming children and putting them at risk of severe complications. Families should rather channel their efforts towards educating their daughters on sex issues."

### ***'Survival sex'***

The refugee families' fears for their daughters are not unfounded. Female refugees and displaced people in Nigeria are at high risk of sexual harassment and exploitation. The UN has said it is aware of a high level of "survival sex" - women turning to prostitution out of desperation - in camps housing Cameroonian refugees in Cross River State.

UNHCR spokesman William Spindler said: "For women, the lack of work combined with the over-stretched reception facilities, creates a higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly from survival sex. So far, only a limited number of such cases have been recorded, mainly in the Amana community of Cross River state. However, UNHCR is concerned that many more incidents go unreported or are referred only to community elders."

But even in their home country, Cameroonian girls are at risk of early marriage and pregnancy. According to UNICEF, in the period between 2008 and 2014, 13 percent of Cameroonian children were married by the time they are 15 and 38 percent by the time they were 18. According to the Cameroon Medical Council, 25 percent of pregnancies occur in school-age girls, and 20 percent of pregnant girls do not return to school.

Many Cameroonian families may fear that living as refugees adds an element of danger for their daughters. But for others, breast ironing is a matter of societal expectation.

"It felt like I was the only one left out," says Pamela, whose two closest friends had ironed their daughters' breasts. "I just had to do it like the others did."

But whether it takes place in Cameroon or refugee communities elsewhere, activists have been warning of the consequences for the victims' physical and psychological health.

"Girls who undergo the procedure risk issues like breast cancer, cysts and an inability to breastfeed, not to mention the physical and psychological scars associated with the custom," said Gambo, who has counselled a number of victims of the practice. "It's time families put an end to such abuse."

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## **WORLD: ALL SURVIVORS PROJECT: Checklist on preventing and addressing conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys**

By Lucia Withers

All Survivors Project (10.12.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2QYss5Y> - Introduction: The pervasive nature and appalling consequences of sexual violence against women and girls in situations of armed conflict is well established. Although women and girls are disproportionately affected, the extent to which conflict-related sexual violence impacts men and boys is also increasingly recognised. Rape and other forms of sexual violence involving males perpetrated by state security forces or non-state armed groups (NSAGs) has been documented in at least 30 different states affected by armed conflict in recent years.

Men and boys can be vulnerable to opportunistic attacks as well as to targeted sexual violence aimed at punishing, humiliating, terrorising and repressing victims/survivors and their communities. Multiple factors can increase their vulnerability including political affiliation, religion, ethnicity, age, actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity, disability and socio-economic status.

Although sexual violence against men and boys has been documented in many different situations, including during armed attacks, house searches and at checkpoints, available information suggests that the risks are significantly heightened in certain settings. This is particularly so when they are deprived of their liberty or when they are associated with or are members of state security forces or NSAGs. Forced displacement, whether within or across national borders, as well as situations of extreme humanitarian need can also increase male vulnerability to sexual violence by parties to armed conflict, as well as by others including peacekeepers, humanitarian workers, members of organised crime groups (such as human traffickers), smugglers and community members.

Ongoing efforts to protect women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence show that there are no quick fixes. Rather, prevention requires multi-faceted approaches that address both proximate and root causes, including gender-based discrimination and inequality. To be successful, concerted and co-ordinated efforts by many diverse state and non-state actors are needed. However, national authorities have particular responsibilities to respect and promote the human rights of all individuals within their territory and/or jurisdiction. States must therefore take all feasible steps to protect against and ensure appropriate responses to conflict-related sexual violence, whomever the perpetrator.

All Survivors Project (ASP) has developed this checklist on preventing and addressing sexual violence against men and boys to assist governments and those involved in supporting them (amongst others, national human rights institutions (NHRIs); UN peacekeeping and other field operations; UN agencies, offices, experts, treaty bodies and special procedures; and international and national non-governmental organisations (I/NGOs) to support national efforts to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence against males.

This checklist is intended to complement ongoing vital and urgently needed efforts to better protect women and girls against conflict-related sexual violence, from which attention to others at risk should not distract or detract. Rather, its aim is to support efforts to ensure that men and boys are protected against conflict-related sexual violence in law and practice; that national policies and other measures aimed at eradicating such abuses recognise and respond to the risks and vulnerabilities of all persons; and that all survivors have access to justice including reparations, as well as to quality, survivor-centred medical, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and other responses without discrimination.

The checklist is based on ASP's research on conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, including field research in Afghanistan, Central African Republic (CAR), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Syria, Sri Lanka and Turkey, as well as reviews of national laws in selected conflict-affected countries and publicly available national action plans and other policy documents. It also draws on secondary research on conflict-related sexual violence and responses to it in reports, briefings, guidelines, protocols and other publications by UN bodies, mechanisms, agencies and experts, international criminal tribunals, I/NGOs, initiatives such as the UK Government's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) and academic sources.

Experts on human rights and armed conflict, the rights of sexual and gender minority (SGM) persons, and international criminal justice were consulted in the drafting of the checklist (see acknowledgements). In addition, a draft version of the checklist was reviewed by and comments received from representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); the Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; the Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict; the UN Department of Peacekeeping

Operations (DPKO); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); and the UN Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict. However, ASP is responsible for the final content of the checklist.

Click [here](#) for the full checklist.

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## **INDIA: Unnao rape case: Indian woman set on fire on way to hearing dies**

***An Indian woman who was set on fire on her way to testify against her alleged rapists has died of her injuries.***

BBC News (07.12.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2Rz3o7x> - The 23-year-old died late on Friday after suffering cardiac arrest at a Delhi hospital. She had 90% burns.

She was attacked on Thursday as she was walking to a hearing in the rape case she filed against two men in March in Unnao, in northern Uttar Pradesh state.

Five men, including the alleged rapists, have been arrested, Indian police say.

The sister of the victim, whose name has not been released, told the BBC that she wanted the death penalty for the pair.

She said the family would continue to fight the case against them in court.

Rape and sexual violence against women have been in focus in India since the December 2012 gang-rape and murder of a young woman on a bus in the capital, Delhi.

But there has been no sign that crimes against women are abating.

According to government figures, police registered 33,658 cases of rape in India in 2017, an average of 92 rapes every day.

Unnao district has itself been in the news over another rape case.

Police opened a murder investigation against a ruling party lawmaker in July after a woman who accused him of rape was seriously injured in a car crash. Two of her aunts were killed and her lawyer was injured.

Separately, on Friday, Indian police shot dead four men suspected of raping and killing a young female vet in the southern city of Hyderabad last week.

That case sparked widespread outrage, and the killing of the suspects, in what rights activists believe may have been an extra-judicial killing, sparked jubilation among local residents.

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## **BANGLADESH: Bangladeshi migrant female domestic workers face violence**

By Nayema Nusrat

Inter Press Service (28.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2PeBT0i> - Millions of Bangladeshi women are facing violence either as domestic housemaids or as migrant workers in Gulf countries. A few days ago, a video in social media, secretly filmed by a Bangladeshi housemaid employed in Saudi Arabia, caught everyone's attention where she was helplessly crying and begging to be rescued from her abusive employer.

A large number of women from Bangladesh leave their families behind and travel thousands of miles away from home with the hope to get better earnings and ensure a better future for their children and family. While many women realize their expected hope, others face a different reality – suffering through insurmountable cruelty and mistreatment by their foreign employers and find no one to turn to for immediate rescue.

Another extremely common form of violence is inflicted by not getting their due salaries as promised despite the hours of hard labor they provide.

In the video, this young woman Sumi was hiding in the toilet, crying for help and begging to be brought back home. She said, "I might not live any longer; I think I am about to die, please keep me alive, take me back to Bangladesh quickly", she said in "Bangla". In the video she stated that her owners locked her up in a room for 15 days and barely gave her any food. They burned her arms with boiling hot oil and tied her down.

She also alleged that she was sexually assaulted by her employers. "They made me go from one home to another. In the first home, they tortured me and hit me repeatedly and then took me to another one where I experienced the same". She was denied any medical treatment by her former employer.

Another very recent story of Husna, 24, surfaced in social media within just a few days of the Sumi incident, who also went to Saudi Arabia through a Bangladeshi broker agency called "Arab World Distribution". She sent a video message to her husband Shafiullah, begging for help to free her from the abusive work conditions – she had faced physical violence ever since her arrival there.

The contacts at the local broker agency in Saudi Arabia denied her of any assistance with derogatory words and attempted to hit her. In the video message to her husband she also describes how her owner turned crueler towards her since she expressed the urge to return home.

The recruiting agency in Dhaka demanded an additional 100,000 taka (USD 1178.11) from Akter's husband if she is to break the two years initial contract to work abroad, as he reached out to them for help.

Most Bangladeshi workers are recruited by "Dalals" (chain of sub-recruiters connected to the recruitment agencies in the country). Women who go for work to Saudi Arabia or other Middle Eastern countries come from very poor families in rural areas and are often duped by these "Dalals", realizing soon after they arrive for work. They often receive false promises of salaries of about 20,000 taka (USD 235) per month but rarely get written job contracts although it's a legal requirement.

These recruiters typically charge them a large amount of recruitment fee for arranging to work abroad. These poor women arrange money either by mortgaging or selling their properties or getting loans with a very high interest rate.

Rothna Begum, a senior researcher from Human Rights Watch (HRW) told IPS, "Most of these women are already in debt before they even started to work abroad, as the recruitment fees combined with loans with high interest rates keep accumulating".

These women workers are employed in Gulf countries under 'Kafala' immigration system. 'Kafala' is an employment framework in the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that require sponsorship from a national for migrant workers to be employed and reside in the country. The sponsor, either an individual or a company, possesses substantial control over the worker.

(The GCC is a political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries— Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.)

Begum stressed on how the 'Kafala' system across the gulf countries make the domestic workers more vulnerable to abuse. She noted, "in the GCC states under the restrictive 'Kafala' immigration rule, migrant workers' visas are tied to their employers so they cannot change jobs without their employer's consent. Migrant workers who escape an abusive employer can be punished for "absconding" with imprisonment, fines, and deportation".

Human Rights Watch (HRW) interviewed hundreds of migrant domestic workers in GCC countries over the years, and almost all of them claimed that their employers had confiscated their passports, phones and restricted their communication.

Some women claimed that as they are typically already coming with so much debt, they feel trapped in exploitative situations, as they feel bound to stay to recoup their money and pay off debt.

Some brave ones risked their lives trying to escape by climbing down tall buildings or jumping off balconies. But those who escaped typically found little or no help from local police. Their employers accused them of criminal activities such as theft or absconding to the police.

HRW's Begum said "often domestic workers dropped any claims against their employers, in exchange for their employers dropping their own accusations, just so the women could go home. Others found the process of appealing for their unpaid salaries or filing criminal complaints prohibitively lengthy and costly, as they are not allowed to work for another employer during an appeal".

Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), a Bangladeshi Migrant Rights Group released results of a study with 110 returnees, where the number shows that majority had not been able to effectively or safely make money in Saudi; 86 percent among the women interviewed said their Saudi employers didn't pay their salaries, 61 percent said they had been physically abused, and 14 percent said their owners sexually abused them.

And returning home to Bangladesh doesn't necessarily guarantee they will still be safe from their 'Dalals'. Some who returned were beaten up by them for demanding the salaries as promised.

This year BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities), one of the largest Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) in the world, released new figures showing that 1,300 Bangladeshi women had returned from Saudi Arabia in 2018 because of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of their Saudi employers. They also said that this year alone, the bodies of 48 female workers were brought back from Saudi Arabia.

Nuri, another Bangladeshi woman who was tortured and worked without pay in the home of a Saudi family for two months told Thomson Reuters Foundation, "My 'Dalal' beat me up and broke my leg when I filed a case against him. I was in the hospital for 15 days. I stay with a friend right now, far away from my house because [the broker] lives nearby my place".



Nuri held her ground strongly to find justice and is determined about fighting the case in the court – “After he beat me up, I am not turning back”.

Shamim Ara Nipa, a freelance social worker in Bangladesh told IPS, “most of the time these migrant workers do not have proper contact information to reach out to the country of origin agency or the embassy directly for help”.

Nipa also noted that the Saudi Government had been helpful in repatriation of these migrant workers as long as Bangladeshi Government is cooperating. The Bangladesh Government typically steps in when the story of a worker gets highlighted via social media or group protest, such as the case of Sumi who is now in a safe place thanks to BRAC, Bangladeshi Government and it’s Embassy in Saudi Arabia; but there are numbers of other similar violence cases in Gulf countries which never surfaced in mass media, therefore remained silent and unresolved due to lack of government intervention.

Although the Government admits that Bangladeshi workers face violence while working in Saudi Arabia, it rules out the idea of banning female workers going to Saudi Arabia.

Violence against Bangladeshi women workers is still ongoing at an alarming rate; Bangladesh should ensure that it provides the highest protection for its workers abroad, including by increasing oversight over its own recruiting agents, offering protection for its workers in host countries, and aiding workers in distress.

It’s understandable that there are actions and policies that are pursued by the Government of Bangladesh and the United Nations; however, better outcomes are expected while the policies and actions are being implemented and monitored closely.

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## **WORLD: Women defenders of the land and the environment: silenced voices**

OXFAM (cited 27.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2qS438Z> - The expansion of large scale mining activities and agribusiness in Latin America has greatly increased territorial disputes and resulted in an alarming rise in violence suffered by individuals who defend water, land, forests and the rights of women, afro-descendants, indigenous and farming communities.

Threats, bullying, judicial harassment, illegal surveillance, forced disappearances, blackmail, sexual assault and murder are common practice.

Across the world, more than 200 defenders were murdered in 2017. Almost 60% of them were in Latin America.

People defending the land and the environment fight peacefully in the frontline against climate change, the preservation of the world’s ecosystems and the protection of human rights, but at the same time, they are facing terror campaigns on a daily basis that aim to silence their voices. Meanwhile, different governments and companies are not assuming their duty to guarantee their safety and tackle the root causes of such assaults.

### ***Women defenders, in the eye of the storm***

In this context, women defenders are perceived as a threat because they question and jeopardize the power structures that are based on class privileges and gender discrimination. Moreover, they routinely and clearly denounce just how harmful it is for humanity to continue supporting a system that permanently exploits life on the planet.



These women are the victims that most suffer the consequences of the loss of access to land and natural resources.

In addition to the risk that women defending the rights of the land, the territories and the environment have to face, they also have to withstand the difficulties derived from living in rural areas, from belonging to farming communities, from being afro-descendants or indigenous, from being women or from their sexual orientation or diverse gender identity.

### **Miriam Miranda, Garifuna defender, Honduras**

“In Honduras, like in the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, women are in the frontline when it comes to fighting for our rights, against racial discrimination and to defend our environment and our survival. We don’t just fight with our own bodies; we also provide our strength, our ideas and our proposals. We don’t just give birth to children, but also ideas and actions”, said Miriam Miranda, a Garifuna community leader defending the land belonging to Afro-Hondurans struggling against exploitation and plunder.

### **Silenced voices in Colombia**

Since the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016 and the subsequent withdrawal by the FARC from the area, in Colombia there has been a sharp increase in legal and illegal agribusiness and mining business models that pose a direct threat to the interest of the indigenous and afro Colombian communities living there because such large scale economic activity carries a severe social and environmental impact in the native population.

Women defenders of the land, territories and the environment are a nuisance to those that have an economic interest in areas with rich natural resources. As a result, they are being threatened and murdered for raising their voices, demanding respect and dignity.

Assaults against these women in Colombia have doubled in the first quarter of 2019.

The current government led by President Iván Duque has not carried out effective measures to prevent and protect women defenders of the land, territories and the environment. Indeed, their demands are not even registered. Moreover, the absence of women with political power – in particular belonging to afro Colombian, indigenous and farming communities - has resulted in the country not taking into account their differential reality or gender perspective when tackling the issue.

### ***Help them defend their voice***

In Oxfam, we’re fighting so that the valuable contribution by these women defenders is acknowledged as well as to protect their lives, their right to be leaders and to live with dignity in their communities. As a result, we work together with organizations that are experts in the field so that they can be trained to prevent violence, self-defense and to protect their communities. Moreover, we support their demands and emphasize their situation, both nationally and internationally. But this is not enough.

We ask the Colombian government to listen to these women defenders and to apply specific urgent protective and preventive measures in order to reduce the alarming numbers of murders and threats. We want the criteria of these women to be applied since they know better than anyone else the problems they’re facing, their land and the needs of their communities.

## **FRANCE: Paris protesters march against deadly domestic violence towards women**

By Angela Charlton and Thibault Camus

TIME (23.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2DhnRW8> - Several thousand protesters marched through Paris on Saturday to demand a national wake-up call and more government investment to prevent deadly domestic violence against women, a problem that President Emmanuel Macron calls "France's shame."

A wave of purple flags and signs snaked from the Place de la Republique through eastern Paris amid an unprecedented public campaign to decry violence against women — and honor the 130 women that activists say have been killed in France this year by a current or former partner. That's about one every two or three days.

While France has a progressive reputation and pushes for women's rights around the world, it has among the highest rates in Europe of domestic violence, in part because of poor police response to reports of abuse. Many of the women killed this year had previously sought help from police.

At Saturday's march, French film and TV stars joined abuse victims and activists calling for an end to "femicide." Many held banners reading "Sick of Rape."

The protest came on the U.N.'s International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and is aimed at pressuring the French government before it unveils new measures Monday to tackle the problem.

The measures are expected to include seizing firearms from people suspected of domestic violence and prioritizing police training so they won't brush off women's complaints as a private affair.

Some of Saturday's marchers want 1 billion euros in government investment, though the funding is expected to fall far short of that.

French activists have stepped up efforts this year to call attention to the problem, with an unusual campaign of gluing posters around Paris and other cities every time another woman is killed. The posters honor the women, and call for action. They also hold protests, lying down on the pavement to represent the slain women.

A 2014 EU survey of 42,000 women across all 28 member states found that 26% of French respondents said they been abused by a partner since age 15, either physically or sexually.

That's below the global average of 30%, according to UN Women. But it's above the EU average and the sixth highest among EU countries.

Half that number reported experiencing such abuse in Spain, which implemented a series of legal and educational measures in 2004 that slashed its domestic violence rates.

Conversations about domestic violence have also ratcheted up in neighboring Germany, where activists are demanding that the term "femicide" be used to describe such killings.

In France, lawyers and victims' advocates say they're encouraged by the new national conversation, which they say marks a departure from decades of denial. Women aren't

the only victims of domestic violence, but French officials say they make up the vast majority.

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## **HAITI: Haitian women's rights groups demand justice for raped female prisoners**

By Sandra Lemaire, Exalus Mergenat & Matiado Vilme

VOA (17.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2XQnIIX> - "Enough, we cannot deal with this anymore," a visibly disgusted Predica Jean, coordinator for the League of Haitian Women for Reconstruction (Lig Fanm Ayisyen pou Rekonstruksyon / LIFAR) said during a press conference in Port-au-Prince.

"We're asking all the political actors who are involved to resolve the situation quickly so we can have a country where we can live (in peace and security), where women's rights are respected," she added.

Jean decried the gang rape of a dozen female prisoners by male prisoners attempting to escape from a jail in the northern city of Gonaives last week. She asked for justice and reparations for all the women who were violated.

About 340 male prisoners, angry about the jail's poor living conditions, broke out Nov. 7-8. They had been reportedly held for days in overcrowded cells without food and water. They managed to disarm a guard and break through the gates. Once out, they sought female prisoners in a separate part of the jail, according to witnesses, and raped them repeatedly until a police unit arrived and fired tear gas to stop the attack.

Jean also demanded the immediate release of a female prisoner who remained jailed even though she was set to be released before the attacks.

"They claimed they couldn't find her release form and held her in jail where she was subjected to rape," Jean told reporters.

The LIFAR coordinator cited the Geneva Conventions and other international law statutes that demand prisoners of war, as well as civilian prisoners, be treated humanely. "These laws are being violated in our country," Jean said.

A human rights activist who spoke to VOA Creole said police officers who arrived at the jail during the incident told him they were shaken by what they heard.

"Some of the officers said they were heartbroken and crying when they heard the screams of the women during the criminal actions of the men," the activist said.

After the incident, the nongovernmental organization Zanmi Lasante (Friends for Health) stepped in to address the rape victims' immediate health needs, including testing for sexually transmitted diseases. They were also provided medication to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Jeanne Bolivar, the Haitian Ministry for Women's Affairs coordinator for the Artibonite Department, visited the female prisoners and told VOA Creole they were visibly distraught. She said she is working to find a psychologist who can counsel the victims. She also denounced the authorities of Gonaives who transferred the women after the attack to a jail in neighboring St. Marc in their underwear.

"The women's rights were not respected, their dignity was not respected at all," Bolivar said. She told VOA Creole she spoke to a young woman who told her she was raped by seven men.

Bolivar said she is working to find food for the transferred prisoners as well.

Women's rights activist Guerline Residor called on law enforcement officials to act responsibly.

"We are asking the Ministry of Justice, the chief of police, police officers, etc., to intervene rapidly to resolve the dangerous situation women in the north find themselves in," she said.

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## **AUSTRIA: ECHR *Kurt v. Austria* case of 8 y.o. boy murdered by abusive father referred to the Grand Chamber of the ECHR**

OHCHR (05.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Xa1tXL> - The applicant, Senay Kurt, is an Austrian national who was born in 1978 and lives in Unterwagram (Austria). She married E. in 2003. They had two children, A., born in 2004, and B., born in 2005.

In July 2010 Ms Kurt called the police because her husband had beaten her. She alleged that he had been beating her for years and that recently the situation had worsened. The police noted that the applicant showed signs of injuries. A barring order (Betretungsverbot und Wegweisung zum Schutz vor Gewalt) was issued against E. This order obliged him to stay away from their common apartment as well as from Ms Kurt's parents' apartment for 14 days. E. complied with the barring order, and no further incidents were reported to the police.

Although Ms Kurt had refused to testify, in January 2011 the Graz Regional Criminal Court convicted E. of bodily harm and dangerous threatening behaviour and sentenced him to three months' imprisonment, suspended for three years with probation. Until May 2012 no further incidents were reported to the police.

In May 2012 Ms Kurt went to the St. Pölten District Court and filed for divorce. On the same day, she reported her husband to the police for rape and making dangerous threats. She added that he had beaten her regularly, sometimes slapping the children as well. She was in great fear of her husband and stated that she wanted to protect herself and her children. A police officer issued a barring order against E., who accompanied the police voluntarily to the police station.

Two days later E. returned to the police to enquire whether it would be possible to contact his children. The police took the opportunity to confront him with his children's statements that he had beaten them. E. confessed that he had beaten them "every now and then", but "only as an educational measure", without being aggressive. He added that his children were everything to him.

On 25 May 2012 E. went to A. and B.'s school. He asked A.'s teacher if he could speak briefly to his son in private. The teacher, who later stated that she had not been informed of the problems in the family, agreed. When A. did not return to class, she started looking for him. She found him in the school's basement, where he had been shot in the head. His sister B., who had witnessed her brother being shot, was not injured. A

warrant for E.'s arrest was issued immediately and the police started investigations, but E. was found dead in his car that day, having shot himself.

