

Table of Contents

- **[WORLD: Analysis of feminists' prejudice against religious minority women](#)**
- **[WORLD: Tai Ji Men & UN Day on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#)**
- **[WORLD: 'War on Women' needs forceful response, not glib statements](#)**
- **[U.N. : Gender Parity in UN's Treaty Bodies: Challenges and Solutions](#)**

WORLD: Analysis of feminists' prejudice against religious minority women

By Mariz Tadros

[IPS UN Bureau](#) (17.02.2023) - Since researching the experiences of gender discrimination against women in poverty who belong to religious minorities, many fellow feminists have turned their back on me.

The inherent assumption among some of my feminist critics is that by defending women who are targeted on account of their religious affiliation, I am defending their religions. Yet defending the rights of a Hindu woman in Pakistan or Muslim woman in India do not constitute defending Hinduism or Islam.

Defending a woman's right not to be discriminated against because of her identity and challenging religious bigotry both go hand in hand. We need to [challenge all political projects that seek to homogenize people](#) while simultaneously defending women, minorities, artists and others whose positioning accentuates their experiences of inequality.

Feminist reluctance to address injustices experienced by women who belong to religious minorities is also driven by concern that we end up empowering religious movements whose ethos is against [women's equality](#).

Again, we need to distinguish between women who are the targets of hate because they do not share the same faith as the majority, and anti-feminist movements who often are from the majority. We need to show solidarity with the former while challenging the latter. Well-meaning progressive, feminists based in the West are [reluctant to openly advocate for the rights of religious minority women living in Muslim majority contexts](#) because of legitimate concerns that this would feed into orientalist (racist) representations of radical militant Islamist groups or by intolerant sections of society.

Yet can we be inadvertently reproduce a colonialist mindset when we decide to omit the experiences of minority women out of fear of misappropriation in the west?

Why should women who have experienced genocide be denied transnational feminist solidarities because it would be more progressive to focus on the Muslims who were against the genocide.

Research undertaken by the [Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development](#), shows that in countries including Iraq, Pakistan and Nigeria, experiences for women are made worse where their experiences of gender inequality, religious marginality and socio-economic exclusion intersect.

For example, women belonging to religious minorities become easy targets of vilification and assault because of the visible manifestation of difference through what they wear. [Yazidi, Sabeian or Christian women are exposed to harassment in disproportionate levels in Iraq](#) because they do not cover their hair while [in Pakistan, Hindu women dressed in Sari are subject to ridicule and targeting because their middle bodies are said to be 'exposed'](#).

Even if you belong to the majority religion, and you cover up more than the others, this still means exposure to harassment for being seen to practice the religion differently, as experienced by [Ahmediyya women in Pakistan](#) and the Izala Sufi women in Nigeria.

Women from religious minorities can also be at significant risk of sexual assault. While all women in patriarchal societies are exposed to sexual harassment independently of their religious affiliation, women affiliated to religiously marginalized communities are targeted because of the circulation of stereotypes that they are more available or 'fair game' or that men are not obligated to respect them the same respect as those from the majority religion.

While all women living in poverty suffer the impact of gender, caste and socio-economic exclusion combined, the experiences of discrimination become more acute and severe when shaped by ideological prejudice.

In [our research in the aftermath of covid](#), Muslim women spoke about being denied health care because of the scapegoating of Muslims for the spread of the pandemic, while in Iraq Yazidi women spoke of how despicable stereotypes of Yazidi women not washing meant doctors denied them treatment.

The feminist movement cannot continue to represent itself as committed to inclusivity through intersectionality (the recognition of and redress to- interface of gender, race, class, ableism and so forth in shaping and influencing power dynamics) while turning its back on women who come from a religious minority background where their rights are denied.

A review by doctoral researcher Amy Quinn-Graham of UN Women's website and publications related to intersectionality and/or 'minorities' from 2014 – 2019, showed that compared to indigenous women, migrant women, women with disabilities, women and girls living in rural localities, older women, and women and girls of African descent, all of which were accounted for in the [UN's Commission on the Status of Women agreed conclusions from 2017 onwards, concerns for the vulnerabilities facing "ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities"](#) were raised only once and for the first time in 2019, by the EU.

Certainly, there are feminist movements, scholars and those engaged in policymaking who recognize and seek redress for discrimination on grounds of religion experienced by socio-economically excluded women, but it seems they are the exception, rather than the norm. It is not too late for us to be inclusive, and this International Women's Day we should recognize and show solidarity with women who belong to religious minorities living on the margins. We just have to start by not making excuses for their omission from our "intersectional lens".

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WORLD: Tai Ji Men & UN Day on the Elimination of Violence against Women

CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, and Human Rights Without Frontiers organized on November 25, 2022, one of their bi-monthly webinars discussing the Tai Ji Men case, with a special focus. The proposal by Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, the Shifu (Grand Master) of Tai Ji Men, to institute October 16 as a World Prayer Day, was presented as an antidote to all kinds of violence.

