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AFGHANISTAN: Herat woman whipped by taliban for alleged affair

The Herat Department of Women's Affairs on Wednesday said that Taliban fighters publicly lashed a woman from Oba district over reports that she had an affair with a man.

Tolo News (14.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2Qq7tge> - The video footage, which was widely shared on social media, appears to show dozens of Taliban fighters surrounding a woman and lashing her.

The video footage, which was widely shared on social media, appears to show dozens of Taliban fighters surrounding a woman and lashing her.

"Based on the information that we have, the incident happened in the Greshk area of Oba district in Herat," said Anisa Sarwari, the head of the Herat Women's Affairs Department.

"Is it appropriate that the people see such events by the Taliban during the peace process, how the Taliban claims that they want to make peace and reconcile with the people," said Monisa Hassanzada, the deputy governor of Herat.

Coming at the same time as the announcement of the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and the unclear fate of the peace process, this event has worried women in Herat.

Women have warned that if the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan is not done in a responsible way, the achievements of Afghan women in the past two decades will be lost and they will once again face severe restrictions.

"We are in a situation where targeted attacks are carried out against the women, most of the attacks are claimed by the Taliban, there is still acts of violence by the Taliban against women in Herat and other remote areas of Afghanistan," said civil society activist Zahra Karamat.

"If the US forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan is done in an irresponsible way, the women will face an insecure peace and their humanitarian rights and liberties will be sacrificed and the women will face a dark future," said Halima Salimi, the head of the Afghan's Women Network in Herat.

"If someone commits a crime, first there is a need for an investigation and evidence to prove that a crime was committed, then there should be an authorized court to issue a verdict but not in the kangaroo court," said religious scholar Abdul Khaliq Haqqani.

The Taliban has said that they will investigate the footage.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told TOLONews that the group had not held such a trial in recent months in Herat.

AFGHANISTAN: Afghan woman shot, blinded, for getting a job

By Abdul Qadir Sediqi

Reuters (10.11.2020) - <https://reut.rs/2UzFwRq> - The last thing 33-year-old Khatera saw were the three men on a motorcycle who attacked her just after she left her job at a police station in Afghanistan's central Ghazni province, shooting at her and stabbing her with a knife in the eyes.

Waking up in hospital, everything was dark.

"I asked the doctors, why I can't see anything? They told me that my eyes are still bandaged because of the wounds. But at that moment, I knew my eyes had been taken from me," she said.

She and local authorities blame the attack on Taliban militants - who deny involvement - and say the assailants acted on a tip-off from her father who vehemently opposed her working outside the home.

For Khatera, the attack caused not just the loss of her sight but the loss of a dream she had battled to achieve - to have an independent career. She joined the Ghazni police as an officer in its crime branch a few months ago.

"I wish I had served in police at least a year. If this had happened to me after that, it would have been less painful. It happened too soon ... I only got to work and live my dream for three months," she told Reuters.

The attack on Khatera, who only uses one name, is indicative of a growing trend, human rights activists say, of an intense and often violent backlash against women taking jobs, especially in public roles. In Khatera's case, being a police officer could have also angered the Taliban.

The rights activists believe a mix of Afghanistan's conservative social norms and an emboldened Taliban gaining influence while the United States withdraws its troops from the country is driving the escalation.

The Taliban are currently negotiating in Doha, Qatar, with the Afghan government to broker a peace deal in which many expect them to formally return to power, but progress is slow and there has been an uptick in fighting and attacks on officials and prominent women around the country.

In recent months, the Taliban have said they will respect women's rights under Sharia law but many educated women say they have doubts. The insurgent group has opposed a reform to add mother's names to identity cards, one of the first concrete stances they have revealed on women's rights as they engage in the peace process.

"Though the situation for Afghan women in public roles has always been perilous, the recent spike in violence across the country has made matters even worse," said Samira Hamidi, Amnesty International's Afghanistan campaigner. "The great strides made on women's rights in Afghanistan over more than a decade must not become a casualty of any peace deal with the Taliban."

Childhood dream dashed

Khatera's dream as a child was to work outside the home and after years of trying to convince her father, to no avail, she was able to find support from her husband.

But her father, she said, did not give up on his opposition.

"Many times, as I went to duty, I saw my father following me ... he started contacting the Taliban in the nearby area and asked them to prevent me from going to my job," she said.

She said that he provided the Taliban with a copy of her ID card to prove she worked for police and that he had called her throughout the day she was attacked, asking for her location.

Ghazni's police spokesman confirmed they believed the Taliban were behind the attack and that Khatera's father had been taken into custody. Reuters was unable to reach him directly for comment.

A Taliban spokesman said the group was aware of the case, but that it was a family matter and they were not involved.

Khatera and her family, including five children, are now hiding out in Kabul, where she is recovering and mourning the career she lost.

She struggles to sleep, jumps when she hears a motorbike and has had to cut off contact with her extended family, including her mother, who blame her for her father's arrest. She hopes desperately that a doctor overseas might somehow be able to partially restore her sight.

"If it is possible, I get back my eyesight, I will resume my job and serve in the police again," she said, adding in part she needed an income to avoid destitution. "But the main reason is my passion to do a job outside the home."

AFGHANISTAN: Women with disabilities face systemic abuse

Barriers, discrimination in health care, education.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ALGERIA: Chaïma: Algeria women protest over teen's rape and murder

Protests have been held in several cities in Algeria to demand action to stop violence against women following the rape and murder of a teenager.

BBC News (09.10.2020) – <https://bbc.in/3745VyK> - The charred body of Chaïma, 19, was found in a deserted petrol station in Thenia, 80 km (50 miles) east of the capital Algiers, this month.

Her killer confessed to the crime and is under arrest, local media say.

There are also reports that the charred body of another woman was found in a forest overnight.

Women held sit-in protests in Algiers and Oran, chanting Chaïma's first name and calling for an end to gender-based violence. Activists also took to social media with the hashtag #JeSuisChaima (I am Chaïma).

Activists say there was a heavy police presence despite the small protests.

"This government offers no shelters or mechanisms to protect the victims from their torturers, this government says it has laws, but in reality women are asked to forgive their aggressor, be it their brother or their father or whatever," one woman at the rally in Algiers said.

"Women file a complaint and wait three or four years for it to be resolved and for a judgement to be rendered. These are unacceptable conditions. Algeria is for Algerian men and women."

Chaïma's mother said the suspect had attempted to rape her daughter in 2016, when she was 15, but the case was dropped.

Femicides Algeria group, which tracks such killings, says 38 women have been killed on account of their gender in the country since the start of the year. They recorded 60 in 2019, but believe the actual number is far higher as many such killings go unreported.

BANGLADESH: Why is it so difficult for Bangladeshi women to get justice?

16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

By Meenakshi Ganguly

HRW (25.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33CTZRs> - In 2015, Salma's husband and his parents held her down and poured nitric acid down her throat because they wanted more than the Tk 100,000 (USD 1,100) that her parents had already paid in dowry. For months since the wedding, her father-in-law had beat her repeatedly, demanding more. Salma went to stay with her parents to escape the abuse. But when villagers started gossiping about her broken marriage, her parents told her to return to her in-laws. When she said she was being physically abused, they told her "you just need to endure." Now, she is fed through a tube in her stomach.

Salma's story is disturbingly common in Bangladesh, where over 70 percent of married women and girls have faced some form of intimate partner abuse, about half of whom say their partners physically assaulted them. But the majority of women never told anyone about this abuse and only three percent take legal action.

In many cases like Salma's, survivors seeking help are turned away—by family, community, and the police—and can be in even more danger when forced to return to their abuser. When Salma tried to escape the violence, she was met with stigma and—with only a handful of government-run shelters in the country and limited access to support services—she had nowhere else to go.

Salma has fought for a legal remedy for over five years now, but to little avail. Her father, meanwhile, had a stroke and the family cannot afford to continue pursuing justice. The public prosecutor bringing the case told her that her in-laws were paying more bribes so she "should pay more money." "That is how you will get justice," he told her. He too, of course, requested bribes, she said.

Every time they go to court to find out the status of the case, court officials, police and the prosecutor all ask for "tea and snacks costs," Salma said. Now she says she is telling her father, "You have been going to the courts for the last five years and nothing is happening. Let's just give up."

But there are concrete actions the Bangladesh government and donor governments can take now—during the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence—so that Salma and other women and girls seeking legal recourse never have to give up.

The 16 Days of Activism is an annual international campaign in which governments and activists come together to address violence against women and girls. It runs from November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, until December 10, Human Rights Day.

The Bangladesh government should work with concerned donor governments, activists and the UN to conduct an audit of currently available shelters, disseminate this information, and commit to opening at least one shelter in each of Bangladesh's 67 districts by 2025. Shelters should remove restrictions that limit their accessibility, such as requiring court orders to stay there or restricting the presence of children. No woman or girl should ever have to "just endure" violence because there is nowhere else to go.

The law ministry should immediately create an independent commission to appoint public prosecutors to ensure their independence. Donor governments like the US that are involved in justice reform should ensure that training for public prosecutors and police emphasises working with victims of gender-based violence and consider joint training for prosecutors and investigating officers to improve coordination on cases of gender-based violence.

As Salma described, as cases go on for years, justice officials frequently demand bribes, making it more and more difficult to continue to pursue justice. This problem is exacerbated by a lack of transparency and accessibility of case information, given Bangladesh's 3.7 million-case backlog. Without a centralised filing system, cases get lost and survivors are forced to pay bribes to get court officials to find their case information and move cases forward. The German government led an impressive justice audit in Bangladesh and would be well-placed to spearhead a project to move case files into a centralised online filing system—gender-based violence cases would be a good place to start.

The Bangladesh government should ensure that legal aid is reaching women and girls in need and that they are aware of their rights. Last year, the national legal aid services organisation distributed funds to 2.5 times more men than women.

The law commission drafted a witness protection law nearly a decade ago—it should be passed into law in consultation with Bangladeshi women's rights organisations, and donor governments should support the implementation of a witness protection programme.

Violence against women and girls is so pervasive in Bangladesh, it is sometimes dismissed as unsolvable. For these 16 days of activism, the government and donors should listen to activists who are offering workable solutions.

Here are 16 actions the Bangladesh government should take for the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence:

1. Commit to creating at least one shelter for women and girls fleeing violence in each of Bangladesh's 67 districts by 2025.

Shelter services are so limited that for most women and girls facing violence there is nowhere to go to escape abuse. The shelters that do exist often allow only short-term stays of a few days, and most shelters have specific criteria for who can use them, excluding some survivors from any access to shelter.

2. Pass a long-promised witness protection law.

Bangladesh has no witness protection law, meaning that survivors seeking justice and those willing to testify on their behalf risk serious threats, intimidation, harassment, and even death. The Law Commission proposed draft legislation nearly 15 years ago but it has yet to move forward.

3. Replace the rape law with a law that sets out a comprehensive definition of sexual assault, recognizes all potential victims, and criminalizes as sexual assault any sexual act occurring without consent.

The current legal definition of rape in Bangladesh specifically excludes rape within marriage and defines as rape only acts by a man against a woman, excluding men, boys, and transgender, hijra, or intersex people from protection. There is no definition of penetration under the law, meaning that cases of rape that include the insertion of objects or other parts of the rapist's body are more likely to lead to acquittal.

4. Repeal the newly passed death penalty for rape and instead work with activists to institute real reforms.

The Bangladesh government recently passed an amendment to allow for the death penalty as punishment for rape, after widespread protests in response to several recent gang rape cases. There is no conclusive evidence that the death penalty curbs any crime, including rape, and it could end up deterring reporting or even encouraging rapists to murder their victims to reduce the likelihood of arrest. Instead, the government should carry out real reforms advocated by experts and activists.

5. Amend the Evidence Act to prohibit use of character evidence against rape survivors.

Lawyers and rights groups have repeatedly called for the repeal of section 155(4) of the Evidence Act 1872, which allows defense lawyers in rape cases to defend their clients by

showing that the victim was of “generally immoral character.” This provision is a clear disincentive to victims stepping forward.

6. Make sure legal aid reaches women and girls in need.

Survivors of gender-based violence are entitled to apply for free legal aid from the government. However, this aid is inaccessible for most survivors of gender-based violence. The national legal aid service said in its 2019-2020 annual report that legal aid was provided to over 2.5 times more men than women.

7. Pass an anti-sexual harassment law.

Bangladesh does not have a comprehensive law governing sexual harassment. In 2009, the High Court issued a judgment providing detailed guidelines governing sexual harassment in all workplaces and educational institutions, but they are rarely followed. The government should systematically monitor these sites to make sure that these guidelines are followed and finalize a draft bill on sexual harassment.

8. Provide sufficient training to police, prosecutors, and judges on handling gender-based violence cases and hold them accountable when they mishandle these cases.

Survivors of sexual and other gender-based violence who go to the police often face a refusal to file a case, bias, victim blaming, stigma, and humiliation. A women’s rights lawyer told Human Rights Watch that “the police frequently have a negative attitude and don’t believe the victim. A lot of police have no knowledge of how to handle gender-based violence cases.” All justice officials should be adequately trained in working with survivors of gender-based violence and should undergo training on gender equality—and the government should provide a system to allow survivors mistreated by police to file complaints and ensure that their complaints are taken seriously.