In February 2014 Ms Kurt instituted official liability proceedings. She argued that the public prosecutor's office should have requested that E. be held in pre-trial detention after she had reported him to the police and that there had been a real and immediate risk that he would reoffend against his family. She claimed 37,000 euros (EUR) in compensation for non-pecuniary damage. She also applied to the court for a declaratory judgment that Austria was liable for any possible future damage caused by the murder of her son, which she assessed at EUR 5,000.

In November 2014 the St. Pölten Regional Court dismissed her claim. It held, in particular, that taking into account the information the authorities had had to hand at the relevant time, it had not been obvious that there was an immediate risk to A.'s life. In January 2015 the Vienna Court of Appeal dismissed her appeal, and in April 2015 the Supreme Court rejected an extraordinary appeal on points of law.

The application was lodged with the European Court of Human Rights on 16 December 2015.

Relying on Articles 2 (right to life), 3 (prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment) and 8 (right to respect for family life) of the European Convention on Human Rights, Ms Kurt complains that the Austrian authorities failed to protect her and her children from her violent husband, which resulted in him murdering their son.

In its Chamber judgment of 4 July 2019, the European Court of Human Rights dealt with the case under the substantive aspect of Article 2 of the European Convention.

The Chamber held, unanimously, that there had been no violation of Article 2 of the Convention, finding in particular that the domestic authorities had been entitled to conclude that a measure other than the barring order that was issued against the father, such as pre-trial detention, had not been warranted under the circumstances known to them. Accordingly, they had not failed to comply with their duty under Article 2 to protect the applicant's son from his violent father.

On 4 November 2019 the Grand Chamber Panel accepted the applicant's request that the case be referred to the Grand Chamber.

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## **SPAIN: Spanish court acquits 5 men of rape on grounds that 14-year-old victim was unconscious**

CBS News (01.11.2019) - <https://cbsn.ws/2qgpakX> - Spaniards are voicing outrage after five men were acquitted of rape on the grounds that their 14-year-old victim had been unconscious at the time. The Barcelona-based court ruled Thursday that the men were guilty of the lesser crime of sexual abuse and sentenced them to 10-12 years and fined them 12,000 euros.

It ruled that their act could not be considered sexual assault since the girl was unconscious after consuming alcohol and drugs. That meant they did not need to use violence or intimidation, a requirement for a rape conviction in Spain, the court said.

Spain's deputy prime minister, Carmen Calvo, said that while her government does not comment on court decisions it has set as a priority a modification in the law to make clear that consent is necessary for sexual relations to occur legally.

On Twitter, Barcelona's Mayor Ada Colau slammed the "outrageous sentence," BBC News reported. "I am not a judge and I do not know how many years in prison they deserve, what I do know is that it is not abuse, it is rape!"

The attack occurred in the town of Manresa, near Barcelona, in 2016 when the girl and the men went into an abandoned factory to drink.

The court said that since the victim was unconscious during the attack, she "could not accept or reject the sexual relations" and that the men "could carry out those sexual relations without the use of violence or intimidation."

Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau and other left-wing politicians and feminist groups have condemned the ruling, as well as clamoring for the law to be strengthened in the victims' favor.

"Another senseless verdict by the patriarchal Justice that doesn't want to understand that only a Yes means Yes," Colau wrote on Twitter. "An unconscious 14-year-old girl was gang raped. I am not a judge and I don't know how many years of prison they deserve, (but) what I do know is that this is not abuse, it is rape!"

Marisa Soletó, of the feminist group Fundación Mujeres, said that "this is just one more piece of proof for the necessity to change the penal code."

A similar 2017 ruling sparked widespread protests when five men were found guilty of sexually abusing a woman but acquitted of rape for an attack in Pamplona. Spain's Supreme Court later overruled the lower court and convicted them of rape. BBC News reports the new case is known as the "Manada de Manresa" - Manresa Wolf Pack - for its similarities to that case.

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## **CAR: Exclusive: Blunders in Central African Republic sex abuse probe detailed in internal UN review**

***After nearly 100 women and girls in Central African Republic accused Burundian and Gabonese peacekeepers of rape, sexual abuse, and exploitation, the UN deployed investigators to the country in 2016. The number of allegations rose to more than 130, with more than half ultimately dismissed.***

By Paisley Dodds & Philip Kleinfeld

The New Humanitarian (31.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2NAmnLg> - Now, a 50-page internal UN report, marked "confidential draft" and obtained by The New Humanitarian from a former UN staffer concerned over the review's findings, details blunders in the investigations and lays out how women and girls – as well as UN investigators – were let down in the process.

The draft report details a litany of problems in the way investigators conducted interviews with the alleged victims – from the Burundians discrediting their testimony to the UN failing to ask crucial follow-up questions that could have corroborated their accounts. It also states that:

- UNICEF failed to take accurate victim testimonies and waited weeks before informing the UN's investigatory and oversight body of the allegations.
- The UN failed to provide basic security for investigators.
- The atmosphere for women and girls making the allegations was described as "threatening", with one investigator reportedly asking a woman about her alleged perpetrator: "Did you love him?"
- The system of DNA collection and storage allowed samples to decay – specimens that could have identified alleged perpetrators.

The New Humanitarian's investigation began last year after on-the-ground reporting in Central African Republic – where one in four people are either internally displaced or living in neighbouring states – discovered problems with the UN probe and the existence of the internal review. TNH obtained the draft report in mid-October.

The internal review – commissioned in January 2017 by a director of the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and submitted in April that year – gives a rare behind-the-scenes glimpse of how the UN investigates claims of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and shows why it can fail the alleged victims it is intended to serve.

The majority of the allegations were dismissed, according to UN data. The draft report highlighted that at least one case against a peacekeeper was dismissed due to shortcomings in the investigation. The shortcomings weren't isolated, the review found.

"The findings of this report show that despite numerous statements, commitments, and much publicised successive SEA policy frameworks, important SEA-related norms and procedures continue to be unknown or unevenly applied; They also show that much remains to be done to eradicate SEA," the report's author concluded.

The draft report was based on responses from 23 UN staff, three former workers, and other respondents involved in the investigation and operation in Dekoa – a remote town five hours drive north of the capital, Bangui – from April to September 2016.

The most common complaints from people interviewed for the review was poor planning.

"I do not want to renew my experience with this. This was done in disarray," one responder said in the draft report.

Ben Swanson, the OIOS director who ordered the review, emailed The New Humanitarian on 27 and 30 October, saying that the draft was unedited, "potentially damaging" as written, and based on a "range of highly subjective opinions".

The draft was shared with OIOS Under-Secretary General Heidi Mendoza at the time, Swanson said, adding that lessons offered in the draft were taught and applied.

"The lessons have been applied in investigations where we have had to deploy large numbers of staff to deal with multiple witnesses/victims, particularly with due regard to case management, an 'eagle-eye' view of the investigations and continuity," Swanson said. "We have not had to deal with a similar investigation requiring a large-scale deployment into austere conditions."

OIOS, formed in 1994, performs three oversight functions inside the UN: internal audits, investigations, and evaluations. Fatoumata Ndiaye of Senegal this month succeeded Mendoza as OIOS under-secretary-general.

In its annual report in 2017, OIOS said the review of the Dekoa investigation had led to reforms: "That experience resulted in the Division (OIOS) reviewing how it responded to



the challenges of investigations into sexual exploitation and abuse, especially in terms of gathering testimonial, physical, medical and forensic evidence...”

A former OIOS investigator, who asked to remain anonymous because the review was meant to be internal, shared the draft report with TNH, hoping its findings would be publicised and more could be done to assist the women and girls who made the allegations. The review’s author, who is also an investigator, declined to comment when contacted by TNH and asked that he not be named given the sensitivity of the internal draft.

Swanson described the results of the investigation as “quite good”, and said it was unclear why Burundi dismissed the majority of the cases or why the results for Gabon were still pending nearly four years later. “Evidence was found to support a number of allegations made by the victims,” he said. “We submitted two large investigation reports which substantiated a number of allegations.”

Neither Gabon nor Burundi responded to questions from TNH by the time of publication. Troop-contributing countries are responsible for investigating their own soldiers, but OIOS often assists them.

### ***‘I have no power to complain’***

TNH discovered problems with the sexual abuse investigation in Dekoa last year during a reporting trip to Central African Republic, which has been in crisis since 2013, when an alliance of northern rebels known as the Séléka ousted then-president Francois Bozizé, eventually triggering the peacekeepers’ deployment.

It was at a displacement camp in Dekoa that much of the alleged abuse and exploitation occurred. Some peacekeepers allegedly offered women and girls military rations in exchange for sex; others allegedly gave them money to spend on better housing outside the camps – behaviour prohibited by the UN’s code of conduct for peacekeepers.

“Are your family able to support you and buy you the things you need?” a Gabonese peacekeeper allegedly asked a 23-year-old woman who spoke to TNH last year.

The woman said the soldier then raped her; eventually she entered a relationship with him.

A former UN investigator deployed in 2016, who asked not to be named as he wasn’t authorised to speak about the investigation, told TNH last year that the probe into SEA allegations had been hampered by delays, sudden changes of leadership, and inappropriate victim and witness interviews that may have harmed the alleged victims’ cases.

When TNH interviewed alleged victims last year, none knew about the status of the investigations. Most had more immediate concerns: a mattress to sleep on or money to put themselves or children through school.

Years after their alleged mistreatment by UN peacekeepers, the women and girls who spoke to TNH last year described largely feeling abandoned; UN agencies and NGOs provide support to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, but few if any provisions are made for women whose claims are under investigation.

“I have no power to complain,” one 19-year-old woman who alleged she had been raped by a Burundian peacekeeper told TNH last year.

Some women who made allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse were under the age of 18, while two women who claimed to have been raped by Gabonese troops said they were looking after the children of those rapes on their own. Paternity was disputed in both cases.

"I am expecting support from the international community," said a 26-year-old woman allegedly raped by a Burundian peacekeeper. "They are the ones who sent the troops that abused me. That would be justice."

### ***'Humiliating' and 'irrelevant' questions***

Investigating allegations of sexual abuse is difficult at the best of times. The boundaries of "exploitation" and "consensual relationships" are often blurred when people – especially women and girls – are reliant on assistance in humanitarian crises.

But a litany of mistakes made by investigators and detailed in the review may explain why so many of the allegations brought by women and girls were dismissed.

Burundian investigators lacked skills and experience and were "initially more concerned with discrediting witnesses than taking their testimonies", the draft report stated.

The interviews were "interrogatory" and involved questions and comments described as "humiliating", "irrelevant", and "incongruous". One OIOS team member even suggested pulling out of the joint investigation altogether, the draft report noted.

Some OIOS investigators were also described as inexperienced and lacking empathy, while others reported getting pressure from supervisors to produce a minimum number of interviews per day, potentially compromising cases.

There were also corruption claims, though investigators only found out about those allegations after they were on the ground. One local official, for example, was accused of soliciting false testimonies of sexual abuse and exploitation in exchange for payment. The allegation of fraud and corruption, however, was not properly followed up, the draft stated.

Both OIOS and Burundian investigators also failed to ask critical follow-up questions, which led to one woman's account being dismissed, the draft report claims.

In that case, the woman – known as Victim A – said she fell pregnant from a Burundian peacekeeper and was hospitalised after an abortion. Ultimately, her alleged perpetrator was cleared because of errors.

Neither Burundi nor Gabon responded to questions on whether information in the draft report could lead to the re-opening of some of the cases.

This year, the UN mission in Central African Republic has seen more than 20 allegations involving 33 UN personnel – just over half the total number of people accused of sexual exploitation and abuse across all the UN missions.

MINUSCA did not respond to questions on why the CAR numbers remained high.

### ***'This was done in disarray'***

"No proper work plan was prepared," said one investigator interviewed for the draft report. Another recalled: "We made things up as we went along."

Arriving in April 2016, some 31 OIOS staff – 21 professional grade investigators – rotated in and out of Dekoa, spending 137 days in Central African Republic and interviewing 435 people, including complainants and witnesses, the review said.

UNICEF conducted a first set of interviews before informing their UN colleagues at MINUSCA. Respondents in the draft report said the interviews were filled with such inaccuracies that they “would have had serious implications for any subsequent legal proceedings”.

“It was quite apparent that (the) victim’s initial complaints had not been recorded by UNICEF when they were first approached with the complaints,” one said.

“In the initial planning, I would interrogate the information provided by UNICEF more thoroughly as it was inaccurate,” another respondent said.

The draft report also noted that it took UNICEF weeks to inform OIOS of the allegations.

UNICEF spokesperson Najwa Mekki said the agency’s reporting procedures require that such allegations are relayed to the highest UN official in a given country within 24 hours. She did not clarify why it took so long in the case of Dekoa.

“In the years since the sexual abuse scandal by peacekeepers in the Central African Republic, we have taken firm measures to strengthen our reporting and response,” Mekki said. “We now have better procedures for reporting cases of abuse, a stronger victim assistance programme, and more solid guidance to staff.”

### ***'Rotten' DNA samples***

The collection and storage of DNA samples were also cited as problematic.

Although the majority of samples were collected from March through May 2016 – long after the alleged abuse and rapes occurred – they were stored in Bangui for “many, many months”, and it wasn’t until April of 2017 that the OIOS Nairobi office received them, the draft report reads.

By the time they arrived in the lab, “most were already rotten. It is therefore hardly surprising that positive results could not (be) obtained”, it adds.

In March 2017, OIOS also dispatched investigators to Burundi to collect DNA specimens from soldiers. UN peacekeepers are not required to give DNA samples, although one of the report’s recommendations calls for troops to give voluntary samples. It is not known how many Burundian and Gabonese supplied samples.

DNA analysis done by Burundian authorities also “failed to extract a DNA profile from the samples collected from the babies”, the draft report reads.

At the time of TNH’s reporting last year, Swanson, the UN’s top investigator, said DNA testing on some 20 women and their children showed “with a high degree of confidence, that the soldiers identified were not the fathers of the children they were alleged to be”.

OIOS investigators interviewed for the report also complained of weak security measures and poor living conditions that left some dependent on emergency food rations and one respondent using their bedroom as an office and meeting space.

In May 2016, MINUSCA conducted a security assessment and issued 18 recommendations including the need for 24/7 guards and a 2.5-metre-high perimeter

wall. A month later, just one of the 18 recommendations had been implemented, according to respondents in the draft report.

MINUSCA did not respond to requests for comment by the time of publication.

Burundian and Gabonese peacekeepers being investigated for SEA claims were also responsible for security patrols in the area and around the compound where UN investigators were staying.

"It is very lucky that nothing happened," one respondent said in the draft report.

In his October emails to TNH, Swanson said the conditions in Dekoa were challenging, as was the scale of the operation.

"I utterly reject the suggestion that I knowingly sent investigators into harm's way; security considerations were addressed, regular risk assessments carried out, briefings given and patrols organised," he said. "It is true that some investigators were discomfited by their surroundings, others weren't and it reflected in their feedback. The truth is that the UN is expected to work in dangerous and uncomfortable locations."

***'I am not going to wash our dirty linen in public'***

When initially contacted for this story, Swanson called the investigation "entirely professional".

"The investigation was conducted in an entirely professional manner with proper regard to the rights of the victims and due process rights of the subjects of the investigation," he told TNH in a 27 October email.

Last year, Swanson confirmed to TNH that a review had been done to show what worked – and what didn't – in the Dekoa operation.

At that time, he also noted "shortfalls" in the "quality of interviewing by national investigators [from the countries the peacekeepers came from] and some of our own interviewers", as well as problems with DNA evidence on "two to three swabs". But he added: "I am not going to wash our dirty linen in public."

Although far-reaching and overwhelmingly critical, the review wasn't all bad.

Swanson, himself, was credited with making "prompt" decisions, working to improve living conditions for investigators in Dekoa and for "constant involvement before, during and after the completion of the investigations".

OIOS investigators, too, were praised for their motivation, dedication, professionalism and the ability to work with one another.

Internal reviews of joint investigations are not uncommon at OIOS. A review was conducted after Sri Lankan peacekeepers were implicated in a child sex ring in Haiti in 2007. More than 100 Sri Lankan soldiers were sent home, but none were ever jailed.

Internal reviews of operations, however, are less common, according to Peter Gallo, a former OIOS investigator.

"I don't know of a single incident that has been dissected like this," said Gallo. "This seems to have been fairly unusual to take a holistic and inward look at what went well and what went wrong."

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## **FRANCE: French panel: Seize guns to reduce domestic violence**

By Claire Parker

Associated Press News (29.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/34qQ5cq> - A French government panel on domestic violence is urging authorities to begin confiscating guns from people following the first complaint of family violence levied against them.

That proposal was one of 65 recommendations released Tuesday to tackle the intractable problem of domestic violence in France, where a woman is killed by her partner every three days, according to government statistics.

French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe launched the initiative in September. It's the first time that France has undertaken a comprehensive national effort to address domestic violence, according to Gender Equality Minister Marlene Schiappa.

Other proposals include mandatory reporting requirements for health professionals who witness signs of domestic violence and new protocols for police responding to domestic violence complaints. The experts also are encouraging awareness programs about gender violence, urging banks to make it easier for women to leave their partners, and educating children and adolescents about gender equality.

Schiappa said most of domestic violence killings in France are carried out with guns, arguing that if authorities take away the weapons that could reduce such deaths.

French law enforcement has received much criticism for failing to quickly and adequately respond to complaints of domestic violence. The government began to treat the issue with increased urgency after President Emmanuel Macron visited a domestic violence hotline in September and observed a police officer rejecting a woman's call for help.

Schiappa, who is overseeing the government commission, told a news conference Tuesday that the recommendations mark an important step toward "a system of zero tolerance" for all types of domestic violence.

The commission also urged greater awareness of the psychological effects of domestic abuse, including when women feel so trapped in a toxic relationship that they decide to kill themselves. In 2018, 217 French women died by suicide for this reason, according to lawyer and domestic violence specialist Yael Muller.

Schiappa said it is important to recognize "psychological violence" and "economic violence" as forms of domestic violence that are just as pernicious as physical blows. She described a case of a woman who was driven by her partner to jump out of a window.

"Does he bear no responsibility since he didn't physically push her? I don't believe so," she said.

"We still have an enormous amount to do to make progress against domestic violence, because for years, despite all the efforts of previous ministers, the number of femicides has not decreased," she said.

The government pledged 5 million euros (\$5.5 million) in September to create 1,000 shelters for female victims of domestic violence in 2020. An additional 1 million euros (\$1.1 million) will go toward anti-domestic violence initiatives.

The recommendations will now go to government ministries and France's National Assembly and Senate to consider making them into law. The commission will formally conclude its work on Nov. 25, the international day for the elimination of violence against women.

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## **ECUADOR: Amazonian women denounce 'state violence'**

***Indigenous protesters accuse security forces of using excessive force as demonstrations continue for tenth day.***

By Kimberley Brown

Al Jazeera (13.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2oHUBE3> - Lineth Calapucha distributed blankets and clothes to other protesters in a cultural centre in the Ecuadorian capital Quito on Friday as the sounds of bombs from tear gas and pepper spray echoed outside.

It was the ninth day of anti-government protests that began as calls for President Lenin Moreno to abandon fuel subsidy cuts and labour and tax reforms. But for indigenous protesters, it has since grown into a wider movement against the government's treatment of indigenous people and their land.

"What we're asking for is peace, tranquillity, and that the government understand that we, the people and [indigenous] nationalities act peacefully," Calapucha told Al Jazeera, as women and children streamed into the cultural centre to take shelter.

"Look, even now, we weren't even doing anything and they started launching tear gas," she said.

Calapucha is one of dozens of women from the Amazonian Women's collective who travelled to Quito to join the national protests and denounce the "inhumane repression" of protesters by police.

"We are women of peace, defenders of our territories and our families," the collective said in a statement on Saturday.

"We have come in peace but the state, as always, received us again with violence," the women added. "We want to build a society and a country where our rights are respected."

Moreno declared a state of emergency and moved the government out of Quito earlier this week as tens of thousands of protesters converged on the capital, vowing to stay put until the government reverses its decision to cut the decades-old fuel subsidies and roll back the reforms.

The government, however, has also remained defiant, saying the reforms are necessary to comply with a \$4.2bn loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Calapucha said indigenous people reject the austerity measures, but their complaints go much further: They are demanding that the government stop all oil and mining in indigenous territory.

"We felt from the Amazon what was happening here in Quito and Guayaquil. That hurt us," Calapucha said.

On Friday night, clashes began after police fired tear gas and pepper spray on a crowd of about 20,000 protesters in front of the National Assembly. The protesters had been rallying for hours, chanting anti-government slogans, with indigenous women singing and burning palo santo, a tree native to Ecuador, in front of the heavily guarded building.

By Saturday, the government and indigenous leaders announced they would begin talks to negotiate the details of the austerity measures. But protests continued, prompting Moreno to impose a curfew in the capital.

### **Excessive force**

Protesters have accused security forces of using excessive force. At least five people have been killed, 800 severely wounded and more than 1,000 people arrested since the protests began, the state ombudsman said late on Friday.

Inocencio Tucumbi, an indigenous leader, was killed earlier this week when a tear gas canister fired by police hit his head, according to witnesses. The indigenous community honoured him by holding a mass procession and mass on Wednesday. They also detained eight police officers for several hours during the day, forcing them to witness the mass, before releasing them to the United Nations officials in the evening.

The vast majority of those wounded have been in Quito, where police have been accused of firing tear gas and pepper spray near hospital entrances, as well the cultural centre and universities, where the more than 10,000 indigenous people have been sleeping. This includes pregnant women and small children.

"There has been an excessive use of tear gas, of which weighs a lot on the protesters, but also on the girls and women who are around," says Monica Vega Puebla, legal accessor with the human rights organisation INREDH.

Government officials were not available for comment, but according to local media, Interior Minister Maria Paula Romo apologised for tear gas being fired at the universities, saying: "These are places where indigenous people are staying and have to remain safe places and they will be. These acts have no justification and will not be repeated."

Romo, however, denied that there has been an overuse of force, and instead continuously pointing out the violent acts by protesters.

Calapucha said there were clashes with police in the Amazon city of Puyo, where she has been protesting since the uprising began last week, but it never reached the same level of violence as Quito.

For the Amazonian women and many indigenous people in Ecuador, this month's protests only highlight what they call years of repression by the government.

"We want a country where we don't have to live in fear that our lands will be destroyed, our rivers will be polluted, our forests will be cut down. Where we are never afraid of our children being discriminated against and excluded in their own lands," the Amazonian women said in their statement.

"Yes, we are angry," Calapucha added, but "this is how we chant: 'not one more bomb, not one more rock.'"



## **WORLD: Exhibition combines research and painting to portray modern slavery's survivors**

By Olivia Cuthbert

Al-Fanar Media (04.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Ix7eIW> - The emphasis of international organizations on the trafficking of women is often more on trying to stop the practice than on healing those who have been sold into slavery. In a new exhibition that combines the perspectives of art and academia, Syrian artist Sara Shamma highlights the need to help survivors cope with their trauma and build a future, despite the suffering they have endured.

The exhibition, *Sara Shamma: Modern Slavery*, which opened October 1 at King's College London, articulates the experiences of trafficked women around the world, including the thousands of Yazidi women and children abducted and used as sex slaves by the Islamic State. Shamma became interested in the women's fate after hearing their stories from friends who had seen them sold off at slave markets with price tags around their necks. "I wanted to shed some light on modern slavery as a whole because it's a big issue but nobody talks about it, especially in the Middle East."

