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## **Caster Semenya loses appeal for equal treatment**

***Swiss Court upholds regulations biased against women athletes.***

By Minky Worden

HRW (08.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/35oVdBK> - The Federal Supreme Court of Switzerland has ruled that sport regulations that violate women's rights cannot be struck down as inconsistent with Swiss public policy, dealing a blow to the rights of all women athletes. The court came to this conclusion despite finding that the regulations in question – which create a regime of discriminatory surveillance and medical interventions on women – violate fundamental human rights of the South African runner Caster Semenya.

The Swiss court was reviewing an appeal by Semenya, who has been targeted for a decade by variations of the regulations, and ruled ineligible to compete. In 2019, the Court of Arbitration for Sport, based in Lausanne, Switzerland, upheld the most recent version of the regulations, which targets a subset of women with variations of their sex characteristics and naturally occurring elevated testosterone levels.

The regulations compel these women to undergo medical interventions or be forced out of competition. Identifying which athletes are impacted by the regulations will be done through subjecting all women athletes' bodies to public scrutiny and requiring those that seem "suspect" to undergo a medical examination. Men athletes are subject to no such surveillance or compelled medical tests.

There is no clear scientific consensus that women with naturally occurring higher-than-typical testosterone have a performance advantage in athletics. For these women athletes, being compelled to undergo a medical examination can be humiliating and medically unnecessary, as well as disrespectful of their rights.

The regulations target women in running events between 400 meters and 1 mile. Semenya's favored event was the 800 meter race, in which she won the gold medal in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

In a [report](#) published earlier this year, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recommends immediately revoking eligibility regulations for women athletes like those enforced by World Athletics, track and field's global governing body. The World Medical Association has [recommended](#) that physicians around the world should not observe the regulations as they violate medical ethics. The decision from the Federal Supreme Court means that the regulations will remain for now.

"I will continue to fight for the human rights of female athletes, both on the track and off the track, until we can all run free the way we were born," Semenya said in a statement about the Swiss ruling.

In this Olympic year, athletes are looking to the International Olympic Committee to set guidelines to protect women athletes from abusive and invasive surveillance, testing, and bans. Caster's case shows how urgent this is.

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## **Hitting women hard, pandemic makes gender poverty gap wider: U.N.**

By Anastasia Moloney

Thomson Reuters Foundation (02.09.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3hhIMKa> - The coronavirus pandemic will widen the poverty gap between women and men, pushing 47 million more women and girls into impoverished lives by next year, and undoing progress made in recent decades, the United Nations said on Wednesday.

Worldwide more women than men will be made poor by the economic fallout and massive job losses caused by COVID-19, with informal workers worst hit in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, according to new U.N. estimates.

"The increases in women's extreme poverty ... are a stark indictment of deep flaws in the ways we have constructed our societies and economies," Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the head of U.N. Women, said in a statement.

During the pandemic, women have lost their jobs at a faster rate than men have, as they are more likely to be employed in the sectors hardest hit by long lockdowns such as retail, restaurants and hotels, it said.

Women are also more likely to work in the informal economy, typically in jobs as domestic workers and cleaners that often come with little or no health care, unemployment benefits or other protections.

"We know that women take most of the responsibility for caring for the family; they earn less, save less and hold much less secure jobs," Mlambo-Ngcuka said.

According to the U.N.'s International Labour Organization (ILO), about 70% of domestic workers globally had lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19 by June this year.

Overall, the pandemic will push an additional 96 million people into extreme poverty by next year, of whom nearly half are women and girls, according to estimates by U.N. Women and the U.N.'s Development Programme (UNDP).

This will bring the total number of women and girls worldwide living in extreme poverty to 435 million - defined as a person living on \$1.90 a day or less - and it is expected that this figure will not revert to pre-pandemic levels until 2030.

By 2021, for every 100 men aged 25 to 34 living in extreme poverty, there will be 118 women - a gap expected to increase to 121 women per 100 men by 2030, according to U.N. estimates.

Governments could adopt measures to help women in low-paid and informal jobs, said Achim Steiner, a UNDP administrator.

"More than 100 million women and girls could be lifted out of poverty if governments implement a comprehensive strategy aimed at improving access to education and family planning, fair and equal wages, and expanding social transfers," Steiner said.

Nearly three in every five of the world's poor women live in sub-Saharan Africa, and the region will continue to be home to the highest number of the world's poorest after the pandemic.

Recent gains made in reducing poverty rates in South Asia are threatened as the region is set to face a "resurgence" in extreme poverty, with women worst affected, the U.N. said.

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## **Top doctors and lawyers condemn 'shocking' treatment of women in childbirth during COVID-19**

***Exclusive: openDemocracy investigation reveals 'traumatic' incidents defying WHO guidelines in 45 countries – as experts warn of 'tens of thousands' of extra maternal deaths.***

By Nandini Archer & Claire Provost

openDemocracy (16.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fyJ3HE> - Top doctors and lawyers from around the world have condemned the "shocking and disturbing" treatment of women giving birth during the COVID-19 pandemic, a new openDemocracy investigation reveals today.

Since March, openDemocracy has identified cases of "traumatic" experiences in at least 45 countries that contravene World Health Organization (WHO) guidance, and some national laws. In at least six countries, pregnant women have also died after COVID-19 restrictions reportedly prevented or delayed access to emergency services.

Dozens of women across Europe, Latin America and Africa have also described to openDemocracy their own first-hand experiences of:

- birth companions banned from hospitals – in some cases even after other lockdown restrictions have been lifted;
- forcible separation from newborns and being prevented from breastfeeding – despite no evidence that breast milk can transmit coronavirus;
- pain medication withheld because hospital resources including anaesthesiologists were diverted to the COVID-19 response;
- procedures performed without their consent, including caesarean sections, induced labour and episiotomies, to speed up labour.

Maternal health advocates say that while incidents like these occurred in many countries before COVID-19, responses to the pandemic have made these problems worse.

The findings come as experts warn that COVID-19 restrictions could cause "tens of thousands" of additional maternal deaths around the world.

Across Latin America, which already had the world's highest C-section rate, doctors and maternal health advocates have warned that the number of these procedures has also increased because of "misguided policies" and "fear of overloading hospitals".

In many cases, these procedures have been performed against women's wishes and without the medical justification that the WHO guidelines and national laws require.

In Uganda, a doctor at one hospital told openDemocracy she knows of at least three women who died after they couldn't reach the hospital due to transport restrictions.

Other women in labour and distress reported being turned away from health centres or shunned by medical staff, because they appeared to have coronavirus symptoms or didn't have masks, or because maternity facilities were rededicated to the COVID-19 response.

Experts have raised concerns of many more cases like this in countries where health infrastructure was already fragile before the outbreak.

Some hospitals have reversed restrictions affecting women giving birth, following local media coverage and campaigns. In countries including Armenia and Ukraine, however, bans on birth companions have remained even after lockdowns have eased.

"My husband and I are ready to handcuff ourselves together if doctors won't allow him in," said one woman in Ukraine who recently launched an online petition to be allowed to give birth with her partner in the room.

"It seems we've slipped through a gap," says Zaynab Iman from the UK, who described feeling "abandoned" in March with the "heartbreaking" cries of other women at one London hospital that had temporarily banned companions.

A woman in Ecuador also told openDemocracy she felt "abandoned" when she gave birth in late March at a health centre without medical assistance. "They left me alone with my husband in the delivery room, with no one to advise us or tell us anything."

Health experts told openDemocracy that these restrictions on women giving birth were "unnecessary" and lawyers said there could be legal consequences for governments whose pandemic responses failed to protect women's rights.

"openDemocracy's research clearly reveals how unnecessary restrictions constitute an alarming pattern of women's health and rights being deprioritised during the crisis," said Belgian MEP Petra De Sutter, who is also a gynaecologist and president of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF).

"There is no reason... that women should be denied respectful care," said Quazi Monirul Islam, a medical doctor involved in drafting WHO's 2005 childbirth guidelines. The global health body has emphasised that these guidelines still apply under COVID-19.

Islam partly blamed an "initial panic" by hospitals faced with the pandemic. He compared it to his time working in Botswana in the 1980s when, he says, hospitals misunderstanding HIV research had also separated women and children at birth.

But Melissa Upreti, a lawyer and member of a working group on discrimination against women at the UN human rights office OHCHR, warned that around the world "the risk of contagion has been used as a pretext to deny proper care."

"It's really shocking and disturbing," she said, calling the denial of services that women need "discrimination from a legal standpoint. We do have a very strong case to make... that governments are violating their own laws and policies."

"You can be sure, cases are going to be filed," says Nelly Warega, a lawyer with the Women's Link Worldwide NGO in Kenya. She said African governments could face lawsuits if their lockdown rules led to the death or injury of pregnant women.

"We expect more from our governments in times of crisis," added Austrian MP Petra Bayr, chair of the Council of Europe parliamentary assembly's equality committee and

EPF vice-president. "They must be held accountable for the mistreatment documented by openDemocracy and put in place systems to make sure this doesn't happen again."

### ***'Dehumanising treatment'***

World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on childbirth during the pandemic, published in March, reiterates its long-standing advice that women giving birth should be treated with dignity and respect and given clear communication and appropriate pain relief.

This guidance adds that women should be accompanied by a person of their choice while giving birth, and they should be supported to breastfeed and have skin-to-skin contact with newborns, even if they are COVID-19 positive. Procedures including C-sections should only be performed when they are medically necessary or have the woman's consent.

Many countries have national policies that echo these principles and in Latin America several countries have in recent years passed laws against "obstetric violence".

However, openDemocracy has identified cases in at least 45 countries of women who were reportedly treated in ways that defy this guidance during the pandemic.

These cases include bans on birth companions at some hospitals in at least 35 countries; forcible separations of women and newborns in at least fifteen countries; and cases of women who said they were not supported to breastfeed in at least seven countries (despite no evidence that the virus can be transmitted via breast milk).

In eleven countries, women reported that they didn't consent to the C-sections, induction and episiotomies (the cutting of a woman's vagina) that were performed on them, or said that they did not believe these procedures were medically justified.

In at least 20 countries, COVID-19 restrictions including curfews and transport bans have blocked women's access to critical health care before, during or after birth. In at least thirteen cases in six countries, this led to deaths of the women or their babies.

Large global firms that make baby formula have separately been accused of 'exploiting' the pandemic by taking advantage of mothers' fears of transmitting coronavirus through breastfeeding to aggressively promote their products.

WHO's director of sexual and reproductive health, Ian Askew, says its guidelines are "based on the best scientific evidence available". They exist to ensure respectful care, and should be followed everywhere, both during the pandemic and beyond, he added.

"Many of us are receiving anecdotal reports of women not receiving respectful, dignified or high-quality care before, during and following childbirth," says Askew, who is also a medical doctor, calling this an "alarming" trend.

A spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, said it has also received reports of abuses during COVID-19 childbirths. "Documenting these incidents is a critical first step to exposing the problem", they said.

"Governments need to act now," says Enid Muthoni from the Center for Reproductive Rights in Brussels, adding that "it is entirely possible for European health systems to follow WHO's guidelines while responding to the pandemic."

### ***Disrespected and endangered***

Across several African countries there have been reports of women who couldn't reach hospital in time during emergencies due to COVID-19-related transport restrictions. Some of these women reportedly died as a result, while others delivered their babies by the roadside or in other unsanitary public places.

The imposition of coronavirus curfews and transport restrictions in Latin America has also led to women missing antenatal check-ups, walking long distances to reach hospital, or being forced to have unplanned and risky home births.

Responding to openDemocracy's findings, maternal health advocates acknowledge that COVID-19 has made things worse for women in childbirth. However, they emphasise that, even before the pandemic, too many women have felt disrespected or endangered while giving birth.

In recent years, this has been increasingly well documented including by the WHO which led a study published in the Lancet last year which found that 42% of women interviewed by researchers in Ghana, Guinea, Myanmar and Nigeria said they experienced physical or verbal abuse, stigma or discrimination during childbirth in health facilities.

In Latin America over the last decade, several countries have specifically outlawed "dehumanising treatment and/or abusive medicalisation" of women giving birth, defining "obstetric violence" as a specific type of criminalised gender violence.

But, says Mercedes Muñoz, head of the NGO Venezuelan Association for an Alternative Sex Education, despite the law in her country, obstetric violence "is so normalised by authorities and medical staff".

"Women feel they risk being unassisted or neglected if they demand their rights, and this usually makes them keep quiet," she says. "What pregnant women have to go through in Venezuela is absolutely Dantesque."

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## **UN Committee stands with women and girls in global anti-racism protests**

OHCHR (10.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2B3eY4Q> - The UN women's rights committee has called for a new era of human rights and gender justice, stressing that the lives of black women and girls also matter.

In a statement issued today, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) said it stood in solidarity with the millions of women and girls who joined the protests after the killing of George Floyd, insisting that their voices calling for an end of racism be heard.

The violence inflicted on George Floyd by four police officers in the United States in May has generated anti-racist protests and solidarity movements throughout the world.

"At the most vulnerable moment, Mr. Floyd called for his mother, as have other victims before him, reminding us of the great loss, pain and economic dislocation that women experience in losing their children, spouses and partners, siblings and other family members in this unrelenting cycle of racist violence," the Committee said.

While the majority of killings have been of African American men, African American women, including Yvonne Smallwood, Aiyana Jones, Sandra Bland, and Breonna Taylor,

have also been victims of police brutality. Taylor was a 25-year-old emergency medical technician who was shot in her bed when police raided the wrong house in March 2020.

The Committee affirms that women and girls are also victims of racism and are directly and indirectly affected by racial injustice and discrimination. While African descendants are especially affected, the Committee is also concerned about systemic racism and discrimination against indigenous/aboriginal and Roma women and girls throughout the world.

"The Committee recognizes this legacy (of racism) and the imperative to add our voices to those calling for justice and human rights for all," CEDAW said in its statement.

In this International Decade for People of African Descent, 2015–2024, declared by the United Nations, the Committee said it stood in solidarity with the family, friends and community of all victims of systemic racism and racist violence globally, and all who have risen in justifiable indignation.

The full statement is available [online](#).

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## **When will sports stop policing femininity?**

### ***UN Human Rights Commissioner rebukes sex testing women athletes.***

By Kyle Knight

HRW (01.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/321DYo4> - In a [report](#) published this week, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recommends that eligibility regulations for women athletes like those enforced by World Athletics, track and field's global governing body, be revoked immediately.

The regulations target women athletes with some variations in their sex characteristics that cause their natural testosterone levels to be higher than typical. The regulations deny these women the right to participate as women for running events between 400 meters and 1 mile unless they submit to invasive testing and medically unnecessary procedures. There is no clear scientific consensus that women with naturally occurring higher-than-typical testosterone have a performance advantage in athletics. There are no similar regulations for men.

These regulations rose to prominence as a result of the decade-long controversy surrounding South African runner Caster Semenya, who lost her appeal for equal treatment in the Court of Arbitration for Sport last year. Semenya's case came in the wake of another groundbreaking fight against gender discrimination in sports by courageous Indian sprinter, Dutee Chand. Runners in Kenya, Burundi, and Uganda have also been negatively affected by the regulations.

The UN's report roundly criticizes the regulations, saying they "create the risk of unethical medical practice" by blurring the line between informed consent and coercion and encouraging medically unnecessary procedures (a critique the World Medical Association issued previously). The report also points to the power imbalances between the doctors affiliated with sporting bodies and athletes, saying: "in sport, such power imbalances are compounded by athletes' dependency on the sports federations requiring such medical interventions and the frequent absence of adequate and holistic support during the decision-making process."

These regulations are stigmatizing, stereotyping, and discriminatory, and have no place in sport or society. They amount to a policing of women's bodies on the basis of arbitrary definitions of femininity and racial stereotypes.

The report authors call on sporting bodies such as World Athletics and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to carry out "in conjunction with athletes, public education campaigns to counter gender-stereotyped and racist attitudes to address negative and stereotypical portrayals of women and girl athletes in the media, including attitudes about appropriate norms of femininity."

Indeed, as the convener of global sport, the IOC should lead in upholding human rights.

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## **Support civil society at the UN Security Council**

By Kaavya Asoka

NGOWG (01.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3eaCtXg> - Six months into 2020, during what should be a celebratory year for women's civil society marking the 20th anniversary of Resolution 1325 (2000), their voices are barely heard at the UN Security Council. Why?

Since 1 January 2020, the Council has held 53 formal meetings and 64 open VTCs during which 21 civil society briefers have delivered statements, 11 of whom were women. This represents a 38.9% decrease compared to 2019.

The current limitations facing the Security Council as it conducts its work virtually undoubtedly pose challenges to civil society participation. However, in the more than three months since the Council began working remotely, it has become clear that these are not merely technical challenges but a lack of political will — a deprioritization of the voices of independent civil society despite Council member's claims of women's critical role in ensuring peace and security.

The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (NGOWG) has nominated 18 civil society representatives under all six presidencies to brief the Council on 12 different agenda items, pursuant to the Security Council's commitment to invite women civil society representatives to brief during country-specific meetings under Resolution 2242 (2015).

### ***Warnings from civil society about exclusion***

On April 18, along with 30 other human rights, humanitarian, development and women's rights organizations, we wrote to the President of the Security Council to raise concerns around the transparency of the work of the Security Council and obstacles to the effective participation of civil society due to changes to its working methods under the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 11, we followed up with supportive Council members to continue to raise the alarm regarding what we saw as a continuing pattern of exclusion. In parallel, other civil society organizations have raised similar concerns around barriers to inclusive and meaningful engagement of civil society as well as risks of intimidation and reprisals in the context of other virtual UN meetings, including the High-Level Political Forum and the Human Rights Council.

However, despite the repeated warnings issued by dozens of organizations from around the world, the pattern of exclusion continues. This trend must be urgently reversed, lest we lose the gains made over the last four years.

In response to this downward trend, since early April, we have continued to facilitate informal briefings between women’s civil society representatives and Security Council members on Colombia, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, the Central African Republic and South Sudan. With our support, Council members have heard from 14 women with expertise on nine different countries over the course of the last two months.

However, we are concerned that these informal channels will become a replacement for civil society participation in the formal work of the Security Council. As we have repeatedly raised with Council members: women civil society representatives must not be relegated to only informal spaces, where they will not be able to share their perspectives with the full Council membership. This is counter to the Council’s own commitments as laid out in Resolution 2242 (2015).

### ***The Security Council must live up to its own promises***

Over the last 19 years, the Security Council has reinforced, acknowledged and highlighted the role of civil society over 500 times, calling for Member States and the UN to work with civil society in conflict prevention efforts, peacebuilding, provision of humanitarian assistance and peace processes[1] and has, on multiple occasions, recognized the role of civil society, particularly women’s groups, as crucial interlocutors in conflict situations.

Since the adoption of Resolution 2242 (2015), the number and diversity of women civil society briefers at the UN Security Council has increased; from nine women in 2016 to 40 in 2019. These briefers bring a wealth of expertise and experience to the Security Council, enriching its discussions by highlighting marginalized perspectives and raising issues that would otherwise be overlooked in favor of political considerations. The importance of these briefings, however, goes far beyond numbers.

Issues related to women, peace and security are less likely to be raised if they aren’t raised first by a civil society brifer.[2] Briefings by civil society leaders expand the understanding of policymakers related to the role of women’s organizations in mediating and negotiating local disputes or advocating on behalf of their communities in parallel to formal peace processes. The tendency of the international community to focus largely on high-level, formal processes is detrimental to a deeper understanding of the complexity of crisis situations and, importantly, the central role of women peacebuilders, human rights defenders and women’s civil society organizations on the frontlines providing essential services and resolving conflicts. This means that without these briefings, the critical perspectives of individuals and communities who are directly affected by the Council’s decision-making are not being heard, nor are Council members making these decisions with a full picture of the situation on the ground.

Civil society can often be more effective than international actors in settling local disputes or providing services such as humanitarian and development assistance — these are, after all, their own communities, and they have valuable insight into what drives local conflicts as well as the best solutions. Yemeni activists, for example, have recently highlighted that the Mothers of Abductees Association, who were excluded from the Stockholm peace talks, have negotiated the release of more than 940 arbitrarily detained persons — meanwhile, there has been no progress through the UN-led process to date. The Security Council only stands to benefit from hearing these perspectives — and learning from and supporting such strategies — when civil society contributes to its discussions. This is also why we have strongly advocated for women-led society to be actively consulted and included in shaping responses to COVID-19 and emphasized the importance of women’s leadership in designing and implementing pandemic responses.

Civil society briefers take risks to share their perspectives in public fora — it is therefore essential that they are heard at the highest levels, and that their recommendations are acted upon. As an organization that has supported 47 briefers in Security Council meetings and open debates since 2009, we are acutely aware of the risks that civil society take when they criticize their governments or parties to conflict and challenge social and gender norms. They work in dangerous contexts, relentlessly undertaking courageous work to serve their communities — defending human rights, delivering life-saving services to survivors of gender-based violence, advocating for the protection of women’s rights in law and practice, and undertaking direct negotiations with armed actors on the local level, to name but a few. In 2019 alone, at least three civil society briefers experienced a backlash following their briefings to the Security Council as a direct result of raising issues related to attacks on civil society, enforced disappearances, gender-based violence and systematic exclusion of women from public and political processes. Each brifer was harassed via social media, and one brifer was the subject of a formal letter of complaint by their government to the President of the Security Council. There are, of course, many others.

Civil society representatives brief the UN Security Council in the hope that the Council will not simply listen to them but hear what they have to say. But if their recommendations are not acted upon, the risks they face are all for nothing.

Concerns are now deepening among civil society that the current deprioritization of civil society access and participation will be exploited by Security Council members that have historically been hostile to their participation in the first place upon returning to formal, in-person meetings. Supportive Council members must act now to ensure that civil society is heard and that their concerns are reflected in Council discussions. Security Council members must elevate their voices, their work and their legitimacy, and lay the important groundwork for civil society, human rights defenders and peacebuilders to be recognized and valued, to protect civic space, and to prevent attacks and reprisals rather than responding to them after they have taken place.

**We therefore urge the Security Council to prioritize the following:**

- In line with Resolution 2242 (2015), ensure women civil society briefers are invited to brief the Security Council during country-specific meetings, including during open VTCs, and not limited to briefing only during thematic open debates, informal briefings or side events.
- Maintain the foundational principle of independence by ensuring that civil society briefers are selected and supported by civil society organizations, and not only hand-picked by Security Council members.
- Ensure that the recommendations put forth by civil society briefers are acted upon in all outcome documents and statements delivered by Security Council members, and track and follow implementation of these recommendations as called for by the UN Secretary-General in 2019 as one of six immediate actions to be taken by Security Council members.

As a coalition dedicated to gender equality and women’s human rights, the voices of grassroots women’s civil society are at the heart of the NGOWG’s work; they should be at the center of the Security Council’s work as well. In a year that was meant to resonate with the voices of women — 40 years since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and 20 years since the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) — the Security Council can and should do better. If not now, when?

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## **COVID-19 increases suffering of children in conflict**

By Samira Sadeque

IPS News (25.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38de6H0> - The current coronavirus pandemic is having a profound affect on children in conflict zones — with girls especially being at higher risk of violence and sexual health concerns.

“For adolescent girls specifically, these disruptions can have profound consequences, including increased rates of pregnancy and child, early, and forced marriage,” Shannon Kowalski, director of advocacy and policy at the International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC), told IPS.

Kowalski shared her concerns this week after an open debate on children and armed conflict at the United Nations, where experts shared the progress made in the efforts to pull children out of conflict-ridden circumstances, as well as how the current pandemic has made the issue more complex.

Virginia Gamba, special representative of the secretary-general for children and armed conflict, said her team had documented 25,000 grave violations against children.

Henrietta Fore, executive director of U.N. Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said at the Jun. 23 briefing that although the organisation had rescued almost 37,000 children in the past three years, there remains massive concerns about the number of children still in dire situations.

She cited the U.N.’s monitoring and reporting mechanism statistics over the last 15 years that reflect this reality.

UNICEF documented a total of 250,000 cases of grave violations against children in armed conflict, including:

- the recruitment and use of over 77,000 children;
- killing and maiming of over 100,000 children;
- rape and sexual violence against over 15,000 children;
- abduction of over 25, 000 children; and
- nearly 17,000 attacks on schools and hospitals.

The numbers reflect a grave — and timely – reality. On May 12, terrorists blew up a hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan, killing 24 people, including two infants. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has since pulled out from the hospital citing security concerns.

This only deepens the problem for marginalised populations such as women and children. Fore said children in conflict zones who are now further caught in the pandemic are at a “double disadvantage”, given that they’re likely finding themselves at “increased risk of violence, abuse, child marriage and recruitment to armed groups”.

### ***A general increase in conflict***

Experts say there has been a general increase in organised violence in various parts of the world under the pandemic. Sam Jones, communications manager at Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a data collection and crisis mapping project, told IPS that they’ve documented state repression and consequential violence in some places

under the pandemic, while in some other cases, “warring parties have used the pandemic as an opportunity to escalate campaigns or push the advantage”.

Jones’ concern was reflected in Fore’s speech on Jun. 23, where she pointed out that when states manipulate this kind of crisis, it’s the children who are hardest hit.

“Far too often, parties in conflict are using the pandemic and the need to reach and support children...for political advantage,” she said. “Children are not pawns or bargaining chips – this must stop.”

Certain areas have seen what Jones said is the largest increase in organised violence since the pandemic broke out around the world: Libya, Yemen, India, Mali and Uganda.

For all the countries, except Uganda, it was a mere intensification of already existing violence; in Uganda, the violence came in the form of government restrictions.

“By mid-April, ACLED had already recorded more than 1,000 total fatalities from conflict in Mali. Over the first three months of the year, we recorded nearly 300 civilian fatalities specifically, a 90 percent increase compared to the previous quarter,” he said.

“At best, violence has continued despite the pandemic, while at worst both armed groups and state forces could be using it as an opportunity to ramp up activity and target civilians,” he added.