9. Better resource the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act Enforcement Officer position.

The act created an enforcement officer position for each upazila (sub-district) who is responsible for making applications to the court for protection orders, accessing legal aid, and referring victims to a safe shelter when necessary. However, enforcement officers are often severely overburdened and underequipped.

10. Introduce mandatory comprehensive sexuality education classes in all schools including teaching about consent, gender equity, and healthy relationships.

Violence against women and girls is so socially normalized in Bangladesh that survivors often don’t feel they have any right to complain or seek help. Sexual violence is ubiquitous, as is the victim-blaming that follows. Schools have a crucial role to play in changing the attitudes of boys and girls and building a healthier and more equitable society. The government should develop a curriculum on these topics starting from a young age, with age appropriate material, and require it to be taught in all schools.

11. Amend the Dowry Prevention Act, 2018 ensuring that it does not deter victims from reporting dowry demands.

In September 2018, parliament passed a new Dowry Prevention Act, 2018. However, some aspects of the law may actually lessen protections for women. In particular, criminalizing dowry payments could deter reporting cases in which a bride’s family is

coerced into giving dowry through violence, the threat of violence, or other forms of pressure.

12. Revise the Child Marriage Restraint Act to set the minimum age of marriage at 18 for women and men with no exceptions.

In Bangladesh, 22 percent of girls marry before age 15 and 59 percent marry before age 18, the highest percentage in Asia and the fourth highest in the world. In 2017, as countries around the world cracked down on child marriage, Bangladesh took the extraordinary step of essentially re-legalizing child marriage by passing legislation permitting girls under 18, with no specified minimum age, to marry under undefined “special circumstances.”

13. Adopt and implement a comprehensive national action plan to end all child marriage.

The Bangladesh prime minister pledged in 2014 to end child marriage and to create a national action plan toward that end. But the government has not published an action plan and there has been little progress toward ending child marriage, in spite of a United Nations Sustainable Development Goals target for all countries to end all marriage before age 18 by 2030.

14. Create an online centralized filing system for all gender-based violence cases, and make relevant case information accessible to all parties free of charge.

Bangladesh has a backlog of about 3.7 million pending legal cases. The government should work with donor governments to train judges and implement a centralized organized system for tracking court cases in order to reduce the backlog and increase access to legal information. The lack of transparency without an organized and accessible system for case files often leads to demands for bribes and other forms of corruption. Women seldom have proper access to information and legal counsel, leaving them particularly vulnerable to such corruption and abuse.

15. Commit resources to expanding and increasing the capacity of Victim Support Centers.

The Bangladesh police have eight Victim Support Centers to provide emergency shelter for a maximum of five days, and coordinate health care, legal advice, psychological counseling, and access to rehabilitation programs. However, they have limited resources and capacity. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police Victims Support Center has even published recommendations to improve its own capacity to reach and support victims, including increasing safe home facilities, but those are yet to be carried out.

16. Ensure that One Stop Crisis Centers and Cells are available and that staff are properly trained to support survivors.

The government created nine One-Stop Crisis Centers to provide social service support, immediate medical assistance, psychosocial counseling, and coordination with police and legal aid providers. But women’s rights activists say the actual functioning of the centers varies and other service providers have reported instances of crisis centers and cells being inoperative or shut down. Activists said that some staff at the centers have been known to treat survivors with disbelief, stigma, and even discourage them from filing a case, particularly in cases of sexual violence.

BANGLADESH approves death penalty for rape after protests

Move comes after nationwide demonstrations sparked by series of sexual assaults.

By Hannah Ellis-Petersen

The Guardian (12.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2H0T84M> - Bangladesh will introduce the death penalty for rape cases, after several high-profile sexual assaults prompted a wave of protests across the country in recent weeks.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, cabinet secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam confirmed that the cabinet had approved a bill ruling that anyone convicted of rape would be punished with death or "rigorous imprisonment" for life.

The death penalty amendment to the women and children repression prevention bill, which currently stipulates a maximum life sentence for rape cases, will come into effect on Tuesday, said the law and justice minister, Anisul Huq.

Last month, footage of a young woman being violently assaulted and gang-raped by a group of men in the south-eastern Noakhali district went viral on Facebook, after the video was released by the attackers to blackmail and shame the victim. Eight people have been arrested in connection with the case.

It led to an eruption of protests in the capital, Dhaka, and other cities at the failures to tackle the endemic problem of sexual assault and rape in Bangladesh.

"This truly disturbing footage demonstrates the shocking violence that Bangladeshi women are routinely being subjected to. In the vast majority of these cases, the justice system fails to hold the perpetrators responsible," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, south Asia researcher at Amnesty International.

Outrage had already been mounting after several members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the governing party, were arrested and charged with gang-raping a woman in the northern town of Sylhet a few weeks earlier.

Many of the protesters on Dhaka's streets had called for stricter punishment, including the death penalty, and the crowds carried placards bearing messages such as "Hang the rapists" and "No mercy to rapists".

However, Amnesty pointed out that the issue in Bangladesh was not the severity of punishment for rape, but a failure of the courts to bring convictions in rape cases and the victims' fear of coming forward.

Naripokkho, a women's rights organisation, found that in six districts between 2011 and 2018, only five out of 4,372 cases resulted in a conviction. Overall, only 3.56% of cases filed under the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act have ended up in court, and only 0.37% have resulted in convictions.

The problem appears to be worsening. Between January and September 2020, at least 975 rape cases were reported in Bangladesh, including 208 gang rapes, according to statistics gathered by human rights organisation Ain-o-Salish Kendra. In over 40 of the cases, the women died.

The UN also released a statement last week expressing its concern at the escalating cases of sexual violence against women: "The recent case of the woman from Noakhali that was circulated through social media has yet again underlined the state of social, behavioral and structural misogyny that exist."

The statement said urgent reform was needed to "to the criminal justice system to support and protect victims and witness, and to speed up the slow trial process".

In January, after a student at Dhaka University was raped, the government was ordered by the courts to form a commission to address the rise in sexual assaults and put together a report by June. The commission has yet to be formed.

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

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

By Mersiha Gadzo

Al Jazeera (25.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3gZ5IxP> - There is not a room or spot in the Vilina Vlas hotel where women were not raped or people were not killed, according to Bakira Hasecic, president of Bosnia's Women Victims of War (WVW) association and a rape survivor from Visegrad.

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

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

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

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

One survivor, who wished to remain anonymous, told Balkan Insight how Bosnian Serb strongman Milan Lukic, head of the Serb paramilitary White Eagles - also known as Avengers - raped her at her home in Visegrad after killing her 16-year-old son in front of her with a knife.

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

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

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

A tourist attraction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Online petition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Where women were raped'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Rape as genocide'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By Philip Obaji Jr.

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

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

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

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

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

Gender-based violence

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

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

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

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

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

'No girl is safe here'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Survival sex'

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

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

But even in their home country, Cameroonian girls are at risk of early marriage and pregnancy. According to UNICEF, in the period between 2008 and 2014, 13 percent of Cameroonian children were married by the time they are 15 and 38 percent by the time

they were 18. According to the Cameroon Medical Council, 25 percent of pregnancies occur in school-age girls, and 20 percent of pregnant girls do not return to school.

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

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

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

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

CHINA: Chinese social justice activist 'disappeared'

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

By Yaqui Wang

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

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

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

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

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

"Let's go through the tough time together." This is the last tweet Li posted before her disappearance, in reply to a tweet by Luo Shengchun, the wife of the arbitrarily detained human rights lawyer Ding Jiaxi. In the past several years, despite the government of Xi Jinping's ever-tightening grip on civil society, countless people have chosen to embrace

one of China's toughest life paths – challenging the powerful authoritarian government. Let's remember the pain they endure in the struggle for human rights in China.

ECUADOR: Protecting Ecuador's students from sexual violence

Government should fully implement Inter-American Court ruling.

By Elin Martínez

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EU: Europe's thermonuclear debate on privacy and child sexual abuse

Everyone from Ashton Kutcher to Australia's eSafety commissioner has weighed in.

By Nicholas Vinocur

POLITICO (20.11.2020) - <https://politi.co/39iu8BQ> - Should platforms like Facebook and Instagram be able to scan for evidence of child sexual abuse and grooming online?

That question is at the heart of an explosive debate in Europe about online privacy that has roped in everyone from actor-turned-tech investor Ashton Kutcher to the EU's top privacy regulator and observers as far afield as Australia.

On one side there is the EU's executive branch and its defenders, including Kutcher, who want such automatic scanning to continue. They argue that the scanning tools don't infringe upon privacy because the algorithms don't "understand" the content; such tools flag it for human review if it matches a digital ID for child pornography, or hits certain keywords.

On the other side, there are privacy activists, EU lawmakers and the bloc's top privacy regulator, who say that automatic scanning — particularly of text exchanges — is a major infringement of people's fundamental right to privacy: Even if its intent is limited, it still opens the door to abuse because the practice has no clear legal basis.

In a November 11 opinion, the European Data Protection Supervisor blasted a Commission proposal that would allow the scanning as contrary to EU privacy rules. And the Parliament's rapporteur on the draft law, Birgit Sippel, has voiced concern, saying Parliament is unlikely to meet a December 21 deadline to pass the derogation into law.

Now Ylva Johansson, the EU's home affairs commissioner who is behind the derogation initiative, is pushing back — with unexpected support from Kutcher, who co-founded an organization called Thorn in the U.S. to combat child sex trafficking and abuse. In an interview with POLITICO, she said the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) Wojciech Wiewiórowski — who's in charge of policing EU institutions — had ignored children's well-being.

"What I'm criticizing is that the EDPS are only talking about the privacy of the users. But there is also the privacy of the children, the abused children who are the subject of illegal content ... The EDPS left that whole angle out," she said.

"I had expected the EDPS to help us with that. Instead, he [Wiewiórowski] acted a bit blind in one eye, not seeing there is a huge infringement of the fundamental rights of those children. You have to realize there is a balance to find, and not only to protect the rights of the users."

'Growing' problem

Johansson's comments come as the clock is ticking down on a deal within EU institutions. If lawmakers can't agree on Johansson's draft law, platforms will face new privacy rules without an exemption for child sexual abuse material — rendering the automatic scanning illegal.

But the Swedish commissioner argued that it was urgent to give them a chance to carry on the practice, which she says is already in use to detect copyright-infringing material.

According to the head of Europol, who spoke to POLITICO in March, there has been a substantial increase in examples of child exploitation online during the pandemic because kids are spending more time on their phones and computers during lockdown.

Johansson said that trend hasn't let up: "There are a lot of signs that child exploitation, especially online, is growing." She added that her office planned to propose permanent legislation to combat child sexual abuse online next year, but that in the meantime platforms needed a legal means to keep detecting the illegal content.

"That's what I hope now: that Parliament will not follow the draft from the rapporteur [which watered down Johansson's proposal] and rather opt for an opinion that is much closer to the [Commission's] proposal," she said.

With emotions running high on either side of the debate, the issue of automatic scanning has drawn attention far beyond the bloc.

Australia's eSafety commissioner, tasked with protecting people online, has written to the Parliament's civil liberties committee, which has the lead on the file, advocating for Johansson's proposal. And Ashton Kutcher — who played bumbling teen heartthrob Michael Kelso in the U.S. sitcom "That '70s Show," and has since remade himself as a tech investor — has thrown himself into the mix, including by tweeting at EU lawmakers.

"Time is running out to ensure a proactive and voluntary online child abuse detection methods are preserved in the #EU," he tweeted on Wednesday.

Kutcher's star power has opened doors. Last week, he scored a videoconference with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and Johansson cited him as proof that the scanning issue was one of global importance.

Is this legal?

But the other camp bristles at the outside interventions and time pressure. Not only are defenders of the derogation oversimplifying the issue, they argue, but they run the risk of creating a precedent that will allow platforms to flag and remove all manner of content, some of it harmless, without any solid legal grounding.

Rather than opposing a clampdown on online child sexual abuse, they favor an approach they say would be more in line with the bloc's privacy rulebook, the General Data Protection Regulation. Sippel, for instance, objects to the part of Johansson's draft law that pertains to child grooming — i.e., text or audio communication — not the part that pertains to child pornography, which she wants more clearly defined.

The Commission "does not wish to take a stance on whether current voluntary practices to detect and report child sexual abuse material are in fact legal under EU law," Sippel said in her draft report on Johansson's proposal.

The Commission wants its proposal to be finalized by December 21, but some lawmakers dismissed the deadline as artificial, since scanning would not stop overnight without the derogation.

But David Lega, who heads a Parliament group on children's rights, says a deal is not only necessary but possible within the time limit.

"I think it [the deadline] could be met and I hope that it will be," he said. "There is time both procedurally and legally to do this now."

The derogation is meant to apply until the European Commission presents a fully fledged piece of legislation on the fight against sexual abuse online next year.