During an art-research residency at King's College, she worked alongside Siân Oram, a senior lecturer in women's mental health at the university's Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience. Through the Helen Bamber Foundation, a human-rights organization that supports survivors of extreme cruelty, they identified and interviewed women from different countries, drawing out details that troubled Shamma deeply.

"After the first interview with a survivor," she said, "I couldn't sleep. I was imagining pictures, noises, smells. ... These paintings are my reaction about what I learned. They are not an illustration of what happened, but the feeling that these stories leave in you."

### **How Women's Ordeals Begin**

Some of the women said their ordeal began when a spouse or parent died and a relative stepped in to exploit them. "A male member of the family, maybe an uncle or somebody else, took her and raped her, sold her children and then sold her separately," Shamma said, recounting circumstances she heard several times.

She knows all too well how pervasive modern slavery is. Living in Syria and Lebanon, she has witnessed other forms of captivity, including the domestic slavery endured by migrant workers across the region, which is often taken for granted in local society. An estimated 2.4 million migrant domestic workers are enslaved in the Gulf countries alone, according to the International Trade Union Confederation.

Speaking with survivors from other countries and cultures has given Shamma's exhibition a global relevance. Measuring modern slavery is difficult but in 2016, an estimated 40.3 million people were enslaved on any given day, 71 percent of them women, according to the Global Slavery Index.

While responses to the scale of the problem often focus on prevention, there's also an urgent need to improve support for survivors, Oram said. "Through this project we have begun to understand the realities of women's lives after exploitation. It explores what survival and recovery mean to them—how they think about themselves, others, and the future. Our hope is that the work inspires new ways of depicting, and thinking about, the impact of modern slavery."

The collaboration has also yielded insights for Oram, who believes an artist's perspective has added new layers to her scientific research. "Thinking about the tone of voice, the posture, the look in somebody's eye and really trying to keep hold of all of that and using it to understand what they meant when they were saying the words, I think that will be a change in practice for me."

On display at Bush House, King's College London through November 22, the paintings achieve what words and statistics cannot, conveying at a glance the complexity of human slavery experiences and the complicated emotions behind them.

One of the most complex works in the series, *Double Motherhood*, shows three generations of women embracing one another in a seemingly nurturing pose. But another reading, captured in the expressions of the younger woman and her daughter, hints at a more malevolent motherhood, where it's the matriarch that's responsible for enslaving more vulnerable women in the family.

In another painting, *Hiding in Plain Sight*, the eyes of the subject create tension, conveying vulnerability and defiance, fear and disdain, simultaneously. Many trafficked women suffer from feelings of guilt and survivor's shame. "Wherever they go, they sense that they are being watched by people," Oram said.

### **Portraits of Traffickers**

There's also a strong emphasis on the devouring male gaze, most notably in a series of oil sketches depicting unnamed men who are suggestive of the human traffickers who sold and enslaved these women. As in the larger oil paintings, these are not based on particular individuals, but rather on the artist's impressions, drawn from real life experiences encountered in her research.

To protect their identity, Shamma did not depict the women she spoke with; instead she paints their lives, past and present, capturing the pain they have endured and their efforts to overcome it. "I want my paintings to touch and move people, to change their minds and make them ask questions," said Shamma, who has received numerous international awards for her work over the years.

Art and science have often been married to great effect, but it's rare to see the research practices of artist and academic carried out in tandem. Kathleen Soriano, who curated the exhibition, believes this work enters new territory, not only in the methodology behind it, but in the issues it confronts and the way they are approached.

"A lot of the imagery that's been produced around this subject matter has been largely photographic and illustrative, so it's quite unusual for a topic like this to be taken in figurative painting," Soriano said. "Art is about making people feel, it's not just about understanding. I think this will have an impact because people aren't used to looking at this sort of subject matter in painted form."

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## **USA: 1 in 16 U.S. women say their first sexual intercourse was rape**

By Laura Santhanam

PBS NewsHour (16.09.2019) - <https://to.pbs.org/2kLHaRS> - A staggering one in 16 women said they were raped by force or coercion the first time they had sexual intercourse, according to a new study of government survey data.

Survivors reported higher rates of unwanted first pregnancy, abortion and an array of other physical and mental health problems, study authors wrote in an analysis published Monday in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

### **What does the study say?**

Between 2011 and 2017, researchers for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention questioned a nationally representative sample of 13,310 women, ages 18 to 44 about marriage, divorce, family life, reproductive health and more. Men were not asked about the first time they had sexual intercourse, and women with no history of vaginal intercourse and girls 17 or younger were not included in this study.

Among women who responded, 6.5 percent said their first time having sex was forced upon them. That equates to an estimated 3.3 million women nationwide. If the survey had included girls younger than 17 or women older than 45, "certainly that absolute number would be higher," said Laura Hawks, a primary care doctor at Cambridge Healthcare for the Homeless and the study's lead author.

### **"Quite honestly, that's the tip of the iceberg."**

"Quite honestly, that's the tip of the iceberg," said Hawks, who is also a research fellow at Harvard Medical School.

The trauma of this first sexual experience left a legacy of negative health outcomes for survivors, the study suggested. Among these survey respondents, 30 percent of women reported an unwanted first-time pregnancy, compared to 18 percent of women who said they chose to have sex the first time.

Women who were forced to have sex the first time were also more likely to report having had an abortion and have had problems ovulating or menstruating, significantly higher than women who described their first sexual experience as consensual.

Often, the sexual violence happened when the women were girls. Among respondents, 7 percent said they were younger than 10 at the time of the assault, while another 29 percent said they were between the ages of 11 and 14. The largest segment, at 39 percent, said the assaults happened between the ages of 15 and 17.

While women of all racial and socioeconomic groups reported these assaults, women of color and women in poverty reported higher rates of first-time forced sex.

### **Why is this important?**

One out of five women and one out of 71 men will be raped in their lifetime, according to the CDC's 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey. Among those who had been raped, 81 percent of women and 35 percent men reported post-traumatic stress disorder of varying duration, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

These first-time experiences are important for physicians to understand and monitor with trauma-informed care, Hawks said. This includes requesting permission to ask difficult questions and being sensitive when performing any genital exams.

"Any physical exam can be traumatizing for someone who has encountered physical or sexual violence in the past," Hawks said.

A patient's exposure to sexual violence "needs to be top of mind for medical professionals, particularly those serving teenagers and young adults, said said Scott Berkowitz, president of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

"Any physical exam can be traumatizing for someone who has encountered physical or sexual violence in the past."

Nearly half of all victims of sexual violence who call RAINN's national hotline are under age 18, Berkowitz said. Younger people are at greater risk and while there is no guaranteed prevention he said there are steps children and young adults can take to lower risk.

Caregivers can empower their children to speak out by discussing personal boundaries so children know what kinds of behavior are appropriate. It is also important for parents to reassure their child that if someone ever mistreats them, the parent or caregiver remains a safe person for the child to talk to.

If an act of sexual violence has already occurred, Berkowitz said family and friends should be supportive, let the victim lead the conversation, and remember that the "reaction of the first person they tell is going to have a big effect on everything that happens next, on their healing process, how long it takes, or whether or not they report to police."

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## **EU: The European Commission's second anti-trafficking report: A call to end the "culture of impunity"**

By Brianna Hertford, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (18.09.2019) – On the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2019, Dr Myria Vassiliadou, the EU Anti Trafficking Coordinator, presented the EU Commission's second report on trafficking to the FEMM and LIBE committees at the European Parliament.

Dr Vassiliadou's core message was clear: in order to truly make progress on the EU's goal to stop trafficking, we need to end the current culture of impunity. This is especially true for sex trafficking, which the report found to be the most common type.

Sex trafficking is immensely lucrative and only exists because there is a demand for it. These are the true drivers of this issue, not the individuals who are trafficked or their vulnerabilities. An effective prevention strategy must target the "buyers and users and profitters," says Dr Vassiliadou. If we do not address the business model of trafficking, we will never be able to fully stop traffickers from preying on people.

Dr Vassiliadou discussed individual cases of trafficking and general trends in the data, gaps in current policies and implementation, and ongoing initiatives to combat the issue. She presented recommendations addressing the root of the problem such as: criminalising the *knowing* use of 'services' of victims of trafficking; implementing the 2011 [EU anti-trafficking directive](#) in judicial and criminal systems to ensure enforcement; and targeting the "chain of actors" involved in this severe crime. To be clear, this new approach would only criminalise perpetrators who knowingly engage in services with a victim of trafficking, and would not criminalise the victims of trafficking themselves.

The legal framework to eradicate trafficking exists, but the issues lie in the coordination and implementation of it at international, national and local levels. It is imperative that a

comprehensive strategy is developed to combat trafficking across all sectors. Another key finding was that there is a lack of resources to properly support individuals who have been trafficked, and so an increase in funding for civil society is recommended.

A final challenge that Dr Vassiliadou raised in this session was the “general fatigue” of policymakers when discussing sex trafficking and exploitation. Although policymakers are indeed addressing a very complex and distressful topic, it is critical to prioritise this grave human rights issue and combat the identified culture of impunity. As Dr Vassiliadou reiterated, “it is only when we stop the money and the exploiters that we stop the trafficking.”

*The second report from the European Commission, titled [Second report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings \(2018\) as required under Article 20 of Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims](#), was published on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 2018. More information on this topic and the recommendations of the EU Commission can be found [there](#).*

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## **SOUTH AFRICA: In Pictures | Women protest against gender-based violence**

By Barry Christianson

New Frame (06.09.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2kszs5m> - Women’s voices reverberated in fury as protesters honoured those who have been raped and murdered in South Africa, and demanded that the government take better action against perpetrators.

*HRWF comment: This protest was sparked by the murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana, a student at the University of Cape Town (for more information click [here](#)). The following are statements from women at this protest. Click [here](#) to view their photos.*

**Khanyisile Welani, 17, from Nyanga East (centre) is a high school student at Rhodes High in Mowbray.**

Khanyisile is also the cousin of Uyinene Mrwetyana. “I’m here to protest against women being raped,” she says. “I’m also a survivor and I’m here to stand for every woman who never had a word to speak out. I’m here to stand for every four or five-year-old child who isn’t capable of standing up for themselves and saying, ‘Enough is Enough!’ The police are not doing anything. I’m here to stand for Uyinene.”

**Bonita Barnes from Tafelsig in Mitchells Plain is studying human resources management at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.**

“About a year and a half ago, a neighbour of mine, her daughter passed away,” she explains. “She was raped and murdered by the guy who had a crush on her mom. So I felt obligated to be here on her behalf.”

**Bukiwe Sidini from Langa is studying safety in society at Northlink College in Bellville.**

“I’m a woman who’s concerned, a woman who does not feel safe anymore in a democratic society,” she says. “I decided to come out here as a woman first because we’re being violated so much. It needs to stop. It’s been happening for years, but we haven’t been speaking out and doing so much about it.

"But the time has come now for us to act and react as the youth, as the people that gives these votes to our government. We need to stand up today and we will not be deterred. We will not stop until we see change. We will come tomorrow and the day after. We will come until the government hears us. Until they do something that is tangible. Something we can see. Because currently we're not seeing anything.

"People rape children and at the end of the day, they still come out. Correctional services is not working right now. The rehabilitation process that they have in the justice system is not working. The person who raped Uyinene and killed her already had some other violations, so the justice system is not rehabilitating. So that's why we are here today."

**Jonique Pietersen is a student at Stellenbosch University.**

"Honestly, I don't want to leave my legacy knowing that I didn't make an impact," she says. "I'm not gonna stay silent anymore. This has been going on for way too long. So I actually went to the statue [of Louis Botha, outside Parliament in Cape Town]. I painted my hand red. That represents our blood that has been shed. I wanted to make my mark on the statue so it can be there and I know that I did something to make a change."

**Shanlen Ishmail from Elsies River works at a call centre while studying education part-time.**

"I'm here because I want justice for women," she says. "I have two little sisters, one goes to high school. They're definitely vulnerable and I am, too. And not just for my family but for everyone else. It's been going on for a while, we've been silent and it's just been escalating. So we are literally done being silent. It's close to home. We are all vulnerable. It's not happening because of what we wear, where we go ... It's happening any time, it's happening with people close to us. We can't trust anybody. It doesn't matter what we wear, it doesn't matter how old we are. Old people are getting raped, babies are getting raped. It's everywhere."

**Abigail Bolisiki from Gugulethu goes to Sans Souci Girls' High School in Newlands.**

"The most infuriating thing is that the men who are supposed to be protecting us, according to patriarchy, are the ones that are killing us," she says. "Why do we have to survive and not live? ... Why do we have to fight more than men for our space on this land, whereas men are entitled to their own space and way of living, and it has to always affect us because we are inferior to them? I won't say it has been a success because not all the rapists and perpetrators have been caught. When we fight we die, when we don't fight we die. So we might as well fight and die trying, so we know we did our part."

**Robin Jones, 21, works in the film industry.**

"What frustrates me is the fact that people are still not taking us seriously as a gender," she says. "We have to fight to have a voice and, still, people are disregarding it."

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## **AUSTRALIA: Hospital hierarchies are fostering sexual harassment against young doctors**

***In a stressful workplace where life-and-death decisions are taken, blatant sexual offensiveness can be dismissed as letting off steam***



By Louise Stone, Christine Phillips and Kirsty Douglas

The Guardian (10.09.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IEN5YR> - As issues of sexual harassment and toxic workplace cultures are gaining more coverage in the media, it has surprised people to read such accounts by doctors and surgeons.

People may wonder if these accounts could possibly be true, and if so, why highly trained professionals put up with being demeaned and sexualised at work.

We are three doctors who have studied the phenomenon of sexual harassment and abuse of doctors and medical students, by doctors. As clinicians we have worked with survivors of sexual abuse by fellow medical professionals.

The experience of being demeaned and sexually harassed while performing their work is commonplace for female health professionals. Internationally, 59% of medical trainees experience bullying and harassment, with 33% experiencing sexual harassment. In a large survey by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, 30% of female surgeons reported experiencing sexual harassment, in most cases by a male surgical consultant. Junior doctors are over-represented among recipients of sexual harassment.

Surgery is a discipline which requires intensive training, feats of physical endurance and rapid and complex decision making. Neurosurgery is a particularly high-stakes profession where health and disability rely on millimetres of decision making and skill. In Australia, entry into this elite tribe is through an apprenticeship model that relies on senior staff selecting, training and mentoring junior staff. Training and mentoring can shade into "beneficial mistreatment", the idea that hierarchy, harsh feedback and feats of physical endurance (like brutal hours) will prepare their junior doctors for the difficult life ahead.

Hierarchical hospital cultures which support high-profile specialists make it difficult to protest offensive behaviour, particularly when the progression of one's career relies upon the support of one's supervisor. In a stressful workplace where life-and-death decisions are taken, blatant sexual offensiveness can be dismissed as letting off steam, a professional coping strategy. For juniors that do choose to report there are confusing, unconnected and at times conflicting pathways via their employer, their training bodies and/or the legal systems.

Holding doctors to account for their behaviour has proven extremely difficult. Although some surgeons are remarkably reflective about their humanness and vulnerability, many are not. Senior doctors can see themselves as invulnerable, and recent high-profile cases suggest they are correct. John Kearsley, a senior radiation oncologist convicted of drugging and indecently assaulting his registrar, pleaded guilty to this crime but his sentence was reduced to nine months imprisonment on appeal due to his "outstanding medical work". Chris Xenos, a senior neurosurgeon, was required to pay damages to his registrar when the Victorian civil and administrative tribunal found he sexually harassed her. Despite this, he was promoted to acting head of department and continued to work at Monash Medical Centre because of his "exemplary record as an employee". The complainant, Dr Caroline Tan, has not worked in the public sector again.

Clinicians who call out the behaviours of doctors at the peak of their profession are rarely embraced by their colleagues. Whistleblowers experience personal cost and risk their careers, even if they are senior in the hierarchy. For junior doctors who are victims of toxic behaviours, the risk of losing their careers after reporting harassment and bullying is high. In our research, we also found that doctors are also silenced by long-standing beliefs around professionalism. "Being professional" is equated by their colleagues - and



sometimes by themselves – as keeping knowledge of the behaviours within the tight circle of the ward, the operating suite, the emergency room or the clinic.

Those who do report often suffer the indignity or being cast as villains themselves. Despite winning her case, some sectors of the media treated Dr Caroline Tan as the whipping girl for victim feminism. "Clearly, the surgical training system which has served Australians so well must be destroyed to advance the causes of gender feminism," Miranda Devine wrote in the Daily Telegraph. "Just pray you don't get a brain tumour."

If we are to manage the complexity of the dilemma of toxic cultures in our workplaces, we must grapple with some difficult realities. Hierarchical workplaces sometimes exist in places where hierarchy is necessary. There is no time for democracy when surgical dilemmas unfold rapidly in an operating theatre. Sexism and sexist power structures are not unique to surgery. The groundbreaking Operating with Respect program by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons offers one model for other professions on a coordinated long-term approach to countering entrenched culture, but progress is slow.

These initiatives will not succeed without changes in hospitals. Unsustainable overtime and profoundly unhealthy working hours are encouraged by institutions, not just professions. Exhaustion makes doctors vulnerable, and we cannot expect the junior doctors to manage the complexity of entrenched bullying and harassment alone. Whistleblowers need to be protected, not by written policies, but by enacted processes that prevent harm to them and their families. And finally, we cannot expect our heroes to work in unsustainable jobs with little input from life outside of the artificial glare of the surgical lights. Their patients and colleagues deserve better, and so do they.

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## **Attacked for gender, not views: Hong Kong women protesters facing rape threats from troll army**

***A young female protester, Ka Yau Ho, said a photograph shared online of her being detained by the police during a rally was altered so it appeared her nipples were showing.***

News 18 (02.09.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IP75YK> - Rape threats, body-shaming and doctored photos: women supporting the anti-government protests in Hong Kong say they are being harassed online by suspected pro-Beijing trolls.

Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators have taken to the financial hub's streets week after week in the biggest challenge to China's rule of the semi-autonomous city for decades.

But female protesters posting support for the pro-democracy movement said they have experienced a slew of sexist online attacks in response.

"They are not attacking my views or anything, they just attack me because I am female," said Hong Kong student Mickey Leung Ho Wun.

The 17-year-old discovered a doctored picture of her at a pro-democracy rally was being spread on Facebook via a page supporting the city's police.

In the original, Wun is standing next to a banner reading 'I am a secondary school student' but in the altered version, the sign reads 'I am not wearing any underwear.'

"These are Hong Kong people who are pro-Beijing," Wun speculated of the users sharing the picture.

Another young female protester, Ka Yau Ho, said a photograph shared online of her being detained by the police during a rally was altered so it appeared her nipples were showing.

Celebrity Hong Kong singer turned activist Denise Ho said on Facebook the aim of the online attacks against her was to "ignore her will, ignore her vision, focus on her exterior and dress, and then demonise."

These women said they suspected pro-Beijing trolls were behind the sexist abuse, as the majority of messages were in simplified Chinese — predominantly used in mainland China.

They added that the abuse has intensified since Beijing ramped up its hardline rhetoric over the protests.

On Wednesday evening, thousands rallied against alleged police sexual violence, holding aloft purple lights in solidarity with abuse victims.

Attendees shared the #ProtestToo hashtag, a play on 2017's global #MeToo movement that exposed sexual assault and harassment in high-profile industries — and helped improve attitudes towards abuse survivors.

But women at the protest told AFP they had stopped posting online as the rhetoric against the protesters increased.

A spokesperson for Hong Kong's Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women said online harassment was "a weapon to harm women," adding that it was linked to outdated social norms and cultural values.

Social media has been a key battleground for both sides during the protests.

Earlier this month tech giants Twitter and Facebook said they had suspended nearly 1,000 active accounts emanating from China, aimed at undercutting the legitimacy of the Hong Kong protest movement.

Twitter said it had shut down a further 200,000 accounts before they could inflict any damage.

Laurel Chor, 29, said as a female reporter covering the protests in Hong Kong she had received a "constant barrage" of abuse in her comments and Instagram DMs.

"They were using words like whore or prostitute and bitch," she said.

A Twitter post which called on people to shun a list of female Asian journalists — including Chor — was indicative of how "women do get disproportionately targeted and it is not only gendered but also racial," she said.

Similarly, journalist Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, born in mainland China but writing about the protests from Australia, said her Twitter account was swamped by negative comments, including rape threats.

"The insults that were towards me they were a really weird combination of nasty nationalism, sexism, and racism," she said. "I felt physically sick."

It is not only pro-democracy demonstrators who have endured abusive gendered attacks.

Photographs of Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's chief executive, have been superimposed onto scantily-clad models' bodies and pasted on walls in the city.

Meanwhile, the wives of a number of serving police officers were identified by Telegram users who created a poll on the encrypted messaging service to vote on which wife they would rather "sleep with", a senior police source said.

A Twitter spokesperson told AFP that "abuse, harassment and hateful conduct have no place on our service".

Neither Instagram nor Facebook immediately responded to comment but Instagram confirmed they were actively investigating the issue.

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## **UGANDA: Kampala's market women unite against harassment**

***Tired of suffering physical and verbal abuse at one of the Ugandan capital's largest markets, female vendors are holding perpetrators to account***

By Alice McCool

The Guardian (19.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Z1CtGe> - Some men are in the habit of touching women, says Nora Baguma, a vendor at Nakawa market, in Uganda's capital Kampala. "We call them bayaye," she says, sitting at her banana stall.

"We give men punishment for this. I take men to the office if they cause problems. They can suspend that man for a week or a month," Baguma explains. "It makes them stop. They fear us."

Baguma is the women's representative of Nakawa market, one of Kampala's largest, where about 7,000 workers sell their wares.

The work of a local organisation, the Institute for Social Transformation, has increased awareness about sexual harassment among women at Nakawa. A protocol for dealing with cases has now been established; before, women in the market could only hold perpetrators to account informally.

The market is divided into six zones, each with 40 departments. Every department has a women's representative, and they are the first port of call for sexual harassment complaints. Next is the zone leader, and above that the market's disciplinary committee.

As she puts handfuls of mukene (dried silver fish) in bags for customers, market vendor Catherine Nanzige explains how punishments vary depending on the severity of the crime. "You pay a fee of 50 to 100,000 Ugandan shillings (about £10-20) and if you pay that fee and do the same thing again, you are given a month suspension from the market. If you continue, they expel you."

A Nakawa market committee member, Nanzige has been working there since she was a child, helping at her mother's stall.

"They see me and they fear me, because they know if I see them touching someone I will say that one is not in order, pay 100,000 shillings," she says.

Many, though, are still reluctant to speak out – particularly younger women and girls. "Waitresses serving lunch here are young, 12 or 13 years old. When they take food to customers, those men harass them," says Susan Tafumba, another vendor and secretary of Nakawa's groundnuts department.

"They can touch the breast, make some gesture, say something, before they will give them the money," sighs Tafumba. "Young girls here don't know they can get help, so they end up keeping quiet."