### ***How conflict affects children and girls***

The crisis in Mali is especially of importance as human rights advocates released a statement of concern just a day after the briefing, about Mali’s failure to curb female genital mutilation (FGM).

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) raised alarms about the report released by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which stated more than 75 percent of girls under the age of 14 had gone through the practice as of 2015.

Among other findings, the committee found that government has “failed to guarantee victims of female genital mutilation access to adequate and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive health care”.

Concerns raised by experts such as Fore and Kowalski, when put next to the data about the ongoing conflict and continued prevalence of FGM in Mali, creates a worrying picture for the West African nation.

The committee report found that the women and girls in Mali already had limited access to sexual and reproductive health.

Meanwhile, Fore pointed out that the pandemic has exacerbated the lack of access for women and girls in countries that were already struggled to provide access. This raises the questions about how, on top of being a country in conflict, the pandemic is further exacerbating the health of girls who suffered FGM in Mali.

Fore said the current pandemic further adds layers to the crisis surrounding children in armed conflict.

“As the pandemic spreads, healthcare facilities have been damaged or destroyed by conflict, services have been suspended, children are missing out of basic medical care

including vaccination, and water; sanitary systems have been damaged or destroyed altogether making it impossible for children to wash their hands," she said.

Meanwhile, Kowalski of IWHC raised concerns about U.S. President Donald Trump's recent decision to pull funding from the World Health Organisation, and what that means for girls caught in conflict.

"In addition, in most countries affected by COVID-19 we are experiencing increases in gender-based violence, reduced access to contraception, abortion, and other reproductive health services, and a decrease in the quality of maternal health care — all which are intensified for women and girls in conflict," she said.

Gamba, after sharing the statistics of children suffering in conflict, ended her speech on an important note.

"Behind these figures are boys and girls with stolen childhoods and shattered dreams, and there are families and communities torn apart by violence and suffering," she said. "The only thing children and communities have in common today is their hope for peace, a better life and a better future. We must rise to meet that expectation."

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## **Including widows in the work to "build back better" from COVID-19**

***Statement for International Widows Day by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.***

UN Women (23.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/31n2pfk> - Over the past several months, we have seen the myriad ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the lives of women and men differently. Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the effects of the pandemic are exacerbated for women and girls. At the same time, mortality from the virus tends to be higher for men. UN Women's data hub, Women Count, presents World Health Organization data that shows men account for 59 per cent of coronavirus deaths in Italy, 68 per cent in Mexico and 77 per cent in Thailand. This represents a devastating human loss, and one that is likely leaving tens of thousands of women newly widowed at just the time when they are cut off from their usual socio-economic and family supports.

Already, widows were largely unseen, unsupported and unmeasured in our societies. The latest figures that we have (2015) estimate that some 258 million women globally have been widowed. The actual number is likely to be much higher and to grow further as the coronavirus and its related effects on health continue to rage around the world.

Experience from past pandemics, for example HIV/AIDS and Ebola, shows that widows are often denied inheritance rights, have their property grabbed after the death of a partner, and can face extreme stigma and discrimination, as perceived 'carriers' of disease. Worldwide, women are much less likely to have access to old age pensions than men, so the death of a spouse can lead to destitution for older women. In the context of lockdowns and economic closures, widows may not have access to bank accounts and pensions to pay for healthcare if they too become ill or to support themselves and their children. With lone-mother families and single older women already particularly vulnerable to poverty, this is an area that needs urgent attention.

Governments must provide immediate support, while working to revamp social and economic structures in the long-term. In addition to legal reform to ensure that widows

have equal inheritance and property rights, we need to see fiscal stimulus programmes that support widows and older single women economically. For example, the reach and benefit levels of social assistance programmes such as cash transfers and social pensions should be expanded and these benefits must be accessible to those without bank accounts. It is critical to invest in the work of civil society, in particular grassroots and community-based groups, who can provide widows with vital support at the local level and challenge the discriminatory, sometimes deadly social norms that they face.

Widows must not be left out of our work to “build back better” from COVID-19. Let us ensure that our recovery prioritizes their unique needs and supports societies to be more inclusive, resilient and equal for all.

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## **End violence, harassment at work**

### ***Speed ratification of global standards adopted a year ago.***

HRW (18.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dvvFDm> - Governments should prioritize ratification of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today, on the eve of its first anniversary. The groundbreaking treaty, adopted June 21, 2019 by government, employer, and worker members of the ILO, sets international legal standards for preventing and responding to violence and harassment at work.

The 31-page report, “[Dignity and Safety at Work: A Guide to the 2019 ILO Violence and Harassment Convention](#),” highlights the main obligations for governments set out in the treaty and elements of national laws and policies that reflect promising practices.

“No one should have to tolerate violence and harassment, but for many workers – especially women – it is often an inevitable part of getting or keeping a job,” said Nisha Varia, women’s rights advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. “The ILO Violence and Harassment Convention provides critical guidance to governments on how to prevent this violence and how to protect workers from stigma and retaliation so they can speak up and get the justice they deserve.”

On June 12, 2020, Uruguay became the first country to ratify the convention, which will enter into force with the second ratification. Argentina, Belgium, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Namibia, the Philippines, South Africa, Spain, and Uganda have signaled their intention to ratify. Countries that ratify agree to align their national laws to the treaty’s standards and will be periodically reviewed for compliance by the ILO.

The #MeToo movement and attacks on health workers in the context of the coronavirus pandemic have highlighted the urgency of strong measures to prevent work-related violence and harassment and to ensure that survivors have access to services and remedies. Human Rights Watch has documented violence and harassment at work around the world, including in agriculture, domestic work, education, fishing, the garment industry, health, journalism, mining, public office, and the military.

The ILO has found that many existing laws exclude the workers most exposed to violence, for example domestic workers, farmworkers, and those in precarious employment. A 2018 World Bank report found that 59 out of 189 economies had no specific legal provisions covering sexual harassment at work.

The treaty sets out minimum obligations for governments, including ensuring comprehensive national laws against harassment and violence at work and prevention

measures such as information campaigns and identifying high-risk sectors. It also requires enforcement – such as inspections and investigations – and access to remedies for victims, including complaint systems, whistleblower protections, services, and compensation.

The treaty covers workers, trainees, workers whose employment has been terminated, job seekers, and job applicants, among others, and applies to both formal and informal sectors, public and private. It also includes a requirement to address violence and harassment involving third parties, such as clients, customers, or service providers.

The treaty recognizes that violence and harassment go beyond the physical workplace and includes other activities related to work, such as commutes and offsite work events. It also obliges governments to ensure employers have workplace policies and prevention measures addressing violence and harassment.

The treaty addresses gender-based violence specifically, including the intersection of domestic violence and work, and the steps governments should take, including protections so that domestic violence survivors can seek help without losing their jobs.

Several global workers' and women's rights organizations are campaigning to promote these standards and urging governments to ratify the treaty quickly. These include global trade unions such as the International Trade Union Confederation, the International Domestic Workers' Federation, and several other global unions as well as the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence Campaign and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing.

**Promising steps highlighted in the report include:**

- In Zambia, the definition of the workplace extends beyond formal worksites and includes “any place where the employees work or are likely to work, or which they frequent or are likely to frequent in the course of their employment or incidental to it.”
- India’s law governing sexual harassment extends workplace protection to students, third parties visiting a workplace such as customers or clients, and those directly or indirectly employed, including trainees, apprentices, and volunteers. The law applies both to the organized and unorganized sectors.
- The state of New York in the United States requires public employers to develop and implement programs to prevent and minimize workplace violence, including through written policy statements, conducting risk evaluations, creating a prevention program, providing training for employees, documenting incidents, and reviewing all cases annually.
- In Finland, the 2002 Occupational Safety and Health Act requires work to be arranged so that, “the threat of violence and incidents of violence are prevented as far as possible.” This includes providing appropriate safety equipment and arrangements, ensuring that employees have ways to summon help, and avoiding hazards or risks when employees are working alone.
- Puerto Rico allows an employer to request a protection order for an employee against visitors if the employee has been a victim of domestic violence in the workplace.
- The Philippines and New Zealand provide for 10 days of paid leave for domestic violence survivors to pursue legal proceedings, leave their partners, and protect themselves and their children.
- Spain provides women workers who are victims of gender-based violence the right to a reduction and reorganization of working time, to move their location, and to suspend the employment contract.

- Colombia and Costa Rica have laws and directives addressing workplace violence that instruct labor inspectors on how to handle victim complaints in cases of workplace harassment.
- German law permits employees to refuse to work without losing pay if the employer does not take appropriate steps to stop harassment in the workplace.

“Workers who are marginalized – because of their sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or migration status, among other characteristics – are often at greatest risk of violence and have the least access to any help,” Varia said. “Ratifying the convention and carrying it out is a major opportunity for countries to end these abuses and promote safety and dignity at work.”

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## **Gender lens essential to addressing linked climate change and security crises, urges joint UN report**

***As COVID-19 layers crisis upon crisis in communities affected by climate change and conflict, gender-responsive action is urgently needed.***

UNDP (09.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XKm9HN> - As countries reel from the devastating social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, gender inequality is shaping the experience of crisis, as well as prospects for resilience and recovery.

A new report – [Gender, Climate & Security: Sustaining Inclusive Peace on the Frontlines of Climate Change](#) – by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Women, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) reveals the close links between gender, climate, and security, and shows that women on the frontlines of climate action are playing a vital role in conflict prevention and sustainable, inclusive peace.

Communities affected by conflict and climate change face a double crisis. The pandemic further compounds the impacts of climate change on food security, livelihoods, social cohesion, and security. This can undermine development gains, escalate violence, and also disrupt fragile peace processes.

Women and girls are facing disproportionate economic burdens due to different types of marginalization; gendered expectations can lead men and women to resort to violence when traditional livelihoods fail; and important socio-economic shifts can result from changes to patterns of migration.

“Unequal access to land tenure, financial resources, and decision-making power can create economic stress for entire households in times of crisis, leaving women disproportionately exposed to climate-related security risk,” said UNEP’s Executive Director, Inger Andersen. “The climate crisis stretches well beyond just climate, and tackling it effectively requires responses that address the links between gender, climate and security - we must ensure no one is left behind.”

Research supporting the report shows that in Chad, gender-based violence and structural inequality limit the capacity of communities to adapt to climate shocks. In Sudan, the growing scarcity of fertile land caused by extended droughts and rainfall fluctuation is marked by increases in local conflict between farmers and nomadic groups. Many people – mostly men – have migrated away from local villages in search of alternative livelihoods in large agricultural schemes or in nearby mines, leaving women with greater economic burdens. Other examples highlight climate-related security risks for women in urban areas, especially within informal settlements. Research from Pakistan and Sierra

Leone suggest that water shortages, heat waves, and extreme weather events can create new risks of gender-based violence and deepen pervasive inequalities.

The report makes clear the urgent need for gender-responsive action to tackle these linked crises. Interventions around natural resources, the environment and climate change, for example, provide significant opportunities for women's political and economic leadership and strengthen their contributions to peace. Sustainable natural resource programming also offers opportunities to mitigate sexual and gender-based violence in conflict. Recognizing that peace and security, human rights, and development are interdependent is vital to forge a better future, the report argues.

"Gender inequality, climate vulnerability, and state fragility are strongly interlinked - we know, for example, that countries with higher values in one of these areas tend to score higher in the other two", said UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner. "At the same time, aid targeting initiatives that empower women and promote gender equality remains very low. The concrete examples of these types of initiatives in action showcased in this report can help spur further research and inspire more opportunities to reinforce the roles of women in peacebuilding, which is fundamental to help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals."

"Strengthening the role of women in the management of natural resources also creates opportunities for them to act as peacebuilders and manage conflicts in non-violent manners," adds Oscar Fernández-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support.

Gender considerations should also be fully reflected in emerging policy and programming on climate-related security risks – not only to strengthen awareness and understanding of particular vulnerabilities, but also to highlight opportunities for leadership and inclusion of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes.

More investment for gender equality and women's empowerment is required in fragile states, including implications on human mobility, and especially in sectors related to natural resources, where it is particularly low.

"Building back better with a gender lens means ensuring our post-COVID economies tackle the fundamental inequalities in society and end violence against women," said UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. "Women are a powerful force to rebuild societies more securely, from providing food and shelter, to generating vital income and leading sustainable change."

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## **The sexual-health supply chain is broken**

***Condoms, birth control, and other items are harder to get in the developing world because of the pandemic. That is putting lives at risk.***

By Anna Louie Sussman

The Atlantic (08.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UrVKMI> - It took Dimos Sakellaridis about six years to build Kiss condoms into one of Nigeria's top brands, with approximately 91 million sold in 2019. The prophylactics are available in shops, markets, and kiosks across the country, and a combination of irreverent advertising, a growing population of young people, and a greater understanding of reproductive health within Nigeria has meant his sales have steadily risen.

But if he can't get a shipment of 12 million condoms (and 4 million packs of birth-control pills) out of the Lagos port soon, those stocks will run out. And unfortunately for Sakellaridis, it makes no difference to the customs authorities, who are working their way through a backlog of containers, that ordinary Nigerians depend on Sakellaridis's stranded cargo to prevent unwanted pregnancies and stop the spread of sexually transmitted infections. All he can do is wait—and he is not alone.

Sakellaridis is the Nigeria country director for DKT International, one of the largest family-planning providers in the world. Since mid-March, when measures taken to contain the coronavirus cut work at the Lagos port, the process of clearing incoming cargo stretched from two to three weeks to more than three months. During that time, DKT's central warehouse ran out of condoms.

DKT's struggles highlight the fragility of a global supply chain in which essential goods and medicines are often sourced from a small handful of countries whose competitive advantage has allowed them to dominate various steps of the production cycle. This is not a challenge limited to reproductive health: All over the world, manufacturing, shipping, and logistics have slowed or halted altogether as governments have closed factories, grounded flights, and sealed off borders in response to the coronavirus. But whereas for most goods, this represents little more than an inconvenience, when it comes to vital sexual- and reproductive-health commodities, such breakdowns can put lives at risk.

Women who trust a specific brand of contraceptive might find it out of stock at the pharmacy. Couples stuck at home, unable to locate the inexpensive condoms they normally buy, might skip protection. Central warehouses may not be able to supply the mobile clinic vans that travel to rural communities unserved by the national public-health system. The results of a disrupted supply chain in this field could be disastrous. The United Nations Population Fund, or UNFPA, the organization's sexual- and reproductive-health agency, has flagged stockout risks over the coming months in 46 countries. Marie Stopes International, which provides family-planning services in 37 low-income countries, has warned that up to 9.5 million women and girls are at risk of losing access to contraception and safe abortion services, which could result in 1.3 to 3 million unintended pregnancies, and 1.2 to 2.7 million unsafe abortions. This could, in turn, lead to an estimated 5,000 to 11,000 pregnancy-related deaths.

The effects will differ depending on the individual, Sarah Shaw, the head of advocacy at Marie Stopes, told me—poor people who rely on free services will be worse off than their wealthier peers in the same country, and women in countries with robust health systems will have a wider array of options if a drugstore runs out of condoms. Although high-income countries that manufacture their own drugs import large quantities of active pharmaceutical ingredients, or APIs, from China, meaning they faced a squeeze on supplies at the height of the pandemic, manufacturers are likely to prioritize these more profitable markets over lower-income ones.

At DKT, which distributes contraception and safe-abortion products in 90 mostly low- and middle-income countries, country directors will typically keep about three months' worth of inventory on hand during normal times, according to Chris Purdy, DKT's president and CEO. Even though manufacturing across Asia has come back online as the coronavirus outbreak has eased in parts of the continent, early factory closures in countries such as India, Malaysia, and China, combined with shipping delays and port congestion, has cut this margin close.

The majority of the world's condoms, for example, are made in Malaysia and Thailand, home to natural-rubber industries. The paper for cardboard condom packages then comes from China, Indonesia, and Europe, Paul Liang, the marketing director at Karex

Berhad, one of the world's biggest condom producers, told me. India and China are leading manufacturers of generic pharmaceutical products and cheap drugs, although many Indian drug companies rely on Chinese firms for APIs. Products made in one country might also be shipped to a lab in another for quality testing. Once they're ready for export, they travel by air or sea, depending on the size of the shipment, the urgency of demand, and other factors. Today, many of these travel routes are closed down, severely restricted, or drastically more expensive.

Even without the coronavirus pandemic, which has spurred new quarantine measures and waiting periods, these products were typically subject to inspection once they landed. In Uganda, for example, condoms must be sampled and tested by a regulator. In Kenya, each three-pack of condoms carries a small sticker saying they've met regulatory standards before it can be sold to consumers, which requires unpacking every shipment for manual labeling. Reduced manpower as a result of social distancing and evening curfews in Kenya meant that labeling that normally takes two weeks stretched to more than a month. Had the process been delayed any further, Lauren Archer, the DKT Kenya and Uganda country director, told me, her team would have run out of stock.

Companies such as DKT struggle even to substitute identical products in times of need: Importing countries register drugs, such as injectable contraception or the abortion pill, and medical devices, such as condoms or kits used to provide abortions, by manufacturer and country of origin, not just based on the active ingredient or product category. The process of registering a new drug or medical device with the appropriate national agency can take anywhere from six months to several years. "Let's say you have a stockout from China. It's not a simple matter of 'Well, okay, I'm just going to go buy from India now,'" Purdy told me. "You can't simply switch to a new manufacturer without undergoing re-registration."

Large parts of the world do not have domestic manufacturing capacity for these vital health products, leaving them deeply vulnerable to any glitch or disruption to the supply chain. Even countries that have some domestic capacity are not wholly self-sufficient: Iran does have pharmaceutical production, but does not make its own intrauterine devices, or IUDs, the long-acting reversible contraceptives that prevent pregnancy for several years at a time. When I spoke with Purdy at the end of May, a container holding 50,000 IUDs bound for Iran had been stuck in a Dubai port for nearly three months.

The major global organizations that buy and distribute these goods have tried to anticipate and prevent stocks from running out. Purdy encouraged DKT's country directors to place large orders back in January after a colleague in China sent him photos of empty streets and supermarket shelves scraped clean. In mid-March, Eric Dupont, the head of UNFPA's procurement-services branch, implemented fast-track procedures for bidding on important reproductive-health products and gave national offices greater powers to order what they needed. Yet many of these contracts have yet to be delivered: Marie Stopes International's orders placed in January are still en route, traveling by sea.

These organizations have been using every tool at their disposal to get products to countries where they're needed, and to push them out from central warehouses. The UNFPA used its diplomatic clout to win an export waiver for Indian-made goods. It is also working more with the World Food Programme, which is managing a global logistics cluster on behalf of multiple U.N. agencies, and the UNFPA also joined with a dozen other U.N. agencies to make a joint tender for personal protective equipment.

On a more local level, DKT's logistics partners in Uganda, having been able to obtain just a few of the limited number of permits released by the government for transit vans, are supplementing their transport network with motorbikes, though these can carry only small amounts of goods, Archer said. In Madagascar, Marie Stopes has been using its

fleet of buses to pick up maternity patients—while complying with government-required social distancing—and take them to clinics, after public transport was shut down, according to Shaw. Manuelle Hurwitz, the director of the programs division at the International Planned Parenthood Federation, told me that one way to help meet demand was through calling for policy or regulatory changes, such as classifying family-planning and sexual-health services as “essential,” and allowing telemedicine. IPPF’s member association in India, for example, is using a hybrid model of telemedicine for counseling and follow-up care and clinic visits scheduled at intervals to keep a safe distance between clients. “There’s adaptations like that evolving all the time, but the reality is we’re not reaching as many women,” Shaw said.

These extra efforts have strained organizational budgets. To ensure the consistent flow of supplies—both downstream to pharmacies, clinics, and supermarkets by extending credit to his buyers; and upstream by placing large orders that will take months to arrive—Purdy said he has had to float more than the \$10 million a month that he normally does, forcing him to dig into DKT’s endowment (a \$1.9 million grant from the Swedish government helped defray some of these extra costs). Others I spoke with said they were also spending more on the purchase of supplies—both sexual- and reproductive-health products and PPE for staff.

“I never thought in a million years I would be getting requests to say, ‘Can we use our advocacy budget to buy hand sanitizer?’” Shaw said.

While manufacturing has resumed in India, China, and Malaysia, factories there face long backlogs of orders. New safety measures such as thrice-daily sanitization mean that production will be slow, Liang said, and he is still dealing with interruptions in supplies. Because of restrictions on movement and on large gatherings, many people still won’t get the care they need, or will have to adjust their contraceptive method to avoid doctor’s visits. Shaw said that in the short term, women in the developing world are likely to shift from highly effective long-acting reversible contraceptives such as injectables, implants, and IUDs, to condoms or oral contraceptive pills. These methods typically leave more room for human error, because they must be taken daily or used correctly every time for the highest efficacy.

All of this means that in a few months’ time, there may well be an increase in demand for abortion care. “Whether we’ll be able to meet that demand,” Hurwitz said, “is something else.”

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## **Countries need to do more to stop harmful marketing of breast-milk substitutes, says UN**

***Despite efforts to stop the harmful promotion of breast-milk substitutes, countries are still falling short in protecting parents from misleading information, according to a new UN report released Wednesday.***

UN News (27.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Y29KxB> - Titled [Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes: National Implementation of the International Code – Status report 2020](#), the study highlights the need for stronger legislation to protect families from false claims about the safety of breast-milk substitutes or aggressive marketing practices, findings that take on increased importance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UN World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Baby Food Action Network collaborated in the report’s publication.

## ***Impact of aggressive marketing***

"The aggressive marketing of breast-milk substitutes, especially through health professionals that parents trust for nutrition and health advice, is a major barrier to improving newborn and child health worldwide," says Francesco Branca, Director of WHO's Department of Nutrition and Food Safety.

"Health care systems must act to boost parent's confidence in breastfeeding without industry influence so that children don't miss out on its lifesaving benefits."

WHO and UNICEF encourage women to continue to breastfeed during the pandemic, even if they have confirmed or suspected COVID-19, as evidence indicate it is unlikely that COVID-19 would be transmitted through breastfeeding. "The numerous benefits of breastfeeding substantially outweigh the potential risks of illness associated with the virus," the authors find.

Of the 194 countries analyzed, 136 have in place some form of legal measure related to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent resolutions adopted by the World Health Assembly. While 44 countries have strengthened their regulations on marketing over the past two years, only 79 countries prohibit the promotion of breast-milk substitutes in health facilities, and only 51 have provisions banning the distribution of free or low-cost supplies within the health care system.

Further, only 19 countries have banned the sponsorship of professional association meetings by manufacturers of breast-milk substitutes, which include infant formula, follow-up formula and growing up milks marketed for use by infants and children up to 36-months old.

## ***Trained healthcare professionals know best***

WHO and UNICEF recommend that babies be fed nothing but breast milk for their first six months, after which they should continue breastfeeding – as well as eating other nutritious and safe foods – until two years of age, or beyond.

Babies who are exclusively breastfed are 14 times less likely to die than those who are not, the authors stress. Yet, only 41 per cent of infants 0–6 months old are exclusively breastfed, a rate WHO Member States have committed to increase to at least 50 per cent by 2025.

Inappropriate marketing of breast-milk substitutes continues to undermine efforts to improve breastfeeding rates. Measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as physical distancing, meanwhile hamper community counselling and mother-to-mother support services for breastfeeding - leaving an opening for the breast-milk substitute industry to capitalize on the crisis.

"We must, more than ever, step up efforts to ensure that every mother and family receive the guidance and support they need from a trained health care worker to breastfeed their children, right from birth, everywhere," stressed UNICEF Chief of Nutrition Victor Aguayo.

The Code bans all forms of promotion of breast-milk substitutes, including advertising, gifts to health workers and distribution of free samples. Labels cannot make nutritional and health claims or include images that idealize infant formula. Instead, labels must carry messages about the superiority of breastfeeding over formula and the risks of not breastfeeding.

## **COVID-19 sparks urgency around justice for women, new report calls for action**

***A new report documents major challenges to women's access to justice in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and puts forth recommendations to accelerate action and push back against threats to progress.***

IDLO (21.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2M21N62> - The COVID-19 pandemic escalates threats to women's access to justice according to a new joint report, [Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19](#), released today by UN Women, IDLO, UNDP, UNODC, World Bank, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and supported by the Elders.

Curtailed access to justice institutions, rising intimate partner violence, growing injustice for women workers – including those on the frontlines of the crisis – and discriminatory laws are some of the major risks to women's lives and livelihoods associated with COVID-19.

The report documents emerging challenges and pre-existing gender justice gaps that have been exacerbated by the pandemic – not least an alarming upsurge in domestic violence after lockdowns were announced. Estimates suggest that roughly 2.73 billion women around the world live in countries where stay-at-home orders are in place, which sharply heightens the risk of intimate partner violence.

"Formal and informal spaces which afforded women appropriate safeguards are quickly shrinking", says Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. "Thankfully, both state and non-state actors have galvanized into action as seen in the smart and accessible interventions emerging in several countries. Some women however remain unsafe and invisible due to the digital divide. Forging private and public sector partnerships during the pandemic can ensure that all women have access to mobile phones. Justice systems can no longer be static: we need to begin to explore more sustainable ways of justice delivery, such as for example, optimizing interim orders to prevent rights violations. Furthermore, innovative parliamentary business must be pursued to ensure that the estimated 2.5 million women and girls affected by discriminatory laws are fully protected."

"We cannot let gender equality and women's rights be among the casualties of COVID-19", states Jan Beagle, Director-General of IDLO. "Now more than ever, it is imperative for justice institutions to address the needs of women and girls and deliver people-centered justice. The current pandemic has brought to the forefront the staggeringly wide gap of injustice and inequality. It is more than just a public health and economic emergency, it is also a moral crisis – where those who are already excluded are further marginalized and exposed to heightened dangers. As the risk of gender-based violence continues to grow during the pandemic, and the ability of justice institutions to effectively deliver services is diminished, it is of utmost priority to forge innovative ways to support women's access to justice and empower them to realize their rights."