EU: Covid-19 wave of violence against women shows EU countries still lack proper safeguards

Lockdowns to contain the coronavirus led to spikes in domestic violence reports. In two new studies, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) assesses the measures each EU country took to protect women during the pandemic and shows how governments can amplify the role of people witnessing violence.

EIGE (18.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3q7Xlpo> - "Women usually face the most danger from people they know. EIGE's research shows EU governments recognise this: every single country has introduced special measures to protect women from intimate partner violence during the pandemic. Yet persistent under-funding of shelters and domestic violence hotlines has resulted in sometimes patchy support," said Carlien Scheele, EIGE's Director in the lead up to the international day to eliminate violence against women.

National action plans

Ireland, Spain and Lithuania have launched national action plans to eradicate intimate partner violence during the pandemic. Spain has strengthened coordination among its health, police and justice services, as has Lithuania. Ireland has gone further by putting €160,000 on the table. With that money, the government has helped shelters and hotlines for victims adapt to new remote working conditions. Irish courts have prioritised domestic violence cases and expanded remote hearings. The police are checking up on women who have faced violence in the past.

Legislation

Several countries have adapted legislation to declare shelters and hotlines "essential services" to keep them accessible at all times. In Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia and France, legislation now obliges governments to provide women facing violence at home with alternative accommodation. Estonian courts have been empowered to issue temporary restraining orders against violent partners, protecting the victim from homelessness and pinning accountability on the abuser.

Awareness raising campaigns

Almost every EU country rolled out awareness raising campaigns to let victims know about the help available. Greece, Finland and Portugal addressed refugees and migrants, while other countries reached out to women from Roma communities, LGBTIQ+ women, or those with hearing impairments. Spain's campaign emphasised that domestic violence is a human rights violation -- not a private issue.

Awareness campaigns are important for witnesses, who can fail to intervene because they might not recognise intimate partner violence when they see it. Campaigns also provide clear guidance on how witnesses can help when they fear they will make the situation worse. Around 20-30 % of calls to domestic violence hotlines come from witnesses -- they ought to be reassured and guided through this daunting process.

EIGE's research shows witnesses often want to help in ways aside from reporting to the police, for example by talking to the victim or helping them access support services. Guidance on such ways to help should also be part of campaigns.

Shelter and counselling staff

As EU countries re-enter lockdowns, governments can learn from the positive action taken during the first wave of the pandemic -- as well as the shortcomings. Shelter and counselling staff were overwhelmed with increased demand and heightened distress of victims; they felt unprepared to provide remote support and worried about victim confidentiality. There was not enough personal protective equipment to continue helping victims face-to-face.

Shaky support systems

In the majority of EU countries, the pandemic exposed overall shaky support systems for victims of gender-based violence. A lack of funding and shelter space resulted in women being put up in hotels and privately provided Airbnbs. While quick action is laudable, fire fighting measures delivered by the private sector should not be the solution to save lives. Although natural disasters and pandemics lead to surges in violence against women globally, no EU Member State had a disaster plan in place to deal with this.

Covid-19 has shone a harsh light on how unprepared societies often are to protect victims of intimate partner violence. Government must not turn a blind eye.

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

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

By Francesco Guarascio & Nick Macfie

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EUROPE: Istanbul Convention - Symbol of cultural division of Europe

Novinite (16.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3sOZztL> - The so called "Istanbul Convention" once seemed relatively uncontroversial: a 25-page document meant to reduce violence against women across Europe.

But a decade later, the initiative, known as the Istanbul Convention, has unexpectedly become a proxy fight for the larger culture battles brewing between East and Western Europe.

One by one, Eastern European countries are turning their back on the document, claiming it will erode their version of "family values."

Turkey, which hosted the convention that produced the document, will withdraw from the convention on July 1. Poland has signaled it is questioning the agreement. Other European countries, like Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, signed the document, but haven't translated its provisions into law.

The backlash centers on a semantic dispute that was not the main focus for the document's authors 10 years ago: how, exactly, to define "gender." To a crop of increasingly socially conservative European leaders, the document's definition is a surreptitious means to erode distinctions between men and women and "normalize" homosexuality. To the rest, the issue is not the definition, but what they see as a politically motivated interpretation spread using disinformation.

The division is a concerning development to many European officials and women's rights advocates, raising questions about the Continent's ability to effectively protect against gender-based violence and driving a further wedge between progressive and conservative forces in Europe. In the process, they warned, women's lives are being put at risk.

"This is not just against the Istanbul Convention, it is also an anti-European, and an anti-EU gesture," said Daniel Hölting, spokesperson for the Council of Europe, the international organization of 47 European states that produced and oversees the convention. "It's traditionalists against progressives in Europe."

Hölting added: "The convention is against violence against women and nothing else."

The convention, which came into force on August 1, 2014, was initially signed by the 45 Council of Europe member countries and the EU as a bloc. After that, Turkey was the first country to ratify the convention, and 21 EU countries followed. In 2017, the EU signed the document and started working to ratify it as a bloc. In total, 34 EU and non-EU countries have ratified the convention.

The document was intended to provide the bloc and other non-EU signatories with legally binding standards to "protect women against all forms of violence," including sexual harassment, stalking and forced marriage.

At the time of its drafting, the issue was less about gender than it was about the scope of violence, said Johanna Nelles, one of the document's authors who also assisted the drafting committee in its negotiations.

"It was to what extent the convention should focus specifically against violence against women ... or whether the scope of application extended to men and boys," said Nelles, who now leads the Council of Europe's efforts to get countries to implement the text.

Nelles said the document had to define gender since it was trying to address gender-based violence. The word appears 25 times in the text and is defined as "the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men." Often, the word shows up as part of terms like "gender-based violence," "gendered understanding," "gender-sensitive" or "gender equality."

"Gender is the recognition that society subscribes us all certain roles, behaviors and activities that are considered appropriate for women and men," Nelles said, noting that "many" of these roles "contribute to the perpetration of violence."

Nelles admitted feeling surprised at the current outcry over the document in Eastern Europe, arguing the topic had been co-opted by "social movements, conservative think tanks [and] religious extremists who have a vision that doesn't comply with women's rights."

Indeed, the convention has been swept up in disinformation campaigns and used as populist propaganda.

And opposition is growing across Eastern Europe.

The EU as a whole has not ratified the text in part because six signatories — like Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic — haven't made the document's text legally binding.

EU member Poland ratified the text in 2015, but is now questioning its content under the ruling conservative Law and Justice party. Its leaders are hung up, like others, on the document's use of the word "gender." Last month, the Polish parliament's lower house voted to submit a bill called "Yes to Family, No to Gender" to parliamentary committees for examination.

The rejection has taken different forms elsewhere.

In Hungary, parliament refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention in 2020 after Viktor Orbán's government described the measure as promoting "destructive gender ideologies" and "illegal migration," according to news reports.

In Bulgaria, the constitutional court in 2018 ruled the [convention unconstitutional](#).

In Slovakia, lawmakers voted in 2019 against ratifying the convention.

But Turkey has grabbed the most attention in recent weeks after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pulled out of the convention by presidential decree.

"The Istanbul Convention, originally intended to promote women's rights, was hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality — which is incompatible with Turkey's social and family values," his office said in a statement following the announcement of Turkey's withdrawal.

The topic was top of mind for EU leaders when they traveled to Turkey this week to discuss migration and the customs union. European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen took the opportunity to also confront Erdoğan about his decision.

"I am deeply worried about the fact Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention," von der Leyen told reporters at a press conference following her meeting with the Turkish leader. "This is about protecting women and children against violence. The EU will never hesitate to point out further negative actions."

Von der Leyen's comments reflected the growing fears in Brussels and at the Council of Europe's headquarters in Strasbourg that other skeptics could follow Turkey's lead and withdraw fully, further derailing the EU's effort to ratify the convention as a bloc — an endeavor that is already on the rocks.

Council of Europe officials and gender equality experts argue the Istanbul Convention has nothing to do with homosexuality. In many countries, they note, the document has served as a model to better define gender-based violence, increase financing to support victims and set up help lines and shelters. Such efforts have been especially important during the pandemic, when domestic violence has surged.

"In Sweden, following the entry into force of the consent-based legislation on sexual violence, the number of prosecutions have gone up because many cases that used to be disqualified as rape can now be prosecuted," said Marceline Naudi, who chairs the Council of Europe's expert body that monitors the convention, during a recent online conference on the issue.

"This demonstrates both the transformative momentum created by the Istanbul Convention as much as the high degree of engagement among state parties," Naudi added.

Still, the EU is making alternate plans, sensing it may never be able to ratify the Istanbul Convention as a bloc. The European Commission recently announced it would launch a new legislative proposal to "combat gender-based violence" by the end of the year. The EU could then, potentially, adopt the new legally-binding text via qualified majority, avoiding the need for unanimous approval.

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

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

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

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

Reacting to this situation, Evelyn Regner (S&D, AT), Chair of the EP Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, declared: "These days and the weeks ahead are especially dangerous for women. We are all facing major psychological challenges through isolation or quarantine, but women and sometimes children in unsafe homes are facing a particularly gruelling stress test. We, therefore, must now pay particular attention to this issue and expand our actions to stop violence against women."

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

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

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

FRANCE: Frenchwoman shot, burnt alive by husband near Bordeaux

France 24 (05.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3h3wubX> - A 31-year-old French mother of three was burned alive by her husband, who chased her down the street and shot her in the legs before dousing her in a flammable liquid and setting her alight, police said Wednesday.

The grisly attack took place in broad daylight Tuesday in the well heeled [Merignac](#) neighbourhood, near [Bordeaux](#) airport, in the southwest.

The [woman](#) and the 44-year-old man were separated. Their children aged three, seven and 11 lived with their mother.

The man fired several shots at the woman as she fled down a street, hitting her in the legs. After she collapsed, he set her alight, police said.

He was arrested half an hour after the murder in the neighbouring district of Pessac, armed with a pistol, a pellet gun and a cartridge belt, the Bordeaux prosecutor's office said.

He is suspected both of his wife's murder and of having started fire that damaged her home.

Local authorities have set up a counselling service for witnesses to the killing. The couple's children were not at home at the time of the attack, the prosecutor's office said, adding that they were receiving trauma counselling.

The issue of [domestic violence and killings sparked protests in France in 2019](#). Campaigners complained that women who attempted to report abusive partners to the police were often being turned away.

That year saw 146 women reported killed by a spouse or partner, a 21-percent increase on the previous year.

After an outcry, the government introduced the [use of electronic bracelets to alert victims](#) when their attackers are nearby.

In 2020, [the number of killings fell to 90](#).

HRWF additional information

On 6 May, the Prosecutor in charge of the case met with the press and released a number of additional details.

The victim is identified as Chahinez D. She was 13 years younger than her husband, her assassin. They first met in Algeria and she came to France in 2015. One year later she gave birth to a child. She already had two children, born in Algeria.

The murderer, Mounir B., was born in Algeria in 1976. He has double citizenship, Algerian and French. During a first marriage, he got three children now aged 20, 18 and 11 years. He divorced in 2015. He has had a regular job as a mason for 20 years. He has a criminal record with seven condemnations, including the last one for domestic violence against Chahinez D. in 2020. He was then sentenced to 18 months in prison, nine of which were suspended, and after six months, he was released for good behaviour during his detention.

They were officially separated and when he was released, he was not allowed to approach her any more. However, he did not respect this prohibition on several occasions. When summoned by some judicial authorities, he recognized these breaches of the agreement but remained unpunished and was not obliged to wear an electronic bracelet.

The Prosecutor specified that the family of the murderer did not want his name to be released publicly because they had already received threats on social media.

HAITI: Lifetime ban for football chief

Players demand end to sexual abuse in sport.

HRW (24.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/37kfGqH> - Football's lifetime ban for Haitian soccer federation president Yves Jean-Bart is an important step forward to protect children and young women athletes in sport from sexual abuse, Human Rights Watch said today. The International Federation of Association Football (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, FIFA) decision should be followed by swift action to sanction other abusers and their accomplices, criminal prosecutions in Haiti and other jurisdictions, and ongoing therapeutic support for survivors.

After reports by The Guardian and Human Rights Watch and pressure from Haitian rights groups Kay Fanm, Solidarite Fanm Ayisyèn (SOFA), the National Network for the Defense of Human Rights (RNDDH), and others, over the past seven months, FIFA investigated serious allegations of sexual harassment and abuse against Jean Bart, also known as "Dadou." FIFA's Ethics Committee handed him the maximum punishment in football on Friday, November 20, 2020.

"FIFA's decision is a vindication for all the courageous survivors of abuse and witnesses who came forward to report sexual abuse," said Minky Worden, director of global initiatives at Human Rights Watch. "As Human Rights Watch has documented, they faced personal threats and stigma in society. FIFA's punishment is an important signal that if you are an abuser in football, your days are numbered."

Jean-Bart had been president of the Haitian Football Federation (Fédération Haïtienne De Football, FHF) since 2000. Following their investigation into evidence of systematic sexual abuse of female players, FIFA's Ethics Committee found Jean-Bart guilty of "having abused his position and sexually harassed and abused various female players, including minors." He is now banned from the sport for life in Haiti and internationally, and fined 1 million Swiss francs (approximately US\$1.1 million). He can appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, and has said he will.