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Fronties

HRWF (08.12.2022) – In October, I was invited to a hearing by the European Parliament to share our expertise on the issue of violence against women as an abuse of power by men in a dominating position.

It is a worldwide phenomenon against which no country is immune whatever its political system and the dominant religion or belief system.

Violence against women is a violation of human rights and a form of gender-based discrimination. Rooted in inequalities between men and women, it takes many forms. Estimates of the scale of the problem are alarming.

The instruments put in place by the United Nations and Council of Europe, including the latter's 'Istanbul Convention', to which the EU plans to accede, are benchmarks in efforts to combat violence against women.

The EU is tackling the problem in various ways, but has no binding instrument designed specifically to protect women from violence.

Although there are similarities between national policies to combat violence against women, the EU Member States have adopted different approaches to the problem.

Abuse of physical, psychological or social power leading to violence, including to sexual violence and rape, has many facets and can take place in many contexts. Within a couple, in the professional context, in a religious context, in the world of sports, in the economic and political world.

I will now explore some of these specific areas such as:

- domestic violence in the EU,
- sexual abuse of power, violence and rape by politicians,
- sexual violence and rape in war time.

and I will hereby highlight several aspects of the issue.

Domestic violence

It is in 2014 that the EU Fundamental Rights Agency published the most comprehensive survey on violence against women at EU level but a new report is in preparation. It was then based on interviews with 42 000 women in all 28 then EU Member States on their experiences of physical and sexual violence, sexual harassment. The survey data show that one woman in three had experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. One in 10 women had experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 15, and one in 20 had been raped. Over one in five women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence from either a current or previous partner.

At the most extreme end of the spectrum, Eurostat data on the number of reported incidents of intentional homicide, rape and sexual assault show that in many Member States over half of all female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner, relative or family member. According to a scientific study, there are approximately 3 500 domestic violence-related deaths in the EU every year.

Sexual abuse of power, violence and rape by politicians

The first case concerns the former president, Yahya Jammeh, of **Gambia**, a country of Western Africa.

Ms Toufah Jallow, crowned in a beauty pageant in Gambia, was invited several times by former President of Gambia to the presidential palace under various false pretexts and raped. It was not an isolated case as Human Rights Watch published an excellent report about the multiple rapes perpetrated by Yahya Jammeh during his presidency. After a new president was elected, he fled to a dictatorial country to avoid prosecution on a huge amount of counts.

It took several years to Ms Toufah Jallow to come out of her silence as she and her family did not want her honor to be publicly tarnished. She now lives in Canada and fights for justice, unfortunately without any success up to now.

The second case concerns a prominent politician in **Thailand**. Prinn Panitchpakdi, 44, a former deputy leader of the Democrat Party, the oldest party in the country, is the son of a former deputy prime minister, who was already accused of similar charges by two women in 2003 when he was living in London.

The charges were later dropped but there has been speculation that the alleged victims in London withdrew their complaints after they received financial compensation.

He was again accused a few months ago of having raped three women in total impunity. Others are said to be about to lodge complaints.

Third case. A minister in **France** was accused of rape by two women several months ago. Damien Abad, now Minister for Solidarities and persons with a handicap, was first accused by one woman of sexual violence. A few months later, another woman accused him of rape attempt in 2010 when he was a member of the European Parliament. Mr Abad is himself physically handicapped.

This example also shows that when a victim comes out of her silence, other victims also have the courage to raise their voices and to file a complaint.

Sexual violence and rape in Russia's war on Ukraine

Another area of sexual abuse of extremely brutality is in wartime. We currently have a concrete example of it with Russia's war on Ukraine. A foreign occupation army uses its power to commit massive exactions, including sexual violence and rape.

For 280 days, allegations of sexual violence by Russian troops in Ukraine have been dramatically mounting. At this stage, it is difficult to have even a rough estimate of the number of cases due to several factors, despite the intense work of the ICC and UN bodies.

It is already difficult for a victim in times of peace to reveal such a traumatizing experience. So, you can imagine the mindset of such victims in wartime. It means that testimonies collected by the UN, the ICC or the Red Cross will only represent a tiny portion of the magnitude of the tragedy. A huge number of cases will fall through the cracks as many

women fled to EU countries, were displaced internally or were deported to Russia in unknown conditions. Moreover, the war is still raging in the occupied territories on Ukraine.

The fraught nature of sexual atrocities, which are historically underreported, means that in Ukraine it will be a long time before the full scale of the problem is clear. The small towns in the suburbs of Kyiv that are already known to the world for the widespread killing of civilians — Bucha, Borodyanka and Irpin — are haunted by tales of rape, too. Ukrainian officials and activists have also heard many accounts of sexual atrocities from regions that remain under occupation today.

In such conditions, collecting reliable data is extremely hard. In Ukrainian society, and especially in rural areas, sexual crimes are so stigmatized that victims fear being judged by their social environment. It is usually the victim's relatives and friends who seek help on the victim's behalf.