Worldwide, women working in the informal sector have long fought sexual harassment at work. A recently adopted international treaty influenced by the #MeToo movement is designed to offer such women new protections.

The convention concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work has been praised for its focus on informal sector workers, who represent 61% of the world's labour force and more than 80% of Uganda's.

"It has redefined the world of work to go beyond the workplace itself, and provides for all kinds of employees," explains Ophelia Kemigisha, a Ugandan human rights lawyer. The convention covers the formal and informal economy as well as public and private spaces, for example protecting the rights of women when commuting to and from work.

But whether the convention will be useful in Uganda depends on the government, argues Kemigisha. Uganda's current sexual harassment legislation "was clearly made with women in the formal sector in mind", she says. Regulations only require employers with more than 25 staff to have a sexual harassment policy, failing to cover women working in markets who also "often don't have an 'employer' per se who would be held accountable", she says.

At workplaces like Nakawa market women have "found spaces outside of the set legal systems to find redress for sexual harassment and abuse", explains Kemigisha. The Ugandan government could do more to support these informal mechanisms, she says, "including providing them with more information on how to handle investigations, and sending labour officers to areas that have been neglected to guide them".

Leah Eryenyu, a researcher at pan-African feminist organisation Akina Mama Wa Afrika, is optimistic that the convention will lead to improvements, despite Uganda leading a successful motion to remove a recommendation that explicitly listed the protection of vulnerable groups including LGBT people – although LGBT people are implicitly included as they remain protected under international human rights and labour standards.

Eryenyu hopes that the treaty can bring about change in Uganda, where she says the #MeToo movement is still small, even in the formal sector. For the informal sector, "the practice [harassment] has been normalised and accepted as a way of life," she explains.

Eryenyu's research on women who work on flower farms has found that sexual exploitation – sex in exchange for temporary work or higher wages – is rife. She says that while there are sexual harassment policies in place and women "can report to gender committees", implementation by male-dominated leadership structures is often poor.

Eryenyu argues that to protect women working in the informal sector, better recognition of their contribution to the economy is needed.

"The informal sector contributes greatly to our GDP, but when it comes to issues of protection they are suddenly invisible," she says. "The government should be made to realise this is an important part of the economy that deserves the same amount of respect and protection as anywhere else."

Nakawa market chairperson Charles Okuni, whose background is in finance, understands the economic value women bring to the sector: they make up the majority of market vendors. Sitting in his office above the market, he says Nakawa is working to improve the capital of market women through access to bank loans and through the government's Uganda women entrepreneurship programme, which funds small businesses.

Based on his observations at Nakawa, Okuni considers "women's affairs highly because they are more responsible, more willing to do business".

"Men nowadays, they don't want to take their responsibilities," says Baguma.

"They leave each and every thing to the woman, then the woman starts struggling, selling these things, buying food, paying rent, school fees, so their capital is lost," she says.

"I counsel the women who come to me with these complaints. When you give power to that man, at the end of the day that man can kill you."

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## **EU: New anti-trafficking research calls for political action to implement gender mainstreaming at EU hotspots**

By Brianna Hertford, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (25.07.2019) – Earlier this month, the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) published the report: [Detecting and protecting victims of trafficking in hotspots: Ex-Post Evaluation](#). This research focuses on the gendered dynamics of human trafficking and provides recommendations to strengthen the protection of vulnerable individuals at the external borders of the European Union (EU).

The majority of individuals worldwide who are trafficked are women and girls. Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have been identified by the European Parliament as particularly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. As such, the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality requested the EPRS to conduct research on the nine hotspots in Italy and Greece. These hotspots were established in 2015 as a temporary system for processing asylum claims. This report evaluates the identification process of victims of trafficking, the subsequent protections they are provided, and the overall preventative measures taken to reduce the risk of exploitation and trafficking at hotspots.

The EU has taken a strong stance on trafficking as a violation of individuals' basic human rights. There has been much progress in both Greece and Italy in the past two years towards addressing this issue. However, there are still many barriers to identifying and protecting victims of trafficking, as well as preventing exploitation and trafficking once migrants arrive in the EU.

For example, the report noted that in Greece, nationals from certain countries are assumed to be "economic migrants" instead of in need of international protection. Consequently, their asylum requests are systematically rushed so as to return them to Turkey under the EU-Turkey agreement as quickly as possible. Expediting the evaluation

of asylum applications greatly reduces the ability to screen for vulnerability.

An agreement between Italy and Libya has resulted in less asylum seekers reaching Italian shores since 2017, which has had a beneficial impact on living conditions at Italian hotspots. However, due to the well-documented abuses of human rights occurring in Libya, it is a controversial arrangement. This report notes that 'cooperation with Libya has shifted many of the issues related to trafficking from the European shores to Libya.'

This evaluation details the capacity of European agencies and systems in place to assist states at the EU's external border. It discusses challenges in the "hotspot approach" and in creating a cohesive reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) that both the European Parliament and Commission would agree to. The EPRS recommends concrete measures that would provide a gender-sensitive approach 'such as more female staff in hotspots, prevention of gender-based violence, better gender mainstreaming in practices' and calls for political action to increase the protection and support provided to victims of trafficking at the borders of the EU.

**Source:**

European Parliamentary Research Service

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/631757/EPRS\\_STU\(2019\)631757\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/631757/EPRS_STU(2019)631757_EN.pdf)

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## **PHILIPPINES: Duterte officially endorsed sex tourism, trafficking in Boracay during State of the Nation Address**

By Rosette Adel

Philstar (24.07.2019) - <http://bit.ly/30Siiag> - lawmaker from a women's party-list Tuesday said President Rodrigo Duterte formally advertised sex tourism, trafficking and prostitution in Boracay in his fourth State of the Nation Address speech.

"Duterte's Boracay rehabilitation program created thousands of unemployed, impoverished Aklanon women now increasingly vulnerable to prostitution, human trafficking and abuse," Gabriela Women's Party Rep. Arlene Brosas said.

"Duterte in his SONA officially endorsed sex tourism, trafficking and prostitution in Boracay," she added.

Brosas said this after Duterte last Monday mentioned the rehabilitation of Boracay.

The president, in his speech, boasted about the restoration that occurred on the island.

He said the government "equipped with political will" ordered the closure of the world-famed tourist destination for six months to prevent its "further deterioration."

"I am proud to say that it has been restored close to its original pristine state," Duterte said.

Duterte, however, said Boracay is just the beginning while adding commentary about the women on the island waiting for foreign male visitors as he invited them to visit Boracay.

"Boracay Island is just the beginning. And the girls there, the foreigners are waiting for you gentlemen to visit the place. They are all on the beach sunbathing. You are invited to --- I have not been there," he said in his SONA.

The remark was deemed sexist by some.

In January last year, during his last day in India, Duterte also joked that he would like to lure tourists to the Philippines with virgins.

Duterte said that Islamic State extremists lure followers with the promise of "42 virgins" in heaven as he addressed the Filipino and Indian businessmen present then.

### **'No to leading by example'**

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, the Center For Women's Resources raised the danger of Duterte's call during his SONA about leading by example as it could mean "following his misogynistic attitude, which made it worse for women."

"I implore those who occupy positions of power and authority, to let your deeds and accomplishments do the talking. Lead by example. Words ring hollow when not followed by positive and prioritized action," Duterte said Monday in his speech.

The CWR cited that that violence against women has continued, as one woman or girl is raped every hour.

"Worse, state-perpetrated VAW has become rampant. Since President Duterte became the president, more than 50 cops were involved in various cases of violence against women," CWR said.

Duterte has been previously criticized for casually talking about rape and abuse on women.

His remarks were, however, often been explained by the Palace as jokes and as part of what makes him endearing to the people.

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## **SWEDEN: 'Negligent rape': Has Sweden's sexual consent law led to change?**

By Catherine Edwards

TheLocal.se (12.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2JB2XoL> - One year ago, Sweden introduced a law change that meant sex without explicit consent was considered as rape, including when the victim did not actively say 'no'. The Local spoke to experts to find out the impact this has had on court cases and within Swedish society.

The law change meant that participants needed to clearly demonstrate that they wanted to engage in sexual activity in order for it to be considered consensual.

Two new offences of "negligent rape" and "negligent sexual abuse" were created for acts where courts found that consent had not been established, but in which the perpetrator had not intended to commit rape or assault. Previously, a decisive factor for a rape conviction was proof that a perpetrator used force, threats, or taken advantage of someone in a vulnerable situation.



The law faced backlash at the time, and had to be clarified after Sweden's Council on Legislation said it was too unclear. Others criticized it as "signalpolitik", meaning a policy implemented only for appearances and unlikely to make a real difference.

Twelve months on, rights organizations say the law has had a measurable impact on court cases and helped change the national discussion on sexual autonomy – but warned there was still work to be done.

### ***'Negligent rape' sentences***

"Earlier this year, we looked at 30 court judgments, and these included cases which definitely would not have been considered to be rape before the change in the law; where no violence or other means of force was used," Katarina Bergehed, an Amnesty International expert in women's rights, told The Local.

Over the past year, the new law has been decisive in at least seven rape cases which went to court, according to an investigation by Swedish radio programme I lagens namn (In the name of the law).

The programme said that of 60 rape cases, the new law was crucial in seven, including six convictions of negligent rape.

A study from the Siren news agency reached the same conclusion, finding that in 84 cases where prosecutors mentioned "negligent rape", 45 resulted in a rape conviction while six were sentenced for negligent rape.

### ***'Sleeping in the same bed and wearing only underwear does not mean consent'***

One of these sentences was confirmed by Sweden's Supreme Court on Sunday, marking the first time the country's highest criminal court made a judgment relating to negligent rape.

The 27-year-old male plaintiff was found guilty of the negligent rape of a woman while staying overnight at her home.

The woman said had agreed he could stay overnight, but made it clear she did not want to have sex. Despite that, the man initiated sexual intercourse.

Both the perpetrator and the plaintiff said that she was passive throughout the intercourse, and that they did not speak. The plaintiff said she "froze and did not know how to act", while the perpetrator said he was not sure whether she was awake when he first initiated sexual contact, "but [he] had the impression that she wanted to have sex" and continued because she did not tell him not to. He also said that he stopped the intercourse when he thought she didn't want to continue.

In a statement accompanying its decision, the Supreme Court wrote: "A person who is subjected to sexual acts against their will does not have any responsibility to say no or express their reluctance in any other way. Furthermore, the court notes that the fact that the plaintiff and the perpetrator agreed to sleep in the same bed and that they were dressed in only underwear does not mean that the plaintiff voluntarily participated in the sexual acts."

The man now faces two years and three months in jail, although this includes sentences for other crimes he was found guilty of. The penalty for the count of negligent rape was eight months' jail, according to the Supreme Court.

Without the 2018 law, it is likely that the man would have been acquitted, since intent was previously required for a conviction of rape or sexual assault, and the Supreme Court found no evidence of intent.

### **'Greater awareness about consent'**

The fact that Sweden's law now sets a clear boundary between consensual sex and rape or assault has also helped open up to discussions about sex and consent, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) told The Local.

"There is increased awareness and a greater openness towards talking about [sexual consent] today," said RFSU's Maria Bergström, when asked what changes she had observed since the consent law was passed.

"For example, we can see that this has made it easier for people who have previously experienced this to put words on what happened to them, and to then perhaps go further with reporting it or seeking support. The law has finally made it clear that one always has a responsibility to ensure that there is consent."

"There is a much greater awareness and more conversations today on these questions among young men but also in the adult population -- we also see that the question is raised by the media in a different way than before," she said.

Bergström also mentioned the impact of the #MeToo movement in putting the question of consent and boundaries on the political agenda, as women from a wide range of industries came forward with their experiences of assault and harassment, all calling for tangible change.

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## **INDONESIA: Forcing your wife to have sex is rape: Komnas Perempuan**

The Jakarta Post (09.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/30tr5iI> - In response to a recent case of a man allegedly assaulting his wife for refusing sex, the National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan) has said that forcing your wife to have sex is a form of rape, known as marital rape.

Komnas Perempuan commissioner Adriana said that marital rape was also a form of domestic violence.

"Domestic abuse means that [the husband] is forcing his wife to do something without her consent. That's a form of rape or sexual violence against women that in extreme cases could end in death," Adriana said on Monday as quoted by [kompas.com](http://kompas.com).

Marital rape is often overlooked by many parties, including husband and wife, she said, adding that many victims of marital rape opted not to file a report to the police.

"Cases like this are often not taken seriously even though it's important. Unfortunately, many victims don't consider their husband's actions to be rape," Adriana said.

Police also tend not to take such cases seriously, and often urge for marital rape cases to be settled personally.

The possibility of trauma for children in households where marital rape takes place should also not be ignored.

"The trauma for sexual assault is huge for children and the victim. There could be long-term effects for the child, and in the worst case they could emulate the abuser." Adriana said.

Marital rape came under the spotlight after the alleged abuse of a woman, identified only as FZ, by her husband, identified only as AN. AN allegedly attacked FZ with a machete after she refused to have sex with him in their home.

FZ is currently being treated at a hospital and is in a stable condition

AN has been charged under the 2004 law on the elimination of domestic violence and faces a maximum sentence of five years in prison.

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## **IRAQ: They escaped ISIS. Then they got sucked into Baghdad's sex trafficking underworld**

By Arwa Damon, Ghazi Balkiz, Brice Laine and Aqeel Najm

CNN (03.07.2019) - <https://cnn.it/2Nqj2S6> - Nadia's handshake is strong, but her voice trembles as she says hello. Leaning against a window, she describes in painful detail the twisted journey that saw her evade the grip of terrorists only to fall victim to Baghdad's sex trafficking underworld.

Stories like Nadia's have become all too familiar in the wake of ISIS' defeat in Iraq. The decline of the militant group has given rise to another evil: human trafficking networks that thrive on the spoils of war, the displaced and the desperate.

And she was the perfect mark.

Nadia was living in Sinjar, northern Iraq, in 2014 when ISIS rounded up thousands of women and girls like her from the Yazidi ethnic minority and forced them into sexual slavery. But she says she managed to escape, fleeing with her family through scattered hills to an IDP camp in Iraqi Kurdistan. CNN is not using Nadia's real name out of concerns for her safety.

Still, she was haunted by the fate of others who were not as lucky. She said she started sending money to a man she believed was a trusted friend, who she had met while on the run from ISIS and who said he was coordinating humanitarian aid for other Yazidis. Encouraged by their conversations and propelled by her desire to help, she began organizing demonstrations at the camp, demanding the release of Yazidi women.

Then the calls started. "I would get the threats by phone," Nadia said, explaining that she wasn't sure who was harassing her. "I wasn't afraid for myself, but for my little sister. They said, 'If you don't come, we know where your sister goes to school.'"

When she received a letter from an NGO supporting her application for asylum in the United States, she reached out to her friend, asking for help to get to the embassy in Baghdad. "He said, 'My sister, I can take you. I know a guy in the Iraqi parliament, I can take you to him.'"

On the road to the capital, she sensed something was wrong. "He kept stopping to talk on the phone and send messages," she told CNN. "I said, 'Take me back, I want to go back.' He said, 'No, it's ok, it is about a group of Yazidi girls I freed from Fallujah, they are waiting for us in Baghdad.'"

"He knew my weakness, I was happy when I heard that some of our girls were freed. He convinced me to continue the trip," she said.

When they arrived in a rundown Baghdad neighborhood, notorious for its drug gangs, the unthinkable happened. The old man, who her friend had told her was a parliamentarian, greeted them in a dilapidated building. "He said to me, 'You are mine now, you are mine now.'" He was the head of a sex trafficking gang.

Nadia was shocked. The friend she had trusted all along -- with her money and with her fears -- had sold her into sexual slavery.

"I started fighting ... I started hitting them. They both beat me hard," she said. She says they sedated her with an injection and everything went black.

When she came to, she said she was surrounded by empty bottles and dirty plates, naked and in pain from having been raped by multiple men. She says she thought it was as many as 10, judging by the mess they left behind. "I lost my life, I was destroyed," she said. "Three months they would torture me like this, every day."

Nadia tried to run away, but each time her captors caught and beat her. One time they attacked her so brutally that she had internal bleeding and was taken to the hospital. She heard doctors talking about how they had to save her organs.

In the hospital room, Nadia said the head of the gang would sit at her bedside, stroking her hair and calling her his daughter. He told the medical staff that she had a mental illness and had fallen down the stairs.

When Nadia was released from hospital, she said another woman -- another victim of the gang -- was brought in to keep watch over her. Nadia begged the woman to let her go, but the woman just laughed.

The woman lifted her shirt, revealing a scar on her stomach she said she got when they stole one of her kidneys. "This is what they did to me. I had two little children and they sold them," she told Nadia, before adding: "you will be forced to stay with them, you will get used to this, all that is happening to you."

After months of abuse, just when Nadia thought her life would end, she was rescued. She said she wasn't sure who the men were that saved her, but they took her to a hotel run by a Yazidi and she was ultimately reconnected with her family.

Now, Nadia says she wants justice.

"I am fighting this," she said. "I am using what is remaining of my breath to be a voice for us all, so that this doesn't happen to anyone else."

### ***"Everywhere, there are victims"***

Statistics are difficult to come by due deficient identification guidelines and a lack of referral procedures in Iraq. A dearth of coordinated agencies tracking trafficking activities in the country also means that accompanying data is nearly nonexistent.

But by many accounts, human trafficking has become rampant in the refugee camps dotted across Iraq, as well as in cities like Baghdad, where modern day slavery and forced prostitution networks are growing. Agents from trafficking networks often promise to resettle refugees from Kurdistan, but instead bring them to hotels and brothels in Baghdad, Basrah and other cities across southern Iraq, according to reports from by both the US State Department and SEED, a Kurdistan-based nonprofit.

"When you look everywhere, there are victims," Dr. Ali Akram al-Bayati told us, sitting on a bench on the bank of the Tigris river. Pointing to families picnicking and teenagers snapping selfies, he said there was a lack of awareness within Iraqi society about what was happening behind closed doors.

Al-Bayati works to combat human trafficking as part of the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, which was set up and funded by the government. Ostensibly set up as an independent institution, the commission's mandate is to gather information, investigate cases and bring them to court, but al-Bayati says it lacks the finances and power to do so effectively.

Nadia's case is among the many that the commission is trying to support. According to Nadia, the Iraqi justice system is failing her: the case is being buried in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Baghdad.

On paper, the Iraqi government has stepped up efforts to prosecute and convict traffickers, but al-Bayati said it has failed to tackle the sweeping nature of the problem. His claims are backed up by the State Department's 2019 Trafficking in Persons report.

Iraq's government "increased law enforcement efforts, but did not hold criminally accountable officials complicit in trafficking, including child soldiering and sex trafficking," the State Department said, citing reports that officials in key security positions had played a role in protecting traffickers from prosecution. "The government continued to lack implementing regulations for the anti-trafficking law, hindering its ability to enforce the law, bring traffickers to justice, and protect victims."

Inconsistencies in Iraq's 2012 anti-trafficking law, which criminalized some forms of labor and sex trafficking, has opened opportunities for wrongful convictions.

According to the State Department, the Iraqi government also failed to report what efforts it had made to pursue allegations that security and military personnel in IDP camps were complicit in sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and girls.

"If you are talking about human trafficking, of course when you investigate you will see some of the officials who are involved in that," al-Bayati said. "Whether they are higher or lower officials, of course it's not in their interest to reveal all the facts."

Naming the officials would be pointless. They are too powerful, and his own commission is too weak, al-Bayati says. He told us he had received subtle threats but when pushed he wouldn't go into detail at the risk of putting his life into more jeopardy.

Gaps in the government's referral procedures have also prevented many victims from receiving appropriate services -- the government-run trafficking shelters in Baghdad remained empty throughout 2017, according to the US State Department Trafficking in Persons report.

Al-Bayati said he was aware of around 150 reported cases of sex trafficking across Iraq in 2018. Only four to five women were placed in government shelters, he said.

Last year, al-Bayati said, 426 people were detained for alleged involvement in trafficking crimes -- only 53 were sent to prison.

But available figures aren't reflective of the scale of human trafficking in the country. Fear of retribution and stigma, as well as a lack of faith in the government and the judicial process, silences victims and those who work with them.

Still, there are those trying to help -- albeit, discretely.

### ***Operating in plain sight***

When we arrived at the address for the anti-trafficking NGO, there was no way to know that we were in the right place. There's no sign outside and the first-floor masquerades as something else. We aren't naming the NGO to protect the safety of its employees.

Such a level of secrecy came as a surprise given the relative security in the Iraqi capital these days. The NGO is afraid of getting targeted by gangs and militia groups operating with impunity beneath the city's vibrant veneer.

Inside a room, Ahlam sat in a plastic chair, trembling under a black abaya which concealed her face. All we could see were the soft billows in fabric created by the wringing of her hands as she described how she became prey for sex traffickers in Baghdad.

"It all started with my older brother," said Ahlam, whose name has been changed for her safety.

In 2014, Ahlam's brother joined ISIS in their home province of Diyala, north of the capital, quickly rising to the rank of Emir. He married Ahlam off to an ISIS fighter, but when her husband was detained a few months later, she moved back in with her brother.

Ahlam said her brother had become more radical and more cruel during his time with ISIS. She said he beat her and her sisters and imprisoned her in a room with no food. When she complained to another relative, her brother threatened to kill her.

A cousin ultimately helped her flee to Baghdad, but once she got there she had no one to turn to for help.

"I was in the street, going around lost. Baghdad is a big city, a crowded city," she said. "I got in a taxi. The driver asked me where I want to go, and I said I don't know."

Confused and scared, Ahlam poured her story out to him. He was sympathetic and offered to help. "I thought a savior had arrived. I said to myself finally there is good in the world. He said he could find me something with a relative," she recalled. "I said 'where?' He said, 'you will find out later.'"

First, Ahlam said she was brought to a casino, before being sold to a brothel.

"He brought me to another woman who took me to a house," Ahlam recalled. "I realized that the girls there work as prostitutes."

The NGO where Ahlam ultimately sought shelter is focused on identifying potential victims before they become ensnared in these networks. They have teams working across the country with vulnerable populations, displaced people living in camps, those desperate for work, and others living in the streets.

They try to spread their message through word of mouth and alert potential victims to warning signs, but Iman al-Silawi, the head of the NGO, said there were neighborhoods they don't dare go to.

Ahlam says she begged to leave the brothel, but the madame beat her, broke her phone and sold her on again.

"She forced me to work as a prostitute. She would bring men into the house and she would force me to have sex with them," Ahlam said, sobbing. Ahlam was trapped in the brothel for a few months before seizing an opportunity to run away.

According to people who work with victims, Ahlam's story is representative of the way trafficking rings operate today across Iraq: in plain sight. Those with ties to the networks -- like the taxi driver -- keep their eyes out for vulnerable women and try to lure them in.

And, with a large population of vulnerable people, those networks have swelled, their tentacles reaching across the country and up to the highest levels of government.

"What is my crime?" Ahlam asked. "What have I done to deserve this?"

She bowed her head and contemplated her future. Gone are her childhood hopes of a happy life, a loving husband, a family -- dreams that were first stolen from her by ISIS, then by those exploiting her vulnerability, and finally by her own government which failed to protect her.