Survivors of sexual abuse in Haiti told Human Rights Watch that they want justice for abuses by the president but also football sanctions for all officials who aided and knew about abuses in the national football academy.

"Playing for Haiti, I gave my heart," one women's national team player told Human Rights Watch. "Without us players, you don't have a game. I am so happy Dadou can't abuse his power and stop us from achieving our dreams anymore."

Since May, Human Rights Watch has worked together with the international football players' union FIFPro, who provided lawyers and support for athletes, helped to interview witnesses, and collected evidence of systemic human rights abuses in Haitian football, including confiscation of players' passports, labor rights abuses, grooming child athletes for sexual exploitation, and threats to kill witnesses and survivors.

Jean-Bart has been Haiti's football federation president since 2000 and was re-elected to a sixth term in February. Jean-Bart has publicly denied all allegations and successfully sought to have a judge in Haiti purportedly "clear" him of all charges and exonerate him. That a judge made this pronouncement the day before Jean-Bart's lifetime ban is testament to the power he wields in Haiti and the challenge survivors face in taking on Jean-Bart and his allies. In August, Human Rights Watch documented threats and attacks

on witnesses and whistleblowers, which could prevent them from coming forward with evidence of abuses.

FIFA's statement signals other sanctions against abusers and officials who knew about or facilitated abuses in the Haiti federation could come soon:

The aforementioned ethics proceedings are part of an extensive investigation concerning Mr Jean-Bart, as well as other officials within the FHF, who were identified as having allegedly been involved (as principals, accomplices or instigators) in acts of systematic sexual abuse against female football players between 2014 and 2020. The proceedings are still pending with respect to other FHF officials.

It is essential for FIFA to discipline others who took part in sexual abuse and to remove them from football, Human Rights Watch said. FIFA needs to ensure ongoing therapeutic and logistical support for players, and enforcement of any bans and fines.

"In addition to protecting survivors and witnesses, FIFA should exercise its authority to ban and sanction all officials implicated in sexual abuse or threatening or menacing witnesses during its investigation," Worden said. "In its best form, football is fun, empowering, and healthy for young people and FIFA should do its part to ensure player safety."

INDIA: Women at risk of sexual abuse at work

Poorly enforced laws leave informal workers no recourse.

HRW (14.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/31rJeQV> - The Indian government's failure to properly enforce its sexual harassment law leaves millions of women in the workplace exposed to abuse without remedy, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. The government should urgently ensure compliance with its 2013 [Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace \(Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal\) Act](#), or POSH Act as it is popularly known.

The 56-page report, "[No #MeToo for Women Like Us': Poor Enforcement of India's Sexual Harassment Law](#)," finds that while women in India are increasingly speaking out against sexual abuse at work, in part due to the global #MeToo movement, many, particularly in the informal sector, are still constrained by stigma, fear of retribution, and institutional barriers to justice. The central and local governments have failed to promote, establish, and monitor complaints committees – a central feature of the POSH Act – to receive complaints of sexual harassment, conduct inquiries, and recommend actions against abusers.

"The #MeToo movement helped to shine a light on violence and harassment at work, but the experiences of millions of women in India's informal sector remain invisible," said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "India has progressive laws to protect women from sexual abuse by bosses, colleagues, and clients, but has failed to take basic steps to enforce these laws."

Human Rights Watch conducted field research and over 85 interviews in Tamil Nadu, Haryana, and Delhi, including with women working in both the formal and informal sectors, trade union officials, labor and women rights activists, lawyers, and academics. The findings also draw upon research by Indian organizations.

Women, inspired by the global #MeToo movement, who came forward with complaints against men in senior positions have often encountered a backlash, including threats, intimidation, retaliation, attempted bribes, gaps and bias in legal procedure, and stigma. Those accused have frequently used the colonial-era criminal defamation law against the women who dare to speak out. These produce a chilling effect deterring other victims from coming forward.

The September 2020 alleged gang rape and murder of a 19-year-old Dalit woman in Uttar Pradesh state highlighted both rampant violence against women in India and structural violence against poor and marginalized communities. The authorities' response illustrates the barriers women face in accessing justice.

The vast majority of India's women workers, 95 percent (195 million), are employed in the informal sector. These include jobs from street vendors, domestic work, agriculture, and construction, to home-based work, such as weaving or embroidery. There are also 2.6 million early-childhood care and nutrition workers under the government's Integrated Child Development Services; over 1 million Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) who work as community health workers; and 2.5 million midday meal cooks, who prepare the free lunches provided in government schools.

"For women like me, what is #MeToo? Poverty and stigma mean we can never speak out," said a part-time domestic worker who was sexually harassed by a security guard. "There is no place safe for women like us."

The 2013 POSH Act mandates employers to take steps to protect female employees from sexual harassment in the workplace and to provide procedures for resolution, settlement, or prosecution. It widened the definition of the workplace and covered the informal sector, including domestic workers. It protects all workers in any place visited by the employee during the course of her employment, including transportation.

The law builds upon the 1997 "Vishaka Guidelines" set out by the Supreme Court, mandating that employers take steps to protect female employees from sexual harassment at work after Bhanwari Devi, a government social worker, was gang raped in 1992 by men angered by her efforts to stop a child marriage in their family.

The POSH Act requires employers to create an Internal Committee at each office with 10 or more employees. For other establishments with less than 10 employees and for women working in the informal sector, the state government's district officer or collector is required to form a Local Committee in each district.

These committees handle complaints and recommend actions ranging from a written apology to termination of employment, providing an alternative to filing a criminal complaint with police. Under the POSH Act, the government is also responsible for developing training and educational materials, organizing awareness programs, monitoring implementation of the law, and maintaining data on the number of sexual harassment cases filed and resolved in the workplace. But studies show that many of these Local Committees simply do not exist, and when they do, there is no publicly available information on how to access them.

"Most women suffer in silence until it becomes unbearable, and then they just try to get another job," said Sonia George, a senior official at a trade union. "They do not want to tell their families either because they are afraid that they will be prevented from working."

Domestic workers are especially at risk of sexual harassment and violence due to their isolation in private homes and their exclusion from many key labor protections

guaranteed to other workers. For domestic workers, the POSH Act says that Local Committees must refer the case to the police, leaving no civil remedy. The Indian government should amend the law to ensure that domestic workers have the same access to time-bound justice through the Local Committees as other workers, Human Rights Watch said.

While most private sector companies have Internal Committees, many exist merely on paper to show compliance without any commitment to improving the workplace culture. Employers do little to fulfill their other duties, such as prevention, raising awareness about what constitutes sexual harassment, and consequences for such behavior.

In both the formal and informal sectors, the government should set up effective monitoring systems for committees and publish regular reports to ensure transparency and accountability. The government should establish Local Committees at every level of the local government to ensure easy access and conduct regular training for committee members, district magistrates, and other relevant district officials.

In June 2019, the Indian government, representatives of Indian workers' groups, and representatives from Indian employers' associations all voted in favor of the International Labour Organization Violence and Harassment Convention, a landmark treaty that establishes global standards to prevent and respond to violence and harassment in the workplace.

India should ratify the ILO treaty and fully enforce the POSH Act, Human Rights Watch said.

"The Indian government should stand for the rights of women, whether they are domestic workers, government scheme workers, or office workers, to work in safety and dignity," Ganguly said. "The government should coordinate with workers' organizations and rights groups to address sexual harassment and violence as a key workplace issue, partner in information campaigns, and ensure that those who face abuse can get the support and remedies they deserve."

Illustrative cases from the report

Shanta (name changed), health worker

Shanta, 38, an ASHA health worker in Haryana, said that health workers are particularly vulnerable when they are called to work at night. If they bring a complaint, they come under intense pressure from family of the accused, society, and their own family to withdraw it. In January 2014, Shanta was called by a contractor at a construction site to help a woman who was about to give birth. She said she accompanied the woman to a hospital, but the ambulance driver tried to molest her on the way back:

I didn't say anything at home because I was scared, but I called the medical-in-charge and told him what happened. The staff and supervisors helped me, and we found the driver after three days. But then the police and other ASHA workers asked me to compromise. He apologized in front of dozens of ASHA workers and they asked me not to file an official complaint. But no one told me that there was a law, and I could file a complaint at a Local Committee.

Kainaat (name changed), domestic worker

Kainaat, 25, became a domestic worker when she was 12 after her family migrated from West Bengal to Gurgaon in search of work. For the first few years, as a child, she labored

as a live-in domestic worker in various homes, suffering beatings and threats. In 2012, when she was 17, an older man sexually harassed her:

When his children and grandchildren would go out, he would purposely stay home and keep following me around. He would pat my back, but then his hands would wander. I tried to ignore. Once when he did this, there was no one at home so I went to the washroom and did not come out until others returned. I knew no one would believe me if I told them, so I kept quiet. That man used to tell me, "Wear a short dress, you will look better in it." I put up with it because I had to earn to support my family. But I finally quit because I was so frustrated and decided not to work as a live-in maid anymore.

Shalini (name changed), domestic worker

Shalini was sexually harassed for months by a security guard of the apartment complex in Gurgaon, Haryana, where she worked as a part-time domestic worker:

He would say he loved me. He would wait by the elevator at the end of my shift and when I was alone in the elevator, he would make lewd remarks. One day, it went too far when the guard took out money, forced it into my hands, and asked me to go with him. That day, I cried endlessly when I went home and told my husband I wanted to go back to the village. My husband and my brother-in-law went to the colony and complained to the head of security, whom they knew, and the guard was quietly transferred. If my employers had come to know, they would have likely blamed me. That is why I kept quiet.

For women like me, what is #MeToo? Poverty and stigma mean we can never speak out. There is no place safe for women like us. Not our workplaces, nor our homes, and not the road we take.

IRAN: Iran gov't approves bill to combat violence against women

Masoumeh Ebtekar, vice president for women and family affairs, dedicated the move to 'worthy and patient Iranian women' in a tweet.

By Maziar Motamedi

Al Jazeera (04.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/35dPcqk> - The government of Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has approved a longstanding bill that aims to better protect women against domestic and other forms of violence.

In a meeting on Sunday evening, cabinet ministers greenlit the draft bill, called Protection, Dignity and Security of Women Against Violence, which has been in the works since the administration of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The bill must now be reviewed and approved by the parliament, after which it will be sent to the powerful constitutional vetting body called the Guardian Council, consisting of jurists and religious experts.

The most senior woman in Rouhani's outgoing government hailed the move, which she said was the result of hundreds of hours of work by tens of legal experts, judges, executives and officials.

Masoumeh Ebtekar, vice president for women and family affairs, dedicated the 58-article bill to “worthy and patient Iranian women” in a tweet.

The legislation completed its lengthy process of review by the judiciary in September 2019.

It defines violence as “any behavior inflicted on women due to sexuality, vulnerable position or type of relationship, and inflicts harm to their body, psyche, personality and dignity, or restricts or deprives them of legal rights and freedoms”.

It obligates the judiciary to create offices to support victims of violence and hold educational courses for judges and other judiciary staff.

The bill also envisages the formation of a fund by the judiciary to support victims of violence and help imprisoned women, among other things.

The state broadcaster is also directed by the legislation to produce more programmes that promote the support of women and the prevention of violence against them as family values.

Moreover, the bill sees a role for the ministry of education in holding educational courses for students, teachers and parents, and in better identifying vulnerable students.

The ministry of health, on the other hand, is tasked by the draft bill to boost its medical and psychological services to women and train experts in handling women who have fallen victim to violence.

Law enforcement and prison organisations are among other entities that will have to increase their efforts as part of the vision laid out in the legislation.

In a report published last month, rights group Human Rights Watch said the bill had several positive provisions, including those that engaged different parts of the government and other entities in women’s issues.

But the New York-based organisation said the bill “falls short of international standards” as it does not criminalise some forms of gender-based violence, including marital rape and child marriage.

The bill was finalised by the government after several high-profile incidents concerning women that took centre stage nationally during the past year.

In late May 2020, a 14-year-old girl called Romina Ashrafi was gruesomely beheaded by her father in an apparent case of “honour-killing”. The father was given a nine-year jail sentence.

In September, decades-old sexual traumas were unearthed as Iranian women launched their own version of the global #MeToo movement on social media.

The movement implicated several high-profile artists and one major company, and led to at least one arrest.

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

By Golnaz Esfandiari

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

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

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

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

He then assaulted her, she said.

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

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

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

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

Spotlight on abuse

The outpouring of accounts about alleged sexual abuse, rape, and unwanted sexual advances and the number of women who have joined the movement, some anonymously, appears to be unprecedented in Iran, leading to comparisons with the global #metoo movement that has occurred around the world in recent years and putting a spotlight on such abuse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Absence of education

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IRAQ passes law addressing women survivors of Yazidi genocide

The landmark bill formally recognizes the Yazidi genocide and the trauma of sexual violence, but the community still faces grave security concerns and missing men, women and children.