While the health sector is at the epicenter of the pandemic, the resilience of the justice sector and its ability to deliver justice for women has been brought into sharp focus as the reality of the global crisis sets in.

There is serious concern that gains made on gender equality will be rolled back, including through delays in reversing discriminatory laws, the enactment of new laws and the implementation of existing legislation.

The crisis particularly affects vulnerable groups of women, including those who are forcibly displaced, deprived of liberty or lack a legal identity, and the impact is compounded by the digital divide according to the report.

At a time when digital connectivity is more important than ever to access life-saving information and justice services, women are 20 per cent less likely to own a smartphone and 20 per cent less likely to access the internet from mobile phones than men, bringing into question the extent to which violations of women's rights can be addressed during the pandemic.

The report cautions that if urgent action is not undertaken, the effects of COVID - 19 are likely to derail the fragile progress made towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including SDGs 5 on gender equality and 16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

As the international community races to respond to the risks of a slowdown in the wake of the pandemic, the report presents a global synthesis of the state of justice systems in connection with women's justice needs and highlights innovative interventions underway in many parts of the world.

Calling for a fresh wave of momentum, Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19 urges justice leaders and all stakeholders to take action to increase justice for women and girls during the global health emergency.

"Countries have saved lives by shutting down economies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 but we now need concerted action to ensure that they do not lose hard-won development gains," says UNDP Administrator, Achim Steiner. "As the United Nations moves quickly to support the socio-economic recovery of countries around the world, it is crucial that we have a better understanding of where support is needed most – particularly when it comes to access to justice for women."

Liv Tørres, Director, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies states: "Without decisive action, the meagre progress we have made on women's rights and gender equality over the past decades will be undermined. The justice gap for women is growing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We see an increase in the number of justice problems that women face, due to lockdowns and economic hardship. Simultaneously, the capacity to resolve these justice problems is decreasing. The pandemic is making our gender disparities abundantly clear, reinforces them but also shows us how they can be rectified by policy action. This report is a call for action."

"COVID-19 is public health crisis as well as a socio-economic catastrophe," says Graça Machel, Deputy-Chair of The Elders and Founder of The Graça Machel Trust. "It exacerbates existing gender inequalities and undermines women's rights and liberties. Women's voices and leadership must be at the core of the response to the pandemic and beyond. This new report sets out important findings and recommendations which I urge the highest levels of political power to take seriously."

Justice for Women Amidst COVID-19 was developed by a cohort of international organizations, led by UN Women, the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Bank, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, and supported by The Elders.

It builds on the 2019 Justice for Women report, jointly produced by the High-level Group on Justice for Women, which was co-convened by UN Women, IDLO, the World Bank, and Pathfinders. The report identifies the common justice problems women face, makes the

case for investment and recommends strategies to accelerate action around justice for women.

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## **5 actions to help bring the most marginalized girls back to school after COVID-19**

By Robert Jenkins and Rebecca Winthrop

Brookings (15.05.2020) - <https://brook.gs/2LSe9xH> - The past two decades have been marked by outstanding gains in girls' education worldwide, with the number of girls out of school dropping by 79 million. We cannot risk rolling back this progress. For some children, the impact of COVID-19 will be temporary. But for others, this pandemic will be devastating and will alter the course of their lives.

As we saw during the Ebola crisis, girls are particularly vulnerable when schools close for long periods of time. A recent report estimates that 10 million more secondary school-age girls could be out of school after this initial wave of the COVID-19 crisis has passed. Evidence shows that prolonged school closure can also result in increased sexual abuse and teenage pregnancies. Further, girls from the poorest communities are likely to miss out on remote learning strategies, either because access is limited or because the burden of care often falls on women.

Now, in the face of this pandemic, more than 70 percent of students around the world are still affected by nationwide school closures—or more than 1.26 billion children and youth. While we are just beginning to understand the socioeconomic impact, experiences from Ebola show us that girls will be among the hardest hit.

For many adolescent girls, especially those from low-income countries and the poorest communities, access to education was already a challenge even before COVID-19. A recent UNICEF report shows that nearly one in three adolescent girls from the poorest households around the world have never been to school, and estimates show that only 25 percent of the poorest girls in low-income countries complete primary school. Emergencies exacerbate preexisting inequalities and intensify the existing learning crisis.

Together, this data and lessons learned from our past experience tell us that we'll need to do more than simply reopen classrooms to make it possible for the poorest and most marginalized girls to return to school. We have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to transform education and reimagine the way students learn, so that when schools reopen, they are more gender-responsive and inclusive, help all students to learn, look after all students' health and well-being, and are digitally connected.

Drawing on existing evidence, including the "What Works in Girls' Education" Brookings book, and on-the-ground know-how, we recommend governments and their partners take the following five steps to ensure marginalized girls, alongside boys, can continue their education.

### **1. Lift financial barriers that prevent girls from going to school and that are likely to increase as a result of COVID-19 economic impacts.**

The pandemic is hitting poorer families the hardest. A recent study in Kenya revealed that 68 percent of respondents had skipped a meal or eaten less as a direct result of COVID-19. The economic impact on families and communities leaves adolescent girls at higher risk of child marriage, sexual exploitation, and child labor. Waiving school and examination fees could facilitate girls' return to school. Other strategies, such as cash

transfers for the most marginalized girls, have also proven effective. Following Ebola, the Sierra Leone government waived tuition and examination fees for all learners for two academic years to motivate parents and caregivers to send children back to school. Additionally, in Ghana, keeping girls safe and learning is a priority during school closures. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection will increase cash transfers under the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) Program for extremely poor households across Ghana, facilitating girls' return to school in communities hard hit by the economic impact of COVID-19.

## **2. Scale gender-responsive distance education to reach the most marginalized girls.**

Distance learning strategies are essential during and after COVID-19, especially for the most marginalized girls and boys. While a recent Brookings report shows that currently 90 percent of high-income countries are using remote learning strategies to continue education, only 25 percent of low-income countries are doing so—and then largely through television and radio. There is an opportunity for countries to transform how they reach out-of-school girls and boys, even after the pandemic is over, by designing and scaling remote learning programs using appropriate technology. But it will be essential for these programs to take a gender-focused lens. Marginalized girls have less access to technology, so the design and deployment will need to be especially sensitive to working with and for girls to address these gaps. Additionally, any safety and violence risks that could be posed by girls' participation in remote learning must be identified and protection approaches incorporated, including digital safeguarding flows in tech platforms

For example, in Vietnam alone, nearly 44,000 schools from preprimary to upper secondary were closed to prevent COVID-19 spread, affecting more than 21 million children. In trying to reach every child with learning opportunities the government has seen evidence that income and geography continue to be barriers for distance education and that there is very limited data to show the differential effects of school closures on girls versus boys. UNICEF is working with the government to better understand gender differences in access and learning through distance education so that this pandemic becomes an opportunity for improving the gender-responsiveness of distance education at scale.

## **3. Intensify community mobilization and support for girls' education, including for pregnant girls and those who were out of school before the COVID-19 crisis.**

Back-to-school campaigns must include targeted messages for communities and caregivers to actively engage them in supporting girls going back to school. Messages must be contextualized, culturally relevant, and effective at changing pervasive and harmful gender norms that hold girls back. Communities must monitor girls' attendance once schools reopen, through school management committees and parent and teacher associations, and support their distance learning in the interim.

Ensuring that girls can access learning materials online and offline during school closures, and that families remain committed to girls' education, is key. For example, in Guatemala, UNICEF is working with the government to support communities in remote areas with poor connectivity and no electricity by providing printed material, TV, and radio messaging, and GIFs via mobile phones that depict both boys and girls helping with domestic chores, and survivor-centered guidance for adults to provide psychosocial support to victims of gender-based violence. This large-scale campaign is accompanied by distribution of baskets that include basic groceries and gender-responsive learning activities.

In Sierra Leone, the COVID-19 crisis forced a reassessment of policies that excluded pregnant girls from attending school. Learning from this experience, Sierra Leone's minister of basic and senior secondary education recently issued a new policy on "radical inclusion" and "comprehensive safety," allowing pregnant girls and adolescent mothers to attend school, take exams, and learn safely once schools reopened.

#### **4. Prioritize girls' safety and protection.**

During the 2014–2016 Ebola epidemic, girls were disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, resulting in a spike in adolescent pregnancies and thousands of adolescent girls unable to complete their education. We have already seen that violence against women and girls has increased during COVID-19 lockdowns. Governments must prioritize measures to protect girls from gender-based violence, early marriage and pregnancy to facilitate their return to school. A couple of examples of rapid responses to keeping girls safe and learning come from Jordan and Cote d'Ivoire.

The government of Jordan, in partnership with UNICEF and the U.K. government, has responded with a set of comprehensive policies including psychosocial support for girls through the nonformal education system, and teachers' professional development in life skills education and effective ways to support victims of violence. More than 180,000 children have benefited from these programs so far. In Cote d'Ivoire, with support from UNICEF, the government launched a nationwide distance learning program, "Mon école à la maison," or "My school at home." Under this system, teachers, mothers' groups, community health workers, and community leaders track how the pandemic is affecting students and families, and offer insights on who may need protection from gender-based violence, child marriage, early pregnancy, or other threats.

#### **5. Ensure meaningful participation for adolescent girls.**

While we continue to highlight the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on adolescent girls and young women, we must also recognize their creativity, innovative solutions, and effective partnership in shaping the response and recovery. Adolescent girls and boys can be agents of change in their communities, but for this to happen, the education system needs to intentionally ensure equity of voice and opportunity of participation for all adolescent girls. An education system that recognizes that girls' voices are valuable and allows for their meaningful participation contributes towards girls' and women's empowerment.

Innovative approaches can help to highlight girls' voices. For example, Plan International utilizes a "photovoice" approach to capture what adolescent girls in the Solomon Islands identify as the barriers preventing them from completing secondary education. These photos and their accompanying captions are featured in two youth-led reports: "Our Education, Our Future" and "Stronger Together." Giving voice to the unheard and raising their voices in chorus on local and global platforms is inspiring.

Without urgent action to remove barriers to girls' education, this health crisis could become a children's rights crisis by denying students their right to learn. Now is the time for governments to reimagine education systems so that girls and boys have equal opportunity to attend school, or access quality learning remotely.

## **Joint press statement: Protecting sexual and reproductive health and rights and promoting gender-responsiveness in the COVID-19 crisis**

Government Offices of Sweden (06.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3brcwBo> - We, the Ministers of South Africa, Sweden, Argentina, Australia, Albania, Belgium, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cabo Verde, Canada, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Fiji, France, Germany, Greece, Guinea, Italy, Latvia, Lebanon, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Namibia, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, are honored to issue this joint statement on behalf of the people and governments of 59 countries: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Cabo Verde, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Fiji, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Guinea, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lebanon, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Mexico, Moldova, Montenegro, Namibia, Netherlands, North Macedonia, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Serbia, South Africa, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, Tuvalu, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Ukraine and Uruguay.

Humanity is confronted with the unprecedented threat of COVID-19. Around the world, the pandemic is having a devastating impact on health systems, economies and the lives, livelihood and wellbeing of all, particularly older people. Responding effectively to this fast-growing pandemic requires solidarity and cooperation among all governments, scientists, civil society actors and the private sector.

COVID-19 affects women and men differently. The pandemic makes existing inequalities for women and girls, as well as discrimination of other marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities and those in extreme poverty worse and risk impeding the realization of human rights for women and girls. Participation, protection and potential of all women and girls must be at the center of response efforts. These efforts must be gender-responsive and consider different impacts surrounding detection, diagnosis and access to treatment for all women and men.

The restrictive measures designed to limit the spread of the virus around the world, increase the risk of domestic violence, including intimate partner violence. As health and social protection as well as legal systems that protect all women and girls under normal circumstances are weakened or under pressure by the COVID-19, specific measures should be implemented to prevent violence against women and girls. The emergency responses should ensure that all women and girls who are refugees, migrants or internally displaced are protected. Sexual and reproductive health needs, including psychosocial support services, and protection from gender-based violence, must be prioritized to ensure continuity. We must also assume responsibility for social protection and ensure adolescent health, rights and wellbeing during schools close-down. Any restrictions to the enjoyment of human rights should be prescribed by law, and in accordance with international law and rigorously assessed.

We support the active participation and leadership of women and girls at all levels of decision-making, including at community level, through their networks and organizations, to ensure efforts and response are gender-responsive and will not further discriminate and exclude those most at risk.

It is crucial that leaders recognize the central role of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in health emergencies and the need for robust health systems to save lives. In this context, sexual health services are essential. We recommit to the immediate implementation of

the UHC political declaration by all. Funding sexual and reproductive health and rights should remain a priority to avoid a rise in maternal and newborn mortality, increased unmet need for contraception, and an increased number of unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted infections.

Around the world, midwives, nurses and community health workers are essential to contain COVID-19 and they require personal protective equipment. Safe pregnancy and childbirth depend on all these health workers, adequate health facilities, and strict adherence to infection prevention. Respiratory illnesses in pregnant women, particularly COVID-19 infections, must be priority due to increased risk of adverse outcomes. As our national and international supply chains are impacted by this pandemic, we recommit to providing all women and girls of reproductive age with reproductive health commodities. And we call on governments around the world to ensure full and unimpeded access to all sexual and reproductive health services for all women and girls.

We welcome the multilateral efforts, including by the UN, including UNFPA and UN Women, WHO, the World Bank and IMF, and regional development banks, as well as the G7 and G20 declarations, towards a coherent and global response to COVID-19. We encourage them all in their efforts with national governments and other partners to ensure an effective response and assurance of the continuation of essential health services and rights.

We must coordinate our efforts in this global health crisis. We support the UN General Assembly resolution entitled Global Solidarity to fight COVID-19. And we encourage all governments, the private sector, civil society, philanthropists and others to join us in supporting the emergency response, particularly in the most vulnerable countries, and to give full effect to the global commitment to universal access to health care.

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## **It is time for the world to start caring for the caregivers**

***The ongoing coronavirus pandemic underlines the urgent need for safety nets for domestic workers.***

By Nisha Varia

Al Jazeera (01.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2A1rBN5> - Few workers have cause to celebrate May 1, International Workers' Day, this year. COVID-19 has been accompanied by another pandemic - of job loss and economic insecurity. Domestic workers, primarily women, have particularly precarious jobs and often do not qualify for government support.

In mid-March, as New Yorkers prepared for a mandatory lockdown, a person posted on my town's Facebook group asking what type of protective equipment she should provide to her house cleaner. Replies came fast and furious. "Clean your own home and pay them anyway!" "Cancel and pay!" But in many other communities, and around the world, the response is different.

Domestic workers' organisations and the media are reporting devastating stories of domestic workers catapulted into economic crisis across every region. Faced with lockdowns, social distancing restrictions, and in some cases their own economic hardship, many employers have dismissed their domestic workers or suspended them without pay. The loss of income is devastating for many domestic workers who may have little or no savings.

Others, especially live-in domestic workers on migrant visas such as those in the Middle East, might find themselves with extra responsibilities and longer hours, with children out of school and other household members at home.

The International Labour Organization estimates that there are 67 million domestic workers globally and that 80 percent of them are women. Yet 90 percent of them are excluded from protections such as paid sick leave and unemployment benefits. This is particularly the case in Asia, Latin America and Africa, where the largest numbers of domestic workers are concentrated.

Despite this bleak picture, there are also promising examples of action by private employers, governments and labour groups to create safety nets for this vital group of workers.

In South Africa, domestic workers who are registered with the government are provided six weeks of paid sick leave in a three-year period, and are covered by the Unemployment Insurance Act, which provides up to 238 days of unemployment benefits. Gaps remain - those workers who are not formally registered with the government cannot access these benefits.

France uses a voucher system for social security safety nets and paid leave for domestic workers, easing administrative formalities for employers and contributing to relatively widespread coverage.

A World Bank compilation of emergency relief measures during the pandemic shows that many exclude domestic workers entirely. But some countries are taking steps toward inclusion. Argentina's president, Alberto Fernandez, issued an executive order providing approximately \$155 to domestic workers and other low-wage workers as emergency financial relief.

Spain extended unemployment benefits for the first time to domestic workers on March 31. Registered domestic workers can receive 70 percent of one month's salary if their hours have been reduced or they lost their jobs since the lockdown began. This benefit is smaller than for other workers and not enough to sustain workers through an indefinite crisis but is a step towards bringing domestic workers' benefits closer in alignment to those of other workers.

Workers' organisations are campaigning to end these gaps, pressing governments to include domestic workers in their relief measures. They are using social media and other means to urge employers to continue paying domestic workers even when they cannot work due to social distancing restrictions. In Brazil, the National Federation of Domestic Workers and Themis, a gender equality group, is campaigning for employers to suspend domestic workers with pay or to provide them with adequate protective equipment. Their high-profile webinar explained domestic workers' rights, with speakers including former President Dilma Rousseff.

In the United States, the National Domestic Workers Alliance is well on its way to raising \$4m to distribute to domestic workers. While domestic workers may qualify for economic relief varying by state, a significant proportion are undocumented migrants who cannot access government benefits.

Domestic workers perform essential work, caring for the most important parts of peoples' lives - our children, our parents, our homes. Once restrictions lift, employers would do well to remember how much they missed these services.

These caregivers deserve safety nets on par with other workers and treatment with dignity. The few positive models should become the new norm.

If you are an employer, pay your domestic worker full wages during lockdowns. If you are a politician, push for the full inclusion of domestic workers in emergency relief funds, including direct cash assistance that does not require formal employment registration or migrant status.

And we should all push for longer-term change. In 2011, the International Labour Organization adopted the Domestic Workers Convention, now ratified by 29 countries. These countries are obliged to ensure that domestic workers have legal protections on par with other workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted deep inequalities in how women's work is valued and compensated, and the dire consequences when crises hit without safety nets. But the pandemic also provides an opportunity to make long-overdue changes so that women workers emerge stronger than before. And that would give us a real cause for celebration next Labour Day.

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## **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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## **Some governments are using coronavirus to restrict women's rights**

***Classing abortions as 'non-essential' is cruel and an assault on the rights of women to bodily autonomy.***

By Claire Provost

Al Jazeera (14.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3abWECf> - Women are prominent on the front lines of the world's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Globally, most of our health workers are women. They also do most of the world's unpaid care work - even in "normal times" - taking care of relatives and helping them recuperate both from extraordinary illnesses and everyday exhaustion.

And yet, the rights of these women are coming under historic attacks even now.

Back in early March, a potentially historic bill to liberalise abortion in Argentina was an early casualty; its review has been indefinitely postponed along with many other democratic debates.

In the US, conservative states from Texas to Indiana are now banning most abortions during the pandemic. By classifying them as "non-essential", they are arguing that abortions can be delayed so that all doctors focus on COVID-19 first.

Across the Atlantic, in Poland, a bill to further restrict abortion has been revived and will be heard in Parliament next week. When this first happened, in 2016, it was met with mass protests - which are currently prohibited under coronavirus emergency measures.

Are governments and anti-abortion campaign groups taking advantage of the crisis to further restrict women's rights?

It would not be the first time. Around the world, organised ultra-conservative movements are looking for ways to use this moment to achieve what they always wanted; fewer rights for women over their bodies.

Anti-abortion activists in Slovakia, Italy and the UK are also campaigning for abortions to be suspended during the pandemic, arguing that all resources must be focused on the coronavirus right now. They do not want women to have these rights after the crisis, either.

Others are celebrating the closure of clinics amid emergency measures that have already taken a drastic toll on access to abortion as well as contraception, HIV medicine and domestic violence services.

This pandemic is also exacerbating and shining new light on the astonishing amount of red tape that has long limited women's access to abortion in places where it has been legal for generations.

In Italy, doctors can refuse to perform abortions (and up to 90 percent do, in some areas). Medical terminations (consisting of two pills, taken across several days), are only available during the first seven weeks of pregnancy, rather than nine as in many other European countries. And these pills must be taken in hospitals, unlike in other countries, where they are also available at clinics.

These details are crucial. Abortions are by definition time-sensitive procedures. Even before the coronavirus, women in Italy struggled to access them.

Now hospitals are overwhelmed by the coronavirus and this access is increasingly impossible. As a result, women are being forced to endure unwanted pregnancies for longer and to have surgeries they do not want as medical abortions have been largely suspended.

In other countries, restrictive red tape includes mandatory counselling, waiting periods or requirements that two doctors sign off on an abortion.

Such rules vary across borders but their effect is the same; making difficult experiences for women even harder, even in "normal times", and exacerbating these challenges today.

These restrictions have other things in common, too. Neil Datta at the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights told me they stem from compromises made when abortion was first legalised, which happened in the 1970s in Italy, for example. At that time, some doctors were still "diagnosing" women with hysteria.

In other words, there is nothing enlightened about this red tape. And what ultimately lies beneath these restrictions is the toxic, patriarchal idea that women cannot be trusted to control their own bodies and make their own choices.

Today, women's reproductive rights are being sidelined - again. For its part, the World Health Organization (WHO) has issued guidelines about domestic violence, contraception, childbirth and breastfeeding amid COVID-19.

But so far, it has been noticeably silent on safe abortion during the pandemic.

Thankfully, this is not the full picture. Big changes are also happening in response to the public health crisis and its fallout in all aspects of our lives.

Some US cities have suspended evictions of renting tenants, for example. In Iran, thousands have been released from prison. Many things that would have seemed impossible a year ago, do not any more.

And we are seeing some evidence of this for women's right to choose, too. England and Wales, for instance, have issued new rules to enable women to take medical abortion pills at home and via telemedicine appointments. Ireland and France have done similar. Germany has at least made its mandatory counselling available online and by phone.

These practical moves are victories for sensibility amid crisis. They uphold rights and public health. If women do not need to travel to multiple appointments, this can help limit the spread of coronavirus and get us out of this emergency faster.

Indeed, during crises change can happen quickly. Archaic red tape can be cut. Toxic distrust of women could give way to a new common sense that prioritises rights and health over politics. And those who were afraid of women's autonomy might not find it so scary now that they have witnessed something a lot more frightening - a historic pandemic threatening lives, health systems and democracies worldwide.

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## **What do countries with the best coronavirus responses have in common? Women leaders**

By Avivah Wittenberg-Cox

Forbes (13.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bnNmEJ> - Looking for examples of true leadership in a crisis? From Iceland to Taiwan and from Germany to New Zealand, women are stepping up to show the world how to manage a messy patch for our human family. Add in Finland, Iceland and Denmark, and this pandemic is revealing that women have what it takes when the heat rises in our Houses of State. Many will say these are small countries, or islands, or other exceptions. But Germany is large and leading, and the UK is an island with very different outcomes. These leaders are gifting us an attractive alternative way of wielding power. What are they teaching us?

### **Truth**

Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, stood up early and calmly told her countrymen that this was a serious bug that would infect up to 70% of the population. "It's serious," she said, "take it seriously." She did, so they did too. Testing began right from the get go. Germany jumped right over the phases of denial, anger and disingenuousness we've seen elsewhere. The country's numbers are far below its

European neighbours, and there are signs they may be able to start loosening restrictions relatively soon.

### **Decisiveness**

Among the first and the fastest moves was Tsai Ing-wen's in Taiwan. Back in January, at the first sign of a new illness, she introduced 124 measures to block the spread, without having to resort to the lockdowns that have become common elsewhere. She is now sending 10 million face masks to the US and Europe. Ing-wen managed what CNN has called "among the world's best" responses, keeping the epidemic under control, still reporting only six deaths.

Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand was early to lockdown and crystal clear on the maximum level of alert she was putting the country under – and why. She imposed self-isolation on people entering New Zealand astonishingly early, when there were just 6 cases in the whole country, and banned foreigners entirely from entering soon after. Clarity and decisiveness are saving New Zealand from the storm. As of mid-April they have suffered only four deaths, and where other countries talk of lifting restrictions, Ardern is adding to them, making all returning New Zealanders quarantine in designated locations for 14 days.

### **Tech**

Iceland, under the leadership of Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, is offering free coronavirus testing to all its citizens, and will become a key case study in the true spread and fatality rates of Covid-19. Most countries have limited testing to people with active symptoms. Iceland is going whole hog. In proportion to its population the country has already screened five times as many people as South Korea has, and instituted a thorough tracking system that means they haven't had to lockdown... or shut schools.

Sanna Marin became the world's youngest head of state when she was elected last December in Finland. It took a millennial leader to spearhead using social media influencers as key agents in battling the coronavirus crisis. Recognising that not everyone reads the press, they are inviting influencers of any age to spread fact-based information on managing the pandemic.

### **Love**

Norway's Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, had the innovative idea of using television to talk directly to her country's children. She was building on the short, 3-minute press conference that Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen had held a couple of days earlier. Solberg held a dedicated press conference where no adults were allowed. She responded to kids' questions from across the country, taking time to explain why it was OK to feel scared. The originality and obviousness of the idea takes one's breath away. How many other simple, humane innovations would more female leadership unleash?

Generally, the empathy and care which all of these female leaders have communicated seems to come from an alternate universe than the one we have gotten used to. It's like their arms are coming out of their videos to hold you close in a heart-felt and loving embrace. Who knew leaders could sound like this? Now we do.

Now, compare these leaders and stories with the strongmen using the crisis to accelerate a terrifying trifecta of authoritarianism: blame-"others", capture-the-judiciary, demonize-the-journalists, and blanket their country in I-will-never-retire darkness (Trump, Bolsonaro, Obrador, Modi, Duterte, Orban, Putin, Netanyahu...).

There have been years of research timidly suggesting that women's leadership styles might be different and beneficial. Instead, too many political organisations and companies are still working to get women to behave more like men if they want to lead or succeed. Yet these national leaders are case study sightings of the seven leadership traits men may want to learn from women.

It's time we recognised it – and elected more of it.