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## **AFRICA: Nations urged to enforce family laws to protect women**

By Nita Bhalla

Thomson Reuters Foundation (02.07.2019) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/306dei0> - Women and girls in Africa are still being pushed into forced or early marriages, while those in unhappy unions face discrimination when seeking divorce, campaigners said on Tuesday, urging governments to enforce fairer family laws. The Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) - a coalition of 50 groups - said while most nations had committed to a pan-African pact on women's rights, states had failed to enforce laws relating to marriage, divorce, child maintenance and inheritance.

The pact, known as the Maputo Protocol, came into force in 2005 and guarantees extensive rights in areas from protection against violence to economic empowerment.

Anisah Ari from the Nigeria-based Women Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative, a SOAWR member, said while African nations had taken steps in other areas such as tackling sexual violence, family laws were largely being ignored.

"While the Maputo Protocol affirms women's rights to exercise self-determination and bodily autonomy - free from discrimination, coercion and violence - many African girls and women continue to bear the brunt of discriminatory family laws," Ari told a news conference.

"For instance, despite the fact that women have a right to inherit their husbands' properties after death, this is not always assured - leading to protracted legal battles."



The SOAWR members, which come from 25 African countries, said many nations had enacted progressive family laws in line with the Maputo Protocol, but the laws were not being enforced.

Women's contribution and access to familial property was rarely recognised during marital disputes, and women often faced an uphill struggle when seeking child maintenance, they added.

The legally binding pact, lauded as the most progressive human rights instrument for women and girls in Africa, has been signed and ratified by 42 of the African Union's 55 member states.

Three countries - Botswana, Morocco and Egypt - have neither signed nor ratified it.

The SOAWR members - which come from countries such as Tunisia, Uganda, South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya - said addressing the protection and rights of women and girls in the family was the integral to the advancement of women.

"Family laws are key as the family unit is where the socialisation of gender roles begins. It is where girls first learn their rights and roles in society," said Violet Muthiga from Sauti Ya Wanawake, a Kenya-based women's rights group.

"So if we can intervene at the family level to ensure they are protected and treated fairly, we can change perceptions and curb practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation - all of which happen with the family unit."

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## **INDIA: Arrests after women's heads shaved for resisting rape**

***Two people have been arrested in India's Bihar state after a group of men shaved the heads of two women as "punishment" for resisting rape.***

By Geeta Pandey

BBC (28.06.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2XAYL06> - The group, which included a local official, ambushed the mother and daughter in their home with the intent of raping them, police said.

When the women resisted, they assaulted them, shaved their heads and paraded them through the village.

Police say they are searching for five others involved in the incident.

"We were beaten with sticks very badly. I have injuries all over my body and my daughter also has some injuries," the mother told the ANI news agency.

The women also said that their heads were shaved in front of the entire village.

'There's no fear of law'

The attempted rape is a sexual crime, but the subsequent assault, tonsuring the women's heads and parading them through the village is an assertion of male power in a community, deeply entrenched in patriarchy.

What is most worrisome is that the assaulting mob was led by a government official - an elected representative whose job is to look after the welfare of his people, not attack them.

The audacity of the crime shows how in parts of India there's no fear of law.

To begin with, poor marginalised groups find it hard to even convince the police to lodge complaints. Then their cases are shoddily investigated and an overburdened slow-paced judicial system mean the powerful often get away with blue murder.

Public anger and outrage, that occurs every time a crime of this nature occurs, is short lived.

What is needed is much more consistent action from the authorities, bringing swift justice to the victims of such crimes and restoring the rule of law in remote rural areas of the country.

Some men entered the victims' home and tried to molest the daughter," a police officer told local media, adding that her mother helped her fight off the men.

The state's women commission has also condemned the incident, saying that "further action" will be taken.

This is not the first time such an incident has occurred in the state.

In April, a teenage girl was attacked with acid for resisting an attempted gang rape.

And a few months back, a woman in Bihar was assaulted, stripped and paraded naked through the village market.

Public outrage over sexual violence in India rose dramatically after the 2012 gang rape and murder of a student on a Delhi bus.

The issue became a political flashpoint again in 2018, after a string of high-profile attacks against children.

However incidents of rape and violence against women continue to be reported from across the country.

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## **AFRICA: Survivors of female circumcision call for help with mental trauma**

By Nellie Peyton

Reuters (18.06.2019 ) - <https://reut.rs/2KlsqnG> - African survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM) said mental health services are their biggest need and urged governments and charities to provide support for dealing with long-term trauma.

Survivors and activists from across the continent attending a summit on FGM and child marriage in Senegal this week said mental health should have been on the agenda.

Common in 28 African countries, FGM is often seen as a rite of passage and justified for cultural or religious reasons but can cause chronic pain, infertility and even death.

"We don't have mental health services for survivors of FGM - that is a big thing that is missing in Africa," said Virginia Lekumoisa, a survivor from Kenya who works for the government on children's rights.

FGM typically involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia and is practiced on girls from infancy to adolescence, with the World Health Organization (WHO) estimating about 200 million women and girls have undergone the procedure.

World leaders pledged to end the practice under a set of global goals agreed in 2015.

Cut at 18 against her will, 29-year-old Lekumoisa said she has never received any services to help with the trauma.

"There's this picture that has never left my mind of the blood," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

She works with survivors at shelters in Kenya and said they are desperate to talk to someone about what they went through but the topic remains taboo.

If more survivors received mental health support they might be empowered to speak up and help end the practice, she said.

Aida Ndiaye, 35, from Senegal, said she never had suffered physical complications but the trauma of being cut when she was six years old had stayed with her.

"I remember my sister screaming, 'They're going to kill Aida!'," she said, shaking as she told her story. "I've never been able to forget those screams."

She has never spoken to her parents about it, she said.

Mental health services are lacking in Africa in general, with less than one mental health worker for every 100,000 people, according to the World Health Organization.

Fatoumata Seyba, an activist from Mali, endured a different kind of trauma when her mother-in-law cut her baby daughter without her knowledge. Seyba was against the practice, but her husband's family disagreed.

"It's not easy for a mother to see her baby bleeding and not be able to console her," she said.

Having grown up with friends who told her about their nightmares and shame after FGM, she wants to make sure that her daughter does not suffer in silence.

"I am going to talk to her about it," Seyba said.

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## **LEBANON: Refugee girls in Beirut 'face sexual violence, forced marriage'**

***More than half the refugee girls living in Lebanon's capital face sexual violence and harassment regularly, report says.***

Al Jazeera (18.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZuKqzt> - More than half of the girls living as refugees in Beirut have reported that they face sexual violence and sexual harassment

with alarming regularity, new research by Plan International, a development and humanitarian organisation, has revealed.

Based on surveys of 400 girls aged between 10 and 19, the study on Tuesday described the multiple threats of abuse girls faced growing up in Lebanon's capital city.

Close to 70 percent of those surveyed reported feeling unsafe if they travelled around the city alone during the day, while nearly 90 percent said they feared for their safety at night.

Girls spoke of being harassed or chased by men and boys, while others expressed concern about being kidnapped or raped.

"We're too afraid [to go out alone]. There are always drunk men who harass us and even the ones who aren't drunk harass us," an 18-year-old Syrian girl from Burj al-Barajneh, in the Beirut suburbs, told the researchers.

Ten percent of girls surveyed reported being married or engaged - a practice becoming increasingly common, according to Plan International.

"Some girls, their parents oblige them to leave school to get married. My friends all got married and now they have kids," a 13-year-old Syrian girl in Burj al-Barajneh said.

The report, launched in the run-up to World Refugee Day on June 20, called on governments, the United Nations and civil society actors in Lebanon to take action to support refugee girls.

"Adolescent girls rarely get their voices heard, and during humanitarian crises, this neglect only becomes exacerbated," Colin Lee, Plan International's regional programme director for the Middle East, said.

"Child marriage is on the rise because parents are so fearful for their daughters' safety. Few girls are able to go to school for the same reason, and far too many report desperate feelings of isolation because of the restrictions placed on their freedom of movement by their parents."

### **Plummeting school attendance**

Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world, which includes a recent influx of 1.5 million fleeing the Syrian war, as well as Palestinian families who have been in the country since 1948.

In April 2019, the UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) estimated that in Beirut alone there were 239,005 registered refugees - just under 11 percent of the total population.

Despite the negative environment, the report noted that many refugee girls remain optimistic and ambitious about their future.

"The importance girls placed on getting an education is obvious," Lee said. "Many girls expressed a desire to become a lawyer, a doctor, or an engineer."

"But what was even more striking was the fact that they didn't just believe that education would benefit them directly. They also saw it as a way to support and enhance the resilience of their community and broader society as a whole."

However, school attendance among girls aged 14 or older plummeted, according to the report.

Eighty percent of 10 to 14-year-olds regularly attend school, compared with just 39 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds.

"It is clear from these findings that while teenage girls have unique vulnerabilities, they also have huge potential. As humanitarian actors, it is not only our duty to provide programmes that protect adolescent girls, but also to make it possible for them to have the same opportunities as girls in other parts of the world whose lives have not been disrupted by war," Lee said.

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## **SUDAN: Sudanese doctors say dozens of people raped during sit-in attack**

### ***Hospitals in Khartoum record more than 70 cases of rape in aftermath of attack on protest***

By Zeinab Mohammed Salih and Jason Burke

The Guardian (11.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2WVYKna> - Doctors believe paramilitaries carried out more than 70 rapes during an attack on a protest camp in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, a week ago.

More than 100 people were killed and as many as 700 injured in the attack last Monday on a sit-in and clashes afterwards, as paramilitaries from the Rapid Support Forces spread through the city to quell sporadic unrest.

Harrowing details of rapes by the RSF have emerged in recent days despite restrictions on communications in Sudan, but the extent of the sexual violence has remained unknown.

One doctor with access to data compiled by the central committee of doctors, a pro-reform group, said hospitals in Khartoum had recorded more than 70 cases of rape in the attack and its immediate aftermath.

A doctor at the Royal Care hospital said it had treated eight victims of rape – five women and three men. At a second hospital in the south of Khartoum, a medical source said it had received two rape cases, including one who was attacked by four RSF paramilitaries. Several witnesses have also described similar cases on social media.

Many victims have not sought medical treatment, either because of fear of reprisals, insecurity in the city, or because care has been limited. Human rights activists and experts have described the reports of sexual violence as reliable.

The crisis in Sudan continued on Monday with the second day of a general strike aimed at relaunching an opposition movement battered by a brutal crackdown, and forcing the country's military leaders to resign.

Shops were closed and streets were empty throughout Khartoum and in the neighbouring city of Omdurman, though there was visibly more traffic in the streets than on Sunday, when the strike began. Four protesters were killed in sporadic violence in the two cities over the weekend.

A top US diplomat will head to the country this week to urge an end to the crackdown. Tibor Nagy, the US assistant secretary of state for African affairs, plans to meet both members of the military leadership and protest leaders in Khartoum.

Sudan's military leaders have refused to make any concessions since the start of the strike, blaming the country's protest movement for what they describe as a major threat to the nation and its security.

Lt Gen Jamaledine Omar, from the ruling transitional military council, said late on Sunday that by closing roads and setting up barricades, the protesters had committed a crime.

"The technique of closing the roads and building barricades ... is a fully-fledged crime as it deprives people from being able to go about their normal life," he said.

Omar said the Forces for Declaration of Freedom and Change, a coalition of pro-democracy groups, was to blame for "all the regrettable events" of the past days.

The protest leaders, by their actions, have "crossed the line of peaceful practices ... and have become a major liability for the country and the people's security," he said.

Omar also said the military and the RSF had reinforced their presence across the country "to restore life back to normal".

The military took power after ousting the then president, Omar al-Bashir, in April after months of mass rallies. The ruling council has since refused demonstrators' demands for an immediate move to civilian rule, instead pushing for a transitional power-sharing arrangement.

Talks between the opposition and the council ground to a halt last month then collapsed altogether after the raid on the protest camp.

The Sudanese Professionals Association, an umbrella group of unions that has been spearheading protests since December, urged the Sudanese to continue the general strike, part of a civil disobedience campaign to press the military.

The SPA posted videos and photos on social media it said showed deserted streets and closed shops and businesses in Khartoum's Gabra neighbourhood and the eastern city of Wad Madani.

According to the protest leaders, participation in the strike on the first day exceeded their hopes. They vowed on Monday to continue their "peaceful resistance" until the military council was toppled.

The SPA urged people to close roads again, rebuild dismantled barricades across the country and avoid clashes with the RSF. Security forces on Sunday removed barricades from main roads and ended the sit-in area outside the military's headquarters.

"The solution is to get life paralysed," the protest leaders said.

Activists say professionals including bankers, doctors, air-traffic control staff, pilots, electrical engineers and economists have been targeted by intelligence services in what they say is an obvious attempt to break the strike.

The internet remains cut off in Khartoum, with other communications significantly restricted.

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## **IRAN: Women attacked for trying to watch football match**

By Maya Oppenheim

The Independent UK (10.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/30ulGbp> - As the Women's World Cup kicks off, female football fans in Iran's capital have been attacked by security guards for trying to watch a men's football match between Iran and Syria.

The women managed to buy tickets to watch the game after the official website of the Iranian football federation initially put tickets on sale without blocking the option for women, despite the fact Iranian women are forbidden from watching football matches.

However, the federation then blocked the option for women to buy tickets the next day, without providing any explanation.

While Iranian women were blocked from entering the stadium and violently attacked by the state security force despite holding tickets, Syrian women were allowed to enter.

At least two of those women were arrested and taken into custody but their fate remains unknown, according to the women's committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

Several of the women who were attacked were interviewed by the sports reporter of the state-run daily Etemad.

"One of the troops placed his foot on the chest of one of the ladies, took away her cellphone and tore away her purse," one of the women said while crying. "The security forces attacked us in a raid and dragged one of the ladies on the ground."

Another woman said: "They kicked us, punched us and swore at us, without our doing anything wrong. There were several of us, women, who were waiting on the lawns outside the west gate of the stadium. We were not chanting. We were not talking. We were not even holding the Iranian flag."

Mansoureh Mills, an Amnesty International Iran researcher, said: "Once again the Iranian authorities are persecuting women simply for their love of football."

"For decades, the Iranian authorities have banned women from football stadiums – with dozens of women arrested trying to enter stadiums to watch football matches in the past year alone. The Iranian authorities should remove these discriminatory bans and allow women and girls to freely access sports stadiums without fear of violence and arrest."

According to Iran Human Rights Monitor, male security guards entered the locker room of female football players in the Iranian city of Shiraz and attacked them verbally and physically on 25 May.

Iranian female football players did not take part in this year's Women's World Cup – which is taking place in France from 7 June to 7 July – despite winning the championship games in Asia.



Female football players do not receive any type of private or public support in Iran, and are not able to draw any non-governmental or private sponsors due to women's sports not being broadcast by the state television networks.

The Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran has had numerous warnings from Fifa in past years for banning women from going inside sports stadiums.

The federation's security manager announced there had been no change in government policy and women continue to be banned from entering sports stadiums. Federation officials and the firms in charge of selling tickets later claimed providing women with the option of buying tickets had been the result of a technical error.

Iranian women have been barred from watching stadium football matches for most of the 40 years since the Islamic Revolution. The clerical regime has been reported to have hired female security forces since August last year to deal with women who attempt to sneak into the stadium with men's make-up.

In Iran women who do not wear a hijab, or are seen to be wearing a "bad hijab" by allowing some of their hair to show, face punishments spanning from fines to imprisonment. Female athletes have to wear the hijab during competitions.

Nevertheless, there has been resistance to the enforced hijab over recent years, with some women shaving their hair and dressing as men. Many women are opposed to being forced to cover their heads and protesters have removed their hijabs and twirl them on sticks in defiance.

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## **MOROCCO: Many women in Morocco face abuse at home, some are now speaking out**

Euronews.com (10.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/31skVRr> - Bearing pictures of scars and bruises she said she had suffered at home, Fatna Ben Ghala sought help at a women's counselling centre in a poor neighbourhood near Morocco's capital Rabat after she and her mother endured domestic violence by a relative.

The case of Ben Ghala, 40, and her mother was not unusual. Some 54.4% percent of women, amounting to millions in a country with a population of about 35 million, have been subjected to violence, according to a survey released last month by the Solidarity, Family and Social Development Ministry.

The survey, which showed the 25-29 age group is most vulnerable, also pointed up the amount of work to be done to remedy the abuse. Only 28.2% of abused women have spoken to a person or an institution about their suffering and only 6.6% have brought their case before justice, the survey said.

Ben Ghala said she was referred to the Araafa listening and counselling centre after she went to the hospital to seek treatment for her injuries.

"We live under oppression and we live in pain. The blow I received in my head deteriorated my vision," she said. Ben Ghala did not identify the relative who she said had abused her.

The Araafa centre can help only a small proportion of the women who say they have been abused. Last year, it offered advice to 146 women subjected to all kinds of violence and abuse. Morocco has dozens of such centres across the country.

"I had a miscarriage because of the beating and the mental pressures I was enduring," said Raja, an unemployed 19-year old, who said her husband had been violent and who now lives with her parents.

"I can't understand why that violence happened. Was it a habit or a mental illness or something else?" she said.

Charifa, 26, told Reuters she had been beaten by her husband, who expelled her from the house and prevented her from seeing her son and daughter, aged 7 and 6.

"I live now with my father and have no way of being next to my children who are not even registered in the family registry and hence unable to attend school like other children," she said, adding that her husband does not provide for the family.

Neither Raja nor Charifa identified their husbands.

### **'Much needs to be done'**

Ben Ghala, Raja and Charifa would need to provide more evidence and bring witnesses to court to see the alleged perpetrators brought to justice.

However, it is very difficult to bring witnesses in domestic violence cases, which happens behind closed doors, as courts often dismiss the testimony of those who might hear but not see screaming, said Naima Saber, Araafa's director.

Morocco adopted a law in September last year criminalising domestic violence and various kinds of verbal and online harassment, "but much needs to be done in order to reduce evidence requirements," she said.

Women are also discouraged from bringing cases to court as they are often asked by other relatives and sometimes local officials to compromise for the sake of keeping the family together, said lawyer Houria Elhamss, who has handled such cases.

"This often prevents women from having access to justice," she said.

Solidarity, Family and Social Development Minister Bassima Hakkaoui told 2M TV channel on Sunday that the law criminalising violence against women has encouraged women to report and sue their aggressors.

"Several people were indicted by virtue of this law," she said. But the rate of violence against women is "scary", she said, adding it calls into question the role of education and the law.

"We ask woman to cooperate with us and to report violence cases in order to enforce deterrence by implementing the law," Hakkaoui said.

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## **CANADA: Report finds violence against indigenous women in Canada at genocide levels**

By Meredith Betz

Non Profit Quarterly (10.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Ign4Ic> - Last week on Monday, a long-awaited report from Canada's two-year National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) was released, stating what many indigenous women knew all along. The findings cited the failure of the government to seek and provide justice to these victims and their families and called for widespread systemic change in governmental policies and processes.

The report was announced by the inquiry's commission at a ceremony with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the families of victims. Facing an audience holding red flowers above their heads in memory of those victims, the prime minister acknowledged the report's conclusion that Canada's treatment of missing and murdered women and girls is equivalent to genocide.

"For too long, indigenous women and girls have experienced violence at a rate that is staggering compared to non-Indigenous women," Trudeau said. Shouts from the audience demanded, "Then do something about it!"

The following day, the Commissioners made this statement: "This is an important moment in the Truth and Reconciliation journey. The acceptance of our findings of fact by the federal government, especially our finding of genocide, is an acceptance of the truths shared by families and survivors. They no longer need to convince others that genocide is a part of Canadian history."

The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability reported that between 2001 and 2015, indigenous women were at elevated risk of homicide. Homicide rates for women and girls were approximately six times higher than those for non-Indigenous women. According to the group, other research indicates that indigenous women are 16 times more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to be murdered or go missing.

Sagkeeng First Nations youth Tina Fontaine could have been just another statistic. In August 2014, Fontaine's body was pulled from Winnipeg's Red River. During the 24 hours before the 15-year-old's disappearance, she was seen by provincial child welfare workers, police officers, and healthcare professionals. Her violent death and the subsequent acquittal of her white murderer resulted in a groundswell of outrage across Canada over the disproportionate number of indigenous missing or murdered women and girls.

Protests ultimately precipitated government action. In 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau allocated \$53m to create the MMIWG inquiry to investigate and report on the systemic causes of all forms of violence against women and girls—a group that explicitly includes lesbians, bisexuals, transgender women, "two-spirit" individuals, and other people who aren't cisgender men.

Approximately 1,500 families of the victims and survivors gave moving testimonies, many citing the failure of social services to protect them. The final report demands a total of 18 "calls to justice" and gives 231 recommendations, including the creation of a national ombudsman for Indigenous and human rights, as well as the establishment of Indigenous civilian police oversight agencies.

The Chief of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, Ghislain Picard, had a tempered response to the report, stating that there is much work to be done. "Let us be clear, although the work of the National Inquiry, including its final report and recommendations, has provided some light and national awareness, it will certainly not be able to resolve, on its own, the vestiges of policies aimed at the extermination of First

Nations. The situation requires major changes at all levels, starting with positive and urgent actions. The answer lies with governments, including our own.”

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## **USA/UN: UN waters down rape resolution to appease US's hardline abortion stance**

***Measure on sexual violence in conflict passes after Trump administration threatened to veto document over references to reproductive health***

By Liz Ford

The Guardian (23.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2VY7HbW> - The UN has backed a resolution on combatting rape in conflict but excluded references in the text to sexual and reproductive health, after vehement opposition from the US.

The resolution passed by the security council on Tuesday after a three-hour debate and a weekend of fierce negotiations on the language among member states that threatened to derail the process.

The vote was carried 13 votes in favour. China and Russia abstained. On Monday, the US had threatened to veto the resolution but it is understood that last minute concessions on Tuesday morning got the US on side.

Other omissions included calls for a working group to review progress on ending sexual violence.

The UK backed the resolution, but expressed regret about the omission on reproductive healthcare. Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, the UK prime minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict, said: "We emphasise the need for a survivor-centred approach. Survivor services should cater to all survivors – with no exception."

But he added: "We deeply regret the language on services for survivors of sexual violence, recognising the acute need for those services to include comprehensive reproductive and separate sexual healthcare."

The UK, he said, would continue to "support access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for survivors of sexual violence around the world. This is a priority. If we are to have a survivor-centred approach, we cannot ignore this important priority."

France and Belgium also expressed disappointment at the watered down text. French permanent representative to the UN Francois Delattre said: "We are dismayed by the fact that one state has demanded the removal of the reference to sexual and reproductive health ... going against 25 years of gains for women's rights in situations of armed conflict."

In recent months, the Trump administration has taken a hard line, refusing to agree to any UN documents that refer to sexual or reproductive health, on grounds that such language implies support for abortions. It has also opposed the use of the word "gender", seeing it as a cover for liberal promotion of transgender rights.

Jessica Neuwirth, the director of The Sisterhood Is Global Institute thinktank and former UN special advisor on sexual violence, said: "It's shocking that the United States turned its back on these girls and jeopardised this urgently needed security council resolution."

During the debate, the secretary-general Antonia Guterres called on the council to "work together to reconcile differences" before the vote was cast.