By Joe Snell

AL-Monitor (02.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3kW8xTF> - After nearly two years in Iraq's parliament, the Yazidi Women Survivors Law passed on Monday in a landmark for formal recognition of the Yazidi genocide.

The bill calls for compensation, rehabilitation and education for survivors. It also creates a new directorate for survivor's affairs and a civil court in the Nineveh governorate and outlines punishment for people involved in abduction and sexual crimes. The move was applauded by Yazidis as progress in addressing the destruction caused by the Islamic State nearly seven years ago.

"Today's passage of Iraq's Yazidi Survivors Bill is an important first step in acknowledging the gender-based trauma of sexual violence and need for tangible redress," tweeted [Nadia Murad](#), a Yazidi survivor of human trafficking and 2018 Nobel laureate.

First submitted by Iraqi President Barham Salih to the parliament in April 2019, the draft bill was reviewed twice but each time met pushback. Some argued that the text was too narrow in scope and needed to include men and boys that were also kidnapped. Other groups fought for the inclusion of Christians, Shabaks and Turkmens who were also subjected to sexual violence.

A special parliamentary committee was formed to amend the terminology. Last month, however, the legislature failed to achieve the quorum needed for a vote. Days later, Salih called on the parliament to expand and expedite the bill.

Never miss another story

Salih tweeted on Monday that the [vote was a victory](#) for “our daughters who have been subjected to the most heinous violations and crimes of ISIS genocide.”

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq also hailed the move as a “[major step](#) in addressing the needs of survivors of atrocities that include reparations and proof of Iraq’s commitment to address the crimes they endured.”

Some Yazidi community members have cautioned against overstating the bill’s importance. The law’s passage is an acknowledgement that what happened to Yazidi women and girls was real and deserves recognition and compensation, but pressing needs continue to face the community.

“We want to make sure that this bill does not constitute the end or the solution of state responsibilities to the people,” said Pari Ibrahim, executive director of the Free Yazidi Foundation. “We are pleased by this bill’s passing, but it does not solve everything.”

Last month, the remains of 104 Yazidi victims of IS were transported to Baghdad and given a [state funeral ceremony](#) before returning to the Sinjar village of Kocho for burial. They were killed in an IS attack on Sinjar in August 2014 that targeted the Yazidi community and other minority groups living in the Sinjar region of northern Iraq.

In total, at least 10,000 Yazidis were killed or abducted by the Islamic state. A majority of the once 550,000-strong community was displaced and only about 30% of the Sinjar district’s population, which also includes Assyrians, Turkmens and other groups, have since returned. More than 2,700 Yazidis are still missing.

“[Efforts must continue](#) to find out the fate of the [remaining missing and kidnapped](#) persons, provide redress for the victims and hold the criminals accountable,” Salih tweeted.

Implementing the law also presents a new challenge amid mounting security and political instability. Public services in Sinjar remain scarce. Infrastructure in the district is still largely destroyed and security is nearly nonexistent, a Yazidi in Sinjar told Al-Monitor.

About [200,000 Yazidis](#) are forced to continue living in displacement camps, but time is running out as Baghdad has called for their closure and for the residents to return home, despite many not having a home to return to.

Armed extremists still haunt the expansive mountain range of Sinjar, where just last week Turkey and Iran called each other’s ambassadors to discuss Turkish attacks on Kurdistan Workers Party fighters that have settled in the area after helping drive out IS.

“Without implementing it correctly, the survivors will not get any benefits from it,” Saad Babir, spokesperson for Yazda, an international organization that supports Yazidis, told

AI-Monitor. "The bill will not end the [suffering that Yazidis are still facing](#) and dealing with on a daily basis."

IRELAND: 'The lowest of the low' – Hundreds of thousands of intimate images of Irish women released online without consent

Government facing pressure to criminalise the non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

By Ellen Coyne

Independent (19.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3qoXMeX> - The Government is under pressure to urgently ban image-based abuse after it emerged that hundreds of thousands of intimate images of Irish women were released online without their consent.

A victims support group has said that 140,000 intimate and sexual pictures, including many of Irish women, have been leaked and shared on the internet.

It is understood that some images were leaked from private social media accounts without consent, while others appear to have been taken without the woman's knowledge. Some of the files also include images of underage girls, which is an offence.

The non-consensual sharing of intimate images is not a criminal offence in Ireland.

Those sharing the images have been "trading" pictures of women, and boasting about having access to pictures of women on a county-by-county basis. The files were first uncovered by the Victim's Alliance, a lobby group representing victims of crime.

Linda Hayden, the group's founder, said it first uncovered a server with a file containing 11,000 images that were "mostly of Irish women".

After searching through more websites and servers, the group said it is now aware of at least 140,000 stolen images of women. In some cases, there are multiple pictures of the same women or duplicates of the same image.

The Irish Independent understands that one server which was hosting the files this week has now been taken down. Ms Hayden said that the Victim's Alliance has been going through the images, and trying to identify and find the victims involved.

"We are not equipped for this," Ms Hayden said. "We believe that Irish women were targeted because the perpetrators know there is no law against sharing intimate images without consent. There seems to be a blind spot."

Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald told the Dáil that the "megafiles" of images had been uncovered by the Victim's Alliance.

"This is a profound violation of women and girls' rights and demonstrates again the inadequacy of Irish law in protecting them against such abuse," Ms McDonald said.

She said that 18 months had passed since the former justice minister got Cabinet approval to amend a Labour Party bill that would criminalise the non-consensual sharing

of intimate images. Ms McDonald said the “glacial pace” of the law had to be improved by the Government.

Some of the images were taken from women’s private social media accounts. In some cases, images were widely shared without consent from websites like OnlyFans.

Labour TD Duncan Smith criticised the men who thought that sharing such images was “acceptable, laddish behaviour”.

“Nothing could be further from the truth, this has to be refuted by every man in Ireland. It is the action of a degenerate, it is scummy, it is the lowest of the low.”

Helen McEntee, the justice minister, told the Irish Independent abuse in any form “is utterly unacceptable and has no place in Irish society”.

The Women’s Aid helpline is 1800 341 900.

KASHMIR: Nowhere to turn for women facing violence in Kashmir

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

By Safina Nabi

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

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

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

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

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

There are no domestic violence shelters in Kashmir. Blockades on mobile phone connections are frequently re-imposed, while movement restrictions hamper NGOs from doing their work. And India disbanded the women’s commission last year along with

Jammu and Kashmir's statehood – axing a government body that advocated for survivors of gender-based violence.

Locked in with abusers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nowhere to turn

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

Unless a woman has severe injuries, most male police officers decline to take such reports, telling victims instead that the assaults are a family matter, said Shah Faisal,

state director of the Human Rights Law Network, a collective of Indian lawyers and activists who provide legal support to vulnerable populations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KENYA: When the price of water is sexual assault

By Rebecca Root

Devex (22.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3oAZsRO> - In a village in Kenya, women wait to fill their jerrycans. While 2 Kenyan shillings (\$0.01) should be payment enough, oftentimes the men operating the informal pumps, boreholes, or kiosks demand a higher price.

Sometimes, it's not just money they're after.

In many households that lack access to safe, readily available water at home, the responsibility of visiting the nearest clean water facility often falls to women and girls. But experts warn that leaves them vulnerable to harassment, sexual assault, or abuse.

Women may feel pressured to flirt or “play along” with utility workers out of fear of having their connection cut off, according to a report by the Water Governance Facility.

Coercive sex is also common. “Essentially, they’re being raped in order to get the services they’re entitled to,” said Barbara Schreiner, executive director at the Water Integrity Network.

Such acts of sextortion — defined by the International Association of Women Judges as “the abuse of power to obtain a sexual benefit or advantage” — for access to water have been recorded in Kenya, South Africa, and Colombia. Experts believe the practice is widespread elsewhere, too.

“It’s prevalent in all sectors, all regions, all countries. It affects women from all backgrounds,” explained Marie Chêne, head of research and knowledge at Transparency International.

COVID-19 has only exacerbated the situation, according to Sareen Malik, executive secretary at the African Civil Society Network on Water and Sanitation. As water becomes even more critical in order to stave off the virus, and the loss of livelihoods exacerbates poverty, the ability to afford water has been put at risk, leaving women more vulnerable to sextortion in places where official services are lacking.

While Malik has worked with water organizations to raise awareness of the issue, historically she said they encountered a lack of belief and resistance to addressing the situation.

Transactional sex has been normalized, she said, but the arrival of the #MeToo movement has helped pave the way for the conversation to be taken more seriously and for action to be taken.

Raising awareness

According to a report that looked at access to water in Kibera, Kenya, sextortion and sexual harassment was “a common phenomenon” and “common knowledge to the residents.”

It noted that “vendors capitalise on the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of women and girls” and the scarcity of water “to coerce them into sex for water,” building off regressive attitudes toward women.

It also noted that most survivors do not report the abuse and that there was little support available for them.

While the issue may be well-known among residents and community members, there is much lower awareness of it among professionals working on water, according to Tasneem Balasinorwala, network officer and gender focal point at the Water Integrity Network.

The WASH sector and other local organizations need to get sensitized to this lesser-known “evil,” she said. “My own personal experience and conversations have shown that people inside and most prominently outside of the water sector who work on water are not always clued in.”

Malik urged practitioners to pay closer attention to what's happening within communities and identify the issue. "Stop looking at a queue of women at a waterpoint and think that is just a queue ... The stolen glances, the flirtatious behavior, the woman who was at the back and is all of a sudden getting her water given to her. There's something more going on," she said. Only through this recognition can steps then begin to be taken to address the assault these women are forced to endure.

Advocates are pushing for sextortion to be criminalized, arguing that without a legal framework to address the issue, women are unable to file a complaint and perpetrators cannot be held to account.

As well as a form of sexual exploitation, many advocates believe it should be classed as corruption. However, it is not included in the United Nations Convention against Corruption, and "in terms of a legal framework, there are almost no countries that explicitly refer to sexual acts as a currency for bribery," Chene explained.

The Water Integrity Network recommends that sextortion be included in all corruption reporting and anti-corruption policies. "When you don't have a name or don't recognize the practice, it's not measured, you don't collect statistics, you don't pass laws or think of strategies to address it so it's invisible," Chene added.

Providing support

Balasinorwala urged WASH practitioners to explore whether practical changes to water facilities could help prevent assault, such as additional lighting around a pump, or installing automatic water meters to eliminate the need for a utility worker to visit the home.

But where incidences do happen, survivors must be better supported, the advocates said. Research has found cases largely go unreported because of a lack of knowledge of how to do so and fear of stigma.

"There's a lot of shame, social stigma, taboo linked with this kind of offense," Chene said, adding that in some cases women are forced to marry an abuser or can be fined for adultery.

She called for governments and organizations to implement reporting mechanisms and support for victims. That could mean providing access to physical and psychological health services, as well as financial and legal support.

Authorities must also be provided with training on how to handle such cases, Avello said. In the Philippines, for example, gender sensitivity training for judges includes information on sextortion. In the Middle East and North Africa region, the Water Governance Facility also offers a course on water integrity and gender that touches upon sextortion and the gender lens of corruption.

"More needs to be done in terms of people talking about it, especially at the high level," Malik said.

KUWAIT: Domestic violence law signals hope for Kuwait's women

Government should implement legislation, address gaps in protection for victims.

By Rothna Begum

HRW (29.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nnWZtq> - This month, after years of activism, Kuwaiti women's rights activists won a new law establishing protections against domestic violence. The need for this law was underscored on September 9 when Fatima al-Ajmi, aged 35 and pregnant, was shot repeatedly and killed, reportedly by a family member for marrying a man outside of her family's community. Her killer had reportedly threatened her before.

In 2019, I spoke to nine women in Kuwait who described facing abuse from family members and husbands. They said they were either scared to go to the police or were turned away when they did. One hundred and fifty-five countries have legal protections against domestic violence, but until now, Kuwait had no explicit law setting out protection measures against domestic violence, or even shelters they could go to. Some laws, like article 153 in Kuwait's Penal Code, even provide men with reduced sentences for killings of women found in the act of adultery.

On September 20, Kuwait began catching up to the global norm and issued a new Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, after the National Assembly passed it on August 19. The law creates a national committee – with representatives from different ministries and civil society – to draw up policies to combat and protect women from domestic violence. The committee will also submit recommendations to amend or repeal laws that contradict the new domestic violence law. The new legislation also establishes shelters and a hotline to receive domestic violence complaints, provides counseling and legal assistance for victims, and allows for emergency protection orders (restraining orders) to prevent abusers from contacting their victim.

However, the new law has serious gaps. While it provides penalties for violating protection orders, it does not set out penalties for domestic violence as a crime on its own. It also does not include former partners or people engaged in relationships outside of wedlock, including those engaged to be married or in unofficial marriages.

As the tragic killing of Fatima al-Ajmi has shown, these long-awaited protections are crucial. Kuwait's real test will be ensuring implementation of its new law, filling remaining protection gaps, and emphasizing prevention, including by repealing discriminatory laws that leave women exposed to deadly violence.