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## **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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## **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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## **UNFPA study shows limits on women's reproductive decision-making worldwide - one quarter of women cannot refuse sex**

UNFPA (01.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bOMWqu> - Approximately a quarter of women cannot refuse sex or make their own decisions about accessing proper health care, a major international study has found. UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, today released groundbreaking new research revealing how far the world has come in allowing women and girls to make informed decisions about their reproductive rights.

Most countries have strong laws to ensure women can access their sexual and reproductive health and rights. But the reality women face is often very different. UNFPA measured women's reproductive decision making in 57 countries, and legislation on sexual and reproductive health and rights in 107 countries, and the findings showed, amongst other trends, that in over 40% of the countries, women's reproductive rights are regressing.

"One woman in four in the countries we examined is not able to make her own decisions about accessing health care. This is shocking and unacceptable," said Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA Executive Director. "This new research offers a comprehensive picture of the state of sexual and reproductive health and rights around the world, both in law and the lived reality of women and girls. It will help us better understand what works and pinpoint the challenges that remain with a level of detail we have not had before."

The new findings help us measure progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), gender equality and women's empowerment. More precisely, they cover two indicators under SDG 5 on achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (Target 5.6). Indicator 5.6.1 measures women's reproductive autonomy and indicator 5.6.2 measures the legal and regulatory frameworks that exist in countries to allow people their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The key findings from the research include:

\*Only 55% of women can make their own decisions on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

\*A quarter of women are not able to make their own decisions about accessing health care.

\*Countries on average have 73% of the laws and regulations in place needed to guarantee full and equal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

\*Almost 100% of countries' laws and regulations guarantee access to voluntary HIV counselling and testing and protect the confidentiality of people living with HIV.

\*Many states impose legal restrictions that impede access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for certain groups - namely women and adolescents.

This research will be a crucial resource for UNFPA, governments, and partners to efficiently respond to the most pressing needs of women and girls around the world. For the first time, it allows us to identify the challenges different countries still face in the full realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights that legal frameworks may not account for.

You can access the research here: <https://www.unfpa.org/sdg-5-6>.

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## **Global report - FGM/C: A call for a global response**

End FGM European Network (17.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3af1Qvc> - Female Genital Mutilation or Cutting (FGM/C) is happening in far more countries around the world than widely acknowledged, and the number of women and girls who are affected is being woefully underestimated, finds a new global report.

FGM/C is occurring in at least 92 countries, but only 51 (55%) have specific legislation against the practice, leaving millions without adequate legal protection.

The End FGM European Network, the US Network to End FGM/C, and Equality Now have partnered to produce the report '[Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Call for a Global Response](#)', bringing together for the first time wide-ranging information on the practise and pervasiveness of FGM/C in countries not currently included in official global data.

According to figures released by UNICEF in February 2020, at least 200 million women and girls have undergone FGM/C in 31 countries worldwide. This figure only includes states where there is available data from large-scale representative surveys, incorporating 27 countries from the African continent, together with Iraq, Yemen, the Maldives, and Indonesia.

Our research has now identified at least 60 other countries where the practice of FGM/C has been documented either through indirect estimates, small-scale studies, anecdotal evidence, and media reports.

The growing body of evidence featured in our report reveals that FGM/C is taking place in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, and North America. It also highlights key gaps in data availability and anti-FGM legislation.

FGM/C involves the partial or complete removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons, thereby interfering with the natural functions of girls' and women's bodies.

There are various types of FGM/C. It includes clitoridectomy, which is the partial or total removal of the clitoris, and excision, which involves the removal of the entire clitoris and the cutting of the labia minor.

In another form, known as infibulation, all external genitalia is removed and the two sides of the vulva are stitched together to leave only a small hole. Other procedures involve pricking, nicking, or in other ways damaging the female genitalia.

The procedure itself can be fatal, and data on the total number of deaths each year is unavailable. The practice has no health benefits and can have serious lifelong physical and psychological harm.

It is typically carried out on girls between infancy and age 18, with women occasionally subjected. While it is often done without anaesthetic, it is increasingly happening in medical settings performed by healthcare professionals.

Although the type and justifications for FGM/C can vary somewhat within different cultures, it is deeply rooted in gender inequality and often is a reflection of the patriarchal desire to control the sexuality of women and girls.

Despite mounting evidence demonstrating the global pervasiveness of FGM/C, levels of awareness and acknowledgement amongst government authorities and the general public remain unacceptably low.

The dearth of accurate data is enabling governments reluctant to tackle FGM/C to ignore the issue. Better statistical information is invaluable because it can help put pressure on states to take action and provides a baseline from which the scale and effectiveness of interventions can be measured.

Governments need to strengthen investment for evidence-based research and enact and enforce comprehensive laws and policies. There is also an urgent need to improve the wellbeing of survivors by providing critical support and services.

The international community and donors should bolster their global political commitment by increasing resources and investment into the provision of assistance to survivors and the empowerment of women and girls.

Dr. Ghada Khan, Network Coordinator of US End FGM/C Network said: "The global relevance of FGM/C, as highlighted in the findings of the report, once again calls for the collection and dissemination of reliable data on FGM/C prevalence across all regions, countries, and contexts in order to support FGM/C prevention efforts, and provide care and services to all women and girls who have undergone the practice worldwide."

Accurate data also assists grassroots organizations and researchers to attract funding as a lack of financial backing is a major problem hampering the work of women's rights activists.

Flavia Mwangovya, Global Lead at Equality Now said: "The stories shared by brave survivors and activists demonstrate how women across the world are uniting in their commitment to end this harmful practice, irrespective of the type of FGM involved or where it occurs. We owe it to survivors and those at risk to ensure that political commitments made by governments to end FGM are finally fulfilled."

FGM/C is recognized as a human rights violation under international human rights law. In 2012, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution to eliminate FGM/C, and

in 2015, the 193 countries unanimously agreed to a new global target within the Sustainable Development Goals for the elimination of FGM/C by 2030 (SDG5).

Fiona Coyle, Director at the End FGM European Network said: "FGM must be recognized as a global issue that needs global prioritization. With only ten years to go to achieve the goal of zero girls undergoing FGM, we have no more time to waste. We need to work across communities, countries, and continents.

Everyone everywhere is called to substantially increase efforts towards the abandonment of FGM. We need increased political will, stronger laws and policies, increased community engagement, and increased investment to truly end this practice."

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## **States should not use religious beliefs to justify women and LGBT+ rights violations – UN expert**

OHCHR (02.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TEwt0u> - States should repeal gender discriminatory laws grounded on religious beliefs and must address gender-based violence carried out in the name of religion by non-State actors, said a UN expert in a report presented to the Human Rights Council today.

"I firmly reject any claim that religious beliefs can be invoked as a legitimate 'justification' for violence or discrimination against women, girls or LGBT+ people. The right to freedom of religion protects individuals and not religions as such," said Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

In his report, the UN expert urges States to repeal gender-based discrimination laws, including those enacted with reference to religious considerations that criminalize adultery; criminalize persons on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity; criminalize abortion in all cases; and facilitate religious practices that violate human rights.

"Women and LGBT+ people experience discrimination and violence inflicted in the name of religion by State and non-State actors that impedes their ability to fully enjoy their human rights, including their right to freedom of religion or belief," Shaheed said.

The Special Rapporteur also expressed deep concern at the rise in political and religious campaigns, which invoke religious freedom to seek to rollback human rights that are fundamental to gender equality, at both national and international levels.

"Religious communities are not monolithic. In many religions, a plurality of self-understandings exists, some of which may be more committed than others to advancing gender equality and non-discrimination," the UN expert said.

"While religious organizations are entitled to autonomy in the administration of their affairs, such deference should be extended within a holistic conception of rights grounded in the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and inalienability of all human rights.

"States have an obligation to guarantee to everyone, including women, girls and LGBT+ people, an equal right to freedom of religion or belief, including by creating an enabling environment where pluralist and progressive self-understandings can manifest," Shaheed said.

The Special Rapporteur also presented reports on his recent country visits to the Netherlands and Sri Lanka to the Human Rights Council.

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## **UN chief: Growing inequality for women should shame world**

By Edith M. Lederer

Associated Press (28.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cuCPbs> - U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned Thursday that inequality for women is growing and it "should shame us all in the 21st century because it is not only unacceptable, it is stupid."

The U.N. chief said in a speech at the New School in New York that gender inequality and discrimination against women is the "one overwhelming injustice across the globe — an abuse that is crying out for attention."

"Everywhere, women are worse off than men, simply because they are women," he said, and minority, migrant, refugee and disabled women "face even greater barriers."

Guterres said gender inequality is "a stain," just like slavery and colonialism were in previous centuries.

He said young women like Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl who campaigned for girls' right to education after surviving being shot by Taliban militants, and Nadia Murad, the Nobel peace laureate who survived enslavement and sexual abuse by Islamic State extremists in Iraq, "are breaking barriers and creating new models of leadership."

But despite these advances, Guterres said, "the state of women's rights remains dire."

"Progress has slowed to a standstill — and in some cases, been reversed," he said. "There is a strong and relentless push back against women's rights."

Guterres pointed to violence against women "at epidemic levels," with more than one in three women experiencing violence in their lifetimes, and legal protections against rape and domestic violence "being diluted or rolled back."

The secretary-general spoke ahead of the meeting of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women from March 9-20 which will assess implementation of the declaration and platform for action adopted by the world's nations at the U.N. women's conference in Beijing 25 years ago to achieve gender equality.

Guterres said women leaders and female public figures "face harassment, threats and abuse, online and off" and are excluded from "the top table" in government, corporations and peace negotiations.

"From the ridiculing of women as hysterical or hormonal, to the routine judgment of women based on their looks, from the myths and taboos that surround women's natural bodily functions, to mansplaining and victim-blaming — misogyny is everywhere," Guterres said.

"And the digital age could make these inequalities even more entrenched," Guterres warned.

The secretary-general said he sees five areas where achieving gender equality "will transform the world."

First, he calls for an end to “men waging war on women,” noting that 137 women around the world are killed by a member of their own family every day.

The U.N. is committed to putting women at the center of conflict prevention, peacemaking, peace-building and mediation — and to increase the number of female peacekeepers, he said.

In other areas, Guterres said “macho posturing will not save our planet” but gender equality “is essential if we are to beat the climate emergency.” And he said women still earn just 77 cents for every dollar earned by men and that must be rectified to ensure equal economic rights.

As for the digital divide, Guterres said many algorithms are biased toward men, and “unless women play an equal role in designing digital technologies, progress on women’s rights could be reversed.”

Finally, the secretary-general said political representation must improve, noting that while women’s participation in parliaments around the world has doubled in the last 25 years, it’s only been “to one quarter” of members, and less than one-tenth of the world’s nations are led by women.

“Gender equality is a question of power — power that has been jealously guarded by men for millennia,” Guterres said.

“We must urgently transform and redistribute power, if we are to safeguard our future and our planet,” he said.

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## **NATO adopts first-ever policy on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse**

***NATO has adopted its first policy on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse.***

NATO (30.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2uoed2S> - The policy, which applies to all personnel, makes clear NATO’s zero-tolerance approach. This robust policy defines what behaviours are unacceptable, how to prevent them, and how Allies will work collectively to ensure accountability. The policy is focused first and foremost on prevention, and this is key for protecting women and girls and all who might be at risk. By raising awareness, requiring training, and taking other steps to create an environment conducive to the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, the policy sends a clear message of enhanced protection and ensures the trust and confidence of NATO’s citizens and those of the countries in which the Alliance operates.

According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the policy is “another practical way in which we show our commitment to our principles and core values, including respect for human rights.”

NATO is committed to advancing gender equality and the principles of Women Peace and Security across its tasks and functions – military and civilian. This work is guided by the NATO/EAPC Policy on Women, Peace and Security and the concepts of integration, inclusiveness and integrity, which stem from the Alliance’s core values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The policy was adopted by NATO Foreign Ministers in November 2019 and endorsed by NATO leaders at their meeting in London in December.

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## **Anti-abortion laws: a war against poor women**

***Given the amount of research that shows how ineffective punitive laws are in curbing the number of abortions women carry out, it is difficult to imagine any other reason that they exist, other than to keep women out of the workforce and in poverty.***

By Manuella Libardi

Open Democracy (28.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2RY08Rx> - The political fight against anti-abortion legislation is infact a class battle, and the reality is that abortion is only illegal for poor women. Women with resources can always interrupt their unwanted pregnancies. Either they know a doctor who performs medical abortions for an exorbitant price, they have the resources to travel to a place where abortion is legal, or they have the means to buy an abortion pill in their own country or elsewhere.

Restricting access to safe abortions keeps poor women in poverty, perpetuates the cycle that prevents them from social mobility and allows wealth to remain in the hands of the rich, particularly white men.

Deciding if and when to have a child is essential for a woman's economic and psychological well-being: it has implications for her education and for entering the workforce. In a 2018 study based on interviews with 813 women in the United States throughout five years, researchers found that women who had abortions denied to them were more likely to be in poverty within six months compared to women who were able to interrupt the pregnancy. Women who were denied abortion were also less likely to have full-time work and more likely to depend on some form of public assistance. Both effects "remained significant for 4 years."

The study concludes that "women who were denied an abortion were more likely than women who received an abortion to experience economic difficulties and insecurity for years. Laws restricting access to abortion may lead to worse economic outcomes for women".

### **Latin America**

In Latin America, this scenario is exacerbated by the huge inequalities of the region, which makes poor women and minorities invisible to those who are creating public policies. Indigenous women, for example, are disproportionately affected by adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

The rates of unwanted pregnancy and teenage pregnancy are high among indigenous populations and indigenous women also face greater risks of complications related to abortion such as injury or death than the general public.

Poor, young and ethnic minority women suffer the physical and social costs imposed on them by the restrictive anti-abortion laws of Latin America the most. Latin America is home to six countries that criminalize abortion in all cases, even in situations where a woman's life is at risk. In El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Suriname, women have to carry a full term pregnancy even if it means they could die in the process, which is an explicit violation of their human rights.

This makes Latin America the region of the world with the strictest anti-abortion legislation. The only other two places that fully penalize termination, even if the procedure is medically necessary to save the woman's life, is Malta and the Vatican.

El Salvador made headlines in 2019 when Evelyn Hernández was acquitted of a murder conviction related to the death of a fetus. She had been sentenced to 40 years in prison for giving birth to a dead baby, in other words, for miscarrying.

In this Central American country, at least 159 women have received sentences of between 12 and 40 years of prison for violating the country's anti-abortion laws. About 20 remain in jail today, and none of these women comes from rich or economically stable families. All are poor.

### ***The race factor***

The political-economic order is made up of many variables, and race is among the first. In the United States, black women have the highest abortion rates in the country. This is a consequence of the serious wealth gap between white and black families, which remains constant even among poor families.

A white family that lives near the poverty line generally has a yearly wage of around \$18,000, meanwhile, black families in similar economic situations usually have a near-zero average wealth. While all women suffer the consequences of the battle against abortion, class reality means that women of color feel the effects disproportionately.

A large number of studies show that access to safe abortion in the United States had more visible positive effects among black women. After the legalization of the procedure, the entry of black women into the workforce increased 6.9 percentage points, compared with 2 percentage points among all women.

The legalization of abortion in the United States reduced adolescent fertility among all women. However, black women and girls experienced an increase in the high school graduation rate and college admission, while legalization did not improve educational outcomes for white women and girls. This is another indication of how inequality disproportionately affects women of color.

### ***Restrictive laws do not decrease abortions***

The highest abortion rates are found in developing countries, specifically in Latin America. Leading the list is the Caribbean, with 59 per 1,000 women of reproductive age, followed by South America, with 48. As expected, the lowest rates are found in North America, with 17, and in Western and Northern Europe, with 16 and 18, respectively.

Given the amount of research that shows how ineffective punitive laws are in curbing the number of abortions women carry out, it is difficult to imagine any other reason that they exist, other than to keep women out of the workforce and in poverty.

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## **The UN unveils 6 themes in a big year pushing for women's rights**

By Stéphanie Fillion

PassBlue (20.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TJAani> - As the countdown to this year's main events celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women has

begun, UN Women has announced six themes to anchor the two Generation Equality forums to be held in May and in July. While many women's groups applaud the broad themes, some have serious qualms about one topic in particular.

The Generation Equality Forum is a civil society-led global gathering, officially announced last June, that will play a major role in the Beijing+25 commemorations. They officially start with the annual Commission on the Status of Women, or CSW, in March at the United Nations, where a review of the progress and gaps of the 1995 Beijing agenda will be made to inform the two forums later in the year as well as a UN General Assembly session in September.

The new "action coalition" themes are: gender-based violence, economic justice and rights, bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive rights, feminist action for climate justice, technology innovation for gender equality and investing in feminist movements and leadership.

UN Women leads the Generation Equality forums with France and Mexico, where women-centered groups, "allied countries" and other partners will convene from May 7-8 in Mexico City and July 7-10 in Paris. Their goal is to further define the blueprint hammered out at the New York conference on how to achieve gender equality — especially for young women — by 2030.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted by 189 countries at a conference held in 1995 to achieve gender equality and women's rights. Hillary Clinton, the United States first lady at the time, famously declared at the Beijing meeting, "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights. . . ."

Despite progress on some fronts, no country has achieved gender equality since that bold declaration. In the current political environment, growing nationalism and populism in certain countries, such as the US, pushback against ensuring full rights for women has been powered by the highest levels of governments.

"The themes for the action coalitions were finalized through a thorough analytical process of reviewing evidence and data to assess the nature of need, the degree of readiness and the action coalition's ability to deliver game-changing results within five years," said Julien Pellaux, the strategic planning adviser to the executive director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

Each coalition will be led by a group of partners, including UN member states, women's movements, civil society organizations and corporations as well as some UN agencies. The themes were chosen by a 52-member Generation Equality Strategic Planning and Leadership Group, formed by UN Women.

In addition, the coalitions will work on a plan toward the UN Decade of Action, which aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals.

This year is also an important marker for commemorating UN Security Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace and security, a 20-year-old landmark document ensuring women's rights in conflict. It has made scant progress in guaranteeing that women are equally represented at peace negotiations, to the disappointment of many women's groups.

While some themes chosen by UN Women echo traditional ones on gender issues, the one on technology innovation reflects more recent realities.

Technology holds significant potential to improve women's and girls' lives, Pellaux from UN Women told PassBlue. "The diverse ways in which technology is impacting on gender equality shows that rather than being an unstoppable force, technology is malleable and can be geared towards the achievement of social goals with the right interventions and levers.

"Interventions and investments should support technological development and innovation and ensure that technology serves the purpose of advancing gender equality," he said.

### **'Bodily autonomy'**

The reaction to the announcement of the themes has not been roundly praised. Some women's groups around the world are dismayed about the process behind the choice of themes and the results, saying the decision-making has been dominated by Western organizations favoring decriminalization of prostitution.

In November, PassBlue published a story about UN Women having just declared its neutrality in the battle among global feminists over whether sex work should be decriminalized. At the time, a statement from Mlambo-Ngcuka, the head of UN Women, overruled a 2013 memo that the agency would "recognize the right of all sex workers to choose their work or leave it and to have access to other employment opportunities."

The move to neutrality by UN Women, possibly to avoid fearsome squabbles on the topic during 2020 commemorations, seemed to surprise advocates of decriminalization.

"We are aware of the different positions and concerns on the issue of prostitution/sex work and are attentive to the important views of all concerned," Mlambo-Ngcuka wrote in the statement. "UN Women has taken a neutral position on this issue. Thus, UN Women does not take a position for or against the decriminalization/legalization of prostitution/sex work."

Mlambo-Ngcuka was responding to a letter she had received days earlier, signed by more than 1,400 individuals and organizations, who were concerned that UN Women was allowing civil society groups advocating for decriminalization of buyers and sellers of sex to influence future debates about women's equality and rights. Those debates included the Generation Equality forums and the Commission on the Status of Women meeting. Last week's announcement on the action themes, however, is keeping the debate around UN Women's neutrality alive.

Taina Bien-Aimé, the executive director of the New York-based Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, which opposes the legalization of prostitution/sex work, denounced the wording of the theme on "bodily integrity." She says it favors one side of the debate.

The letter sent to UN Women last fall was written by Bien-Aimé's organization. She is a former Wall Street lawyer and a founder of Equality Now.

"The concern is that," Bien-Aimé told PassBlue, "while respect for SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights] is key to all women's fundamental rights to health and equality, it has, incomprehensibly, become a vehicle to push to legalize the global multi-billion-dollar sex trade and redefine prostitution as labor."

Pellaux of UN Women said the wording of the themes "was kept general for now with the expectation that Coalition leaders will have [to] further refine the titles as part of the Action Coalition blueprints."

"This includes the coalition on 'bodily integrity and sexual and reproductive health and rights,'" he said.

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## **Ruled out of work: Refugee women's legal right to work**

By Daphne Jayasinghe

International Rescue Committee (15.12.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2syv9CN> - Refugee women seeking jobs and economic opportunities must navigate a labor market mired in complex and gender discriminatory rules and regulations. Burdened with the effects of violence, trauma and displacement and the responsibility of building a new life in a new country, they find their ambitions and their potential thwarted.

This briefing assesses the impact of the law on refugee women's right to work and access economic opportunities in high refugee hosting countries. We find that laws governing women's opportunities to get a job or start a business are far from gender equal. For example five out of 10 of the highest refugee hosting countries impose legal barriers in the majority of areas measured by the World Bank's Women Business and the Law index. Dig deeper into the data and we find that women suffer particularly high legal barriers in certain areas: Just two of the 10 highest refugee hosting countries mandate equal pay for work of equal value; just three of the top 10 mandate equal rights to inherit assets; and seven of the top 10 restrict women's participation in certain industries.

We worked with a team of lawyers to assess the legal framework for refugees' participation in the economy in four different contexts—Ethiopia, Germany, Jordan and Uganda—and found a complex set of rules and requirements affecting refugees' opportunities such as onerous requirements for work permits, limitations on freedom of movement and constraints on the ability to establish a business. These laws affect men and women refugees differently and we find refugee women suffer economic exclusion and marginalization as a consequence.

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

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## **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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## **Women and climate change: the challenges women face to be considered as key actors**

By Priti Darooka

The Land Portal (04.12.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Rz5bcl> - I want to thank IWRAP Asia Pacific for organising a two day strategic dialogue on Women Human Rights and Climate Justice. Some of the points shared here are points discussed at this dialogue in Bangkok in November 2019.

I also want to thank contributions by Feminist Land Platform members, especially Farida Akhter of Bangladesh.

The Feminist Land Platform echoes and endorses the relevant issues raised by the author Priti Darooka, who is a founder member of the Platform. The paper was presented during the International Land Coalition Africa meeting in Abidjan, on the 23rd November 2019.

### ***Climate change impacts women differently***

Climate change impacts everyone. However, the impact of climate change is experienced differently based on one's socio-economic position. It is important to realize that women and men are impacted differently, not only as users of energy, water etc. but also as workers and contributors.

Women are the food producers of the world. (According to FAO women produce more than 50% of global food). Natural calamities such as droughts, floods, hurricane, cyclones, earthquake, landslides etc. due to climate change particularly impact women producers, indigenous women, rural women, women from marginalised groups, whose lives and livelihoods rely on natural resources such as land, water and forest. Millions of women who are in agriculture, the informal economy or are self-employed are exposed to toxic chemicals, extractives, and development projects adopted by countries. They are in the bottom most tier of the supply chain, taking up hazardous occupations with precarious working conditions. Therefore, climate crisis impacts women most critically.

### ***From vulnerable group to active actors***

In climate debates, women are profiled as victims or vulnerable groups—severely impacted. However, these platforms generally don't recognise women as active climate actors with knowledge and agency. Women's unequal participation in decision-making processes, including land and natural resource management, and in paid labour market continues to prevent them from being part of climate related planning, policy making and implementation. The question to raise is whether the role of women or the concerns and priorities of women in their multiple realities are taken into account in the climate solutions, in just transition to green economy or green Jobs. Women are often affected by the change and have a more active role to play.

The capitalist and neoliberal model takes nature for granted. It unfortunately believes that nature is a bottomless pit and will continue to sustain this excessive consumption with exploitative patterns of production forever. The same model also renders women's work invisible, especially the unpaid care work and unpaid work in subsistence forms of livelihood. In market economy if you consume what you produce you have not produced at all. Production only has value if it is for the market. Most of women's work, especially in global South is for self-consumption. Hence, most of women's work is of less or no value. The current economic policies is built on women's labour but considers women's labour as the same bottomless pit that will absorb all adversities and continue to provide care and subsistence limitlessly, and always.

### **Claiming for Climate Justice**

The irony of current climate debates is that we want to change nothing, but we want climate change or climate justice. We are not willing to change our consumption patterns or lifestyle. Transition from fossil fuel to renewables for example is not going to resolve the climate crisis. There also needs to be changes in consumption and lifestyles.

The solutions to address climate crisis are sort through science and technology – renewables or reduction in carbon emission through climate change adaptations. The solutions are not human centric but science centric. Women due to their gendered role and cultural norms do have indigenous knowledge in sustainable resource management. The knowledge held by women at community level is scientific but is not valued. For example, in several agricultural communities, seeds are maintained by women and proper gene pool is ensured. This is an in-depth scientific knowledge that is passed from one generation to another – mother to daughters and within the community of women. And if women's leadership is engaged to address climate crisis there would surely be sustainable, inclusive and 'scientific' solutions.

Climate change effects are aggravated through loss of biodiversity that affects poor women and their food from the common resources and common land.

It is also ironic that the top 10 richest countries of the world are the top countries in global philanthropy. Developed countries hold technical solution and continue to pressure less developing countries to have climate adaptation solutions. Through philanthropic grants these rich countries also provide west based consultants to provide technical support to governments and institutions in the South. This whole process also renders local knowledge, especially held by women on the ground regarding traditional resilience practices absolutely irrelevant and useless.

These same rich countries, however, have their multinationals and brands exploit labour, and environment in these developing countries.