Following the vote, Russia's UN envoy, Vasily Nebenzia, said the resolution overstepped the remit of UN bodies and required excessive reports to be delivered. He added: "Don't try to paint us as opponents of ending sexual violence in conflict. It is a scourge and has to be eliminated."

Nadia Murad, the Yazidi Nobel peace prize laureate who spoke at the debate, said: "I think this resolution is a step in the right direction. But adopting this resolution must be followed by practical steps to achieve reality."

The human rights lawyer Amal Clooney had called on members of the UN security council to stand on the right side of history in supporting the Yazidi survivors of sexual violence. "This is your Nuremberg moment," she said during the debate.

The agreed-upon resolution was a sliver of what the Germans had put forward earlier this month. The zero draft included progressive text on strengthening laws to protect and support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who could be targeted during conflict.

It also made specific mention of the need for women to have access to safe terminations.

But the resolution – number 2467 – did for the first time make specific calls for greater support for children born as a result of rape in conflict, as well as their mothers, who can face a lifetime of stigma. It also gave prominence to the experiences of men and boys.

The resolution is the ninth introduced by the security council that has sought to address women's specific experiences of conflict, and advocate for their involvement in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. The first – resolution 1325 – was passed in 2000 after years of lobbying by women's rights campaigners.

Germany has made women, peace and security a priority of its presidency.

However, before the government introduced the resolution, there were concerns that it risked weakening the women, peace and security agenda.

In a statement published last month, 10 organisations, including the Gunder Werner Institut, UN Women and the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy and the NGO Care, said: "Given the further hardening of antidemocratic and decidedly misogynistic stances in the UN security council, we believe there is a danger of a weak resolution text ultimately being negotiated and adopted.

"Some powerful members of the security council, such as Russia, China and the USA, are undermining women's rights and once again questioning, for example, women's and girls' right to self-determination. Through such actions, the achievements that have already been made could be shattered and the 'women, peace and security' agenda overall decisively weakened."

In November, ministers, government officials and civil society groups will attend a second global conference on ending sexual violence in conflict in London. The three-day event is

part of the UK government's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). The first conference was held in June 2014.

The UK is expected to launch the "Murad Code" on sexual violence, named after the Yazidi Nobel peace prize laureate. The code will set out standards of behaviour and care when gathering evidence of sexual violence.

Leaders will also be lobbied to support calls by the actor Angelina Jolie and the former foreign secretary William Hague for the UN to established a permanent, independent body that will gather and assess evidence in cases of alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

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## **UN: Security Council adopts resolution calling upon belligerents worldwide to adopt concrete commitments on ending sexual violence in conflict**

***Members pass Resolution 2467 (2019) by 13 votes in favour, none against, as China, Russian Federation abstain***

UN (23.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GuB5jx> - The Security Council called today upon warring parties around the globe to implement concrete commitments to fight what many speakers described as the heinous, barbaric and all-too-often silent phenomenon of sexual violence during conflict.

Adopting resolution 2467 (2019) by a vote of 13 in favour to none against, with 2 abstentions (China, Russian Federation), during a wide-ranging debate on the prevention and implications of sexual violence, the Council reiterated its demand for the complete cessation of all acts of sexual violence by all parties to armed conflict.

Calling upon the latter to implement specific, time-bound commitments to combat the crime, the Council welcomed efforts by the Secretary-General, his Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and other relevant officials in seeking such commitments and implementation plans, aimed at preventing and addressing all acts and forms of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations.

The Council reiterated its deep concern that — despite its repeated condemnation of violence against women and children in situations of armed conflict, including sexual violence — the phenomenon continues to occur, often with impunity, and in some situations has become systematic and widespread, or reached appalling levels of brutality.

Encouraging Member States to adopt a survivor-centered approach to ensure that survivors receive the care required by their specific needs without discrimination, the Council also called upon parties to conflict to include stipulations prohibiting such crimes in all ceasefire and peace agreements. It further urged States to recognize the equal rights of all affected individuals — including women, girls and children born of sexual violence — in national legislation and recognized the need to integrate prevention, response and elimination of the crime into all relevant Council resolutions, including authorizations and renewals of the mandates of peace missions.

Further by the terms of the resolution, the Council urged existing sanctions committees — where within the scope of the relevant designation criteria and consistent with the present and other relevant resolutions — to apply targeted sanctions against those who



perpetrate and direct sexual violence during conflict. It reiterated its intention to consider including designation criteria pertaining to acts of rape and other forms of sexual violence when adopting or renewing targeted sanctions in situations of armed conflict.

Several experts, high-profile activists and survivors briefed the Council at the outset. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad from Iraq recalled that Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) enslaved thousands of Yazidi girls and women before the eyes of the world in a genocide that continues today. The social fabric of an entire society has been torn and the hopes of entire generations wasted, she said, recalling that her repeated calls for the creation of a working group to rescue those still missing or held in captivity have fallen upon deaf ears. While Yazidi girls and women broke the barriers of silence, stigma and fear by telling their stories, not a single person has been tried for sexual enslavement crimes, she pointed out.

Denis Mukwege, another Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, contrasted today's international landscape to that of 10 years ago, when many doubted the link between sexual violence and peace and security. Today, no political or military official can continue to overlook the fact that the use of rape and sexual violence as tools of terror is a violation of international law, he emphasized. Expressing support for all initiatives seeking to draw a red line against such barbaric actions, he pressed the United Nations and Governments to adopt sanctions against perpetrators. "Healing is complete only when justice has been served," he stressed, welcoming the adopted resolution's focus on children born of rape, the need for a survivor-centred approach, the imposition of sanctions, ensuring justice and accountability, and providing reparations.

The Secretary-General's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict declared: "Wars are still being fought on and over the bodies of women and girls." She added that in the 10 years of her mandate, "a crime that has often been called 'history's greatest silence' has seized the consciousness of the international community and global action has escalated in an unprecedented way". However, the pace of implementation remains slow and criminal accountability largely elusive, she said, adding that sexual violence casts a long shadow over humanity, undermining the prospect of peace and development. Calling for tailor-made responses to the unique circumstances of each situation, she stressed the urgent need to ensure comprehensive health services for survivors. "Yet, if we are ever to prevent these crimes from occurring in the first place, we must confront the unacceptable reality that it is still largely 'cost-free' to rape a woman, a child or a man in armed conflicts around the world," she noted.

António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said the decade since the establishment and mandating of the Office of the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict has seen a paradigm shift in the world's understanding of the crime of sexual violence in conflict. While an increasing number of Governments are demonstrating their willingness to pursue justice and provide services for survivors, "sexual violence continues to fuel conflict and severely impacts the prospects for lasting peace". Indeed, the reality on the ground remains unchanged, with sexual violence continuing to constitute a horrific feature of conflicts around the globe, he added.

Barrister Amal Clooney shared her experience providing legal counsel to women previously kidnapped, bought, sold, enslaved and raped by ISIL. She recalled that as the group's territorial presence declined, Nadia Murad and other survivors called upon the Council to send investigators to gather evidence in Iraq, and just weeks ago the exhumation of mass graves and the identification of victims remains began. However, the trials brought against suspects do not include charges of sexual violence and do not stand as a measure of justice for Yazidis, she emphasized. Laying out several legal options — including referral to the International Criminal Court — she recalled that



similar discussions about the value of justice emerged after the Second World War. “If this august body cannot prevent sexual violence in war, then it must at least punish it,” she stressed, adding: “This is your Nuremburg moment.”

Inas Miloud, Chairperson of the Tamazight Women’s Movement, said her group has been working with indigenous women affected by sexual and gender-based violence in Libya since that country’s 2011 revolution. Hundreds of testimonies outline a common pattern of physical violence, rape, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, abduction and domestic violence, all underpinned by patriarchal norms, she added. Citing the unchecked flow of weapons into Libya and decades-old discrimination against indigenous minorities, she said the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement fails to reflect such crucial issues as gender equality, sexual and gender-based violence and fear of reprisals for activism.

More than 90 delegates also took the floor, with many expressing outrage over the continued prevalence of a crime as abominable to humanity as sexual violence in conflict. While some hailed the adoption of the resolution and welcomed the concrete recommendations laid out in the Secretary-General’s most recent report (document S/2019/280), others emphasized that not enough is being done to tackle the crime’s root causes.

Germany’s Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs underlined the need to strengthen accountability for sexual violence in conflict and to improve the channels through which information on non-compliance reaches the Council. Emphasizing the importance of targeted sanctions and criminal prosecution at the national level, he pointed out that a deadly culture of impunity already exists in many places around the world. “Those who suffer sexual violence often remain victims long after the crimes are committed,” he said, underscoring the importance of addressing the persistent stigma suffered by survivors.

Lebanon’s representative said conflict is synonymous with women who suffer indelible traumas when their bodies are turned into assault weapons. Cautioning against reducing terrorism to a simple ideology, she spotlighted the moral and ethical imperative to prevent both State and non-State actors from brandishing women’s bodies as weapons against them. Urging strict respect for international humanitarian law in times of war, she said the involvement of women in negotiations ensures a path towards sustainable peace. She added that the Council must move from the silence of humiliation to the courage of truth, from indifference to compassion and from injustice to redress.

Several speakers recounted national experiences in seeking to heal the rifts and wounds of war. Sri Lanka’s delegate said her country is emerging from a 30-year conflict that left deep-seated scars. Women were major victims due to their heightened vulnerabilities, he said, emphasizing that as Sri Lanka works to rebuild society and heal communities through reconciliation and justice mechanisms, it is committed to addressing the immediate concerns of women and girls.

Iraq’s representative, meanwhile, reported that his country has turned the page on a sombre history since recovering all its territory from the grasp of Da’esh — which carried out atrocious crimes unprecedented in the history of humanity. Outlining practical measures to return all displaced persons to their homes and provide them with redress for their suffering, he said a draft bill aimed at providing compensation, rehabilitation and reintegration into society for Yazidi survivors was up for debate this month, and a list of persons accused of human trafficking has been submitted to the national prosecutor’s office.

Serbia’s representative outlined national measures aimed at establishing an effective prevention system and punishing perpetrators of sexual violence. As a signatory party to the Rome Statute, Serbia supports the International Criminal Court’s prosecution of

sexual violence during conflict, and cooperated fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, she said. Expressing support for a victim-centred approach, she nevertheless warned against speculating about numbers of victims or insisting upon a “hierarchy of victims” either by ethnic or religious affiliation or by gender, saying that often leads to politicization.

The Russian Federation’s representative, decrying sexual violence in conflict as an “odious military crime” emphasized that the Special Representative must continue to abide by her mandate, saying the Council’s efforts to end sexual violence depend on overcoming differences and ending politicization of the issue.

Iran’s representative said efforts to eradicate sexual violence in conflict cannot succeed without addressing the phenomenon’s root causes — the occurrence of conflict itself. “As long as terrorism, violent extremism, foreign occupation and foreign intervention exist, such a solution remains regrettably out of reach,” he said, adding that destructive advocates of hatred, racism, discrimination and unilateralism are currently uniting against multilateral solutions.

Many speakers conveyed their condolences to the Government and people of Sri Lanka following the series of terrorist attacks that claimed more than 300 lives on Easter Sunday, 21 April.

Also speaking today were representatives of the United Kingdom, Equatorial Guinea, United States, China, Belgium, Indonesia, Peru, Côte d’Ivoire, Kuwait, France, South Africa, Poland, Dominican Republic, Hungary, Finland, Republic of Korea, Ghana, Spain, Albania, Romania, Uruguay, Canada, Argentina, Namibia, Italy, Switzerland, Ukraine, Norway (on behalf of the Nordic countries), Fiji, Greece, Portugal, Turkey, Japan, Netherlands, Estonia (also for Latvia and Lithuania), Ireland, Kazakhstan, Egypt, Slovenia, Mexico, Jordan, Djibouti, Australia, Afghanistan, Luxembourg, Malta, Qatar, Viet Nam, Botswana, Brazil, Bangladesh, Kenya, Sudan, Pakistan, Morocco, Georgia, Costa Rica, Liechtenstein, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Myanmar, India, United Arab Emirates, Liberia, Ecuador, Chile and Paraguay, as well as the Permanent Observer of the Holy See.

Delegates representing the European Union, African Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also participated delivered statements.

[Read more on UN.org](#)

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## **SAUDI ARABIA: 'Shrouded in secrecy': Saudi women activists due back in court**

***Saudi Arabia's most prominent women's rights activists are due to appear in court in Riyadh on Wednesday.***

By Frank Gardner

BBC (17.04.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2PgbRcp> - The women were arrested last May and charged with various offences including spying.

They had been campaigning for an end to the country's male guardianship system and for the right to drive, before the ban was lifted last June.

Since then, horrific details have emerged of their alleged mistreatment at the hands of the Saudi authorities.

On Tuesday, Walid al-Hathloul, the brother of one of the best-known activists, Loujain al-Hathloul, told the BBC his sister was so traumatised by what had happened to her that she wanted to remain in jail, afraid of how her reputation had been unfairly smeared in her absence.

He said that following her arrest Ms Hathloul had been taken to a secret detention facility near the maximum security prison of Dhahban in Jeddah. There, she told her family, she was taken down to a basement and subjected to waterboarding and electrocution.

He named Saud al-Qahtani, a close confidant of the Saudi Crown Prince, as the man who oversaw her torture, allegedly laughing as he threatened to have her raped and murdered.

### ***'Shrouded in secrecy'***

In February a group of British MPs carried out an investigation, supported by a number of international human rights organisations, into the allegations of mistreatment of Ms Hathloul and other female activists. They concluded that the allegations were credible.

In March the UN's Human Rights Council called for their release and more than 30 countries, including all 28 EU members, signed a statement condemning their prolonged detention.

The Saudi government says the detained women enjoy all the rights afforded to them under Saudi law.

But Mr Hathloul said everything about his sister's arrest and detention had been shrouded in secrecy and that the entire judicial process lacked transparency. It was not until November 2018, he said, six months after her arrest, that the family even learned what she was accused of.

The accusations, he said, included "applying for a job at the UN and being in contact with human rights organisations". He added that the prosecution had not produced any evidence to support its allegation of spying.

While Saudi Arabia rejects all criticism of its judicial system, insisting it is based on Sharia (Islamic law), in practice it has always been opaque, with arbitrary judgements often handed down at the whim of a judge.

This case has attracted particularly widespread international condemnation and is seen as further damaging the reputation of Saudi Arabia's controversial Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, known as MBS.

Initially courted in the West as an enlightened reformer who reintroduced cinemas and public entertainment to the conservative kingdom, MBS remains under suspicion for his alleged involvement in last October's murder of the journalist Jamal al-Khashoggi, which his government denies.

Commentators have explained the apparent paradox between the accelerated crackdown on human rights and the crown prince's simultaneous liberalisation of Saudi society as being the ruling family's determination to steer reforms at their pace, rather than at the one demanded by peaceful protesters.

This, in a country where all political parties are banned, would be seen as a dangerous precedent.

### ***What next for the activists?***

The next stage expected in the trial of Loujain al-Hathloul and her co-defendants is the judge's response to their defence, which has already been submitted.

Her brother said the family were deeply worried about what would happen next, partly due to the lack of transparency.

He said his sister was bearing up despite everything, but that she was disheartened that the Saudi authorities had so far failed to investigate her complaints of torture.

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## **KENYA: Who cares about Kenyan women?**

### ***Authorities remain silent despite rising public outcry on violence against women***

By Audrey Wabwire

HRW (17.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2v8vBp4> - Kenyan media has recently been awash with reports of gruesome killings of women. So far in 2019, dozens of women have reportedly been killed by their partners. Many others have been gravely injured. On International Women's Day, Kenyan women took to social media and the streets with the hashtag #TotalShutDownKe, demanding that authorities do more to protect them. But instead of being supported, they are being blamed for the crimes against them, and further bullied online.

One of the most prominent cases involves the murder of a 26-year-old university student, Sharon Otieno. Otieno, who was seven months pregnant, is said to have been abducted, raped, and then killed. The personal assistant of a senior politician she was in a relationship with has been arrested for questioning. But instead of mobilizing people to act against the rising scourge of violence against women, her death sparked victim-blaming and a debate narrowly focused on so-called transactional romantic relationships, instead of the terrible crime committed.

But violence continues. Last week, after another university student, Ivy Wangechi, was killed by a man she knew a few days before her 25th birthday, a popular local radio station ran a segment mocking her death. Three days after Ivy's murder, Peninah Wangechi, 30, was rushed to hospital after she was stabbed 17 times by her husband who had repeatedly threatened to kill her. The police are investigating both incidents, but there is little faith that the cases will lead to justice thanks to Kenya's dismal record of punishing these types of crimes.

Violence against women is endemic in Kenya. A recent national health survey found that almost half of Kenyan women aged between 15 – 49 say that they have been beaten, harassed, or raped, often by someone they know.

Kenyan women are overcoming social and other barriers to speak out against this violence.

Shortly before Women's Day, President Uhuru Kenyatta said that he values the contributions that women make to Kenyan society. But one month after the women's

protest, why hasn't he sent a strong message to assure women that their lives matter? Kenya's women cannot wait a day longer for protection – and justice.

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## **RUSSIA/UN: UN committee sides against Russia in first domestic violence ruling**

The Moscow Times (12.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2U11Ewd> - Russia has breached the rights of a Chechen domestic abuse victim, a United Nations women's rights panel ruled on Friday in what has been called the UN's first decision on domestic violence in the country.

Domestic violence complaints have skyrocketed since President Vladimir Putin passed a 2017 law decriminalizing first-time abuse where beatings resulted in "minor harm." Each year, 12,000 women are killed in Russia as a result of domestic violence, according to official numbers.

NGOs submitted a complaint to the UN in 2013 accusing a court in Chechnya of effectively clearing the victim's husband of attempted murder, instead finding that she had "provoked" him into attacking her with an axe.

Russia violated the victim's rights as a result, the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ruled, "including by failing to uphold her rights as a victim of domestic violence and by directly perpetuating sex-based discrimination and stereotypes in its handling of her case."

CEDAW ordered Russia to award her "adequate financial compensation."

Russia must revise its laws to criminalize gender-based violence and investigate thoroughly all allegations of violence against women, CEDAW also said.

The Stichting Russian Justice Initiative (SRJI) Dutch-based NGO has called the ruling in favor of Shema Timagova the UN's first decision on domestic violence in Russia.

Russia has six months to submit a written response on steps taken in the case.

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## **SAUDI ARABIA: 12 more women's rights advocates jailed**

***Amid international pressure to stop targeting activists, the country cracked down.***

By Leah Rodriguez

Global Citizen (05.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2P3nCTn> - Saudi Arabia jailed another group of women's rights advocates on Thursday.

The advocates and writers weren't politically active, but they had opposed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's regime and expressed public support for reforming gendered laws, according to the Associated Press. The 12 people arrested — 11 men and one woman — reportedly have loose connections with a group of activists who were arrested

in 2018 for campaigning to end the country's ban on women driving and its male guardianship system.

Most of the activists were arrested in the country's capital city, Riyadh, on Thursday, though one was taken by authorities in the city of Dammam. Among them are two US-Saudi dual citizens — Badr al-Ibrahim, a writer and physician, and Salah al-Haidar, whose mother is prominent women's rights activist Aziza al-Yousef.

Officials also detained married writers Khadijah al-Harbi, who is pregnant, and Thumar al-Marzouqi, along with writers Mohammed al-Sadiq and Abdullah al-Dehailan, and women's rights activist Fahad Abalkhail.

The latest round of arrests comes a week after the Saudi government temporarily released three jailed women's rights activists. At least 11 other arrested activists still face charges.

The Saudi government imprisoned the activists for being "traitors," alleging that they conspired with international media and human rights groups, and spread "bad morale." The government denies the activists were tortured or harassed, despite accusations of abuse.

The London-based Saudi rights group ALQST told the Associated Press that a small group of people close to the activists has been barred from leaving Saudi Arabia under a travel ban since February.

Human rights organizations Equality Now and Musawah have expressed concern about the recent punishment of women's rights activists across middle eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

"The arrests, imprisonment, and alleged torture of women's rights activists in Iran and Saudi Arabia should be condemned by all Muslim States," Equality Now Global Director Yasmeen Hassan said in a statement released to Global Citizen.

In light of the arrests made on Thursday, Equality Now and Musawah sent a joint letter to 48 Muslim-majority countries, with signatures from 118 women's rights supporters and leaders working in Muslim contexts, asking them to call for the immediate release of detained activists in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Other human rights organizations have also advised the public to join their calls and put international pressure on Saudi Arabia to end its male guardianship system and stop punishing those who speak up for gender equality.

Over the past couple of years, Prince Salman has lifted the country's decades-long ban on women driving and has allowed women to attend sporting events, but those who stand up for these same freedoms have experienced serious consequences.

"We cannot achieve peace, prosperity, and progress without committing to equality for women and girls, and taking active steps to make this a reality," Hassan said.

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## **HOLY SEE: Pope Francis: Church should admit abuse of women, children, and history of male domination**

By Philip Pullella

Independent.ie (02.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2G9ff4G> - Pope Francis said on Tuesday the Catholic Church had to acknowledge a history of male domination and sexual abuse of women and children and repair its reputation among young people or risk becoming "a museum".

But, in a major document in which he mentioned an array of scandals and again admitted significant failings by clergy, he also said the Church "could not agree with everything some feminist groups propose," a clear reference to the Church's ban on a female priesthood.

The pope is grappling with criticism over the Church's response to a decades-long clerical sexual abuse crisis that has gravely damaged its standing around the globe and seen it pay out billions of dollars in compensation.

Francis made his comment in a 50-page "Apostolic Exhortation" about a month-long meeting of bishops in October on the role of young people in the 1.3 billion-member Church.

Francis, 82, urged young people not to be disillusioned by the sexual abuse scandal, but to work with the overwhelming majority of priests and other clergy faithful to their vocation.

He said clergy sexual abuse was "a tragedy" and asked young people to help the Church in "this dark moment".

"A living Church can look back on history and acknowledge a fair share of male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of enslavement, abuse and sexist violence," the pontiff said.

"With this outlook, she can support the call to respect women's rights, and offer convinced support for greater reciprocity between males and females, while not agreeing with everything some feminist groups propose," he said.

Some women's groups seek a female priesthood. The Church has ruled this out, arguing Jesus chose only men as his apostles.

This month the all-female staff of the Vatican newspaper's monthly magazine on women's issues resigned, saying a new editor sought to put them "under direct male control".

Recent stories in the magazine include one on sexual abuse of nuns by priests. The editor has denied their accusations.

### ***Winning back trust***

Francis acknowledged the Church had to win back many young people who see it as insignificant in their lives or a nuisance.

He said such a view of the Church can "have serious and understandable reasons: sexual and financial scandals; a clergy ill-prepared to engage effectively with the sensitivities of the young."

The Church had to keep and attract young people by better explaining its doctrine, he said.



"A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum," he said.

The pope did not mention demands by women participants at the synod that they be allowed to vote in future synods.

But while he said the Church should be "attentive to the legitimate claims of those women who seek greater justice and equality" and that young people had complained of a "lack of leading female role models," he offered no new ideas. Only a handful of women hold positions of authority in the Vatican.

The pope did not expand on homosexuality, saying only that the synod discussed it.