KYRGYZSTAN: Revolt over violence against women and police inertia

Demonstrations in several cities after the kidnapping and killing of Aizada Kanatbekova, 26. The kidnapper, Zamirbek Tenizbaev, 36, wanted to marry her. He had already been convicted several times for violence. Some policemen are suspected of being involved in the kidnapping. The fight against "marital abductions"

by Vladimir Rozanskij

AsiaNews (04.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3wNXCRr> - Demonstrations against violence against women took place in Bishkek and Oša on 8 April, following the kidnapping and killing of a young woman, with calls for the resignation of the interior minister.

The announcement of the Bishkek procession states: "The whole city is shocked by the story of the kidnapping and murder of the young woman Aizada Kanatbekova. The kidnapping took place early in the morning in the city center. The police had the surveillance video recorded, the license plate number and the car brand of the kidnappers, but they did nothing to save the girl. If you agree that all of this is unacceptable we invite you to come with us to demonstrate against violence".

Aizada, 26 (right in the photo), was kidnapped on April 5. She had just lost her father and lived alone with her mother, Nazgul Shakenova. She graduated from the Turkish-Kyrgyz University of Manas was a national volleyball player a human rights activist and she volunteered during the pandemic. She was much loved by those who knew her, she dreamed of buying a house for her mother, and had no desire to get married; her friends say that she "loved her life, and she hurried to live it".

Her attacker, the 36-year-old Zamirbek Tenizbaev (left in the photo), had already been convicted several times for violence. He had returned from Russia to Kyrgyzstan in 2017, and was a transporter, living on the street and sleeping in a car rented from a relative. At 7 am on April 5, Zamirbek attacked Aizada with the help of four people on her way to work. The kidnapper communicated with the relatives, saying that he could not live without Aizada, whom he had been bothering for weeks now. On 7 April a shepherd found a car with Aizada's body, she had been suffocated with a T-shirt, and that of Zamirbek, who committed suicide after suffering numerous knife wounds.

The tragic affair had a particular resonance due to the inertia of the police, which further aggravated the scandal of the crime. It would seem that some policemen were involved in the kidnapping "for the purpose of marriage": some policemen would have warned Aizada's relatives to "prepare to meet her boyfriend, because Aizada must get married". At the police station, only the "theft of a car" was initially recorded, which was later backdated to kidnapping after the outbreak of the scandal.

The demonstrations revealed popular the indignation at the medieval oppression of women with the people demanding the resignation of Minister Ulan Nijazbekov, accused of covering up the policemen involved in the affair. The crowd are calling for judicial sanctions against the practice of "matrimonial abduction" to be tightened, in Kyrgyz *ala kachuu*, and Prime Minister Ulubek Maripov, in office since the elections in February, has promised to review the laws in this regard. The population is also demanding the arrest of all the other participants in the kidnapping, condemning them for complicity in murder. Police arrested four suspects.

Aizada Kanatbekova was buried in the hometown of Balykcy. She had a ticket in her pocket to Istanbul, where she was to start working to buy a house for her mother. Now her name has become the beginning of the redemption of Kyrgyz women from the arrogance of males.

LEBANON: Broken promises on women's rights

UN review should focus on increased protection against violence, bias.

HRW (04.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nfm7BH> - Lebanese authorities are falling short of their international legal obligations to protect women and girls from violence and end discrimination against them, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch has [submitted a report](#) to the United Nations Committee reviewing Lebanon's compliance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which is tentatively scheduled for June 2021. The country has not made progress to carry out a number of recommendations from its previous review in 2015, including not creating a unified personal status code that would guarantee equal treatment for all citizens and amending the discriminatory nationality law to ensure that Lebanese women married to non-Lebanese men can pass on their citizenship to their children.

"Another five years have passed, and Lebanon has done little to end discrimination against women and girls under its international obligations," said Aya Majzoub, Lebanon researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Lebanon's authorities should show that they are serious about women's rights by coming through on long-overdue reforms before they have to answer to the United Nations again for their failures."

Lebanon has not taken any steps to issue an optional civil code or to reform its 15 religion-based personal status laws and the religious courts that apply them. These courts discriminate against women across the religious spectrum and do not guarantee their basic rights, especially in matters such as divorce, property rights, and responsibility for children after divorce.

The authorities have also not reformed the nationality law, which prohibits Lebanese women married to foreigners from passing citizenship to their spouses and children, while men who marry foreign nationals can pass on their citizenship. This prohibition affects almost every aspect of the children's and spouses' lives, including legal residency and access to work, education, social services, and health care. It leaves some children at risk of statelessness.

Legal protections from domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment remain inadequate. In August 2017, Lebanon repealed article 522 of the penal code, which allowed rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims, but left a loophole with regard to offenses relating to sex with children aged 15 to 17, and sex with virgin girls, with promises of marriage.

The current domestic violence law defines domestic violence narrowly and fails to specifically criminalize marital rape. Members of parliament have introduced multiple draft laws since 2017 on sexual harassment, but parliament has yet to take any action. A lack of coordination in the government's response to sex trafficking continues to put women and girls – especially Syrians living in Lebanon – at risk.

Human Rights Watch has documented how women and girls, especially trans women, sex workers, refugees, and asylum seekers, have experienced systemic violence from Lebanese authorities, particularly in detention centers. Trans women have described being placed in men's cells, being denied food and water, and being coerced to confess. Allegations of sexual violence, including rape, against women in custody are common. As an example, Loyal al-Kayaje was arrested on September 21, 2015 for "harming the military's reputation" after she alleged being raped and tortured by two soldiers in military custody in 2013.

Lebanon has consistently failed to properly investigate, prosecute, and punish those responsible for torture. In 2016, parliament passed legislation creating a national body, the National Preventive Mechanism Against Torture, to monitor and investigate the use of

torture, and in 2017 it adopted a new anti-torture law. The body's five members were named on March 7, 2019, but the government has still not allocated its funding.

Lebanon's economic crisis, compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and the port explosion in Beirut on August 4, 2020, has made life worse for marginalized populations, not least for migrant domestic workers, the majority of them women from African and Asian countries. Many have reported increased incidents of abuse by their employers during the lockdown, and at least seven have taken their own lives since March. Migrant domestic workers remain excluded from Lebanon's labor law protections provided to other workers, and their legal status remains tied to their employer under the kafala (visa sponsorship) system.

On October 14, 2020, Lebanon's State Shura Council, the country's top administrative court, delivered a sharp blow to migrant domestic workers' rights when it struck down a new standard unified contract adopted by the Labor Ministry on September 4. The new contract introduced new protections for migrant domestic workers, including vital safeguards against forced labor, and would have been an important first step towards abolishing the abusive kafala system.

"For the past year, women from all walks of life have taken to the streets to demand equality and an end to all forms of discrimination," Majzoub said. "While the authorities have taken some steps, they need to heed calls for systemic change for equality."

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

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

By Daniela Sala

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

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

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

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

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

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs, put the number in the thousands.

The law

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

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

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

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

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

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

Life on the streets

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

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

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

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

"We meet women who are Lebanese, East Africans and, in recent years, a lot of Syrians, of course," says Paul. "In my experience, they all want to leave the job, but the only ones I have seen leaving a trafficker - it was because they were handed to another [trafficker]."

The Chez Maurice case

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

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

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

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

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

'No trust in the system'

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

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

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

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

When the numbers do not add up

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

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

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

"Vulnerability is increasing, hence trafficking is increasing."

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

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

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

Falling through the cracks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Of course they are victims'

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

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

But there is little she can do.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Double standard'

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

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

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

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

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

But this is not how trafficking works.

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

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

'Long-term solutions'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MEXICO: UN experts call on Mexican police to protect women protesters

OHCHR (20.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2IWGZPL> - Ahead of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, UN human rights experts* today called on Mexican authorities to protect, not attack, women who peacefully demonstrate against violence.

"There is nothing more ironic – and outrageous – than the recent sight of police attacking women who were protesting against the violence and death women face every day in Mexico," the experts said.

They made the call ahead of International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November, the start of the annual 16 Days campaign that ends on UN Human Rights Day on 10 December.

"Violence absolutely cannot be used to repress women who only want to live a life free of violence for themselves and all women and girls, and who protest against femicide, the most lethal form of violence against women, and demand justice for victims."

"Now more than ever, it is vital that Mexican authorities respect and protect the right to peaceful assembly, as well as promote it in public discourse" they said. However, they added, during demonstrations the threat of sexual harassment, violence, arrest, and detention that women face daily in public becomes even worse.

The Mexican government at all levels, has an obligation to create an environment where women can fully and safely exercise their right to freedom of peaceful assembly, without fear of reprisal. It must ensure that the force is only used as a last resort and in accordance with the principle of proportionality, that lethal weapons are not used, and that women are not sexually assaulted in future protests.

The experts called for specific steps to fight the machismo culture within the police force, such as strengthening mechanisms of police accountability, but also to fight gender stereotypes in society.

"Above all, there must be accountability for the way police officers treat women protesters and women human rights defenders, who play a crucial role in promoting women's right to a life free from violence," they said.

In June, the experts raised with the Mexican government their concern over intimidation and threats against those promoting women's rights, particularly threats against women human rights defenders. They are aware of the authorities and other public institutions' efforts to tackle this pattern of violence in the context of protests and violence against women.

MOROCCO: HCP: 5.3 million women in Morocco experience domestic violence

The statistics related to gender-based discrimination in Morocco show that policymakers still need to increase efforts to combat the prevalence of violence against women.

By Safaa Kasraoui

Morocco World News (28.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3jGTQIW> - A lengthy report from the High Commission of Planning (HCP) showcased the prevalence of several types of violence against women in Morocco, including domestic violence.

The 142-page [report](#) on Morocco's implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) devoted a whole section to gender equality and the progress the country has made in the field.

The report showed some remarkable changes in terms of improving gender equality, but indicated that the country's institutions must increase efforts to combat domestic violence and sexual harassment against women in Morocco.

The document reported an overall decrease in violence against women based on searches and surveys that the HCP carried out between 2009 and 2019.

The rate of violence against women aged between 18 and 64 decreased to 57 % in 2019 compared to 63% in 2009.

The statistics show that psychological violence against women dropped from 58% in 2009 to 49% in 2019. Physical violence decreased from 15% to 13% during the same period.

Economic and sexual violence, however, recorded a notable increase. Economic violence increased from 8% in 2009 to 15% in 2019, while sexual violence rose from 9% to 14% during the same period.

In rural Morocco, physical violence against women increased from 9% to 13% between 2009 and 2019.

The HCP also highlighted a remarkable decrease in violence against women in public spaces between 2009 and 2019.

According to the recent statistics, violence against women in public dropped from 33% to 13%.

However, domestic violence perpetrated by family members or marital partners affected 52% of women and girls in 2019.

The rate of marital violence increased by 46% between 2009 and 2019, with 5.3 million women aged between 15 and 74 experiencing violence from their partners.

The perpetrators are mainly boyfriends, husbands, ex-husbands, or romantic partners.

Married women are the largest category who reported violence, accounting for 52%. Around 59% of the victims are aged between 15 and 24.

Marital violence is most prevalent among women with "average education (54%) and unemployed women (56%)."

The HCP report found that psychological violence tops the list with 43% of women (15-74) experiencing this sort of violence from their partners in 2019.

Between 2009 and 2019, sexual violence from a third party against women aged 15-74 increased from 4.3% to 8.5% in Morocco.

Some 10.5% of victims of sexual violence experience such crimes in educational and training spaces (16.2% in rural areas and 9.3% in urban areas).

Sexual harassment also increased by 50% in 2019.

In working spaces, 15% of women were victims of psychological or economic violence.

Despite the alarming numbers, the report lauded a set of reforms Morocco launched to combat violence against women.

The report recalled the approach Morocco's General Directorate of National Security (DGSN) launched last year to assist women exposed to gender-based violence.

In 2019, DGSN introduced support units for women and girls who experienced violence.

The units seek to provide psychological support and guidance victims.

The report also mentioned Morocco's decision to implement Law 103-13 against gender discrimination.

Morocco enacted Law 103-13 in September 2018 to criminalize sexual harassment, assault in public spaces, and cybercrime.

Feminists and activists have long argued that the law contains loopholes due to the absence of a legal framework that would accompany victims during the reporting process.

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

By Karolin Schaps

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PAKISTAN arrests suspect in highway gang rape case amid protests

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gender-based slurs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Police intervened to stop the violence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

PHILIPPINES: Outcry in Philippines over general's 'warning' to female celebrities

Accusing a women's rights group of ties to Communist rebels, the general told an actress she could be killed if she associated with the organization.

By Jason Gutierrez

The New York Times (23.10.2020) - <https://nyti.ms/31RKvRt> - The 22-year-old actress's voice broke last week as she talked about being threatened online with rape. She said she worried about the environment that her young nieces would grow up in, and called for creating "a better future for everyone."

This week, a Philippine general said that unless she changed her ways, she could end up dead.

The general, Lt. Gen. Antonio Parlade — the de facto head of a military task force fighting a long-running Communist insurgency in the Philippines — directed his criticism not at the remarks made by the actress, Liza Soberano, but at the forum where she made them: an online discussion on the rights of women and girls organized by the youth wing of Gabriela, a women's rights group that the military claims is tied to Communist guerrillas. (Gabriela denies the accusation.)