**By leaving women out from the solutions, most climate change solutions directly or indirectly further contribute towards gender inequalities.** For example, with all the noise around shift towards renewables, governments have not provided women with clean, green energy for cooking. Women still in most parts of the world, especially in the global South, continue to burn biomass for cooking.

Climate change debates and solutions therefore need to recognise women's role as workers and producers and as guardians of environment and nature and ensure they are at the centre of all discussions and solutions as key stakeholders.

## **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.

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## **Time for world leaders to honour 25-year-old promises and renew their commitments on women's rights, say human rights experts**

OHCHR (11.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2X8Qj1m> - The international community must prioritise women's rights to meet the promises and commitments on sexual and reproductive health made at a historic global conference 25 years ago, a group of United Nations human rights experts\* has said.

A tremendous amount of work remains to be done to fulfil the ambitious commitments of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) which took place in Cairo in 1994, the experts said.

"We celebrate the important progress which has been achieved. However, 25 years later, we are far from realising the promise of the ICPD agenda," said the UN experts, in a joint statement published as world leaders gather in Nairobi for a summit to mark the anniversary.

"We call on the international community to reaffirm unambiguously its commitments to fulfil the unfinished agenda of ICPD and increase its political will towards and investment on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. We call upon decision-makers to always put women's and girls' human rights at the centre of policy considerations and to meaningfully involve women and girls themselves in all decisions affecting them."

The experts highlighted major achievements including a notable fall of around 38% in the world's maternal mortality rate between 2000 and 2017.

"Yet still more than 800 women are dying daily from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, many of whom are girls," the experts said.

Action was also urgently needed on other reproductive rights, they said, despite the generally wider availability of modern contraception and progress on repealing laws criminalising abortion.

"Criminalising termination of pregnancy is one of the most damaging manifestations of instrumentalising women's bodies and health, subjecting them to risks to their lives or health and depriving them of autonomy in decision-making," the experts said.

"Twenty-five million unsafe abortions occur each year and some 214 million women are deprived of access to essential modern contraception, often leading to unwanted pregnancies.

"The persistent practice of child marriage in many parts of the world continue to lead to teenage pregnancy and the exclusion of girls from education and employment, hence limiting their enjoyment of many other rights," the experts added.

"The push back against women's rights from religious fundamentalists and political conservatives that oppose women's rights are particularly acute in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Despite States' clear human rights obligations in these areas, the strong opposition discourse seeks to retreat from the ambitions of the ICPD agenda, challenging women's right to equality and relegating a woman's role to only the family and procreation.

"Without fully respecting and protecting women's human rights, autonomy and decision-making over their own bodies and lives, we will not achieve the sustainable development goal on gender equality and empower all women and girls."

The Nairobi summit, from 12-14 November, will be attended by heads of State, government ministers, members of parliament and many other groups and individuals interested in the pursuit of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

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## **Fight against HIV leaves women behind**

***New HIV prevention meds are a game-changer for men. Women, not so much.***

By Sarah Wheaton

POLITICO (06.11.2019) - <https://politi.co/2NJZ2rV> - For men who sleep with men, pills that block HIV from taking hold are making unprotected sex feel fun and safe again.

Women aren't getting in on that action.

As European countries gradually roll out pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, priority is going to those most at risk of getting the virus that can cause AIDS, and that means men who have sex with men (MSM). The early results so far show that rates of HIV are plummeting much more quickly among MSM than in other groups.

The specific ways HIV affects women differently have "been a bit of an asterisk," said Jacqui Stevenson, a U.K. researcher focused on gender, aging and HIV.

It's part of a broader trend over the three-decade fight against HIV that's seen women left out of medical research, diagnosed late and facing severe stigma.

Globally, women made up more than half of people living with HIV last year, and about 47 percent of new infections. Yet a median of only 19 percent of the participants in clinical trials of antiretroviral drugs were women, according to a 2015 analysis, and just 11 percent of those in studies of potential cures.

And that's despite the fact that in the parts of the world hardest hit by the epidemic, it's women who are at heightened risk. In sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls and young women aged 15 to 24 made up 10 percent of the population in 2018 — but 25 percent of all new infections, according to 2019 UNAIDS estimates. HIV is the leading cause of death for women aged 15 to 49 worldwide.

"We're failing women with reaching them with prevention," said Luisa Cabal, acting director of UNAIDS' community support, social justice and inclusion department.

One persistent driver of disparities around the world, argue some experts: the perception that men are entitled to sex, but women are not.

### **Mixed progress**

This isn't to say HIV treatment for men is on track. In the developing world, men are less likely to take an HIV test, less likely to seek treatment and less likely to stick with it. Globally, there were fewer men living with HIV than women in 2018, but they made up 60 percent of the AIDS-related deaths, according to UNAIDS estimates.

Still, throughout the epidemic, there's been more research on how prevention and treatment measures work on men's bodies.

In October, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved a new type of PrEP called Descovy — but only for men. The manufacturer, Gilead, simply didn't test it in cisgender women, even though the drug could work differently in vaginal tissue than rectal tissue. That decision has sparked criticism of the U.S. drugmaker. Detractors also note that it's not clear Descovy works better than Gilead's original PrEP drug, Truvada, which is increasingly available in cheaper generic forms. Moreover, trial participants were predominantly white, even though Africans and people of African descent face a disproportionate burden.

Brian Plummer, a spokesman for Gilead (which is also the advertiser presenting Telescope: The New AIDS Epidemic) said that the company and the regulator weren't able to agree beforehand about how to test the new drug in women, but that a trial is now planned in women and adolescent girls.

"Women remain underrepresented in HIV research, including PrEP studies," Plummer said. He noted that setting up a large-scale trial that follows all the rules and lasts long enough to show meaningful results is challenging due to "lack of existing social structures for cisgender women that traditionally support the identification and retention of participants in HIV trials."

These challenges have consistently plagued HIV research, said the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative's Matt Price, a co-author of the 2015 analysis of the proportion of women in studies. He noted that in many societies, women either need to get consent from a partner, or, as primary caregivers, believe they can't easily spend time away.

Another gap: Early studies usually ruled out women of childbearing age to avoid unexpected effects on a potential fetus. Even now, women who wish to get pregnant soon may be reluctant to participate in a long trial.

### ***PrEP's gender gap***

The U.K. is a good example of how countries with a strong track record of helping MSM are not seeing the same improvements for women.

In the government's large-scale trial for free PrEP access, there's been overwhelming demand from MSM to participate. However, the relatively few spots specifically reserved for women are going unfilled. Some advocates are worried the National Health Service will eventually determine that there's no need to create a program for routine access to PrEP for women.

PrEP is "absolutely understood as something that's for gay men" among the general public in the U.K., said Stevenson, a trustee for Sophia Forum, an NGO devoted to women with HIV.

Even though PrEP could be important for women with an HIV-positive partner, or who face gender-based violence or — uncomfortable as it may be for providers to discuss — have unprotected sex with multiple partners, "there's nothing most women would encounter that would even invite them to think about HIV," said Stevenson.

Last week, Public Health England published detailed data about HIV in women for the first time. While HIV diagnosis and care for women is generally excellent by global standards, there are clear signs of disparities. Rates of HIV diagnosis are dropping across the board, but reductions among women between 2016 and 2017 were more modest (13 percent) than among heterosexual men (25 percent) — similar to trends over the past decade. By comparison, rates among men who have sex with men have nosedived, dropping by more than a third since 2015 as PrEP use has become more widespread.

Advocates point to testing trends as cause for concern. While the U.K. has a strong pregnancy-related HIV-testing record, Stevenson notes many women (and their babies) would be much better off learning before conception — and the proportion of women over 50 learning they have HIV has more than doubled since 2008. Women had HIV tests as part of other sexual health services only 57 percent of the time, compared with 79 percent for men.

### ***Global sexual stigma***

In sub-Saharan Africa, it's young women who are most vulnerable. Many social trends are stacked up against them, including high levels of gender-based violence and low levels of education — especially about sexuality. There are also traditions of genital cutting and marriages between older men and much younger women.

Physically, vaginal sex is more likely to lead to HIV infection in women than in men, and adolescents' smaller bodies are more likely to tear. They're less likely to have access to the medicines that can keep them alive once they're infected — and fears of stigma may discourage them from sticking with treatment even when they do have access to the pills.

For its part, the global health community is looking to draw lessons from progress on improving women's access to contraception — a topic likely to be the major focus of a U.N. conference in Nairobi next week.

"Those women being left behind are the youngest, the poorest, the most marginalized," said Cabal.

To Stevenson, who also has field experience in Kenya and Uganda, societal values about women and sexuality are holding back gains in both rich and poor countries, albeit in different ways.

"You're more likely to hear adolescent girls and young women [in sub-Saharan Africa] saying, 'Oh, I went to a clinic, the nurse just told me off, she said I shouldn't be having sex, so why was I looking for condoms,'" Stevenson said. "In the U.K., you might hear a woman in her 60s saying, 'Well I went to the clinic and they told me I didn't need an HIV test.'"

She added, "That is a real difference for men in those settings, where the assumption is, basically, really fundamentally that men need to have sex and they're entitled to [have it]."

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## **Philanthropy for the women's movement, not just 'empowerment'**

***Only women's organizations focused on consciousness-raising, coalition-building, and advocacy can bring the kind of systemic change that women the world over need. The philanthropic community's preoccupation with impact and the short-term projects that deliver measurable outcomes can distract us from what really works.***

By Françoise Girard

Stanford Social Innovation Review (04.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/32GJWrh> - Abundant data shows that the most effective way for philanthropists to advance women's rights worldwide is to directly invest in the women's movement. This means the provision of long-term, general operating support to women's rights organizations that work collaboratively to transform social, legal, and political systems of patriarchal oppression.

However, while today's philanthropists are increasingly quite vocal about achieving gender equality, many foundations have actually decreased their general operating support for these kinds of women's rights organizations, preferring time-bound, project-specific funding aimed at "women's empowerment." The numbers are stark: According to a study by the Women's Philanthropy Institute and Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, women's and girls' groups received only 1.6 percent of US-based charitable giving by individuals, foundations, and corporations in 2016. Moreover, Jill A. Irvine has documented that the share of US foundation funding for general operating support to foreign groups that engage in broad-based advocacy for gender equality dropped dramatically between 2002 and 2013, from 30 percent to 15 percent. This trend has severe consequences. Funding for individual projects that "empower women" can actually be counterproductive, as project-based service delivery grants can leave activists without the time and resources to push for broader systemic change.

If we are serious about women's rights, we must directly support the women's organizations that are pushing forward legislation and policy that guarantees sexual and reproductive rights, codifies fair pay, ensures payment of alimony, and tackles domestic violence. We must support the women's movement, not just "empowerment."

***Why "women's empowerment" projects aren't working***

Billions of dollars are spent annually on projects that aim to empower women. These projects are premised on a simple business case, forcefully made by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and its regional counterparts: that investing in the individual capacities of women delivers economic growth, boosts the national GDP, and works to end poverty.

Examining these projects today, one would be hard pressed to recognize the original vision at the core of “women’s empowerment.” In the 1980s, feminist academics and activists from the Global South were deeply dissatisfied with top-down development models that typically ignored the role of women in society and reinforced patriarchal and colonial-era systems. They promoted a different approach to improving welfare, recognizing and emphasizing the potential and capacity of women to change their communities and countries from the ground up, and supporting women’s groups to organize, to transform gender roles, and to redistribute power.

Today’s focus on investing in individual women, however—whether through microloans, entrepreneurship training, livestock, or scholarships—has little to do with the kind of collective action to transform power relations that these Global South feminists had envisioned. By investing in the individual, the burden remains on women to lift themselves and their children out of poverty, while leaving in place the systems of oppression that cause or contribute to this poverty in this first place.

Not surprisingly, these kinds of projects often fail to effect large-scale change. In a study published in 2019, Sophia Friedson-Ridenour describes how the crop yields of women in Northern Ghana’s farming communities continue to be lower than men’s, despite the US government’s “Feed the Future” project, which provides women access to seeds, technology, and training. The project relies on the assumption that placing more resources in women’s hands will be transformative, in and of itself. This assumption is flawed: Patriarchal bias is systemic in communities where men control ploughing services and the kinds of crops that women can grow. The project did not, however, provide support to women to recognize and challenge traditional power dynamics.

Friedson-Ridenour therefore concludes that we must “avoid instrumentalist approaches to women’s empowerment that simply deepen their integration within economic and social systems that continue to subordinate them”:

“We must go farther and find ways of linking empowerment efforts with wider changes to gendered power relations which both structure access to resources and opportunities, and shape what women imagine as possible and desirable for themselves.”

### ***True empowerment is political***

How can we meet Friedson-Ridenour’s challenge? Real empowerment begins when women come together and reflect on the social norms that keep them as second-class citizens, a political process grounded in acknowledgement of systemic subordination, and leading to the recognition that women have the power to act together for change. This process of consciousness-raising and mobilization happens within women’s movements the world over.

In fact, women’s movements are the key, and often the only, factor driving change on women’s rights. In a 2012 study, Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon analyzed a 70-country dataset from 1975 to 2005 and found that the autonomous mobilization of women was the crucial factor accounting for domestic policy change on violence against women. A strong women’s movement outweighed all other factors that one might otherwise assume

to be more statistically predictive, such as national wealth or the political program of government. Similarly, a 2018 study by Alice Kang and Aili Mari Tripp analyzing data from 50 African countries found that legislative reform on women's rights was significantly less likely without action by domestic women's coalitions.

The impact of women's movements is far reaching. Feminist coalitions have produced a seismic shift in how the world thinks about and prioritizes gender equality. From the creation of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 to the negotiations that led to the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, it has always been the mass mobilization of the global women's movement that has pushed governments to include gender equality and women's rights in international agreements and norms, whether in health, education, water and sanitation, or criminal justice reform. As president of the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), I've participated with feminists from around the world in many of these diplomatic negotiations, and I've seen how easily gender equality falls off the agenda without the women's movement's constant pressure.

### ***What not to do***

Despite such evidence, many US foundations fund women's groups in ways that actually undermine their work, breeding divisions and decreasing opportunities for coalition building. Funders often balk at supporting a movement whose long and complex struggles seem difficult to measure and quantify. The philanthropic community's increasing preoccupation with demonstrating impact often translates into funding only short-term projects that can deliver quick results and easily measurable outcomes.

However, a variety of studies have shown that short-term project funding harms the women's movement. For example, a field study conducted in 2009 by Dean Chahim and Aseem Prakash demonstrated how project support and stringent reporting requirements had the effect of fracturing, depoliticizing, and ultimately, de-legitimizing Nicaragua's women's movement. By forcing women's organizations to compete with each other for the same project-based funding—rather than encouraging grantees to use the money to collaborate and strategize with fellow movement members—funders actually disincentivized collective action and ruptured partnerships. Moreover, service delivery projects took time away from broader activism, consciousness-raising, and community organizing, thus weakening the movement as a whole. Numerous other researchers have found the same effect, describing how time-bound funding for specific projects has weakened grassroots women's movements in Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Colombia, in Ghana, and in Palestine and Egypt.

Moreover, when funding is tied to discrete project outcomes, recipients are unable to use that funding for essential "indirect" expenses like rent, accounting software, recruitment, or meetings. The "nonprofit starvation cycle," a now ubiquitous term coined in the mid-2000s, describes the vicious feedback loop associated with this kind of project-only funding: Nonprofits without the money for indirect expenses are unable to effectively implement their programs, making them less attractive to future potential funders. Women's rights organizations are particularly vulnerable to "starvation" because essential movement-building activities like hosting convenings or forming advocacy coalitions tend to fall outside the parameters of such project grants.

### ***Funding for the long-term***

Social change takes time. Women are rarely granted control over their own lives, sexuality, and reproduction without a fight, and setbacks abound. To support true change, funders must accept that the process is gradual, and support it over the long haul. This means providing grassroots and national women's organizations with flexible

long-term operating support, and refraining from harmful stipulations, such as those that prohibit the use of funds for conference participation or convenings.

Spaces where women can collaborate, strategize, and build solidarity across diverse movements are critical for organizations and activists seeking to mobilize and form long-term coalitions on a mass scale. One of IWHC's first grants to the Argentine women's movement was to pay rent for an apartment in Buenos Aires to allow activists from across the country to meet each other and engage directly with policymakers on a daily basis. This is exactly the kind of request that many donors would scoff at as unnecessary indirect expenses and operating costs, yet it was this investment that helped lay the foundation for 2019's "green wave" demonstrations that produced a watershed moment for reproductive rights. Without spaces for women's groups to collaborate, strategize, and build coalitions, the women's movement remains fractured and unable to effectively mobilize for change. Yet a 2019 study by Jill A. Irvine and Nicholas Halterman found that US foundation funding for activities that create solidarity and identify issues is low and in decline, with funding for grassroots organizing never reaching more than 5 percent.

The identity of the funder also matters. Support for social movements is most successful when the donor is part of the movement. Women's funds—philanthropic organizations that fund women's rights organizations and movements—can effectively play that role. Organizations like IWHC, Mama Cash, MADRE, and the Global Fund for Women foster longstanding relationships with a variety of women's organizations by supporting them through cycles of defeat and victory toward lasting change. Since the mid-1990s, for example, IWHC has supported Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR), whose human rights and consciousness-raising trainings across Turkey laid the ground work for grassroots mobilization, as was the case when thousands of women took to the streets in 2012 to protest the Turkish government's proposed abortion ban, successfully forcing it to back down.

At IWHC, we employ a long-term, flexible grant strategy based on the Whitman Institute's trust-based philanthropy model—a grantmaking model that provides flexible, multi-year core funding and support "beyond the check" through leadership development, advocacy training, and other forms of capacity-building. Trust-based grantmaking relies on long-term relationships and the belief that change must be driven by the community. This high touch model is grounded in mutual trust and allows both the funder and grantee to quickly react to changing political dynamics. This—and the wealth of evidence that points to the unique role of women's movements—is why we trust our grantees to set their own priorities and agenda, and to develop the strategies that will be most effective for them, their partners, and their communities.

If even a fraction of US foundations acknowledged the critical role of consciousness-raising, coalition-building, and advocacy—and funded accordingly—we could be exponentially closer to achieving women's rights. Robust evidence and experience from around the world point us in the right direction. Now, it's time to follow the path.

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## **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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## **Only 1% of gender equality funding is going to women's organisations – why?**

***There's been a \$1bn boost in support in the last two years, but only tiny pots of money are trickling down to feminist groups***

By Kasia Staszewka, Tenzin Dolker and Kellea Miller

The Guardian (02.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2LFUdPs> - In the past two years alone, governments and international institutions have announced more than \$1bn (£0.8bn) in new commitments to support gender equality globally.

These include: €500m (£440m) for the European Union and UN's joint Spotlight Initiative, €120m by France for its feminist foreign policy and \$114m by Norway to end sexual and gender-based violence in conflicts. Canada has announced CAD\$490m (£290m) towards three programmes: women's leadership (\$150m), the LGBTQ2 Fund

(\$40m), and the Equality Fund (\$300m). This fund was among the nearly \$600m committed to women and girls in June at the Women Deliver conference.

When the Dutch created the €77m MDG3 Fund in 2008, it was one of the first and largest of its kind ever created for gender equality. Now, it would be one of the smallest.

We should celebrate this unprecedented scale of commitments and, especially, the feminist movements and allies who have organised for decades to bring these resources to the table. But we celebrate cautiously.

A growing body of evidence proves that feminist movements are driving gender equality, and increasingly donors agree. However, we often see governments' bold statements fizzling into inaction and only tiny pots of money trickling down for feminists organising in the global south.

We also know that while recent government commitments might be big, they pale in comparison with spending that compounds inequality for women, girls, and LGBT people, such as increasing militarisation, growth based on natural resources, and an unjust economic system.

For example, in 2017, governments committed \$4.6bn in aid for gender equality as a primary objective, but spent \$1.7tn on the military. Massive wealth disparities mean that the richest 1% hold 82% of the world's wealth – much of it accumulated on the backs of women's labour, both paid and unpaid.

The new influx of funding has the potential to shift the needle on gender injustice. But only if the money supports feminist solutions to the root causes of gender inequality. To do this, donors must transform their power, politics and practices to centre feminist movements driving change on local, national and global levels.

Here's how this can be done.

Firstly, money must be moved directly to feminist movements in the global south.

With the new government commitments, one might think that movements' coffers are growing. But they're not. The latest figures from 2016-2017 show that a meagre 1% of all gender-focused aid went to women's organisations. The bulk of this money went to international organisations based in the donor countries, rather than feminist groups leading their own, context-specific solutions.

Secondly, working with movements requires a transformational approach, not a transactional one.

We hear time and time again that donors want to support movements, but that those movements don't fit their bureaucratic requirements: their budgets are too small, finances unaudited, or their evaluation systems are underdeveloped.

What local feminist movements need are resources that are big, agile, cross-issue and long-term. It means that some of the donors' long-established funding models need to change, but it is not impossible.

If you can't reach feminist movements with your money, adopt new funding models and feminist funding practices. Leading from the South, for instance, is a €40m funding model led by women's funds in Asia, Africa and South America, created by the Dutch government in response to the advocacy by movements after their flagship Funding

Leadership and Opportunities for Women programme failed to reach women's rights groups.

Thirdly, donors must use their power to transform their own politics, peers and sectors.

Funding is not a single charitable gesture detached from the world outside.

To effect change, donors need to not only invest ambitiously in movements, but to critically reflect on their policies and practices.

Commitments are great, but now it is time for action. Donors must engage feminist movements as equal partners, work to transform their own institutions, and campaign to build an interdependent and coherent feminist funding ecosystem that unlocks resources for human rights and gender justice.

This is not only the way to better spend \$1bn, it's the way to unlock the power of well-resourced and resilient feminist social change.

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## **Trump's anti-abortion global gag rule threatening women's lives, report says**

***'People are dying' in Africa and south Asia as a result of policy that bans aid to foreign groups who support abortions, says author of report***

By Adrian Horton

The Guardian (05.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2HXiA95> - The Trump administration's anti-abortion restrictions on US global health aid funding have significantly damaged healthcare for women in Africa and south Asia, according to a new report.

Restrictions on funding also include limiting access to funds for sex education, and shifting funds to anti-LGBTQ and pro-abstinence groups such as Focus on the Family, researchers say.

The "Crisis in Care" report from the International Women's Health Coalition outlines the two-year impact of the Trump administration's "global gag rule" which prohibits funding to international NGOs that do not sign a pledge saying they will not provide or promote abortions as a method of family planning. The rule applies to an organization's non-US funded activities too, regardless of the local laws regarding abortion.

"I think the most impactful and glaring thing is that people are dying as a result of the policy," said Vanessa Rios, pointing to a case in Kenya in which two women died from unsafe abortions – one used knitting needles – after a sex-worker organization stopped providing abortion information or referrals.

The new report, built on 118 interviews with community health organizations in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Nepal, portrays an international health community grappling with confusion over the gag rule's implementation, increased stigmatization of reproductive health services, and a ripple effect that is closing or fragmenting critical health services. It also illustrates the international implications of intensifying efforts in the US, primarily in Republican-dominated state legislatures, to roll back abortion access.

Though every Republican president since Ronald Reagan has implemented the gag rule, which is imposed by a presidential memo, the Trump iteration expands the amount of

money susceptible to the order, and has implications for funds for a wide array of global health concerns such as malaria, HIV/Aids, tuberculosis and nutrition.

According to the new report, adherence to the gag rule now applies to \$9bn in US foreign aid and extends to many organizations that previously did not have to comply with the policy.

The escalation of the gag rule, the report says, has led to confusion among international providers as to what services and advice they can offer, and increased fear that a wrong step will jeopardize vital funds.

Interviewees who received US funding from all four countries said they believed the gag rule allowed “absolutely no opportunity” for providing any information, service or referral relating to abortion, according to the report. “Even when prompted, many organizations did not or could not explain that the policy does not apply to abortion in cases of rape, incest, and when the woman’s life is in danger, and that it allows for post-abortion care.”

The report also warned that the US’s aggressive stance against abortion counseling and services was emboldening “regressive actors” – rightwing or anti-reproductive health groups – in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa.

“The amount of money from the US to other countries isn’t decreasing, it’s just going more and more to regressive groups,” said Jedidah Maina, executive director, in Kenya, of Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health, at a panel previewing the report.

These groups include the anti-LGBTQ Christian group Focus on the Family, which now receives US funding to fight HIV/Aids in South Africa through a “purity pledge” program, which promotes sexual abstinence among young people.

Focus on the Family is one prominent example of how, two years into the more stringent gag rule, “we’re seeing the real shift: if organizations are declining to sign this policy, then where is that funding going? We’re seeing newer relationships with these [rightwing] groups,” said Rios.

One organization in Kenya which focused on maternal, newborn and child health, HIV/Aids, and support to orphans was forced to terminate programs after refusing to sign the gag rule; according to the report, the resulting \$990,000 loss between 2018 and 2019 closed its office in Mombasa, cut 15 staffers and ended services and education for 13,000 children living with HIV.

As a solution, Rios and the International Women’s Health Coalition’s report advocated for the Global HER Act, which would legally end the gag rule and prohibit another president from implementing it. “We have the power to make it so presidents can’t, just with a stroke of their pen, implement a policy that is so harmful to the health of people worldwide,” Rios said.

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## **Female genital mutilation policy polemic**

By Hilary Burrage

Northwestern University School of Medicine (05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2WywFIO> -

***Polemic***

Time-honoured divides are sometimes so embedded that reconciliation between different perspectives looks to be impossible.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) provides one example of this divide, both because of the nature of the practice itself – anything which concerns sex or gendered beliefs can become a minefield – and because of the diametrically opposing perspectives held by its traditional proponents and those who in modern times have sought to eradicate it.

### **What is FGM?**

In physical terms FGM comprises cutting, excision or other intentional damage to the (mostly external) female sexual organs.<sup>[1]</sup> The labia majora and/or minora may be reduced or removed, the visible parts of the clitoris<sup>[2]</sup> may be cut or excised, the vagina may be partially or almost entirely closed (infibulated), or other harm may be inflicted. The instruments to inflict this injury are anything from a finger nail or shell to a razor blade or scissors. Infibulation may be achieved using thread, thorns or anything else that enables sewing up; all of which are likely unsterile, and often extremely unhygienic, leading to a very high risk of infection and sometimes even death.