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## **SLOVAKIA: Lawmakers ditch international treaty on women's rights**

Kafkadesk (01.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2COkdmI> - Last week, the Slovak Parliament passed a resolution to force the government to drop the ratification process of the so-called Istanbul Convention – a Council of Europe treaty to protect women against domestic violence and promote gender equality.

Presented by junior coalition member Slovak National Party (SNS), the resolution was passed by 101 in favour and 28 against. SNS, a conservative and nationalist party, claimed the convention contradicts the Slovak Constitution's definition of gender.

In 2014, Slovakia passed a constitutional amendment that defined marriage as a union between a man and a women, effectively banning gay marriage (same-sex civil partnerships are not legally recognized either).

Last February, former Prime Minister and Smer chairman Robert Fico, who was forced to resign last year under the pressure of mass protests, had already announced the country would not ratify the convention, arguing the treaty "needlessly questions natural differences between men and women and calls them stereotypes".

He was referring to the controversial article 3 of the convention that defines gender as "social roles, behaviors, activities and characteristics that a particular society considers appropriate for women and men". He also stated that Slovakia would gladly adopt the measures that specifically concern the protection of women against violence.

Slovakia's Roman Catholic Church also publicly criticized the convention.

Although Slovakia signed the document in 2011, the legislative ratification process has been repeatedly postponed. Although more than 40 countries already ratified it, several EU countries, mostly from the former Eastern bloc including Hungary and the Czech Republic, haven't ratified the convention either (Poland, where the treaty came into force in 2015, is the only Central European to have done so).

You can find the full text of the Istanbul Convention [here](#).

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## **INDIA: Analysis | What is forcing Indian women to stay at home?**

***Early marriage is not responsible for the low female labour force participation. Blame the male backlash effect for it.***

By Punarjit Roychowdhury

The Hindustan Times (01.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2WCRHfm> - India has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world. In 2017, only 27% of adult Indian women had a job or were actively looking for one. The comparable figure for the rest of world was 50%. Equally alarming is the fact that the earnings and wages of women who are employed are low. According to the Global Wage Report 2018-19, the hourly wages of women are 34% less than men in India, a disparity that is highest among 73 countries mentioned in the report. It is often suggested that a major reason for the poor labour market outcomes of Indian women is the high incidence of child marriage in India. Advocacy group ActionAid estimates around 33% child marriages in the world happen in India. The average age of marriage for women also continues to be significantly lower compared to that in many other developing countries such as countries such as Brazil, Chile, Kenya and Pakistan.

Early marriage hampers labour market prospects of women in two ways. First, it interrupts a woman's formal education, which negatively impacts her labour market outcomes. Second, early marriage leads to early motherhood. This causes younger brides to focus more on the home (raising children, for example), in turn, reducing their likelihood of participation and productivity in the labour market. In light of this, it is often proposed that one way to address the issue of dismal labour market prospects of Indian women is through policies that can potentially delay their marriage.

Can marriage delaying policies improve women's labour market prospects in India? I recently collaborated with Gaurav Dhamija (a doctoral student at the Shiv Nadar University) to examine this question.

Using nationally representative household data of close to 40,000 women from the Indian Human Development Survey 2012, I found that delaying the age of marriage for women does not lead to better labour market outcomes for them.

One possibility is that delaying the age for marriage does not lead to more education and lower fertility for Indian women. This, however, does not seem to be the case. Indeed, older brides in my sample, are more educated and have lower fertility (as measured by the number of children).

I believe that my results can be explained by what is known as the "male backlash" effect.

According to this theory, the more educated (and hence empowered) a woman, greater is her chance of facing domestic violence. This is because when gender roles and power relations are redefined, men resort to violence to reinstate a culturally prescribed norm of male dominance and female dependence. In fact, in a recent study published in Population and Development Review, based on data from the National Family Health Survey 2005-06, sociologist Abigail Weitzman finds unequivocal evidence of Indian women who are at least as educated as their husbands have a higher likelihood of experiencing frequent and severe intimate partner violence than women who are less educated than their spouses.

Since the theory of backlash effect predicts a positive relationship between violence and educational attainment of women, and because education increases with women's age at the time of marriage in my sample, it is reasonable to claim that older brides, as compared to younger brides, are likely to face more male backlash and be denied the freedom to work. This male backlash effect could nullify the positive effects of more education and lower fertility and, therefore, Indian women's labour market prospects.

These findings suggest that for improving labour market outcomes of Indian women, conventional policies that talk about delaying marriage and laws to prevent child marriage may not be sufficient. Such policies must be complemented by smart and effective interventions to curb the male backlash effect. For example, gender quotas in politics and the corporate sphere could be useful in reducing male backlash. These steps must be taken through coordinated efforts of the government, panchayats, and NGOs to ensure that outdated gender role and age role beliefs do not serve as impediments for women to enjoy the fruits of delayed marriage.

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## **USA: US official Scott Lloyd admits to tracking teens' menstruation**

Now This News (25.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Z1zt9j> - Trump official Scott Lloyd tracked the menstrual cycles of teen migrants to stop them from obtaining access to legal abortions.

American Bridge obtained a 28-page spreadsheet from the government, which lists pregnant teen and pre-teen migrant girls, how far along their pregnancies were, if the pregnancy was a result of consensual sex, if an abortion was asked for, and notes including last menstrual cycles.

Lloyd was the head of Trump's Office of Refugee Resettlement. He is an anti-abortion activist with virtually no prior relevant experience. Under him, the agency denied migrant girls their right to an abortion, despite being ruled illegal in a recent lawsuit.

Instead of providing pregnant minors with options, Lloyd and his staff pushed them to get anti-abortion counseling. A judge ordered the government to stop blocking this access to abortion on March 30, 2018. But there are entries on the spreadsheet that date back as late as June 2018, meaning that Lloyd might have blocked abortions after this ruling.

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## **ITALY: Too 'ugly' to be raped — top court opens probe into sentence**

By Cristina Abellan Matamoros

EuroNews (15.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Uye4lz> - Italy's top court has opened a probe into a sentence by an Ancona appeals court that found the victim in a rape case was "too ugly to be raped," according to Italian news agency ANSA.

The sentence, which was issued by three female judges, said the rape of a 22-year-old Peruvian woman by two men was not "credible" because of her "masculine appearance".

The men were convicted in 2016 by a court of first instance for the attack, which took place in 2015.

The victim's name was not made public under Italian law.

According to Italian media, the judges made their decision based on a photograph of the woman and because one of the defendants registered her number on his mobile phone under the name "Viking".

The Supreme Court of Cassation cancelled this sentence and ordered a new appeals trial. The case will be reheard by a court in Perugia.

Cinzia Molinaro, the lawyer of the victim, told Euronews her client was back in Peru because of the "isolation" that ensued following the first trial.

"After her alleged abusers were acquitted in the appeals trial, the situation got even worse. The (victim's) mother had to leave Ancona because of the shame she felt and went back to Peru," the lawyer said.

The Peruvian woman's mother had since returned to Italy but had moved away from Ancona, she added.

It came after an Italian man's sentence was halved earlier this month when a Bologna appeals court ruled that he murdered his girlfriend in a "passionate rage".

Both of these cases sparked anger among women's' groups who called for better legislation to protect women from violence.

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## **TURKEY: Islamist President Erdogan attacks women's rights activists as 'Enemy of the Nation'**

By Ben Cohen

The Algemeiner (11.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2CaUunZ> - Turkey's Islamist President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday redoubled his attack on the women's rights activists who last week defied a state ban by marching on International Women's Day.

Erdogan had previously decried the marchers at Friday's demonstration for allegedly whistling and booing as the Muslim azan, or call to prayer, was played over public loudspeakers in central Istanbul. Thousands of mainly female protestors who defied the ban on the march were brutally dispersed by police, who fired tear gas while attacking the protestors with batons and guard dogs.

"The batons and tear gas are not enough for them, now they're setting dogs on women approaching from side streets," one Twitter user said on Friday.

Erdogan defended the treatment of the protestors in comments at a campaign rally on Monday in the southeastern province of Adana.

"It's our honor to be against the enemy of the nation, the enemy of the azan, the enemy of the land, and the enemy of the state," Erdogan said in remarks quoted by Turkey's Anadolu news agency.

"They directly attack our independence and our future, disrespecting our flag and our prayer," the Turkish leader added.

One of the political parties behind Friday's march denied that the protesters had intended to insult the call to prayer.

Faik Oztrak, spokesman for the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), said the noise during the protests was against police intervention, insisting that "no one has any problem" with the call to prayer.

Human rights groups say that state restrictions on freedom of assembly in Turkey have become more stringent in the last year, with many of them citing as an example the 2018 ban on Gay Pride marches on the grounds of "security threats and public order."

Women's activists meanwhile accused Erdogan of making political capital out of the march ahead of local elections at the end of this month.

"Police violence against tens of thousands of women trying to take part in the march cannot be covered up with polarizing language, fake news, and hate," a statement from the "March 8 Feminist Night march" said on Monday.

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## **PUERTO RICO: Fight against women's rights setbacks on International Women's Day**

By Nicole Acevedo

NBC News (08.03.2019) - <https://nbcnews.to/2CpuGVA> - For Alexandra-Marie Figueroa Miranda, International Women's Day is not just about celebrating women's accomplishments. It's about speaking out against what she sees as a series of women's rights setbacks that have taken place in Puerto Rico over the last year.

"We're angry and we're actively fighting back against a government that continues to pass measures that put our well-being at risk," Figueroa Miranda, a campaign and activism coordinator at Amnesty International in Puerto Rico, told NBC News.

Figueroa Miranda is one of hundreds of women in Puerto Rico marching on Friday at the annual "Paro de Mujeres" demonstration, also known as 8M, marking the date, March 8.

Their fight to defend their rights to access effective health services, increase public safety and eradicate gender-based violence — among other demands — has gained a new sense of urgency as a growing level of domestic violence has plagued the island and the Puerto Rico Senate just passed legislation limiting access to abortions for women under 18.

On Thursday, Puerto Rican lawmakers voted to pass bill PS950. It requires that women under 18 obtain their parents' consent to get an abortion. If they don't receive parental consent, "the minor can go to court if she insists on having an abortion to present their claims to getting an abortion," the legislation reads.

A previous version of the bill authored by Sen. Nayda Venegas Brown, a pro-statehood lawmaker and evangelical minister, required women younger than 21 to have parental consent in order to terminate a pregnancy.

***Urgent plea for action on domestic violence crisis***

A report from the American Civil Liberties Union shows that a high percentage of domestic violence incidents reported to the Puerto Rico Police Department do not result in convictions. Roughly 20,000 protective orders are issued annually and a comparable number of domestic violence incidents are reported to the police, but fewer than 500 convictions for domestic violence are made annually.

From 2007 to 2011, 107 women were killed by their intimate partners, according to the ACLU. In 2011 specifically, 30 women were killed by an intimate partner — a number that's six times higher than Los Angeles, which has about the same population of 3.7 million.

Puerto Rico's domestic violence pattern worsened over the last year as 51 women were murdered, at least 23 of them by their intimate partners.

"As long as the government continues to ignore our demands, our sense of urgency is just going to keep growing because we keep being ignored. We're in a precarious situation," the Grammy-winning singer and march attendee Ileana Cabra Joglar, known artistically as iLe, told NBC News in Spanish.

Significant delays in the adjudication of protection orders, poor enforcement of such orders, inadequate staff to deal with domestic violence cases and inefficient evidence collection processes during investigations are some of the deficiencies the ACLU identified in how Puerto Rico deals with the issue. These have been prevalent since at least 2006.

"I cannot believe that there is not an immediate reaction from the police," iLe said. "It makes me feel horrible. ... It gives me terror, seeing that people care less and less about violence."

While she has previously attended Puerto Rico's "Paro de Mujeres" demonstration, and this year is no different, the singer is also using her music to shine a light on the issue.

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## **IRELAND: Government ratifies Istanbul Convention obliging it to tackle violence against women**

By Kitty Holland

The Irish Times (08.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2UCLDTA> - After many years of campaigning by women's groups, the Government on Friday ratified the Istanbul Convention - a key international instrument to tackle violence against women.

Though Government signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, in November 2015, it has taken over three years to put the legislative framework in place to enable ratification.

The convention, which includes 72 actions, obliges signatory states to:

"protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence;

"contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women;

“design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence;

“promote international co-operation with a view to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence” and;

“provide support and assistance to organisations and law enforcement agencies to effectively co-operate in order to adopt an integrated approach to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence”.

Dunja Mijatovic, the council’s commissioner for human rights, noted ratification on Twitter, saying: “I welcome #Ireland’s ratification of the #IstanbulConvention on the International #WomensDay - 34th @coe state to ratify. And I urge all member states to ratify and fully implement this landmark instrument to #EndViolenceAgainstWomen”.

Women’s Aid, which supports women and girls experiencing abuse in Ireland, said the Government must now “step up” fully to the commitments made in ratifying the convention.

Director Margaret Martin said “the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a major milestone in tackling domestic, sexual and gender based violence. At the heart of any progress there must be the increased safety and protection for women and children affected by domestic violence.

“Only effective implementation, including resourcing, will make a very real difference. It is worth remembering that one in five women experience some form of domestic abuse in Ireland and our 24-hour national helpline responds to 50 calls a day.”

She said there was “no reason not to prosecute and properly sanction offenders.

“An Garda Síochána will have to respond to calls for help, collect evidence and assess the risk of further violence to adequately protect victims. Judicial proceedings will have to be carried out in a manner that respects the rights of victims at all stages of the proceedings and that avoid secondary victimisation.

“And the State will have to account for progressing this implementation of the convention through a monitoring system that sees a key role for NGOs in providing information on change. Making the change real for women and children and increasing their safety should be the most important priority.”

Women’s Aid can be contacted on freephone 1800 341 900.

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## **CANADA: Muslim organisation against “honour” crimes**

By Marc Montgomery

RCI (07.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Czola1> - Just released is a new study on gender-based violence (GBV) called, “Dishonourable Violence: Changing the Narratives on Honour and Shame Among Muslim Canadian Communities”.

It is the product of Islamic Relief Canada a non-profit humanitarian aid group and came following a year of study of GBV within Canadian-based Muslim communities.

It is an analysis of the concepts within the Muslim community (and other patriarchal cultures) of “honour” and “shame”.



he report notes that many Muslim women may be reluctant to speak about any violence or intimidation because of how that might reflect on the Muslim community, or on the family itself within the community, itself a form of bringing "shame" onto both. There is also the fear they might become isolated from their family if they expose violence.

The book says violence can take a variety of form including:

-psychological/emotional: coercion, insults, belittling, shaming, threats of violence divorce or exclusion

-physical: hitting, slapping, genital mutilation, severe dress codes, limiting access to sufficient food, locking women inside the home

-sex: forced sex, violent sex, forced marriage, denied control over reproductive matters

-isolation.neglect: locking woman inside home, restricted activities (eg phone calls, movement outside home), restricted social contacts,

-economic: withdrawal of financial support, denial of acces to finance, given a strict "allowance", forced handover of earnings, excessive scrutiny of expenses

-spiritual/religious: misinterpretation of Qur'an to encourage and/or justify abuse, reinforcing climate of control and fear, chastisement using religious/spiritual language

-control of legal/migration status: forced marriage, confiscation of legal documents eg-passport, threats to "send back to home country" if abuse not tolerated or male demands not met, woman returned to home country and abandoned

The document also notes that the stresses of immigration to a new and much different society, employment issues, and the fact that some people and families arrive from conflict zones perhaps already suffering from degrees of trauma, any and all of which may play out in violence against close family members.

More importantly however, the study shows how religious texts are being misinterpreted to justify domination and gender-based violence.

The organisation says they are clearly against gender-based violence in all forms and document is designed to shed light and direction on the issue.

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## **EUROPE: Violence against women rife in eastern Europe, says OSCE study**

***The OSCE spoke face-to-face with over 15,000 women to gather data on the prevalence of sexual, physical and psychological violence in southeastern and eastern Europe. The results showed a "grim picture."***

By Cristina Burack

DW.com (06.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FcSch1> - he Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) published Wednesday the "grim" results of a large-scale survey on violence against women in eight different countries in eastern and southeastern Europe.

The representative report surveyed around 15,000 women aged 18-74 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, Moldova, Ukraine and Kosovo, asking them about their experiences of violence and abuse since the age of 15.

#### Key findings on violence

- Some 70 percent of women said they had experienced some form of violence since the age of 15, with 31 percent saying this had occurred within the last 12 months.
- Twenty-three percent of women responded that they had experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner, while 18 percent said they had experienced this from a non-partner.
- Family members were responsible for 31 percent of non-partner physical violence experienced by women.
- Psychological violence is the most common form of violence against women, with 60 percent of women reporting this from a partner.
- All women can experience violence, but women who are poorer, economically dependent or have children are more at risk.
- Women with a tertiary education tend to experience higher rates of violence, particularly from non-partners.

"Violence against women and girls is a persistent human rights violation," the organization said in its report, adding, "the OSCE recognizes violence against women and girls as both a threat to individuals and a broader security."

#### **Norms and attitudes**

The report, which was both quantitative and qualitative, also examined norms and attitudes towards women and violence in the surveyed countries.

"Beliefs in female subservience, spousal obedience and silence surrounding VAWG [violence against women and girls] continue to persist in the region," it said.

Nearly six in 10 women thought that violence against women was very or fairly common. However, the findings pointed out that many women do not report experiences of violence because they distrust authorities or do not feel informed about what to do.

The organization said the survey aimed to address a lack of sufficient data and compliment an EU-wide survey that had been undertaken in 2014.

#### **Goals for the future**

The secretary general of the OSCE, Thomas Greminger, described the report as "an important step towards eliminating violence against women."

"Ultimately, we need to use the results to achieve specific policy goals: reduced violence against women, improved services for survivors and greater security for women and girls overall," he added.

Greminger presented the results alongside the EU's gender advisor, Mara Marinaki.

The survey was undertaken in conjunction with various partners, including the European Commission, UN Women and Germany's permanent mission to the OSCE.

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## **SCOTLAND: Better protect women's rights amid Brexit threat**

***Scotland must go "further, faster" on women's rights as Brexit threatens to exacerbate inequality, the Scottish Human Rights Commission has told the UN.***

By Kirsteen Paterson

The National (27.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2EhucRk> - The national body delivered its new report to the UN's Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in Geneva yesterday.

The paper, which contains 24 recommendations, warns that "harmful" gender stereotypes continue to "limit opportunities" for women and girls.

And though LGBTI issues will now be covered in schools to stamp out hate-based harassment, the country's national approach to addressing bullying makes "little reference to misogyny or gender based" trouble, despite a 2018 report which found female pupils suffer "alarming levels" of sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, women's hourly earnings remain 14% below those of men, females are still underrepresented in decision-making roles in the political and public sphere and conviction rates for sexual violence remain low.

Without "appropriate training" for police and prosecutors, as well as greater public awareness, the report says new legislation will not be effective.

Moreover, UK welfare reform has had a "significant negative impact on women", with the problem more acute for single parents, those with disabilities and individuals from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The report also states that Brexit is expected to "have more of an adverse impact on women as the primary users of, and workers within, public services", stating: "It is key that the UK Government ensures that there is no regression in the protection and realisation of women's rights."

Judith Robertson, chair of the commission, said: "Our recommendations to government include measures to ensure Brexit has no negative impact on women's rights.

"It also recommends action to mitigate the impact of austerity on women's economic and social rights; and improvements to law and policy to tackle the high prevalence of violence against women.

"While the Scottish Government is to be commended for many of its actions to progress gender equality, our latest report to the UN shows that it must now go further, faster, to ensure that all women in Scotland are able to enjoy all of their rights – economic, social, civil and political – on the same terms as their male counterparts."

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## **TURKEY: 440 women were killed in 2018: Women's rights group**

By Zeynep Bilgehan

Hurriyet Daily News (25.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Xn39wK> - A staggering 440 women were killed in Turkey in 2018, according to an organization that keeps a tally of femicides across the country.

Of this number, 131 were logged as "shady deaths," in which there is no blatant connection between the cause or reason and the death. But women's rights groups have long blamed authorities for failing these women by ignoring circumstances and factors that may have led to the murders.

Some 43 women were killed just in January of this year, a report by Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu (We Will Stop Femicide Platform) stressed, adding that the bodies of seven out of the 43 women were found in lakes, streams or buried in the woods.

The number of women killed in 2017 was 409, according to a previous report published by the same organization.

"The forms of violence against women are changing. Shady deaths and femicides by unknown assailants are on the rise. Many incidents are being covered up. When [femicide] cases are identified as 'suicide,' it becomes exemplary for similar incidents," Fidan Ataselim, secretary-general of the platform, has told daily Hürriyet.

Ataselim underlined that the state's agencies "need to side with women" and police officers need to meticulously collect and analyze evidence in women murder cases.

"The more we bring shady deaths out into the open, the more the numbers will decline," she said.

"In our report, 10 out of 43 femicides are labeled as 'shady killings' [in January of this year], but this is only the figure we could have gathered [from news reports]," said Gülsüm Kav, the general representative of the platform, implying that the actual figure could be much higher.

"Unless perpetrators and their motives are identified, unless deterrent penalties are given to suspects and killers, and unless precautionary measures are taken, violence will continue," Kav said.

"It is getting more difficult to identify the perpetrator in femicides, because cases are not being taken seriously," said Leyla Süren, one of the lawyers of the platform. "In Turkey, if the victim is a woman, investigations are not being launched," Süren said.

The lawyer also stressed that when the Istanbul Convention, formally known as The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, was signed in 2011 violence against women had reached its lowest rates in recent years in Turkey. "Discourse has changed since, and since 2000 violence against women has increased by 1,400 percent," she said.

Süren also drew attention to the importance of public opinion in femicide cases and said for cases which the public follows closely, the relevant court's decision of good conduct time "gets precluded about 83 percent."

An example of this is the case of Şule Çet, the lawyer said, referring to a 23-year-old university student who died after being thrown out of the 20th story of a tower in the capital Ankara in the early hours of May 29, 2018. Two male business partners have been indicted by a prosecutor for sexually assaulting and then murdering Çet by throwing her out of the window of the tower. The case is still ongoing.

"The case of Şule Çet has reached this level of importance thanks to the women's movement and the pressure of the public. People have come to the point of seeking justice on Twitter. They are sharing it [the case of Çet] on social media to access justice... Families only feel relieved after they are convinced of an efficient investigation," Süren said.

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## **VATICAN CITY: They say they were sexually abused by priests, then silenced. Now these women are speaking out**

By Melissa Bell, Saskya Vandoorne and Laura Smith-Spark

CNN (20.02.2019) - <https://cnn.it/2GAVOES> - Lucie was just 16 when she became involved with a Catholic religious community after attending a holiday camp in Switzerland. At the time, she told CNN, she was "very, very, very alone" and looking for friends and affection.

What she found at first was "really like a family," she said. But two years later -- by which time she was preparing to become an "oblato," a lay person affiliated with a religious order -- she says a pattern of sexual abuse by a charismatic priest who she considered her spiritual father began.

It took 15 years for Lucie -- a pseudonym used at her request to protect her family -- to realize that what she says she experienced over several months in the 1990s was abuse. At the time, just 18 years old, she felt "disgusted" by the physical intimacy she says the priest forced on her but also wracked by guilt and powerless to stop him.