"Liza Soberano, there's still a chance to abdicate that group," General Parlade said on Facebook. Otherwise, he said, she would "suffer the same fate" as Josephine Ann Lapira, a young activist who was killed in a 2017 battle between the military and the Communist rebels, the New People's Army.

The general's comments led to an outcry from social media users, liberal politicians and the Commission on Human Rights, an independent government body.

"Coming from a high-ranking military official, such a statement is a form of suppression and restriction that serves to dissuade those who speak up for their beliefs and advocacies," a member of the rights commission, Gwendolyn Pimentel-Gana, said on Friday.

A lawyer for Ms. Soberano, Jun Lim, said that the actress was "apolitical," and accused General Parlade of "red-tagging" her — that is, accusing her of being a Communist. "Expressing her love and respect for women and children is her personal advocacy," Mr. Lim said.

General Parlade denied implying that Ms. Soberano was a Communist, saying that he had meant only to warn her against associating with militants. He said he supported women's rights.

But some of the general's critics said his comments reflected a hostility toward women that is prevalent in President Rodrigo Duterte's government.

In his Facebook remarks, General Parlade also warned another Filipina celebrity — Catriona Gray, who won the Miss Universe pageant in 2018 — against associating with left-leaning activist groups. And he accused Angel Locsin, an outspoken actress, of being involved with the rebels.

Ms. Gray, in particular, has been vocal about the government's crackdown on human rights organizations and its passage of a contentious antiterrorism law that rights groups say was designed to stifle opposition voices.

"To Liza and Catriona: It is difficult and painful to be at the front lines fighting beside persons oppressed by a norm that advocates rape, murder and exploitation," Senator Risa Hontiveros said by telephone.

"We will be monitoring him from now on," Senator Hontiveros said of General Parlade. "He should not use his power as a general and threaten these women."

Mr. Duterte, a self-confessed womanizer, has been repeatedly accused of misogyny. He once joked about the gang rape of an Australian missionary during a prison riot in the southern Philippines, saying that he should have been allowed to participate.

The New People's Army, the armed wing of the country's Communist Party, has been waging guerrilla warfare since 1969. Mr. Duterte, who calls himself a leftist and who once studied under the party's founder, Jose Maria Sison, wooed the rebels to the negotiating table soon after taking office and had hoped to complete a peace deal before stepping down in 2022.

But the relationship soured, with the rebels and the military accusing each other of continuing to foment violence. Mr. Duterte scrapped the peace talks and said he would resume them only if Mr. Sison returned to the Philippines from self-imposed exile in the Netherlands.

Gabriela, the country's most prominent women's rights organization, has denied having ties to the Communist Party or the rebels. Arlene Brosas, a Philippine lawmaker who is a member of Gabriela, said the military was using a "rehashed script" to attack the group.

"Our 20 years of advancing women and children's rights inside and outside of Congress cannot be smeared by their repeated lies," she said.

Ms. Soberano is a popular film and television actress whose breakthrough came with "Forevermore," a soap opera on the ABS-CBN network. On Friday, ABS-CBN issued statements in support of both Ms. Soberano and Ms. Locsin, who also appears on the network.

In the online discussion last week, Ms. Soberano became emotional as she talked about supportive messages she had received from women after filing a criminal complaint against someone alleged to have posted a rape threat against her on social media.

"I cried when they sent me those messages," she said, "because I didn't realize how many women were struggling to stand up for themselves."

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

By Shona Murray & Natalie Huet

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

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

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

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

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

MEPs have also slammed the Polish government's move.

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

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

Using EU funds as leverage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi women are speaking up online

Male guardianship, sexual harassment amongst major concerns.

By Hiba Zayadin

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Observatory recalls that 2018 saw an unprecedented crackdown against women rights defenders (see background information). Dozens were detained on vague security charges for defending women's rights. Several were reportedly tortured while in detention. The acts of torture included electric shocks, whipping the women on their thighs, rape threats and sexual harassment.

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

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

Background information [1]:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Actions requested:

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

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

vi. More generally, ensure in all circumstances the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and instruments ratified by Saudi Arabia.

Addresses:

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

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

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

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

SOUTH AFRICA: Why access to decent toilets could help reduce sexual violence in South Africa

By Andrew Gibbs & Tarylee Reddy

The Conversation (17.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2EpjIDw> - South Africa has exceedingly high rates of rape of women and girls by non-partners. It's estimated that between 5% and 12% of women may have been raped by a man who is not a romantic partner. This, however, could be an underestimate. In earlier research, 21% of men reported perpetrating non-partner rape in their lifetime. Rape is a human rights violation. It also has a negative impact on the mental health and social wellbeing of women and girls.

An important but overlooked factor adding to the risk of rape by a non-partner is the issue of toilets.

Studies globally have made the link between the lack of adequate sanitation – particularly open defecation (outdoors) or shared community toilet facilities – and the increased risk of women and girls being raped. This can happen when women and girls

walk during the day, and particularly at night, to use toilets. Poor maintenance of shared toilet facilities poses additional risks.

In South Africa, not everyone has a private secure toilet facility. A government survey in 2015 showed that access to private toilet facilities had improved. But a quarter (25.6%) of households only had access to shared toilets. Most shared toilets were within 200 metres of the household. But 6.1% of households reported having to go more than 200 metres to access toilets. Among those who had to use shared toilets, concerns included physical safety, poor lighting, lack of water to flush or wash hands, and poor infrastructure.

These challenges are particularly clear in communities where infrastructure has not kept pace with rapid growth. And it may be that women and girls who do not have private secure toilet facilities are more likely to be raped than those who do have decent facilities. We set out to examine whether this was the case.

Link between toilet type and non-partner rape

Our study was conducted in the South African provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. We looked at four health districts. In each of these four districts we identified communities with particular challenges related to HIV, where community partners work. We conducted a cross-sectional quantitative survey, designed to be representative of young women in these communities. The primary study was for a wider analysis exploring young women's vulnerability to HIV, and we re-purposed the data for our own analysis. Our analysis included 10,635 young women between the ages of 18 and 24, who were asked about their household's access to toilet facilities.

We found that only half of the women in our study had access to their own indoor toilets. A fifth had their own outside toilet (such as a pit latrine), and approximately one third of the women reported that they only had access to shared toilet facilities. In addition, a small proportion (0.6%) reported they had no access to any toilet facilities.

Overall, we found that one in 20 (5.7%) of the young women in our study had been a victim of non-partner sexual violence in the past year. The highest rate of past year non-partner sexual violence was observed in women who only had access to shared toilet facilities (7.2%) and those without any toilets (7.1%), compared to 5.5% and 4.8% in those with their own outdoor and indoor toilets.

After controlling for a variety of factors which may confound the association, including poverty, we observed that women who use shared toilets were at a 45% increased risk of past year non-partner sexual violence compared to those with their own indoor toilets. A similar increase in risk for past year non-partner rape was also seen for those with no toilets (43%), but because of the small numbers reporting this, it was not statistically significant.

Our findings importantly demonstrate that the lack of access to adequate private toilet facilities for young women and girls is increasing their risk of being raped by a non-partner.

Sustainable development goal 6, indicator 6.2, is specific about this: "By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations."

As our study showed, despite a growing number of young women and girls having access to sanitation, this is not safe for them.

Preventing non-partner sexual violence

Addressing the significant public health and human rights burden of non-partner rape requires integrating these insights into urban planning, as well as focusing on social transformation. There needs to be continued effort by government and non-governmental organisations to address men's perpetration of rape, including improved policing, and holding men accountable for this.

Our study also highlights that improving access to sanitation facilities which are private and secure must be central to discussions on the prevention of sexual violence. Addressing the abhorrent level of non-partner rape in South Africa requires such a multi-sectoral approach, with those involved in urban upgrading and the provision of water and sanitation working closely with communities.

SOUTH KOREA: Seoul court orders Japan to compensate 12 Korean sex slaves

By Hyung-Jin Kim

AP News (08.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2XANrzB> - A South Korean court on Friday ordered Japan to financially compensate 12 South Korean women forced to work as sex slaves for Japanese troops during World War II, a landmark ruling that's set to rekindle animosities between the Asian neighbors.

Japan immediately protested the ruling, maintaining that all wartime compensation issues were resolved under a 1965 treaty that restored their diplomatic ties.

The Seoul Central District Court ruled the Japanese government must give 100 million won (\$91,360) each to the 12 aging women who filed the lawsuits in 2013 for their wartime sexual slavery.

The court said Japan's mobilization of these women as sexual slaves was "a crime against humanity." It said it happened when Japan "illegally occupied" the Korean Peninsula from 1910-45, and its sovereign immunity cannot shield it from lawsuits in South Korea.

The court said the women were the victims of "harsh sexual activities" by Japanese soldiers who caused them bodily harm, venereal diseases and unwanted pregnancies and left "big mental scars" in the women's lives.

The proceedings in the case had been delayed as Japan refused to receive legal documents. Seven of the 12 women died while waiting for the ruling.

Another 20 women, some already diseased and represented by their surviving relatives, filed a separate suit against Japan, and that ruling is expected next week.

The women were among tens of thousands across occupied Asia and the Pacific who were sent to front-line Japanese military brothels. About 240 South Korean women came forward and registered with the government as victims of sexual slavery, but only 16 of them, all in their 80s and 90s, are still alive.

Observers say it's unlikely for Japan to abide by the South Korean court ruling. A support group for women forced to work as sex slaves said it may take legal steps to seize Japanese government assets in South Korea if Japan refuses to compensate victims.

Japan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Akiba had summoned South Korean Ambassador Nam Gwan-pyo to register Tokyo's protest of the ruling.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato also called the ruling "extremely regrettable," saying "the Japanese government cannot accept this by any means."

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said later Friday it respects the ruling and will strive to restore the dignity of the women. It said it will examine the verdict's possible effects on ties with Japan and make efforts to maintain "future-oriented" cooperation with Tokyo.

Seoul and Tokyo, both key U.S. allies, are closely linked to each other economically and culturally. But their historical and territorial disputes stemming from Japan's colonial occupation have often complicated Washington's efforts to strengthen trilateral cooperation to deal with North Korea's nuclear threat and China's growing influence in the region.

Their relations plunged to one of their lowest levels in decades after South Korea's Supreme Court in 2018 ordered Japanese companies to offer reparations to some elderly South Korean plaintiffs for their wartime forced labor. The spat escalated into a trade war that saw both countries downgrade the other's trade status, and then spilled over to military matters when Seoul threatened to end a trilateral 2016 military intelligence-sharing agreement involving the U.S.

In 2015, South Korea's previous government reached a deal with Japan to resolve the sexual slavery dispute.

Under the deal, Japan offered a fresh apology and agreed to fund a foundation to support victims in return for South Korea stopping to criticize Japan over the issue on the world stage. But South Korea's current government, led by President Moon Jae-in, took steps to dissolve the foundation, saying the 2015 deal lacked legitimacy because officials failed to properly communicate with victims before reaching it.

SOUTH KOREA: Shocked public wants Telegram trafficker identified

By Ser Myo-Ja

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

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

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

The man was accused of sex trafficking dozens of women, producing illegal pornographic materials and distributing them for profit through the Telegram instant messaging app, where he was known as "Baksa," meaning doctor or guru in Korean. He has not been formally charged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Release followed months of negotiations

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

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

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

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

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

Women and children inspired to come forward

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

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

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

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

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

SPAIN: Spain toughens law against sexual violence

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

By Graham Keeley

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Wolf-pack'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By Emma Batha

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Shockingly low'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TURKEY withdraws from European treaty protecting women

By Zeynep Bilginsoy

AP News (20.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3skPOPn> - Turkey withdrew early Saturday from a landmark European treaty protecting women from violence that it was the first country to sign 10 years ago and that bears the name of its largest city.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s overnight decree annulling Turkey’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a blow to women’s rights advocates, who say the agreement is crucial to combating domestic violence. Hundreds of women gathered in Istanbul to protests against the move on Saturday.

The Council of Europe’s Secretary General, Marija Pejčinović Burić, called the decision “devastating.”

“This move is a huge setback to these efforts and all the more deplorable because it compromises the protection of women in Turkey, across Europe and beyond,” she said.

The Istanbul Convention states that men and women have equal rights and obliges state authorities to take steps to prevent gender-based violence against women, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators.

Some officials from Erdogan’s Islam-oriented party had advocated for a review of the agreement, arguing it is inconsistent with Turkey’s conservative values by encouraging divorce and undermining the traditional family unit.

Critics also claim the treaty promotes homosexuality through the use of categories like gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. They see that as a threat to Turkish families. Hate speech has been on the rise in Turkey, including the interior minister who described LGBT people as “perverts” in a tweet. Erdogan has rejected their existence altogether.

Women's groups and their allies who have been protesting to keep the convention intact immediately called for demonstrations across the country Saturday under the slogan "Withdraw the decision, implement the treaty." They said their years-long struggle would not be erased in one night.