But most immediately, FGM is often performed on young girls, even babies, without any form of anaesthesia. Of course there are many variations on how and when FGM is done. Stereotypically the child may be told she will attend a party to celebrate her coming of age (at around age 7 to 10); but when she arrives she is forcefully held down by women – or occasionally men – who assist the main operator, sometimes muting her cries with a cloth thrust into her mouth, and sometimes breaking her bones by the violence of the constraint.

It is thought that around 200 million women and girls alive today have undergone FGM; and another 30 million will join them annually for decades to come. Programmes to eradicate FGM are having some success, but the relevant population – girls and young women – is currently growing at a faster rate than the impact of the various programmes.<sup>[3]</sup>

The facts of FGM are in plain sight;<sup>[4]</sup> but understandings of them remain a matter of serious controversy.

### **But isn't FGM normally just a nick, like male circumcision? Both harmless really?**

Aren't female and male circumcision both mostly just a harmless way of expressing membership of a group? Parents wouldn't permit this 'genital cutting' if it was as bad as you suggest.

No, neither female nor male 'cutting' / genital mutilation (F/MGM) is harmless. Both carry risks of infection, shock and even death, especially in the hands of inexperienced operators who cause very serious damage.<sup>[5]</sup> For women the longer term danger is that she will have ongoing problems with her monthly periods, and more difficulty giving birth, perhaps causing obstetric fistula which is a devastating condition.<sup>[6]</sup> For males, increasingly the rationale for clinical circumcision is the prevention of HIV, but the evidence to justify this remains selective,<sup>[7]</sup> and considerable numbers of young men in Africa die as a result of botched tribal circumcisions in their teen years.<sup>[8]</sup>

The debate about whether female and male 'circumcision' can be seen as parallel issues will probably roll on for decades yet. Perhaps there can be agreement that MGM in normal circumstances affects the health and well being 'only' of the male concerned, whilst FGM often affects not just the girl / woman concerned, but also children to whom

she gives birth. And, as many 'intactivists'<sup>[9]</sup> – those who oppose genital cutting / mutilation - will insist loudly, FGM is prohibited by many nations, whilst MGM is not.

### ***That however is not all we need to know about genital 'cutting'....***

FGM does harm to as yet unborn children, and the harm continues as they grow up. One of the additional tragedies of FGM is that it causes harm not 'only' to the girl or woman who undergoes it, but also quite frequently to her children, who are at greater risk of danger when they are born; and the risk remains higher throughout infancy and childhood that these children will suffer as a result of the continuing FGM-induced ill-health, or perhaps even death, of their mother.<sup>[10]</sup>

This harm arises in several other ways, alongside the hazards of giving birth after FGM. There seems at present to be little consideration of the reduced capacity to conduct everyday business of any woman who has infections, very painful periods, probably anaemia, perhaps permanently mis-shapen or broken bones, etc. With FGM almost all women may be affected, and the impacts both on family life and on the local economy may be severe.

There is also considerable evidence that such practices may engender serious, perhaps life-long, psychological damage.<sup>[11]</sup> In communities where FGM and MGM are widespread, it must surely be that the behaviour of the whole group, as well as of the individuals personally concerned, is affected.<sup>[12]</sup>

Extraordinarily, however, the impact on communities of genital mutilation trauma across groups of individuals is barely ever acknowledged, even as a possibility. In traditional settings this may be because notions such as 'psychological damage' are not part of that community's collective understanding. And in some western societies, whilst the concepts and discipline of psychology are an accepted element in rational thinking, the given norm has been that men are circumcised, so few people are likely to recognise the potential in that practice for psychological pain.

And in both cases, men and women, who would want to believe that their parent/s permitted the imposition of a hurtful and useless procedure on their own children?

### ***So why is FGM done?***

Don't the women who impose FGM on their daughters know, as previous victims of the act themselves, that it is a nightmarish experience which should never be perpetrated on anyone, let alone ever on a child who was led to expect a party or treat?

Answers to this question are as variable as the practice itself, demonstrating the massive divide between traditional understandings of FGM and those of modern commentators, whether such commentators reside in traditionally practising countries or in western ones.

For traditionalists FGM is a non-negotiable requirement, demanded by the spirits of the ancestors whose will must be unquestioningly obeyed, and without which a girl may not 'become a woman', or marry, or perhaps own land. It is the entry ticket to full adult membership of her community. FGM in this context is proof of 'purity', the essential precursor to being transferred, with due payment, from ownership by a father to ownership by a husband.<sup>[13]</sup>

To many western or western-oriented/western-educated observers however FGM is the ultimate cruelty, an assault on the body and psyche of girls and women, designed specifically to destroy female sexual pleasure and keep women subservient to men.<sup>[14]</sup>

For most of us in the West the only possible response to FGM is to seek to eradicate it; it is not a custom to be honoured but a harmful tradition to be stopped. For this reason amongst others many of us insist on the avoidance of euphemisms. The act in formal contexts must be named 'female genital mutilation'.<sup>[15]</sup>

### ***So what about 'female cutting' or 'female circumcision'? Aren't they all the same?***

Why, people often ask, insist on the term 'mutilation'? Isn't it better to use the words 'cutting' or 'circumcision', the terms frequently adopted by traditional communities? Isn't this different tag, 'mutilation', disrespectful and unhelpful?

The strongly argued positions behind this debate arise once more from different takes on the practice. Of course, both to ease communication and as a courtesy, familiar terms will often be used in personal conversation with those directly involved, if survivors (initially victims) prefer a more comfortable term, or in practising communities.

The World Health Organisation, UNFPA and others recommend however that in formal debate FGM be described as what it is: an act which harms and damages the female genital organs, ie genital mutilation. In every field of medicine from cardiology via psychiatry to obstetrics clinicians use euphemisms with patients who prefer that, but in formal discourse all doctors use precise and explicit terminology.

Nonetheless, some western observers, researchers and analysts persist with naming FGM as, eg, 'cutting' (or 'FGM/C'). Survivors apart, the term 'cutting' may indicate that the observer, most likely an anthropologist,<sup>[16]</sup> has adopted a relativist perspective; theirs is an 'insiders' view' – absolutely critical to understanding why FGM occurs, but less helpful when it comes to traction for eradication in modern political or policy mode.

The FGC contingent claims that in order to end FGM we must consistently present matters through the lens of proponents and perpetrators. For them the distinctions between formal and informal usage are not so critical. The language of empathy in order to engage with those who practice and uphold FGM outstrips other observers' concern to speak coldly (at least in formal contexts) about a brutal act so that, as that truth gains traction, fewer children will experience it.

The debate here is about whether to employ explicit terms in dialogue with western influencers and policy makers whose attention must be gained if FGM is to stop, but who always also have many other demands on their time and resources.

### ***Culture or tradition?***

Campaigners who refer to 'FGM' are clear that human rights is the most fundamental issue. For them a person's right to autonomy, including bodily autonomy, is more important than 'respect' for historical practices. Some who avoid euphemisms about mutilation also insist that FGM is not 'culture', but rather it is 'tradition'. This is the position, for instance, of Dr Morissanda Kouyaté,<sup>[17]</sup> the director of the Inter-African Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices,<sup>[18]</sup> who insists that 'cultures' are positive, but 'traditions' may not be.

This distinction between customs (to be respected) and traditions (which may need to be abandoned) is helpful in the fight against FGM.

### ***So what special contributions can anthropologists make to FGM eradication?***

Firstly, it is the anthropologists who can guide us – whether working alongside activists in that community or approaching the issues more formally from the ‘outside’ - on what aspects of a community’s customs and traditions require particularly sensitive handling, whilst we challenge FGM.

And secondly there is a huge gap in our knowledge, as those seeking to impose laws around eradication acknowledge, when it comes to specific practices in specific contexts.<sup>[19]</sup> This applies both in respect of prevention and, where necessary, in the courts of law, when alleged practitioners or commissioners of FGM are put on trial. The interpretation of physical evidence and of social activity is difficult because there are so many different ways in which FGM can be imposed or may be going to be imposed.

The current western / formal understandings of how FGM comes about are stereotypical. In real life physicians may be unsure what they are looking for or may have seen when patients (especially small children?) are examined. And then, if protection orders or prosecutions are sought, standard methodologies for recording and interpreting any observations for the courts have yet to emerge.<sup>[20]</sup>

A better knowledge of the nuanced detail of different FGM practices is something which anthropological studies can provide. The scope for studies by medical anthropologists is wide.

***FGM is a Muslim religious practice; it happens in Africa, not in western societies, so why are we talking about it?***

The often heard and connected claims that FGM is a Muslim practice observed only ‘in Africa’ conflates several myths about the practice.

Firstly, FGM is older than any established religion, and it now has practitioners in all of them, as well as in animist and other belief system communities. Yes, it is prevalent in some Muslim societies, but in fact more people who follow Islam don’t practise FGM than do, and there are many Muslims who don’t even know what FGM is.

Secondly, as we have seen, FGM is defined by history and tradition, rather than religion or faith. It is attached to the identities of various groupings or tribes, eg crossing national borders in the sub-Saharan belt across the continent of Africa; and it is also performed, often in less publicly, in parts of the Middle East, Asia, South America and Australia.

***But FGM doesn’t happen in modern western countries, right?***

Sadly, not right. Given the directions in which the African diaspora has moved, FGM now features significantly in Europe and North America, both of which are estimated to have half a million girls and women who have undergone or are at significant risk of FGM.<sup>[21]</sup>

There are numerous ‘reasons’ why FGM continues even after people leave their country of origin. (Whether it occurs most frequently in the country of origin or of the diaspora is often unclear; every year some children will be sent ‘home’ to be ‘cut’.) Sometimes the practice persists simply because the girls’ new community is closed to new, outside ideas; and, as in the originating communities, sometimes FGM actually becomes resurgent because it is seen as a marker of heritage and identity. Sometimes FGM is ‘required’ at the point of marriage, and sometimes girls may be forced or kidnapped by relatives in the country of origin to undergo this harm whilst on a visit not intended by their parent/s to be for that purpose.

And it is probable that, like the Aboriginals in Australia, some North American and European indigenous peoples may have practised FGM at various points in their histories. Indeed, clitoridectomy – also termed ‘female circumcision’ – continued to be carried out (as a ‘treatment’ for masturbation) on white Christian girls in the USA and UK, by white physicians, until at least the mid-1960s.[\[22\]](#)

Surely trained clinicians – doctor, midwives, nurses and others – would never do FGM? In fact, they would, and do. It is thought that about a quarter of all FGM victims / survivors world-wide are now ‘cut’ by clinically trained personnel – a trend which has produced fierce debate.[\[23\]](#)

Just as traditional birth attendants have for hundreds of years also offered FGM to supplement their income, so do professionally trained clinicians in modern times.[\[24\]](#)

Especially in parts of the world where the salaries of medical professionals are low (if actually paid at all), they can persuade parents – and themselves – that the ‘procedure’ will be safer and less painful in the hands of health practitioners.[\[25\]](#)

FGM medicalization is now the norm in some African countries such as Egypt,[\[26\]](#) Sudan, and various parts of Kenya[\[27\]](#) and Nigeria, as well as, often very discretely, in some middle-eastern states. Sadly there have been several recent global news reports of girls dying even after medicalized FGM. Perhaps such news stories complicate things even more, driving the practice underground whether done by clinicians or not.

### ***Is the answer to make ‘just a nick’ medicalized FGM legal, to keep it safe?***

This idea has gained some supporters who claim that it is possible both to ‘respect’ traditions and make FGM available. Amongst those organisations which sought to legitimize this position, for a time in 2010 at least, was the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP),[\[28\]](#) but the global medical consensus in both the developing[\[29\]](#) and the first world is now firmly coalesced against the ‘nick’ proposal.[\[30\]](#)

The UNFPA regards the increasing medicalization of FGM as a very serious matter because it is an assault on human rights (and so a breach of medical ethics) and because it appears to give legitimacy to the practice – which in turn can suggest that it has no health hazards and that traditional cutters can also continue with their trade.[\[31\]](#)

### ***Why does male circumcision (MGM) continue, when FGM is so illegal?***

This is a good question.

Some anti-FGM activists argue that FGM is a very different matter from MGM, in particular because in some forms FGM are so severe; but MGM can also be lethal. More to the point however, FGM puts at risk the health of as yet unborn babies, as well as that of the individual who undergoes the original procedure. (Also, there are probably a few women anti-FGM activists who resent the what-about-ery of some male activists, especially in the USA, who protest vigorously that MGM is overlooked for FGM...)

Nonetheless, although MGM is ostensibly ‘legal’ in many countries where FGM is forbidden, this does not negate the obvious fact that both are an assault on a child (who cannot give consent) and, as we have seen, both can cause grave ill-health, even death.

More recently however numbers of Stop FGM campaigners[\[32\]](#) have become more direct in speaking out against all genital mutilation – whilst also pointing out that prohibition campaigns must necessarily be different because currently the law is different for MGM and FGM.

It is important to note that male circumcision is, like FGM, a global phenomenon, part of the tradition of both specific religious faiths (Islam and Judaism) and of communities with various belief sets probably going back millennia. What is different is that MGM was in the twentieth century also a customary practice in Christian societies. Particularly, until a few decades ago most men in the USA were circumcised. Whilst circumcision became much less common in Europe some while ago (in the UK the National Health Service is reluctant to fund it unless clinically required) it is only recently that fewer than half the male infant population in the USA were routinely cut.

Two observations might arise from this situation. One is that in places where almost all clinical procedures are conducted as business activity (the customer pays the practitioner direct) there is a clear incentive for said practitioners to recommend any surgery which commands a fee; although even then some practitioners will not offer procedures that they consider potentially harmful or unethical.

The other observation is that in most western countries the senior males who decide the law and policies of their nation have still probably been circumcised. We might therefore be unsurprised that most of them see no necessity to change legislation; and most likely it also colours their perceptions of at least the less invasive forms of FGM, perhaps throwing some light on the reluctance in some instances to pursue such cases through the courts.

Even cases which reach the courts tolerant reference has occasionally been made to male circumcision as a comparison with FGM.<sup>[33]</sup> Should all judges and jurors, one might ponder, be asked to bear in mind the potential for any inadvertent bias as a result of their own bodily status, intact or otherwise?

***There must be 'reasons' why FGM continues. Can't we just show those reasons are invalid?***

Explanations for FGM, everywhere across the globe, vary by time and place; they are rationales for the practice which accommodates different circumstances, usually handed down only by word of mouth, and often in communities where women (and maybe men) cannot read – which enables pretexts to change quite rapidly. For those directly involved the primary issue is generally that girls must be 'pure' (so they can marry with a good bride price), and often ancestors have decreed, with dire threats for any who disobey, that FGM is the proof of that purity.

Whilst such rationales can be challenged by modern western thinking, these challenges will have little leverage in communities where every woman – even if she is actually a young girl – goes through FGM to become marriageable, as the only way to gain the status of an adult. The persuasive nature of this position has been called a 'belief trap'.<sup>[34]</sup> Who would risk the wrath of the ancestors, or the risk of alienation from one's community, by not upholding millennia of tradition?

There is a certain irony, it might be said, in the observation that without proactive interventions some girls at risk of FGM are less well served in modern western societies than in traditional locales where properly considered programmes are being introduced to end FGM. In the west some 'cut' young women from the diasporas are likely to end up put aside, essentially anomic, as part of an underclass with little influence or control over their lives.<sup>[35]</sup>

Alternative Rites of Passage (ARPs) are however increasingly gaining favour as ways to empower girls as they progress towards maturity in traditionally practising communities. ARP programmes<sup>[36]</sup> seem to work best when there is clarity about the dangers of FGM –

respect for persons, but no euphemisms or apologies for the practice - set in the context of bringing the whole community onside. To be effective, endorsement from group leaders, including the men, must be secured. The message must be that women do not need to marry early, and that education rather than premature motherhood will bring better economic and social status returns in the long term.

As yet ARPs are touching just the tip of the iceberg, but slowly the message is getting through in some neighbourhoods. ARPs, allied with newer initiatives to train young journalists (such as the Global Media Campaign to End FGM<sup>[37]</sup>) are also helping to raise awareness by policy makers at community and national levels of the need to end FGM. It is easier for politicians to support eradication interventions when the community has a good knowledge of why that intervention is required.

Nonetheless, in both traditional and western settings, programmes to end FGM are in need of more support at the local level. National policies are more important than some activists on the ground may think, but the converse also applies. There can be considerable resentment (and suboptimal efficacy) if those striving to end FGM within local communities are not supported and, importantly, heard, as they should be by people with influence who hold the purse-strings.<sup>[38]</sup>

***This is hypocrisy. You let western women have labiaplasty, but you've made FGM illegal.***

This might be a good point, but there are two things which weaken this oft-heard criticism:

First, already in some countries labiaplasty and other female genital 'cosmetic' – ie not clinically required – surgery (FGCS) can only be performed on consenting adults. Yes, there are instances in, eg, the UK, of surgery on teenage girls, but it is becoming increasingly clear that this should only be performed in cases of extreme physical or psychological need – and the same requirement or doubts about legitimacy are also often now applied to irreversible transgender surgeries on juveniles. (In all these contexts the term 'children' should ideally reference all people under age 18 regardless of the age of majority in any given country, as at least until this age genitals are in the process of development to their adult form.)

In 2013 the UK Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists published an ethical opinion paper<sup>[39]</sup> which explores issues around FGCS and makes recommendations, but it is clear that more research is required before the evidence on the impacts of FGCS are fully understood. The paper also considers suggested parallels with FGM, and concludes that all surgeons must proceed with great care and ample documentary evidence of informed consent, remaining aware that this is legally an unresolved matter. These areas of legal ambiguity around FGM, FGCS and specifically juveniles have also been considered in respect of labial surgery in the United States<sup>[40]</sup> as well as in Australia and doubtless other countries too.

Secondly, and aligned with the position above, FGM is usually performed on young girls who, whatever they say, cannot give legal consent because they are underage; and even those adult women who agree often give their consent under duress (if at all, and they were not kidnapped or whatever). Thus, FGM is different from FGCS in that the former is normally enforced, and the latter may only be done by qualified surgeons after they have obtained in writing informed consent – although even then it may FGCS is regarded by some professionals as unethical or downright illicit.

A quasi-feasible case could be made by protagonists for permitting FGM and FGCS on adults after fully informed and freely given genuine consent (although this would be

extremely difficult in many instances of FGM to establish), but even then the near-universal injunction on clinicians to 'Do no harm' raises important questions in regard to what the operator, however skilled, does to her/his patient.[\[41\]](#)

Meanwhile, the 'accusation' that FGM is banned hypocritically whilst FGCS is accepted in the West is considerably weakened by the current move in many places towards making FGCS available only under very strictly controlled and/or clinically required conditions.

Nonetheless, professional bodies such as the British Medical Association are clear that more needs to be done about both the legal and the clinical aspects of cosmetic surgery.[\[42\]](#) Until a number of questions around these issues have been resolved, some uncertainties will remain.

### ***You mention mental health in regard to genital cosmetic surgery, but what about FGM?***

In western societies a very small percentage – how many, no-one knows - of those who seek FGCS do actually reach the bar for surgical intervention because of psychiatric conditions (eg resulting from body dysmorphia) which are severe enough to justify genital surgery.

But the proportion of women and girls whose mental health suffers following FGM is probably much higher. This assault on a young person can be seen as a massive breach of trust by those the child depends on in good faith most of all. If her mother won't protect her, who will?

The presentation of this distrust is likely to vary by context. In traditional communities the idea of mental health may not even exist; the well-being of the group eclipses any concern for individuals, but that does not mean no harm has been done; for instance, the condition post-traumatic stress disorder may have as one outcome the formation of tight, inward-looking groups of survivors who find it very difficult to move on from their bonding as people who have experienced something distressing.

This bonding in turn may be an element in the formation of women's 'societies' such as the long tradition of Sande Societies[\[43\]](#) in parts of West Africa, which are predicated on having experienced FGM, and which produce the next generation of cutters and those who run the FGM preparation inductions.[\[44\]](#) The strength of this bonding means it is still very difficult in some locations to dissent from this 'obligatory' practice.[\[45\]](#) In such circumstances it is obviously challenging to find ways to help individuals to move forward, even if they should themselves feel the need, and even if resources to support them are available.[\[46\]](#)

In most western contexts however psychological damage is more readily understood. Girls and women with FGM anywhere in the world may have a range of psycho-sexual and social difficulties arising from their experience,[\[47\]](#) and in locations with mental health facilities these can at least in theory be addressed. Awareness of this requirement is nonetheless very limited, and much work remains to be done in providing adequate health care, especially psychological, to those who have experienced FGM and need it.

### ***Of course medical care is essential for survivors, but we've got laws so can't we just consign FGM – and child marriage - to history right now?***

If only it were that straightforward. Almost everyone agrees that, whilst medical care is critical, the aim must be to prevent FGM, not just treat it after it's been done. The contexts in which FGM occurs are however very difficult to unpick.

The law, whilst critical, cannot be enforced without the active consent of a significant proportion of the community wanting it to have effect. As we have seen, this will often not be the case in regard to eradicating FGM. There is much still to be done to ensure that people in practising communities understand both the hazards of FGM, and the opportunities for girls as they reach adulthood uncut.

Child marriage and FGM are closely intertwined in some places, and the idea that there might be other ways than FGM and marriage by which girls can emerge into womanhood is strange, or even threatening, to people in practising communities.<sup>[48]</sup> There is little or no understanding of the damage which FGM and child / early marriage inflicts, and no notion of womanhood independent of married status. Laws against FGM alone therefore have little impact.

Further, whether in the first world or in developing countries, there remains a big challenge in terms of vocabulary and dialogue in reference to matters genital and sexual. Generally speaking, these matters are not discussed in polite society, and certainly not by men. A lot of groundwork is required before law enforcers (usually male) may feel comfortable talking, or even just carefully considering, 'delicate' issues such as young girls' forthcoming sexuality – and this also holds true across the board for many social workers, teachers and others with responsibility for safeguarding.<sup>[49]</sup> There are many obstacles at ground level to effective policing and prevention.<sup>[50]</sup>

There are also frequently difficulties around cross-border issues. Traditional communities may claim to have abandoned FGM, only to go to the next village, across a state boundary, to cut with impunity. Likewise, in western societies, international and inter-state vigilance is required. This applies whether in Europe (where the probably forthcoming Brexit situation makes things even more complicated) or in eg the United States, where federal enforcement has a different status than state administrations.

We do however know that when the courts find cutters guilty this can have an impact on practising communities. One example of this is France, where the barrister Linda Weil-Curiel and her colleagues have insisted that trials be conducted in the highest courts, and that penalties are significant.<sup>[51]</sup>

### ***Clearly men are important re law enforcement, but otherwise isn't FGM a 'women's problem'?***

It's understandable that observers conclude that, because women usually do the actual FGM cutting, stopping FGM must be up to the women. This belief does not however bear up under scrutiny.

Research in many places has revealed the complex traditions guiding financial considerations around FGM in local economies, and for families. Often, the practice is timetabled for harvest time and the ceremonies cost a lot of money. The expenses are likely to be the responsibility of the girls' fathers, who expect that their investment (in the ceremony and in bring the girl up) will be repaid in bride price or dowry when local suitors select their post-FGM bride. Men effect, and sometimes genuinely have, little knowledge of exactly what happens in FGM, but they are the ones who likely will gain money from it afterwards.

Further, senior men (often especially clerics) in the community are the ones who make most of the rules. If they cannot be persuaded that FGM must stop, it probably will not. FGM and other harmful traditional practices will only cease when everyone in the community, men and women, girls and boys, recognises that it must do so. Education, health care, legal enforcement and (to ensure people know about public health and court decisions) the media, all have a part to play in ending FGM.

### ***What's the cost of all this?***

There are many kinds of 'cost' associated with FGM.[\[52\]](#)

Most obviously the costs of this tradition impinge on the girls and women who experience it.

For some these costs are the pain and fear of the cutting, and then discomfort until the wounds heal, thereafter to whatever extent compensated by the new status gained – albeit a child of, say, ten may be at greater risk if she has 'adult' autonomies conferred on her as a 'married' woman, than if she continues to have the status only of a minor... and that is even before the risks attached to premature pregnancies and difficult deliveries arise.

For other girls and women however the cost of FGM may be a life foreshortened or even precipitately ended. FGM is sometimes almost immediately lethal, and often the harbinger of prolonged or life-long ill-health, with all the hazards that sub-optimal health can bring – both to the woman herself and to any children she bears.[\[53\]](#)

Beyond these personal tragedies there are also however wider costs to the families and communities which continue to practice FGM.[\[54\]](#) Women in poor physical and / or psychological health cannot conduct their affairs as effectively as those who are well. Marriages impaired by painful sexual relationships will not thrive. Children who have had difficult deliveries and early lives will be at a disadvantage as they grow and learn. Local economies dependent on the labour of unwell workers will not function optimally; and so it goes on.

When these real costs are considered it becomes clear that the eradication of FGM is not 'only' a matter of personal suffering and human rights, but also a critical economic issue.[\[55\]](#) At all levels of socio-economic activity from the micro to the macro, families to nation states, FGM causes damage.

FGM is deeply rooted in the economy and economics. It will only stop when there are other ways to provide women 'cutters' with income and status,[\[56\]](#) and when, just as with human trafficking etc[\[57\]](#), the costs to all who do it outweigh the profits of those who practise it.

Meanwhile the negative impacts of FGM (and similar harmful traditional practices) on the wider community, though acknowledged in some academic research,[\[58\]](#) remain largely unseen. It's time for the economists to step up properly.