"It was like automatic you know. He wanted to go to the end -- to ejaculation -- and I was just like an object for him and I had a feeling he did this a lot of times," she said.

Her story is not unique.

CNN has spoken to several other women who say they are victims of the devastating sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse they suffered within the Community of St. John.

For Liene Moreau, who says she was abused by a priest in France for 15 years, starting when she was a novice, or trainee nun, in her 20s, the breach of trust and of faith were the hardest part to deal with.

"The psychological abuse was worse than the sexual abuse; it's my inner life, he took my dignity, my femininity, all that I was. And still today it is very hard to have confidence in myself," she said.

**'Acts contrary to chastity'**

The order to which the women belonged, the Contemplative Sisters of St. John, was founded at St. Jodard in the Loire region of France, in the early 1980s -- one of three orders set up by Father Marie-Dominique Philippe.

Laurence Poujade, a former nun who now heads a victims' organization, says Philippe's doctrine -- and his crimes -- are at the heart of the order's problems today.

"He believed that because he was involved in mysticism, everything was possible," she told CNN. "But no, everything was not possible.

"I think very often about the victims who will never be able to be heard," she said. "We are talking about victims who don't speak out, but what about those who went straight to psychiatric hospitals, what about those who mutilated themselves? I know of one case, her parents called me to tell she had cut out her own tongue. What can you say? What can have happened for a victim to do that?"

In 2013, seven years after his death, the Brothers of St. John revealed that Philippe "had committed acts contrary to chastity with several adult women whom he accompanied at the time." Nuns were among the victims of this abuse, the order later confirmed. For years, there were also rumors about other priests and other victims within the order.

But the lid was fully lifted on the scandal earlier this month, when Pope Francis for the first time acknowledged the sexual abuse of nuns and other women by priests and bishops as a "problem" for the church.

In one breakaway part of the Community of St. John, "corruption" had reached the point of "sexual slavery," he told reporters, leading his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, to dissolve it in 2013.

The Vatican subsequently sought to soften that characterization, saying that when Francis "spoke of 'sexual slavery,' he meant 'manipulation,' a form of abuse of power which is reflected also in sexual abuse."

But the genie was out of the bottle. And it's clear the Catholic Church -- already grappling with a global scandal over the sexual abuse of children by clergy -- has questions to answer.

### ***Pope's words 'like a bomb'***

Shortly after the Pope's comments, the Community of St. John issued a statement recognizing that, beyond the allegations against its founder, "some sisters or former sisters have also testified that brothers and priests of the community were also responsible for abuse. Many of these brothers and priests have already been sanctioned and others are in the process of being sanctioned."

CNN contacted the Vatican for a response to this story; its spokesman would not comment on any specific allegations but did confirm that cases involving clerics belonging to the Congregation of St. John were being investigated by the Vatican.

For Lucie, Francis' words were a watershed moment. They brought huge relief -- and a sense of justification after years spent struggling to be heard. "When I first read the article, it was incredible, it was like a bomb," she told CNN, in her first interview about her experience with a branch of the St. John community in Switzerland.

"I thought, like, okay, everything we tried to tell the Vatican, the Pope, the bishop, there is something happening... because sexual abuse, nobody ever say before."

### ***'I couldn't see him as a predator'***

Lucie told CNN her alleged abuser had misused his position of authority and the order's central tenet of "loving friendship" to justify what he was doing.

On the first occasion Lucie says the priest tried to kiss her on the mouth, she pushed him away. But she says he was not deterred. "I didn't feel I had any power in front of him, I couldn't say really something. When I was trying, he always had arguments to tell me that I'm wrong and he's right. How can I not believe him?" she told CNN.

"He was taking off his clothes and I saw everything -- it was the first time of my life, and I was really disgusted. But I realize that on the moment I didn't feel anything. Because I was not there anymore, it was a protection, to not feel."

Lucie has struggled to grasp why she didn't realize what was happening at the time but now believes it was down to that disassociation and what she calls brainwashing. "It was absolutely 100% impossible for me to see him like a predator," she said.

In response to the allegations made by Lucie, a spokesman for the St. John community told CNN there had been "several accusations of sexual abuse" made towards this particular priest and that he had left the community 10 years ago.

"It is now the Vatican's responsibility to look into these complaints and a legal proceeding is ongoing," the spokesman said. "All the measures at our disposal have been taken to remove him from the community."

### ***Search for justice***

The problem is not isolated to one rogue community. In recent months, CNN and several other news organizations have highlighted the abuse of nuns by male clergy elsewhere in Europe, as well as in Asia, South America and Africa.

Bishops from around the world have been summoned by the Pope to an unprecedented summit this week in Rome to discuss the crisis over clerical sexual abuse. But the four-day meeting will likely focus on the shocking array of claims of abuse of children.

All the women who spoke to CNN said their first struggle was simply to recognize the abuse for what it was. Only after many years did they seek justice, first within the church and then through the courts.

Lucie, who is now married with five children, tried to take her alleged abuser to civil court, but a Swiss public prosecutor ruled that the statute of limitations had expired. A lawyer for the priest declined to comment to CNN on the allegations made by Lucie.

Lucie, who eventually moved to Belgium and still attends church regularly in the small village where she lives, says that before attempting legal action, she had tried unsuccessfully to raise the issue with the St. John community.

"After I don't know, maybe two years, I was conscious that the community was not doing anything, I was talking about (it) with other victims, realizing that they know, that it's been 15 years that they know, that there's other victims. So they don't want to do anything," she said.



Moreau, now 41 and married with three daughters, tried to take her alleged abuser to court in France, but the statute of limitations meant the case was dropped by the Tours prosecutor.

She sought a meeting in 2017 with the priest in question, to confront him, but was advised against it by the order. A brother from the St. John community sent an email in November 2017, seen by CNN, in which he acknowledged "the gravity of the abuse" Moreau suffered but said she must see a psychotherapist for her own sake before seeking contact with that priest.

In letters shown by Moreau to CNN, dating from her time with the order, the priest suggests "discretion... in the future we will have to meet elsewhere ... I pray that we can find clever ways of meeting." He ends by saying that his "crazy love" for her comes from Jesus.

Moreau, who is Lithuanian and at first spoke limited French, now thinks the priest may have targeted her in part because of that.

"I was far from my family, in a foreign country, this is already something, and that might also be why he chose me, an easy prey in the end," she said. The priest also made her believe that the fault was hers, as a "temptress," she said, despite the fact she says she tried to distance herself from him.

The priest in question is being investigated by the Vatican and has been removed from some of his duties, a St. John community spokesman said.

In a February 7 statement, the leaders of the three orders within the Community of St. John said they condemned "every situation of sexual abuse and abuse of power" and reaffirmed "their clear resolve to eradicate any and all abusive situations."

They said the order dissolved by Benedict in 2013 -- and referenced by Francis -- was a small, Spain-based splinter group which separated from the St. John community in 2012 after church authorities tried to bring in reforms following Philippe's death.

The dissolution of the order has brought little closure for Moreau, who is still coming to terms with what she says happened to her.

"It lasted for 15 years, and it's now been two years since I was able to put the word 'abuse' on this, and still today it's very complicated to admit that I might be a victim," she said.

"If only just for myself, I don't want to be a victim. And yeah, I feel responsible because he made me responsible, he made me complicit in his acts."

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## **JAMAICA: PNP alarmed at increased violence against women**

Jamaica Observer (19.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GxAhgh> - People's National Party's (PNP) Shadow Minister of Gender Affairs, Sports and Information, Natalie Neita, says she is alarmed at what she described as the increased level of violence against women in the home.

"We are frightened by the increasing levels of vicious attacks and murders and other serious crimes which are being perpetuated against our women. These attacks have been

on a steady upward trend and must be urgently addressed," Neita said in a release from her party this afternoon.

The shadow minister is calling on the government to introduce a programme to assist "at-risk families with coping mechanisms to lessen the frequency of domestic violence, which often results in horrific fatalities".

According to Neita things took a turn for the worse recently with the murder of three women in western Jamaica.

"We are all aware that crime has been a major challenge for Jamaica over many years; however, there was a time when women and children were spared from its ravages, but this is no longer the case. Women and children are being murdered at rates never experienced before," she said, adding that this is happening against the background of a promise by the Government of a "non-existent crime plan".

The shadow minister urged Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport Olivia Grange to impress upon Prime Minister Andrew Holness and her colleague Minister of National Security, Horace Chang to develop and implement within the realm of a national crime plan a system of protection for children and women; and to ensure that a specific strategy for gender based violence be included.

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## **VATICAN CITY: Men and women religious feel shame for failures on abuse**

***"The abuse of children is wrong anywhere and anytime: this point is not negotiable." This is what the leaders of men and women religious of the world have declared ahead of the "Meeting on the Protection of Minors" in the Vatican, Feb. 21-24.***

By Robin Gomes

Vatican News (19.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Vgl1rt> - "We ask pardon of all for our failures and repeat that we stand with the Holy Father. We commit our efforts to working with him so that the Church can move forward in a coherent, credible and unified way, a way that is genuinely healing, truly renewed, with new eyes to see and new ears to hear."

The International Union of Superiors General (UISG), which brings together the superiors general of institutes of Catholic women religious, and the Union of Superiors General (USG) that brings heads of men's religious institutes, issued a joint declaration on Tuesday expressing their full support for the Meeting on the Protection of Minors, called for by Pope Francis.

### ***Children - most vulnerable***

"In our work as religious, we come across many situations where children are abused, neglected, maltreated and unwanted," the religious superiors wrote. "We see child soldiers; the trafficking of minors; the sexual abuse of minors; the physical and emotional abuse of minors. They cry out to us."

As adults, as Christians and as religious they said they "want to work so that their lives are changed and that the situations in which they are brought up are improved."

They underscored the vulnerability of these children which they said makes them “dispensable, to be used and abused.”

### ***Abuse of authority***

The religious superiors noted that the Feb . 21-24 meeting will focus on the abuse of minors by people of authority in the Church, especially bishops, priests and religious, a story, they said, is full of pain “that has continued for decades”.

“We bow our heads in shame at the realization that such abuse has taken place in our congregations and orders, and in our Church.” “Our shame is increased by our own lack of realization of what has been happening,” and those in authority “failed to see warning signs or failed to take them seriously.”

### ***Change***

The religious superiors acknowledge that 3-day Vatican meeting is a short time, but they expressed their trust in the power of the Holy Spirit that with the winds of change blowing through the Church and goodwill on all sides, important processes and structures of accountability can be started and those already in place can be reinforced.

“The abuse of children is wrong anywhere and anytime: this point is not negotiable,” they emphasized.

### ***Areas of work***

Following the example of Pope Francis, the men and women religious commit themselves to “humbly acknowledge and confess the wrongs that have been done; to reach out to survivors; to learn from them how to accompany those who have been abused and how they wish” their stories be heard.

The UISG and USG identified 3 areas where children are treasured and where their safety is promoted – in education and health care, in formation and in spirituality.

The many schools and hospitals that the religious orders run can ensure better protocols and higher standards of protection of minors.

The protection of minors and adults can be integrated into the formation programme of religious institutes. “It must be clear that whatever the culture and background, the abuse of children is never permitted or tolerable,” they stressed.

The religious superiors also intend that their spirituality centres develop special outreach programmes to any survivor who wishes to find help in their struggles with faith and meaning.” Even though some of the abuse victims would want to stay far from the Church, the religious would like to humbly accompany those survivors who want to make a journey of healing with them.

“Those who have been abused often carry a sense of guilt, shame and even sin. In reality, however, they are the ones who have been sinned against,” the religious superiors said.

### ***Working, walking together***

“We want to act with humility. We want to see our blind spots. We want to name any abuse of power. We commit to engage in a journey with those we serve, moving forward with transparency and trust, honesty and sincere repentance.”

The heads of religious orders want to work with parents, especially mothers, in fighting abuse. They acknowledged that their attempt to deal with abuse showed a “shameful lack of capacity to understand” their pain of the victims. While offering them their sincerest apologies and sorrow, they invited them to work with them to help minimize risks.

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## **USA: Congress allows Violence Against Women Act to lapse**

By Juliegrace Brufke

The Hill (16.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2TZD8l1> - The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which provides funding and grants for a variety of programs that tackle domestic abuse, lapsed at the end of Friday after Congress failed to pass an extension before leaving for its one-week recess.

Lawmakers squabbled over whether a clean extension of the landmark legislation, which was first signed into law in 1994, should be wrapped into a massive must-pass government funding deal that was signed by President Trump on Friday.

But the language was ultimately left off, with Republicans accusing Democrats of playing politics in order to tack on additional partisan provisions.

Rep. Debbie Lesko (R-Ariz.) attempted to force a vote on a clean extension during a procedural vote Thursday, which ultimately failed on the floor.

“For whatever misguided reason, Speaker Pelosi has decided to take a noncontroversial clean extension of the Violence Against Women Act as a bargaining chip,” a spokeswoman for Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), said in an email Thursday.

“Speaker Pelosi will cause VAWA to expire tomorrow at midnight. And apparently, she is okay with that. During every funding agreement previously, Republicans have made sure VAWA did not expire.”

Democrats say current resources for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence will not be impacted by the expiration of the act, noting most programs are funded through the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services.

But should Congress fail to pass an extension in coming months, future grants and funding for resources including shelters, crisis centers and social service agencies could be impacted.

The omission of the act in the spending package that averted a government shutdown could provide Democrats with the opportunity to make reforms that weren’t possible under the Republican-controlled Congress last year.

Reps. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), alongside Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) and Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), pushed for a version last year that would have extended the Violence Against Women Act for five years, but included what some Republicans felt were “controversial provisions.”

GOP leadership instead opted to bring a clean, short-term extension to the floor to allow lawmakers to continue negotiations.

But the Jackson Lee bill could have a far better chance of being signed into law after Democrats took back control of the lower chamber this year.

Democrat-backed changes to the act could potentially include an expansion of youth education and prevention programs as well as protections for Native American women — which was left out of the 2013 reauthorization.

It could also include protections for transgender people and stricter gun laws for those convicted of crimes related to domestic violence, a provision that proved to be a sticking point between the two parties during the last Congress.

A Democratic aide told The Hill that “a full reauthorization is expected to be introduced in March.”

Lesko said she hopes Democrats will be willing to work across the aisle in passing a bill both parties can support.

“As a survivor of domestic violence, I am deeply saddened that this critical legislation will expire,” she said in a statement.

“Rather than supporting my clean extension of the existing law, Democrats voted last night to allow these programs and services to lapse. Although this saddens me, I hope my colleagues will work with me in a bipartisan fashion to reauthorize such an important law for so many women and children in America very soon.”

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## **ZIMBABWE: Women urged to report rape by soldiers**

BBC (29.01.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2Ba5n9s> - Women allegedly raped by the security forces during night raids to suppress recent protests have been urged to report their cases to the police.

The information minister said only one attack has been officially reported despite numerous allegations, the state-run Herald newspaper reports.

The BBC has spoken to six women who said they were raped by soldiers.

Correspondents say there is widespread mistrust of the police, who were also involved in the crackdown on protests.

The state-funded Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission has accused soldiers of using "systematic torture" in the crackdown on protests that broke out a fortnight ago following a more than doubling in fuel prices. It has strongly criticised the authorities for using troops to quell demonstrations.

The BBC spoke to six women who had sought refuge at a safe house about their experiences during the night-time door-to-door raids by the security forces.

One of the women said: "They slapped me, then said they want to have sex with me.

When I refused, they slapped me again. The first soldier had unprotected sex with me. Then the other one said, 'I want to do the same.'"

Information Minister Monica Mutsvangwa said the government did not condone and or tolerate "criminal behaviour by any member of society particularly those in positions of trust".

"All women, who were allegedly raped, are encouraged to come forward and report the cases to the Zimbabwe Republic Police Victim Friendly Unit, which can be found at every police station around the country," The Herald quotes her as saying in a statement.

"The unit is led by a female commissioner, hence, all affected women will be treated with empathy, compassion, respect and due care. Their safety will be guaranteed," she added.

### **Angry lawyers**

Police say more than 1,000 people, including some children, have been arrested in the crackdown.

The BBC's Shingai Nyoka in Harare says hundreds of lawyers protested on Tuesday in the capital, Harare, against the mass arrests and torture of alleged protesters in detention.

They accused some judges and magistrates of being complicit in human rights violations by fast-tracking of the trials of protesters and denying them bail.

Later in the day, the High Court ordered the release of pastor Evan Mawarire, a prominent activist who has been charged with subversion for calling a three-day stayaway in protest at the rise in fuel prices.

Meanwhile, police say they have arrested an officer seen assaulting a protester in a TV report.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa had ordered the arrest of three men caught on camera assaulting a handcuffed civilian on Saturday.

The officer arrested on Tuesday, Constable Mukamire, had been off duty as he had been suspended in September 2018, the police statement said.

"The security services have always been emphasising that bogus and rogue elements are responsible for acts of lawlessness, which are tarnishing good standing of the security forces," police spokesperson Charity Charamba said.

She urged members of the public who had "suffered similar ordeals" to come forward and report such incidents to the police.

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## **CHINA/INDIA: Asia's expanding illicit market: brides**

By Tharanga Yakupitiyage

IPS News Agency (25.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FYYgEM> - Paradoxically, the world's most populated countries are facing a population crisis: a woman shortage. And it's women who are paying a brutal price for it.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the natural sex ratio at birth is approximately 105 boys to every 100 girls.

However, decades of gender discrimination, which favoured having boys over girls, has left India and China with 80 million more men than women.

"When women lack equal rights and patriarchy is deeply engrained, it is no surprise that parents choose to not to have daughters," said Human Rights Watch's (HRW) Senior Researcher in the Women's Rights Division Heather Barr.

Now that there is a shortage of women doesn't mean that women become more treasured or valued, she noted. Instead, there are very harmful consequences.

"[Women have] become a commodity which is in demand, so in demand that people will use violence to acquire it," Barr told IPS.

"The stories we heard were really unbelievably shocking even after having spent many, many years on human rights issues," she added.

The "bride shortage" has triggered trafficking as women are lured under false pretences and sold as brides.

Bordering China is Myanmar's Kachin and northern Shan states which has seen iterations of conflicts over the last decade.

HRW found that traffickers often prey on women and girls in those regions, offering jobs in and transport to China. The women are then sold for 3,000 to 13,000 dollars to Chinese families struggling to find a bride for their sons.

Once purchased, women and girls are often locked in room and raped so that they can quickly provide a baby for the family.

Often times, women and girls are even sold by people they know—sometimes even by family members.

"The idea that there is a situation, a set of social pressures, a sense of lawlessness that is so extreme that it is causing people to sell their own relatives...it is shocking," Barr said.

In India, bride trafficking has become common in the northern states such as Haryana which has only 830 girls to every 1,000 boys.

In a study, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found in over 10,000 households, over 9,000 married women in Haryana were brought from other States.

Most of those women came from poor villages in Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar where their families, desperate for money, struck deals with traffickers. There are also cases of girls being resold to other people after living a married life for a few years.

According to the 2016 National Crimes Records Bureau, almost 34,000 were kidnapped or abducted for the purpose of marriage across India, half of whom were under the age of 18.

While the immediate consequences for women are clear, there may also be long-term consequences of the distorted sex ratio.

"Part of the reason that we should be worrying about it is that we simply don't know what the long-term consequences of this are. We don't know how this might change societies, but this is something that is going to have an effect through generations," Barr told IPS, highlighting the need for action including better prevention efforts and law enforcement on trafficking and violence against women.

But at the end of the day, governments must do more to address the root cause of the imbalance—gender discrimination.



Though sex-selective abortion is illegal in India, it is still a widespread practice in the country. In fact, approximately five to seven million sex-selective abortions are estimated to be carried out in the South Asian country every year.

China's now two-child policy may also continue to pose a threat to women and girls, as well as the future stability of the country's population.

"The most fundamental problem is gender inequality and most fundamental solution to this is that you have to change the dynamics in society that makes sons valued and daughters not valued," Barr concluded.

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## **CHINA: Uyghur woman details life inside Chinese 're-education camp' in Xinjiang**

***A Uyghur woman has detailed conditions she says were tantamount to torture inside one of China's "re-education camps" in far western Xinjiang province.***

By Flint Duxfield and Ian Burrows

ABC News AU (08.01.2019) - <https://ab.co/2VCQSDy> - The UN has cited estimates that up to 1 million ethnic Muslim-minority Uyghurs may be held involuntarily in extralegal detention in Xinjiang.

China's Government says the camps are vocational training centres providing language training and re-education of extremists.

But reports from inside the centres tell a very different story.

Gulbahar Jelilova, who says she spent 15 months inside one of the camps, has given a rare firsthand account of the conditions.

"We were kept in dark rooms with rats and mice," she told the ABC's PM program.

"Sometimes they were tying up a weight of 5 kilograms to our feet as a way of punishment.

"If they wanted to punish even heavier, they would put handcuffs [on us] and we would be forced to look at the wall across for about 17 hours."

Ms Jelilova, who is originally from Kazakhstan, has spent the last two decades doing business on the Chinese-Kazakhstani border.

She said in May 2017 she was arrested in the Chinese city of Urumqi on charges of illegal transferring 17,000 yuan (\$3,500) between China and Turkey.

"While I was in the camp I told them that I was a foreigner and that I didn't have any wrongdoings," she said.

"We were told we didn't have any rights there. We didn't have any rights to make phone calls outside ... we were like dead people."

Most Uyghurs who have been inside the camps won't speak about their experiences because of fears other family members will be detained in retaliation.

Despite Ms Jelilova's concerns that Chinese police are keeping tabs on her in Turkey where she currently lives, she said she felt compelled to speak out on behalf of other young women currently in detention.

"I cannot eat comfortably when I think about those people. Under those circumstances how can I keep quiet?" she said.

### ***Forced to take unknown medicines***

Ms Jelilova outlined how the women were forced to take unknown medication while in the centre.

"While I was in the camp, they used to give us injections, take blood samples, give medications that we didn't know," she said.

"If we asked what medication it was, they would penalise for asking this question.

"And none of the female people were having monthly periods because they were giving us specific medication that was stopping the periods."

Ms Jelilova's accounts contradict the Chinese Government but they do match up with reports of other Uyghurs and human rights groups.

She said she was beaten inside the camp and when she first entered she weighed 76 kilograms but within a month had lost more than 20 kilograms.

"The total aim of those concentration camps is to eliminate the Uyghur people, the Muslims," she said.

Ms Jelilova said she was let out of the camp following a sustained lobbying effort by her family.

"I was released from the concentration camps three months ago, but every single day the situation in the concentration camps is in front of my eyes.

"The cries of the people are in my ears."

The ABC has repeatedly sought comment from Chinese officials but has received no response.

China has said Xinjiang faces a serious threat from Islamist militants and separatists who plot attacks and stir up tensions between the mostly Muslim Uyghur minority and the ethnic Han Chinese majority.

### **Other reading:**

['I begged them to kill me', Uyghur woman describes torture to US politicians](#)

[I'm a Uyghur Muslim who fled China's brutal crackdown – it's time the world showed us some support](#)

[Police are reportedly cutting too-long dresses off ethnic minority women in the middle of streets in China](#)