Rights groups say violence against and killing of women is on the rise in Turkey but the interior minister called that a "complete lie" on Saturday.

A total of 77 women have been killed since the start of the year, according to the We Will Stop Femicide Platform. Some 409 women were killed in 2020, with dozens found dead under suspicious circumstances, according to the group.

Numerous women's rights groups slammed the decision. Advocacy group Women's Coalition Turkey said the withdrawal from a human rights agreement was a first in Turkey. "It is clear that this decision will further encourage the murderers of women, harassers, rapists," their statement said.

Turkey's justice minister said the government was committed to combating violence against women.

"We continue to protect our people's honor, the family and our social fabric with determination," Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul tweeted.

Erdogan has repeatedly stressed the "holiness" of the family and called on women to have three children. His communications director, Fahrettin Altun, said the government's motto was 'Powerful Families, Powerful Society.'

Many women suffer physical or sexual violence at the hands of their husbands or partners, but up-to-date official statistics are unavailable. The Istanbul Convention requires states to collect data.

Hundreds of women and allies gathered in Istanbul, wearing masks and holding banners. Their demonstration has so far been allowed but the area was surrounded by police and a coronavirus curfew is begins in the evening.

They shouted pro-LGBT slogans and called for Erdogan's resignation. They cheered as a woman speaking through a megaphone said, "You cannot close up millions of women in their homes. You cannot erase them from the streets and the squares."

Turkey was the first country to sign the Council of Europe's "Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence" at a committee of ministers meeting in Istanbul in 2011. The law came into force in 2014 and Turkey's constitution says international agreements have the force of law.

Some lawyers claimed Saturday that the treaty is still active, arguing the president cannot withdraw from it without the approval of parliament, which ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2012.

But Erdogan gained sweeping powers with his re-election in 2018, setting in motion Turkey changing from a parliamentary system of government to an executive presidency.

The justice minister wrote on Twitter that while parliament approves treaties which the executive branch puts into effect, the executive also has the authority to withdraw from them.

Women lawmakers from Turkey's main opposition party said they will not recognize the decree and called it another "coup" on parliament, which had unanimously accepted the treaty, and a usurpation of the rights of 42 million women.

TURKEY: Turkish human rights lawyer dies after hunger strike

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

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

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

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

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

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

UK: Female trafficking survivors in UK forced into unsafe housing, report finds

Large proportion of victims not placed in specialist safe housing, leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation, says charity.

By Nicola Kelly

The Guardian (02.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2W6cdH7> - Female trafficking survivors in the UK who have the legal right to be placed in safe housing are being forced to live in "inappropriate and insecure" accommodation where they risk being re-trafficked and exploited, according to a new report.

Anti-trafficking charity Hibiscus Initiatives says that 98% of modern slavery victims referred to it in the past two years were not given specialist safe housing as is their right under UK law, but were instead housed in unsafe asylum accommodation.

Angelia*, an asylum seeker from Jamaica, was recognised as a potential victim of trafficking through the national referral mechanism, the system used to identify and provide support for trafficking survivors, in May 2019. This should have triggered her right to safe accommodation where she could receive specialist support. Instead she was placed in a multi-occupancy house with no locks, CCTV or front-desk security.

"I've shared with six, seven women in a year, from all different types of nation," she said. "I even had a baby born in the room with me. You wonder who is running this business? Do they really care about you? Do they know the people they put me with? They don't do the checks, none of them."

Angelia, who was sexually exploited in both Jamaica and in the UK, is now sharing a room with a woman who has acute mental health needs.

"She meets men in the park ... she tries to bring them back here," she said. "It's up to me to say, 'Don't bring them here, I'll call the police.' One day, a man was trying to come in the house and wouldn't go away. I stood on my bed at the window and I beat the glass, but he was knocking, knocking, he just keeps knocking, knocking ... I feel like I have to be vigilant, to take care of myself in here."

Justė Marcinkevičiūtė, Angelia's case worker, says it is very common for unknown men to show up at asylum accommodation.

"The key problem of being housed in asylum accommodation is it's not a safe house," she said. "In a safe house, whoever is arriving and leaving is being monitored and there's an extra level of support, but asylum housing is very, very overcrowded. When you have people who have been exploited and they are claiming asylum because their exploiters are looking for them, then that is risky. Subjecting survivors of trafficking to such unnecessary stress ... it's just not right."

She says many women she supports don't know what a safe house is, and it is not typically explained to them by the authorities.

"So many women have never heard of a safe house – and the fact they're not being offered that accommodation is really troubling," she said. "There are two ways forward: either asylum accommodation is made more secure, or more safe houses are established for survivors of trafficking. The way things are at the moment, it's just not working."

A response to a freedom of information request submitted by Hibiscus Initiatives to the Home Office revealed that, of 581 safe house bed spaces available to accommodate referrals, only 25% of those who are recognised victims were allocated those spaces.

The chief executive of Hibiscus Initiatives, Marchu Girma, said: "Safe house provision is important for the recovery and wellbeing of women who are survivors of trafficking. Too many people go missing after being recognised as potential victims of trafficking by the national referral Mechanism. There needs to be more investigation into why these people disengage from the process and do not take up the support they are entitled to. The government needs to address failings and gaps by increasing investment."

The Home Office says that where a potential victim is eligible or already in asylum housing or local authority housing, and there is no risk to them in remaining in their

current location, they will usually continue to stay in that accommodation unless it is assessed that they require a place in a safe house.

"The safety and security of potential victims of modern slavery remains a key priority for the government," a spokesperson said. "We are proud to provide world-leading support for victims to help them rebuild their lives. Financial support, a specialist support worker and, where needed, accommodation, is provided to potential and confirmed victims of modern slavery who have received a positive reasonable grounds decision and have consented to support from the Victim Care Contract."

* *Name has been changed.*

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

Many women still face retaliation for reporting abuse.

By Leah Rodriguez and Pia Gralki

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WORLD/UNICEF: Joining forces to develop a research agenda on intersections of violence against children and women

By Aník Gevers, Elizabeth Dartnall, Alessandra Guedes, and Claudia García-Moreno

UNICEF (07.04.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3txkzqf> - There is growing global recognition of the intersections between violence against women and violence against children. Currently there is insufficient interaction between these fields, and evidence on interventions to address these linkages is limited. It is vital to identify knowledge/evidence gaps to address the intersections of these two forms of violence in order to strengthen prevention and response programming to achieve the best outcomes for both women and children.

To address this need, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative ([SVRI](#)), [UNICEF Innocenti](#), and the Special [Programme](#) on Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction (HRP) hosted by WHO are joining efforts to develop a global research agenda on the intersections between violence against women and violence against

children. The new research agenda will contribute to building knowledge in a more systematic way, ensure that research efforts make the best use of limited resources, and serve to monitor progress over time. It will also inform the implementation of the multiagency [RESPECT Women](#) and [INSPIRE](#) frameworks, support UNICEF's [commitment](#) to respond to the gender dimensions of violence, [SRVI Grant-making](#) and promote coherence in the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development [Goals](#).

Historically, research agendas have been largely driven by researchers with limited input from other stakeholders. To promote participation and minimize the risks of bias, we are proposing to adapt the Child Health and Nutrition Research Initiative [method](#) and use online surveys and meetings to reach a wide group of stakeholders. SVRI, UNICEF Innocenti and WHO/HRP together make up the Coordinating Group which will implement this effort. An Advisory Group will help develop the framework and provide technical input and guidance throughout the process. Finally, a broad group of Global Stakeholders – including researchers, advocates, policy-makers, and practitioners representing different countries, settings, disciplines and areas of focus – will provide inputs and promote dissemination and implementation of the final research agenda widely.

Collaborative Approach

The initiative will build on lessons learned through collaboration with the Global Shared [Research Agenda](#) on Violence against Women and Girls, led by SVRI and the [Equality Institute](#), with participation of UNICEF Innocenti and the WHO, among others. Close collaboration among these processes will promote complementarity of the initiatives.

A stepwise approach to identifying research priorities for the intersections of violence against women and violence against children involves five broad phases (See <https://bit.ly/3dtei9t>).

In partnership with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine's [Gender Violence and Health Centre](#), two systematic reviews are underway that will identify research gaps in the published literature. These reviews focus on: The [co-occurrence of intimate partner violence](#) and child maltreatment: a systematic review of the common contributing factors and on [interventions that address](#) both child maltreatment and intimate partner violence in a coordinated way. In addition, other relevant systematic reviews will be identified.

The Coordinating and Advisory groups will develop a framework to guide a prioritisation process. Global Stakeholders will be invited to rank research priorities and provide additional inputs. The outcomes of these processes will be collated and analysed to identify research questions deemed to be of priority by the field. The Advisory Group will provide oversight of the analysis and results before they are widely disseminated, including through Global Stakeholder network.

Moving forward together

Researchers, practitioners, activists and donors from both the violence against women and violence against children fields are recognizing that collaboration and increased coherence in programming are essential to meet women's, adolescents', and children's needs, and to maximise synergies. Therefore, rather than focusing on research priorities for women or children separately, this initiative will specifically target gaps in knowledge on the intersections between these different but related forms of violence.

A consultative, inclusive process among violence against women and violence against children stakeholders will identify areas where research can enhance coordination, alignment and consistency. The process, as much as the outcomes, will help strengthen both fields and build bridges for the benefit of children and women everywhere.

If you would like to join the Global Stakeholders, please [sign up](#) and we will include you in the database. All are welcome.

For more information about this research priority setting process, please contact Anik Gevers (SVRI) at anik@svri.org

Important links

- ❑ [Violence Against Women and Violence Against Children - The Points of Intersection \(PPT\)](#)
- ❑ [Bridging the Gaps: Reviewing the intersections of violence against women and violence against children \(Event\)](#)
- ❑ [Promoting an understanding of the intersection between violence against women and children \(Event\)](#)

WORLD: 'Toxic': Online abuse drives women, girls from social media

New study finds nearly 60 percent of women and girls using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have suffered abuse.

Al Jazeera (05.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/34vvZPL> - Online abuse is driving girls to quit social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, with nearly 60 percent experiencing harassment, according to a new global study.

One in five girls and young women has abandoned or cut down her use of a social media platform after being targeted, with some saying harassment started when they were as young as eight years old, the survey by girls' equality group Plan International showed.

"Girls are being silenced by a toxic level of harassment," the organisation's chief executive, Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, said on Sunday.

Attacks were most common on Facebook, where 39 percent of girls polled said they had been harassed, followed by Instagram (23 percent), WhatsApp (14 percent), Snapchat (10 percent), Twitter (9 percent) and TikTok (6 percent).

The charity, which will share the report with social media companies and legislators around the world, said the abuse was suppressing girls' voices at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was increasing the importance of online communication.

It called on social media companies to take urgent action to address the issue and urged governments to pass laws to deal with online harassment.

The study found reporting tools were ineffective in stopping the abuse, which included explicit messages, pornographic photos and cyberstalking.

Nearly half of the girls targeted had been threatened with physical or sexual violence, according to the poll. Many said the abuse took a mental toll, and a quarter felt physically unsafe.

"It is time for this to stop. Girls should not have to put up with behaviour online which would be criminal on the streets," the report said.

Facebook and Instagram said they used artificial intelligence to look for bullying content, constantly monitored users' reports of abuse and always removed rape threats.

Twitter said it also used technology to catch abusive content and has launched tools to improve users' control over their conversations.

The survey polled 14,000 girls and young women aged 15 to 25 in 22 countries including Brazil, India, Nigeria, Spain, Thailand and the United States.

Albrechtsen said activists, including those campaigning for gender equality and on LGBT+ issues, were often targeted particularly viciously, and their lives and families threatened.

"Driving girls out of online spaces is hugely disempowering in an increasingly digital world, and damages their ability to be seen, heard and become leaders," she added.

In an open letter to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter, girls from around the world called on social media companies to create more effective ways to report abuse.

"We use [your platforms] not just to connect with friends, but to lead and create change. But they are not safe for us. We get harassed and abused on them. Every. Single. Day," they wrote.

"As this global pandemic moves our lives online, we are more at risk than ever."

Plan International also urged the companies to do more to hold to account those behind such abuse, and to collect data on the scale of the problem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The consequences of the current crisis on victims are far-reaching. Trafficking for sexual exploitation is increasingly moving online where traffickers can keep their revenue intact and enhance the isolation of and control over victims, particularly women and girls, who comprise 94% of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Children, at a time of school closures and potentially more hours spent online, face a greater risk of online grooming. Victims of forced labour find themselves with even fewer options for survival and less legal protection. In the case of trafficking for organ removal, one of the darkest and least addressed forms of trafficking, the impacts of COVID-19 are starting to raise alarm.

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

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

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

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

OSCE (02.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XdRZN2> - Noting a troubling rise in domestic violence in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and self-isolation guidelines in many countries, OSCE leaders called today for measures to be taken by governments to protect women and children. They said that unfortunately, for them home is not always a safe haven, as they are the most susceptible to abuse and need increased protection in these extraordinary times and urged to ensure that they are kept safe from abusers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