### ***Patriarchy incarnate***

The evidence is clear: FGM is a particularly toxic form of patriarchy incarnate;[\[59\]](#) it is imposed quite literally on the bodies of girls and women as a way to subjugate women to the will and even whims of some- of course not all – men. Like some other harmful traditional practices it reduces female human beings to chattels, items to be sold and bought according to their 'value' (read: so-called 'purity', defined by FGM) by men.

FGM is intended to reduce the sexual desires and activity of women - though whether it does so in reality is another matter - so they will remain under the control of the men who bought them (often underage) as 'wives'. It usually brings about termination of any formal western-style schooling, thereby rendering the girl-woman essentially dependent on her purchaser as she reaches adulthood. Even the ownership of any resources such as land may be predicated on 'cut' status. Without FGM a woman may be doomed by her

community leaders (mostly male) to perpetual child status – even though with it she may even suffer fistula and subsequent estrangement from her group.<sup>[60]</sup>

Ultimately FGM benefits no-one, neither those who are harmed, nor those who inflict it, nor the communities in which it is practised. But it does serve the more immediate interests of powerful men who expect, as of right, to maintain their advantaged status. FGM is a key element in upholding the status of powerful men in some traditional communities; and it is carved into the bodies of girls and women. FGM is patriarchy incarnate.

### ***So what else do we need to know?***

The essential message is that FGM is a tradition which harms both individuals and the communities on which it impinges.

Politically, it is essential that a senior minister in government is the person who carries the can for eradicating FGM and other harmful practices. The pretence that a number of ministers can be equally responsible for policy and service delivery means that true accountability is avoided.<sup>[61]</sup>

There is also a need to streamline decisions and operations in practical terms. Many will have a part to play in this, but public health is the discipline and agency which can best bring together all the elements and tools of eradication.<sup>[62]</sup>

Whether the challenge is sexual abuse, knife crime, early or forced 'marriage', or FGM, public health has the potential to synchronise and deliver the required elements of prevention, legal, educational, clinical, community and so forth.

The drama of the high court is one critical aspect of making FGM stop, and the cerebral endeavour of legislators is another, but the day-to-day efforts of public health workers, from many disciplines and with many different contacts and skills, are what will create the momentum to make FGM history in communities everywhere.

### **Footnotes:**

[1] See WHO for an overview of what FGM comprises: <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>

[2] The clitoris is actually quite a large wishbone-shaped organ which surrounds the vagina, but only the front 'button' is visible. An interesting exploration of misunderstandings of the clitoris, and of the patriarchal intent behind its excision, can be found

here: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319382653\\_The\\_Clitoris\\_Anatomical\\_and\\_Psychological\\_Issues](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319382653_The_Clitoris_Anatomical_and_Psychological_Issues)

[3] <https://www.unfpa.org/press/nearly-70-million-girls-face-genital-mutilation-2030-unfpa-warns>

[4] <https://hiliaryburrage.com/2016/04/01/female-genital-mutilation-an-introduction-to-the-issues-and-suggested-reading/>

[5] See [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/health\\_consequences\\_fgm/en/](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/health_consequences_fgm/en/) and <http://www.cirp.org/>

[6] The main causes of obstetric fistula are very young ages to have children, and obstructed, mostly unsupervised childbirth in non-clinical settings. The evidence that FGM causes some fistulae is still disputed <http://www.endfistula.org/what-fistula> but increasingly some researchers insist that there is sometimes a direct connection [https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017RH\\_FGMC-Fistula.pdf](https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017RH_FGMC-Fistula.pdf). It has been suggested that disputes about FGM as potential causation may on occasion relate more to political considerations than to medical ones.

[7] <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/9/08-051482/en/>

[8] See <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt6wp8c1> (and critique: <http://thecircumcisiondecision.com/circumcision-death/> ) a

[9] See eg <http://www.intactamerica.org/>

[10] An infant or child in a traditional community whose mother dies may be in particular peril, see eg <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4423767/> and [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279062829\\_The\\_Effects\\_of\\_Maternal\\_Mortality\\_on\\_Infant\\_and\\_Child\\_Survival\\_in\\_Rural\\_Tanzania\\_A\\_Cohort\\_Study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279062829_The_Effects_of_Maternal_Mortality_on_Infant_and_Child_Survival_in_Rural_Tanzania_A_Cohort_Study)

[11] See eg <https://www.28toomany.org/blog/2016/may/16/the-psychological-effects-of-female-genital-mutilation-research-blog-by-serene-chung/> and <https://ratical.org/ratville/MGMprimer.html>

[12] <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/sites/default/files/publications/Adverse%20Community%20Experiences%20and%20Resilience.pdf>

[13] who may well already have other wives amongst whom there is a pecking order

[14] For this reason I have coined the term 'patriarchy incarnate' – the literal infliction of their will by some men on the bodies of women – to characterise the acts of FGM, forced and early marriage, and other harmful traditional practices: <https://hilaryburrage.com/2016/03/05/patriarchy-incarnate-the-horrifying-practice-of-female-genital-mutilation>

[15] See eg <https://statementonfgm.com/>

[16] Tobe Levin von Gleichen has named these relativist anthropologists as 'anthr/apologists'.

[17] See the Preface to *Female Mutilation* (Burrage, New Holland Publishers, 2016) [http://uk.newhollandpublishers.com/fm\\_preview.pdf](http://uk.newhollandpublishers.com/fm_preview.pdf)

[18] <http://www.soawr.org/content/inter-african-committee-harmful-traditional-practices-iac>

[19] See eg <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2015/01/fgm-court-judgement-raises-questions-about-fgm-and-male-circumcision-in-the-uk>

[20] See eg <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/female-genital-mutilation-fgm-england-wales-statistics-crime-prevent-a8558221.html>

[21] <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20180122STO92230/female-genital-mutilation-the-scourge-affecting-half-a-million-women-in-the-eu> and <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/07/21/424984178/female-genital-mutilation-is-a-u-s-problem-too?t=1538170094551>

[22] This is one first-hand account: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/02/fgm-happened-to-me-in-white-midwest-america>

[23] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5840226/>

[24] [https://www.28toomany.org/static/media/uploads/Thematic%20Research%20and%20Resources/Medicalisation/medicalisation\\_of\\_fgm\\_\(april\\_2016\).pdf](https://www.28toomany.org/static/media/uploads/Thematic%20Research%20and%20Resources/Medicalisation/medicalisation_of_fgm_(april_2016).pdf)

[25] <https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12978-017-0306-5>

[26] <https://www.egyptindependent.com/cut-secret-medicalization-fgm-egypt/>

[27] <https://www.nation.co.ke/health/Emerging-trends-in-FGM-Cross-border-cutting-and-medicalisation/3476990-4583890-gffermz/index.html>

[28] And more recently for instance some Boston USA physicians

[29] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1110570413000271>

[30] [https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017RH\\_MedicalizationFGMC.pdf](https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017RH_MedicalizationFGMC.pdf)

[31] <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/brief-medicalization-female-genital-mutilation>

[32] such as Dr Tobe Levin von Gleichen

[33] See eg <https://ukhumanrightsblog.com/2015/01/18/male-circumcision-can-be-part-of-reasonable-parenting-but-no-form-of-fgm-is-acceptable-family-court/>

[34] See Gerry McKie: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/2096305?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2096305?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) for further discussion of this 'belief trap' – though the parallels between ending FGM and ending footbinding are to some observers less convincing.

[35] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2014/04/24/does-female-genital-mutilation-fgm-in-western-societies-create-an-underclass/>

[36] Eg <https://pastoralistchildfoundation.org/>

[37] Of which this writer is a non-executive director: <https://www.facebook.com/gmcendfgm/>

[38] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2017/07/18/ending-female-genital-mutilation-fgm-requires-support-for-community-activists/>

[39] <https://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/guidelines/ethics-issues-and-resources/rcog-fgcs-ethical-opinion-paper.pdf>

[40] <http://news.trust.org/item/20160526125209-vxc3f>

[41] <https://www.hispacultur.org/book/534979206/download-of-the-epidemics-hippocrates.pdf>

[42] [https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/guidance-for-all-doctors-who-offer-cosmetic-interventions---published-version\\_pdf-69113414.pdf](https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/guidance-for-all-doctors-who-offer-cosmetic-interventions---published-version_pdf-69113414.pdf)

[43] <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58cff6114.html>

[44] A description from 1949 of the Sande (women) and Poro (male) societies in Sierra Leone gives a good idea of how important these organisations have been in the communities in which they exist: <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/aa.1949.51.2.02a00020>

[45] <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/aug/24/sierra-leone-female-genital-mutilation-soweis-secret-societies-fear>

[46] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2017.1295549>

[47] <https://www.28toomany.org/blog/2016/may/16/the-psychological-effects-of-female-genital-mutilation-research-blog-by-serene-chung/>

[48] The 'necessity' for women to attain married status, whilst remaining under the control of their husbands, may also explain some of the vehement objection to homosexuality in many traditional communities; being openly gay would be a threat to the *status quo*.

[49] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2016/11/25/white-ribbon-day-and-what-we-can-learn-from-men-who-challenge-fgm/>

[50] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2016/06/08/policing-issues-in-regard-to-female-genital-mutilation-in-the-uk/>

[51] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2012/11/28/the-uk-can-learn-from-france-on-fgm-prosecutions/>

[52] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2018/04/24/the-many-es-of-fgm-eradication-and-why-they-all-lead-via-economics-and-epidemics-to-public-health/>

[54] <http://www.medinstgenderstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/endFGM-factsheet-EN-online4.pdf>

[55] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2017/11/23/economics-is-why-fgm-persists-oxford-seminar-on-the-elephants-in-the-room/>

[56] <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/04/opinions/stopping-female-genital-mutilation-opinion-lemmon/index.html>

[57] See eg *Ten Types of Human* (Dexter.Dias, 2017), William Heinemann / Penguin

[58] .. and in Chapter 2 of *Eradicating Female Genital Mutilation* (Burrage, 2015)

[59] <http://resyst.lshtm.ac.uk/news-and-blogs/patriarchy-incarnate-horrifying-practice-female-genital-mutilation>

[60] <http://www.endfistula.org/what-fistula#>

[61] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2012/10/01/cross-disciplinary-cross-purpose-the-muddles-of-multi-agency-working/>

[62] <https://hilaryburrage.com/2018/04/24/the-many-es-of-fgm-eradication-and-why-they-all-lead-via-economics-and-epidemics-to-public-health/>

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## **'In context of gender justice, women's right to freedom of religion pretty much ignored'**

World Watch Monitor (19.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Oie86H> - She is a woman who can be identified only as "Z", for her security. She is a Christian in India, a country that is overwhelmingly Hindu. And she is a lawyer defending women and youth from exploitation by landlords and employers, so she was pleased when she got the opportunity to put a client's case to a local official.

"When I went to his office, he was sitting with his legs up on his desk.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"What's my age got to do with anything?" I responded.

"We don't want to see you again around here..."

Such stories of intimidation are common at the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the annual UN women activists' summit, which continues this week.

CSW is the main inter-governmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women globally; it documents the reality of women's lives throughout the world, and shapes global standards.

The story of Z was one heard at a parallel event hosted by the Salvation Army and coordinated by the World Evangelical Alliance, one of hundreds of NGO side events during the summit.

But despite the pervasive presence of the current buzzword 'intersectionality' ("a framework that attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power – eg. race, class, gender – impact those most marginalized in society"), the intersection of gender and religion is barely mentioned in UN documents and declarations, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

And members of the UN NGO Committee on the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) confirm there is almost no research on this particular intersection, i.e., how far women find themselves marginalized due to their religious belief.

This seems all the more surprising when 83% of global women identify with a religious faith, according to the Pew Research Center. Its researcher, Kayatoun Kishi, speaking at another CSW side event, welcomed the gender-specific persecution research done in the past 2 years by the World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International, saying it seems to be the only research looking at 'gendered' persecution for religious belief in such detail. Yet millions of women face this double discrimination, for their faith and their gender, every day – if not triple discrimination, when their poverty adds to the mix.

"I wish I could tell you how rare, how exceptional Z's story is...But alas, I can't", said Helene Fisher, gender persecution specialist of Open Doors, after Z told of women such as Rani, a young Indian woman who'd dreamt of economic independence. A friend had promised Rani a job, but then raped her and threw acid in her face. "Now all I dream of is to sleep; I can't close my eyes any more", Rani confided to Z.

Ms. Fisher stressed that stories such as Z's and Rani's populate the detailed research on persecution that women (and men) experience for their Christian faith, which Open Doors

now conducts every year based on its World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it's most difficult to live as a Christian.

It's based on in-depth questionnaires filled out both by relevant sources inside countries, as well as experts on the countries who are based outside them, and so might feel freer to be more candid. Ms. Fisher and her colleague Elizabeth Miller then analyse the results with a focus on gender.

Interestingly, although the respected Pew Center does not do such detailed research on gender issues, the research Ms. Kishi shared – alongside Open Doors – echoes the latter's findings.

For instance, in the latest Pew research (2016), women are targeted for their faith in 42 out of 77 countries where, to enforce religious norms, violence is used against religious minorities.

This bears out the just-published Open Doors gender research, which shows that the most-cited pressure experienced for their faith reported by Christian women is sexual violence/assault (excluding rape, itself the third most reported pressure).

Sexual violence, often by family or community and used as a means of power and control over women, was reported by 59% of the 50\* countries.

“Christian women and girls are subjected to physical violence. Initially they are usually emotionally pressured by immediate family (e.g. husband, in-laws, parents). Physical abuse starts gradually until finally they are regarded as social outcasts by family and community. This makes them vulnerable and victims of sexual oppression”.

Open Doors 2019 report, concerning Nepal

### **Pew Research**

Pew Research in 2016 found that governments regulate the wearing of head-scarves or head covering for women in 54 countries. Separately, it found that women were harassed for violating religious dress codes in 18 countries (including violation of 'secular' dress code, such as the 'burkini' ban in France).

An example is Sudan. “Female Christians... are forced to dress like Muslims”, the Open Doors' 2019 report said. “Those arrested for 'indecent dressing' often face groping and humiliation during interrogation”.

Open Doors researchers also write that, “for instance, the presence of a cultural disdain for [minority] Christians and their perceived association with loose 'Western' morals (such as in dress code) can perpetuate the false idea that it is permissible to assault a Christian woman. This could in turn serve to focus the choice of victim as, say, a woman whose head is not covered by a hijab. Where all women may be at risk of sexual assault, marginalized Christian women may be even 'more so' ”.

In 61 of the 192 countries surveyed by Pew for 2016, women are at least 2% more likely than men to have a religious affiliation. In the remaining countries, Pew says, women and men display roughly equal levels of religious affiliation because, in many cases, nearly all the population identify with some religious group. In no countries are men more religiously affiliated than women by 2% or more.

Yet “It’s so, so rare to hear about a woman’s right to freedom of religion or belief: this right is pretty much ignored in the context of gender justice [around the world]”, admitted members of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), also attending the CSW in New York.

### ***USCIRF policy and strategic approaches***

In an attempt to remedy this, USCIRF had produced a report in July 2017 “Women and religious freedom: Synergies and opportunities.” This aimed to better understand the synergies between religious freedom and the rights of women and girls, and to address the widespread misperception of a clash between these two human rights.

It concluded that women’s rights and religious freedom are not competing objectives: “When religious freedom is respected, religious actors have the capacity to be mobilized to respond to violations of women’s rights through advocating respect for the dignity and integrity of [all]”.

Following on from its report, in May 2018, USCIRF produced a policy focus on “Women and religious freedom”, which states, under its two strategic approaches: “When a government engages in, or tolerates religious freedom violations against a particular community, the women and girls of that group experience increased vulnerability to other violations and limited access to protection”.

USCIRF’s policy concludes: “The priority theme for CSW 2019 is social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality, and the empowerment of women and girls. Religious freedom is key to fully addressing this priority, as women’s access to both social protection systems and public services is often predicated on their ability to safely navigate the public sphere, an ability severely hampered by religious freedom violations. This is especially true in the case of women from marginalized religious communities, who face dual obstacles in accessing public services”.

While acknowledging that it won’t be possible to get it included for this year’s CSW, the meeting organized by the UN NGO Committee on the Freedom of Religion or Belief ended with a note to try to introduce a resolution – recognizing that women’s rights and religious freedom are mutually reinforcing, and not contradictory – into the 2020 CSW.

Meantime, USCIRF also lists as key areas for its co-operation with the international community:

### **Child, Early & Forced Marriage (CEFM) and related restrictions:**

It says this “is, in many contexts, given religious justification despite the harm incurred and the lack of full consent. While many legislatures have passed laws to counter CEFM, challenges remain, including lack of enforcement in rural communities and the prevalence in some countries of unregistered “religious marriages” conducted outside the legal sphere. The issue is further complicated in situations of sectarian tension or conflict, where governmental or societal actors seeking to preserve religious demographics may interfere with the human rights of inter-faith couples and limit women’s rights to freely choose their spouses. For example, India has witnessed mob violence and forced annulments of marriages arising from fears of so-called “love jihad”, or allegedly coercive seduction and conversion of non-Muslim women by Muslim men, while Burma’s Interfaith Marriage Law restricts the ability of Buddhist women to marry men of other religions”.

Early and forced marriage is the second most-reported pressure experienced for their faith by Christian women, in 57% of the countries surveyed in the latest report from Open Doors.

"Many are also forced into marriage with non-Christians. The fact that there are laws which permit under-age marriage in some states (as well as the existence of cultural and religious norms that discourage girls from going to school) only contributes to this problem".

Open Doors 2019 report, concerning Nigeria

### **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV):**

"Victims of religious discrimination or marginalization are uniquely vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual assault, rape", USCIRF says.

Rape is the third most-reported pressure experienced for their faith by Christian women, in just under half of the 50 countries surveyed in the latest Open Doors report. In Libya, for example, "It has been reported that rape is sometimes used as a form of punishment [for conversion to Christianity]", the report says.

As USCIRF's policy focus goes on to explain: "[Minority religious] communities also have extremely limited access to legal recourse. Governments and non-state actors sometimes perpetrate or tolerate SGBV to intimidate or drive out disfavored religious groups, as in the cases of Yazidi women in ISIS-controlled territory...and religious and ethnic minorities, including Rohingya Muslims and Kachin Christians, in Burma.

"In addition, legal frameworks on SGBV and CEFM in many countries still reflect an uneasy tension between religious, customary, and secular sources of law, especially in countries that have dual legal systems, like Indonesia and Nigeria", the policy says. "States in which religious authorities wield extensive influence may face difficulties in implementing otherwise clearly-drafted legislation on these issues. In Pakistan, for example, national laws on CEFM and SGBV are often ineffectual in the face of opposition from local religious leaders".

Despite acknowledgement of the difficulties, both parallel events ended on a positive note: that where religious freedom for all, including women, is fully practised, economic empowerment follows more quickly and all citizens are enabled to contribute effectively.

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## **United Nations chief warns of pushback on women's rights**

RFE/RL (12.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2EYLpPW> - The head of the United Nations has warned of a "deep, pervasive and relentless" pushback on women's rights around the world.

Speaking at the opening of the annual meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women on March 11, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a fight to "push back against the pushback."

The commission has been charged with achieving "equality with men in all fields of human enterprise" since its founding in 1947.

Guterres pointed to increased violence against women, especially defenders of human rights and women running for political office.

He cited "online abuse of women who speak out," and said women were 26 percent less likely to be employed than men.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, head of the UN women's agency, said some countries don't want health-care facilities to provide "sexual and reproductive rights."

She said the latest data indicated 131 million girls worldwide aren't going to school and there had been a 6 percent increase in girls not attending elementary school.

Geraldine Nason, the Irish UN ambassador who presides over the Commission on the Status of Women, said less than 7 percent of heads of state and government were women. She said only one in four parliament members around the world were female.

She said the commission will be deliberating in the next two weeks about maternity, pensions, safe roads and transport.

The commission will also be focusing on schools that teach girls skills to succeed, women's access to vital health care, "and the fair distribution of care and the domestic work between men and women," she said.

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## **How men's rights groups use the rhetoric of 'equality' to punish women**

***True justice is served by fixing institutions and policies—not by making policy equally harmful to all genders.***

By Kathi Valeii

Pacific Standard (12.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2U67i9o> - Last month, a federal judge in Texas ruled that drafting only men for military service was unconstitutional. The National Coalition for Men (NCFM), the plaintiff in the case, considers the win a step toward gender equity, but not for the reasons you might think. In a press release announcing the legal victory, the NCFM says that it considers conscription for men "an aspect of socially institutionalized male disposability." The draft, according to the NCFM, is evidence of society-wide discrimination against men.

In addition to the draft, the NCFM lists, among other things, education and family court as other areas where men are commonly discriminated against. Statistical data does not support these claims. In fact, more than 90 percent of custody cases are agreed upon by parents without court intervention—and when the courts do become involved, it's commonly because abusers are using the family court as a method of terror when they sue for custodial rights.

And while men's rights activists hold up women's studies programs and affirmative action as evidence of discrimination against white men, to make that argument, you'd have to ignore that women have had more difficulty competing in academia and the workforce, especially in certain fields, like science, tech, engineering, and math.

The NCFM's efforts in the Texas draft case are in line with the group's other efforts that ignore statistical data about who is disproportionately affected by gender-based discrimination. Women and people who can get pregnant face stigma, harassment, and

legal barriers in obtaining necessary reproductive health care, leaving many unable or afraid to seek the care they need. Women and transgender people are more likely than cis men to experience sexual and domestic violence in their lifetime, and they endure harassment and re-victimization when they report their assaults, which is why even in the era of #MeToo, sexual assault goes mostly unreported. The work of men's rights activists consistently undermines the experiences of marginalized communities and works to redefine sexism by framing men as its primary victims.

Men's rights activists could have chosen to take on the draft by challenging the constitutionality of the program in total. After all, forced military conscription is at least suspicious in a supposedly free and democratic society. While the Supreme Court established the constitutionality of the draft in 1918, more recently, lawmakers have challenged its necessity. In 2016, legislators proposed ending the Selective Service, with one of the bill's sponsors referring to it as a "mean-spirited and outdated system." This has hardly been a minority view: In 1981, newly elected President Ronald Reagan objected to the military draft, saying, "a draft registration destroys the very values that our society is committed to defending."

Considering all that, it's curious that the NCFM would choose not to take on the injustice of Selective Service as a whole, rather than using its lawsuit as what looks like a pure expression of spite. Instead of solidarity against illiberal conscription, the NCFM has chosen to center its efforts on ensuring that women will be unfairly affected by forced service too. It's a sort of "you want it all, feminists? Here, let us help you," move.

But the strategy makes a lot more sense once you take a look at the plaintiffs' history.

The NCFM's past efforts have included filing "discrimination" lawsuits against organizations that have hosted networking events marketed to women, and lawsuits against universities for offering scholarships and affirmative action programs to women. In keeping with the playbook of men's rights activists, the NCFM's cases routinely appear to be more about punishing women than about seeking actual justice or equality.

Legitimate civil rights organizations do not seek equality in the form of pulling other people down to a disenfranchised status. True justice efforts work to elevate the conditions of marginalized groups while dismantling the institutions and policies that are causing civic harm. (It's important to note that men's rights groups don't advocate for the benefit of marginalized genders; their entire focus is securing benefits for the most privileged gender—cis men.)

When women are known to make 54 to 87 cents for every dollar earned by a white man—depending on the woman's race—fighting against networking opportunities for women isn't a reasonable attempt to seek justice; it's a move to re-center male entitlement. Opposing affirmative action for women denies the barriers women have faced in attaining an education and ignores the fields in which women are underrepresented. For those two reasons alone, it can't be construed as a justice-seeking effort at all.

White men have long relied on using the language of liberation to entrench their privilege and power. It's similar to the way conservatives say that they fear for their daughters and wives if transgender people are allowed in women's restrooms, or how Hobby Lobby says it would be religious discrimination to require the company to provide insurance that offers birth control for their women employees. These techniques inevitably work to muddy the waters about who is actually facing discrimination in a given situation.

The use of the word "equality" in the efforts to include women in the military draft is a trollish way of obfuscating the NCFM's goal, which is to retaliate against women for their

advances in society over the past century. Suggesting that women also be forced to register for the draft and calling it a victory for equality ignores all the other aspects of American life where women and marginalized genders aren't offered the same opportunities as men. At best, fighting to include women in the draft presumes that all genders currently stand on equal footing; at worst, it presumes that men actually suffer the most on the basis of sex.

Men's rights activists have also been lobbying to redefine sexism to include "misandry" as a way to codify their sense of victimhood, knock women down a peg or two, and further secure their elevated place in society (which they are very anxious about losing). While, historically, the idea that cis men are overwhelmingly marginalized has been laughed out of public discourse, the Trump administration's rhetoric affirming the plight of cis men has reinvigorated these efforts.

The NCFM is offering us a false choice: Women don't need to be forced into registering for the Selective Service before they'll be willing to denounce the conscription of men. It's possible and necessary to oppose the Selective Service for men and at the same time oppose it for other genders too. (It's also unlikely that there will be a draft anytime soon.) True justice is served by challenging the institution and policy, not by making a policy equally harmful to all genders. But justice isn't the business of the NCFM. Instead, men's rights groups are toiling to pull women further down by demanding they be drafted. It's a transparent ploy to make feminists regret ever having wanted equal treatment under the law—by forcing them to obey a law that hurts everyone.

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## **How the global gag rule undermines Ivanka Trump's plan to empower women**

***A new White House initiative aims to economically uplift women in developing countries — but gender equality advocates see a big flaw.***

By Nicole Fallert

Vox (25.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2E9dwLS> - Ivanka Trump has her next project.

The president's daughter and senior adviser is heading the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, which seeks to economically empower women in foreign countries. The project is launching with funding from the US Agency for International Development and will eventually give up to \$300 million to 10 US government agencies to help a projected 50 million women around the world become economically independent by 2025.

"American women demonstrate every day that when women are free to thrive and prosper, they create jobs, strengthen our communities, and bring greater peace and prosperity to our nation and all over the world," President Donald Trump said in the Oval Office two weeks ago when he signed a memorandum establishing the project and dedicating an initial \$50 million.

But the biggest barrier to the initiative's success might be another Trump administration policy: the global gag rule, a federal directive that prevents organizations abroad from receiving money from the US government if they discuss, let alone perform, abortions. Trump, as has every other Republican president since Reagan, reimposed the gag rule when he took office. He also broadened it to cover nearly all health care funding, rather than just family planning funding.

Gender equality advocates are skeptical Trump's initiative can be as effective as the White House says it will be if health is left out of the conversation, according to an analysis of the initiative by the Coalition for Women's Economic Empowerment and Equality.

"We noticed immediately and it's stayed consistent, that piece of the conversation is absent and glaringly so," said Teresa Casale, a policy advocate at the International Center for Research on Women, a member of the coalition.

A recent report from Casale's organization found that, across 97 countries, each additional child reduces a woman's labor force participation by 5 to 10 percentage points. Unmet needs for contraception increase the rate of informal work, which actually endangers women's working rights and makes them more vulnerable to unemployment if they become pregnant.

### ***The initiative wants to eliminate "barriers" to women's participation in the economy***

Trump's initiative consists of three pillars, according to an op-ed Ivanka Trump wrote for the Wall Street Journal. The first pillar focuses on workforce development and the second on promoting female entrepreneurs. The third pillar is dedicated to "eliminating the legal, regulatory and cultural barriers that prevent women from participating in their local economies."

Ten US government agencies, including the State Department and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, will receive money to develop programs meant to accomplish these goals.

Ivanka Trump claims the initiative will increase global economic output by \$12 trillion by 2025.

The Coalition for Women's Empowerment and Equality, founded after Ivanka Trump said at the beginning of her father's term that she wanted to support women globally, analyzed the plan and praised the idea of the third pillar. It is meant to address environmental factors that often limit women's economic decision-making, such as obtaining credit, property ownership, inheritance law, and unpaid care work. On the plan's website, the analysis also praised the inclusion of gender-based violence as a factor limiting women, although Trump's Oval Office memorandum failed to mention this barrier.

The inclusion of compounding environmental factors was "unprecedented" and demonstrated that the plan's drafters listened to expert advice, said Lyric Thompson, director of policy and advocacy at the International Center for Research on Women. She added that the third pillar of Trump's plan "does a lot of work to recognize the economic rights issues the US government has not been a leader on in any administration."

But the third pillar is also where some advocates for gender equality get stuck. If Ivanka Trump wants to "eliminate legal, regulatory, and cultural barriers" to economic participation, she'll also have to address commonly unmet needs for contraception, said Casale, the ICRW policy advocate.

And under the global gag rule — which the Trump administration not only reimposed but expanded — organizations addressing that issue have their hands tied.

"Women's health is integral to her economic participation," Thompson said. "If that ability is greatly constrained by the imposition of the global gag rule, then necessarily there are less women who are positioned to economically thrive."

Casale agreed: "Any organization that receives money on the ground can't talk about abortion and still receive funding," she said. "Those two policies are in contrast and in conflict with one another."

### ***The global gag rule bars groups getting US funding from talking about abortion***

The global gag rule, also known as the Mexico City policy, originated with Ronald Reagan, who established it in 1984. Traditionally, it has barred any organization that performs abortions or discusses abortion as a family planning option from getting US foreign aid meant to fund family planning and contraception.

Since Reagan, Democratic presidents have repealed the policy, while Republican presidents have reimposed it. President Trump went further: His administration expanded the gag rule to cover all health care funding, not just family planning.

Some members of Congress are trying to fight the global gag rule. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Rep. Nita Lowey (D-NY) introduced the Global HER Act the same week Ivanka's plan was announced. The act would allow groups receiving US aid to provide abortions, as long as they don't pay for them with US aid money. Sens. Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) eventually co-sponsored Shaheen's Senate bill, but support largely fell along partisan lines and it never came up for a vote.

"Fundamentally it's a speech restriction," said Beirne Roose-Snyder, director of public policy at the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE). "It takes an entire set of highly effective organizations away from the ability to receive foreign assistance. ... We're looking at a lot of new impacts, but what we know is that it increases abortion."

According to a new book looking at the gag rule in the George W. Bush administration, Roose-Snyder said, the odds ratio of a woman in sub-Saharan Africa getting an abortion doubled after the gag rule was reimposed. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the odds tripled. This is often because, under the gag rule, women are not given access to contraception or prenatal care.

As government agencies working on Ivanka Trump's plan partner with local organizations on the ground, they will basically be forcing agencies to comply with the gag rule or risk millions of women not receiving economic support.

For example, Mozambique's government recently decriminalized abortion, but organizations in that country are forced to choose whether they will work with their own government or risk losing American aid.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment from Vox.

In her op-ed, Ivanka writes the White House plan should not be considered a "women's issue," because it benefits whole communities — but this emphasis hints at missing language around health. And for gender equality advocates, the suggestion that Ivanka Trump's initiative might be called "feminist" is impetus for more work going forward.

"It's not feminist foreign policy because that term refers to an approach to a broader body of work that is comprehensive of all rights and encompasses all auspices of US foreign policy: aid, trade, diplomacy, and defense," Thompson said. "This is a development program that is geared towards women."

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## **Bill and Melinda Gates say the world could get an extra US economy's worth of income by making one important change for women**

By Hilary Brueck

Business Insider (12.02.2019) - <https://goo.gl/TRC9wK> - Bill and Melinda Gates' 2019 annual letter, released Tuesday morning, is a call to action.

It suggests one simple economic stimulus plan that could net the world more than an entire US economy's worth of income.

In a word, that solution is school.

It's not a new idea: Education is often touted as a great equalizer, a force that propels people to achieve their full potential.

But around the world, 30-year-old men have on average 10 years of education under their belts, while women have just nine. If women got a few more years of secondary schooling, the Gateses say, the world could achieve some serious financial gains.

"Girls' education, especially, is among the most powerful forces on the planet," Melinda said in the letter. "Educated girls are healthier."

They also earn a lot more cash.

"If all girls received 12 years of high-quality education, women's lifetime earnings would increase by as much as \$30 trillion, which is bigger than the entire US economy," Melinda said.

Those earnings don't just boost those educated women individually. Closing the education gap between boys and girls boosts a country's GDP, and studies consistently find that women invest more of their income back into their families than men do. Whereas men contribute 35% of their earnings to family, on average, women return 90% to their kin.

Educating women also has positive health repercussions that reverberate for generations.

According to UNESCO, "ensuring that girls stay in school is one of the most effective ways of averting child marriage and early births."

In other words, educated women are more likely to give birth to healthier babies who'll live longer. UNESCO estimates we could cut childhood deaths in half if all women were to receive a full 12 years of education.

"Educated mothers are more likely to ensure that their children receive the best nutrients to help them prevent or fight off ill health, know more about appropriate health and hygiene practices, and have more power in the home to make sure children's nutrition needs are met," a UNESCO fact sheet says.

Of course, providing a solid education to girls and women doesn't completely solve the gender disparity problem. Women with advanced degrees still have higher rates of unemployment than their male counterparts.

But as Gates Foundation CEO Sue Desmond-Hellmann recently told Business Insider, when women learn, their entire families, communities, and even countries benefit.

Because when a woman earns cash, "she'll spend money on health and education for her children," Desmond-Hellmann said.

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## **'Religious freedom' claims used to defend FGM in courts in four countries**

***Cases come as rights advocates warn such arguments are increasingly being 'weaponised' against women's and LGBT equality.***

By Nandini Archer and Claire Provost

OpenDemocracy.net (12.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GNjHYK> - Doctors and lawyers in at least four countries have recently argued in court that bans on female genital mutilation (FGM) violate 'religious freedom'.

Three of these cases – in India, the US and Australia – involved members of the Dawoodi Bohra community, a sect within Shia Islam with about a million followers, primarily in Gujarat, India and the diaspora.

Around 75% of girls in this community have experienced khafz – removing the 'hood' of the clitoris of seven-year-old girls – according to the survivor-led organisation WeSpeakOut.

The fourth case involves a doctor in Kenya who filed a petition last year to legalise FGM, claiming that her country's 2011 ban breaches constitutional rights to "freedom of conscience, religion, belief and opinion".

The cases come as rights advocates warn that freedom of belief claims are increasingly 'weaponised' against women's and LGBT equality.

A small group of US and UK Christian right 'legal advocacy' organisations have supported dozens of cases using such arguments to defend opponents of abortion, contraception and same-sex marriage.

The FGM cases echo their arguments though there is no evidence of collaboration between those involved and these Christian right groups.

FGM, which involves cutting the genitalia of women or girls, is most common in parts of Africa but is also practised in Asia and the Middle East, and among members of some diaspora communities.

Several human rights bodies condemn FGM. Dozens of countries have passed specific laws against it, but there have been few convictions.

Religious leaders have also denounced FGM, including via fatwas from Somaliland's ministry of religious affairs last year, and the Dar al-Ifta in Egypt.

Zainah Anwar, executive director of Musawah, a global Muslim women's rights movement, told 50.50 that religious freedom arguments cannot be used since "FGM is a cultural, not religious, practice".

"It has been proven to be harmful to women and girls", she added, "and is therefore an un-Islamic practice" that is "deeply entrenched in the patriarchal need to control women's bodies and sexualities".

### ***The 'Religious freedom' cases***

In August 2018, a group called the Dawoodi Bohra Women's Association for Religious Freedom (DBWRF) celebrated overturning Australia's first FGM conviction against three community members in 2015.

A spokesperson said they "exercise their right to religious freedom by practicing khafz on their daughters", while public opinion "is intent on denying women their right to practise their religious observance".

In November, a US judge ruled that a law banning FGM was unconstitutional. This case involved members of the Dawoodi Bohra community in the northeastern city of Detroit, accused of 'cutting' nine girls.

The defence team of the accused doctor in this case, Jumana Nagarwala, also argued that her prosecution violated her religious freedom.

The judge dismissed the charges and said "Congress overstepped its bounds by legislating to prohibit [FGM]" – that this was an issue for states to regulate.

He dropped other charges against another doctor, two surgery assistants and four mothers who bought their daughters to the clinic. The US government is expected to appeal this decision this spring.

In an ongoing FGM court case in India, members of the Dawoodi Bohra community claim they face persecution for performing khafz.

There is no specific law against FGM in India, but the Attorney General said FGM is still a crime under other legislation and urged the Supreme Court last April to "step in and issue directions on the issue".

Dawoodi Bohra lawyers claim their practice of khafz is "an essential aspect of Islam" that "cannot be subjected to judicial scrutiny". They say it is protected under the constitution via religious freedom.

Judges pushed back, describing FGM as a violation of "the bodily integrity of a girl child". But they have referred the case to another five-judge bench.

Masooma Ranalvi, founder of the WeSpeakOut survivors' campaign, criticised this as "an attempt to re-frame the issue... to continue this discriminatory practice under the garb of religious freedom".

She said it seemed "clearly aimed at delaying the verdict in this case".

50.50 received no response to requests for DBWRF comment on the cases.

Recently, Samina Kaanchwala, DBWRF's secretary, told The Hindu: "Khafz, as practiced by the Dawoodi Bohras, is very different from FGM". She called it "a harmless religious practice" that "has been completely medicalised".

Ranalvi, from WeSpeakOut, responded: "Saying khafz is not FGM is clearly an attempt to obfuscate the main issue. ... The nature of the practice is offensive, oppressive, harmful and not religious at all".

This month WeSpeakOut called for FGM to be an issue in Indian political parties' campaigns for the upcoming 2019 elections.

"A lot of political parties talk about women's rights and saving the girl child. We want to ask them what is their take on FGM? Will they end it? Will they support a ban on it? If yes, they deserve our vote", they said.

Kenya's FGM case is also ongoing and it's unclear when it will come to trial.

A doctor filed a petition to Kenya's High Court to legalise FGM claiming that under the ban women "are denied their inherent right and fundamental freedom of choice to pursue their cultural or religious destinies".

In Europe, such religious freedom arguments do not appear to have been made in the countless FGM court cases filed so far.

In the UK, where a 2003 law imposes penalties of up to 14 years in prison for offenders, the fourth-ever FGM prosecution succeeded this month.

France's experience contrasts with that of many other countries; while it has no specific FGM laws, about 100 people have been convicted under laws against grievous bodily harm and violence against children.

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## **We have to stop blaming 'backward' culture for FGM and child marriage**

***These issues have received increased global attention. But simple attacks on 'tradition and culture' just fuel the backlash to women's rights.***

Open Democracy (06.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Sau0x7> - Campaigns to end female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage have received renewed support and funding from diverse global actors over the last five years. Despite commendable progress towards ending these harmful practices, challenges remain.

For instance, many countries with high rates of FGM and child marriage still do not have laws banning these practices, including Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone. Even in countries with these laws, a backlash has hampered efforts to eliminate them. In the past year, religious freedom arguments have been invoked in US and Indian courts to defend the practice of FGM.

In January 2018, a Kenyan doctor filed a case seeking to legalise FGM, claiming that her country's ban on the practice since 2011 is unconstitutional. She argues that adult women in particular should be allowed to do what they want with their bodies and that banning FGM is tantamount to embracing Western culture and casting local practices as inferior. This case is ongoing.

Meanwhile, many in the West still seem to engage with FGM in particular as a 'white woman's burden', whereby African girls need to be rescued from 'backward culture.' Though not all communities in Africa practice FGM and are culture and tradition really the main drivers of such harmful practices?

Too often, culture and tradition are invoked to perpetuate human rights violations, as many shy away from attacking other peoples' cultures and traditions. This leaves fertile ground for abuses to continue unpunished.

At the same time, arguments resting on culture and tradition provide a moral ground for others to claim their actions are aimed at 'saving poor girls and women' from 'backward' cultural and traditional practices of their communities. This, of course, has neo-imperialist undertones.

What's too rarely acknowledged is that harmful practices like FGM and child marriage are deeply rooted in the unequal social and economic relationships between men and women: a system that subjugates women and girls, while privileging men and boys simply referred to as patriarchy.

Culture is not static. The cultures of diverse groups have changed over time, adapting and reforming certain hazardous aspects without giving up other harmless, positive and meaningful ones.

The global attention FGM and child marriage are now receiving will only transform unequal power relations between women and men if we apply the antidote to patriarchy: a human rights approach.

Harmful practices are violations of human rights to dignity and health, including sexual and reproductive health; personal security and physical integrity; and freedom from torture, and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Girls subjected to them are often denied rights to education and forced to drop out of school, contributing further to women's social and economic powerlessness.

FGM and child marriage are forms of discrimination and violence against women under universal human rights. This perspective overcomes the perception that interventions to end harmful practices are 'neo-imperialist' attacks on particular cultures. It also places responsibility on governments who have duties to ensure the human rights of all persons in their jurisdictions.

Crucially, aims to challenge harmful practices must be situated firmly within the context of broader efforts to address the social and economic injustices women and girls face the world over. These must not be isolated single-issue struggles.

Adequate resources are needed for prevention, protection, and provision of services, as well as partnerships and prosecutions where required. Protection services can support high-risk girls, including through shelters or alternative care and telephone hotlines staffed by trained counsellors.

Education, information, life skills and livelihood training and health service programmes can meanwhile empower girls and women to assert their rights and make informed decisions. Public education and awareness-raising can transform underlying patriarchal social norms, attitudes and beliefs.

Laws and policies banning FGM and child marriage send an important, clear message that states will not condone harmful practices. States must guarantee girls and women equal protection under the law, including access to legal remedies and possible reparations,

while strengthening the ability of state and non-governmental agencies to protect those at-risk.

Adequate resources and training for professionals in health, education, social work, judiciary, police and other sectors is vital to transmit accurate information about sexual and reproductive health, better implement legislation and punish perpetrators, and increase support for survivors to access remedies and services including medical, psychosocial and livelihood assistance.

States must be held to account on their international obligations to protect women and girls from all forms of violence and discrimination. Diverse groups must be targeted and mobilised to end harmful practices, including, but not limited to: women, men, boys and girls of all ages, traditional and religious leaders, civil society, health professionals, universities, media and practitioners.

In particular we must support those running prevention and protection programmes at the grassroots level where the transformation of social norms is critical to ending FGM and child marriage.

A joined-up, comprehensive approach, based on human rights is the only way we can challenge the patriarchal structures that are the key drivers of such harmful practices. A simple attack on culture and tradition only fuels the fire of the backlash to women's and girls' rights globally.

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## **Why home is the least safe place to be a woman**

By Emma Charlton

World Economic Forum (27.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2FJ6pxD> - Where's the most dangerous place to be a woman?

At home, according to new research from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, which shows almost 6 in 10 women intentionally killed are murdered by an intimate partner or a family member. That equates to 137 killed every day, by people they know. And the number is increasing.

Women in Africa and the Americas are most at risk of being killed by intimate partners or family members, the report shows. In Africa, the rate is 3.1 victims per 100,000, while in the Americas it was 1.6. The lowest rate is found in Europe. Most worryingly, the study highlighted how little tangible progress has been made in recent years.

"Gender-related killings of women and girls remain a grave problem across regions, in countries rich and poor," Yury Fedotov, executive director at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime writes in the report. "While the vast majority of homicide victims are men, killed by strangers, women are far more likely to die at the hands of someone they know."

The findings are underpinned by figures from the World Economic Forum's wide-reaching [Global Gender Gap Report](#), which looks at the status of women in society and seeks to quantify the differences between men and women in four key areas: health, economics, politics and education.

In the Forum's report, the Health and Survival sub-index reflects violence against women. One part looks at the sex ratio at birth, to capture the phenomenon of "missing women" prevalent in many countries where families prefer sons. Another part looks at

differences in male and female life expectancy, to capture years lost to factors including violence, disease and malnutrition.

Many countries score well, when assessed using this index and 34 out of 144 have reached parity, suggesting little difference exists. Azerbaijan, Armenia and China are the lowest ranked countries, the data shows, with some of the lowest female-to-male sex ratios at birth in the world.

Violence against women – particularly intimate-partner violence and sexual violence – is a major public health problem, according to the World Health Organisation. It estimates that 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.

So why are so many women being killed? As well as domestic violence, the UNODC report cites honour-related killings, dowry-related killings and deaths resulting from armed conflict as some of the reasons. It notes that violence against women is often under-reported to the police and that a large share of it remains hidden.

The UNODC findings, which are part of a larger report on homicide due for release in 2019, have implications for policymakers around the world. The agency says women need access to specific resources that enable them to leave a violent relationship. Women also need specialized support services, including shelter, protection orders, counselling and legal aid, which are effective in helping women to leave abusive relationships.

“Across the world, in rich and poor countries, in developed and developing regions, a total of 50,000 women per year are killed by their current and former partners, fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters and other family members because of their role and status as women,” the report concludes. “Women need access to a comprehensive range of services provided by the police and justice system, health and social services, which need to be coordinated to be effective.”

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## **Persecution of minority Christian women ‘hidden, complex, and interwoven with “everyday” discrimination’**

By Olivia Jackson and Elizabeth Lane Miller

World Watch Monitor (26.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2See1JZ> - Five new reports – about Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq, Colombia and the Central African Republic – unmask the multiple domestic, societal and state dynamics used in the persecution of Christian women and girls in each country.

When viewed individually, the tactics used against women – from subtle discrimination surrounding access to education through to extreme violence – appear as un-related ‘actors’, taking turns to harass a woman’s expressions of faith.

But now each of these reports, by the World Watch Research (WWR) Unit of global Christian charity Open Doors International, catalogues the inter-related web of dynamics and tactics, and concludes by connecting up the ‘domino’ impact of simultaneous persecuting events. The resulting picture is akin to the anguish caused by a thousand paper cuts plus, all too often, much deeper wounds.

As the same Unit's gender-specific analysis of global persecution trends explained earlier this year: while men often face much more obvious and public forms of pressure and persecution for their faith, women's suffering is often in daily life.

The timing of these reports coincides with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women yesterday (25 November).

### ***Invisible and lifelong hardship***

Each report looks closely at the implications for freedom of religion for Christians in its focus country. In all these contexts, women's lives are all too often characterized by invisible and lifelong hardship. However, women from minorities (in this case Christians, but not excluding others too) have their difficulties made worse by the compounding effect of the exploitation of their socio-economic and legal inequalities.

A man's night in jail is always easier to 'count' than an assaulted woman whose community is trying to hide and protect her from what is misperceived as her shame. Unlike an unjust detention, her experience of persecution hardly shows on the surface; like a bloodless paper cut repeatedly inflicted, her persecution hides in plain sight.

In order to avoid the shame of a daughter choosing to identify with a minority faith, a family patriarch might arrange for her to be forcibly married to a man of the dominant religion. A happy marriage, a good man, he says. Without the education or financial means to support herself, she is often trapped in an increasingly abusive marriage without legal recourse. Everything is provided for her, why should she leave? When children are added, those antagonistic to her faith within her new familial structure gain new leverage in her dilemma: For the good of her children, why can't she do what's "best for them?" These diverse dynamics, when observed as recurring patterns of attack on a minority religious community, are highly effective at undermining the free expression of religion.

### ***In war and armed conflict***

Also, the rippling consequences of living in a state in conflict – of the sort that 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winners Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad have been combatting – are deeply damaging and worthy of the headlines they receive. Recognition of "their efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict" is very welcome in the context of religious persecution.

Women have been targeted in war and sectarian conflict throughout history and, as this new research reveals, the use of sexual violence in situations of religious pressure and persecution is no exception.

Open Doors' research found that, surprisingly often, violence against Christian and other minority women is an extension of harmful cultural practices, or discrimination, viewed as 'normal' for women within their particular context.

However, just as the recent Nobel Prize award reminds us that sexual violence cannot be excused amidst the devastation of war, so violence and other forms of persecution should not be ignored in the context of cultural or legal discrimination against women. These many 'smaller' vulnerabilities are equally important to address. Failure to cleanse a wound, no matter its size, leaves a place for harmful bacteria to enter.

### ***Increasing resilience***

The good news is that – by understanding the nature and extent of the intersection between generalised violence against women and religious persecution – organizations supporting minority faiths are better able to equip communities and individuals to prevent this where possible, and also to support survivors, thus increasing resilience.

Women's resilience in action is a perfect place to bring support. Women are often at the forefront of community efforts towards peace, such as the Christian and Muslim women of Boda, in the Central African Republic. Their women's groups have given participants economic lifelines, self-respect and a place to overcome their trauma.

In fact, every vulnerability and dynamic identified in these five reports offers a corresponding way in which women's resilience can be reinforced. In addressing these many opportunities, individual women and girls can be strengthened to increasingly survive and thrive with their families, as they each practise their chosen faith.

The five new reports – about [Egypt](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Iraq](#), [Colombia](#) and the [Central African Republic](#) – can be accessed using the password 'freedom'.

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## **Older women do double the unpaid work of men, says study**

***Study of 31 countries finds women over 60 undertake domestic and care work spanning up to to seven hours a day***

By Karen McVeigh

The Guardian (16.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2DQ60Yp> - Older women spend twice as much time as older men on unpaid work, research has found.

A report by the Overseas Development Institute covering 31 countries shows that women over 60 spend an average of four hours a day on work that goes unrewarded and largely unrecognised.

Researchers who examined employment patterns across developed and developing countries found the disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic and care work performed by women persists into older age regardless of geography. In Ghana, older women spend just over two hours a day doing unpaid work, a figure that rose to almost four hours in British households. In Cape Verde, meanwhile, women spend seven hours a day on such tasks.

At the same time, and particularly in poorer countries, older women are juggling large amounts of mostly informal and highly precarious paid work too, according to the report.

Researchers found that there were risks for older women engaging in such work, including mental and physical health problems, and financial losses due to the demands of multiple activities. There was also a danger of women encountering violence and abuse during their work as a result of discrimination, the report found.

The study underlines the need to ensure income security for older women as their share of the global population increases. It is anticipated that, by 2050, the number of people aged over 65 will have risen almost threefold compared with figures recorded in 2010, reaching 1.5 billion – 16% of the world's population.

Governments must refocus their social protection policies to support older women, warned the report's authors.

"These findings reveal the full extent to which gender inequalities persist into older age," said lead author Fiona Samuels, senior research fellow with the ODI's gender equality and social inclusion programme.

"The social expectations on women to simply get on with unpaid domestic and care work are putting them under increasing strain and limiting their life choices."

The researchers found that in Ethiopia, one of the countries where field research was conducted, household chores have a shaping influence on how older women structure their days.

Women interviewed for the project spoke of a relentless cycle of household tasks – cooking, cleaning, washing – as well as physically demanding duties such as collecting water and firewood. When they become too old to carry these items, many women simply resort to dragging them.

Inevitably, there is a limit to their powers of endurance. "How can I work?" reflected one 70-year-old interviewed for the study. "Can people work without their hands? My own clothes are even washed with someone else. I do not wash them. I also have asthma. I cannot breathe."

The report made several recommendations for governments, including supporting social pensions for older women and reducing and redistributing unpaid care work, through better care provision, including childcare.

Age International, the organisation that commissioned the research, are calling on the UK government to do more to ensure the "invisible" contributions of older women are recognised and valued in its international development programmes, so that they have greater choice in their work.

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## **Want gender equality? Let's start with ending child marriages**

By Megan E. Corrado

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

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

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

Worldwide, around [15 million – or one in three – girls](#) are annually subject to child marriage, often forced or coerced. [Married minors are more likely to experience](#) poverty, domestic violence, lack of access to education, sexual abuse and emotional and physical

health challenges. Child marriage frequently leads to adolescent pregnancy and childbirth, which pose dramatic risks due to a girl's biological immaturity. Moreover, [pregnancy is the leading cause of death](#) of girls aged 15-18. Those that survive often grapple with pre-birth complications, fistulas, stillbirth and other physical ramifications to themselves and their children.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **Exploiting women for prostitution a crime against humanity says Pope Francis**

By Philip Pullella

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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