Position of the UN and other institutions on sexual violence and rape in Ukraine

Despite all the difficulties that have been mentioned, it is obvious that Russian soldiers are using rape as a tactic of war. This was clearly confirmed by [Pramila Patten, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict](#), when she briefed the UN Security Council on 6 June after her visit to Ukraine in early May.

Since 24 February, **Pramila Patten** has issued three public statements "to ensure that this issue is not shrouded in silence or normalized by impunity". She has also urged all parties to the conflict to ensure the protection of civilians from sexual violence.

"Too often have the needs of women and girls in conflict settings been side-lined and treated as an afterthought," she said.

She also warned against waiting too long to act, saying

"An active battle-ground is never conducive to accurate 'book-keeping' [...] if we wait for hard data and statistics, it will always be too late,"

How to prevent and respond to sexual violence

The UN has elaborated an instrument meant to prevent sexual violence and respond to it in wartime. It is named "*Framework of Cooperation with the United Nations on the Prevention and Response to Conflict Related Sexual Violence*" Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna signed it on 3 May last. What does it say?

Five critical areas are highlighted in the Framework and the first four are also valid for any situation of sexual violence in peace times.

- First, strengthening rule of law and accountability as a central aspect of deterrence and prevention of crimes of sexual violence.
- Second, strengthening the capacity of the security and defence sector to prevent sexual violence.
- Third, ensuring that survivors of sexual violence, as well as their children, have access to adequate services, including sexual and reproductive health, psychological, legal, socioeconomic services and reintegration support.
- Fourth, ensuring that sexual violence is addressed in the framework of any ceasefire agreement, and ensuring that amnesties for sexual violence crimes are explicitly prohibited. It means no impunity, which is also be a guideline for crimes committed in peace times.
- And fifth, addressing conflict-related trafficking in persons for the purposes of sexual exploitation or prostitution.

In conclusion, impunity cannot and should not prevail even if it takes years or decades to identify, hunt and arrest the perpetrators of sexual violence and rape.

Tai Ji Men and the UN principles for the elimination of violence against women

Dr Hong's teachings about the relations between men and women are based on equality, mutual respect, mutual trust and fidelity, transparency, responsibility and non-violent settlements of domestic conflicts.

Tai Ji Men is not a patriarchal society in which men and boys would have a dominant position. Girls and boys, men and women are treated in the same way and share responsibility in the movement based on one's will.

Tai Ji Men is a microcosm and a laboratory where the UN principles for the elimination of violence against women are constantly being put in action. Their good practices are beneficial to Taiwanese society and to the image of the country. Their achievements deserve to be highlighted and lauded.

WORLD: 'War on Women' needs forceful response, not glib statements

By Shada Islam

EU Observer (06.07.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3o9l2Oa> - Across the world, women's rights are under assault. This global war on women demands urgent international attention — and a forceful collective response.

Feel-good tick box references to gender equality of the kind made in last week's long-winded and largely unreadable official G7 and Nato statements are not enough.

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, not a single UN member has achieved gender equality.

Discrimination based on gender is happening in democracies and autocracies, in secular societies and religious ones, in rich and poor nations.

Orientalist and Islamophobic tropes notwithstanding, it is not just a problem "over there" in the Global South and in Muslim majority states. It is also a blight on the face of too many Western democracies.

The US Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v Wade, the 1973 landmark case protecting women's right to abortion, is a case in point.

And because what happens in America does not stay in America, there are fears the ruling is likely to [embolden anti-abortion movements worldwide, including in Europe](#).

Some modest headway in recognising the unrelenting tide of discrimination and violence facing women worldwide was made at last week's [largely self-congratulatory and mostly irrelevant G7 talk fest](#).

The group's mention of the many challenges and structural barriers facing women and the call for a gender-equal global economic recovery are a "step in the right direction", says the [Gender and Development Network](#).

The G7 did commit to ensuring women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

But meeting only days after the US Supreme Court decision, neither US president Joe Biden nor any of the other six leaders — joined by the only woman participant, EU Commission president Ursula Von der Leyen — mentioned the right to abortion.

Even the tough-talking hard security-wired Nato summit, which had 11 women leaders in attendance, managed only a passing reference to the UN's under-implemented and under-funded Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Alliance's work to "incorporate gender perspectives across the organisation".

Let's be generous and say these are good beginnings.

But let's also be honest and say this is cursory, complacent lip service.

The onus is now on Indonesia as the current G20 chair to make sure that gender equality really gets the priority attention it deserves at the [summit in Bali in November](#).

The unnoticed 'care economy'

That means backing up noble intentions with real action on funding and investment in the [care economy](#), a commitment to ensure women's reproductive health and making sure that women do not bear the brunt of the looming global economic slowdown.

Escalating levels of global inequality are eroding fragile but hard-won gains on gender inequality and it is women — particularly those who face multiple and escalating forms of intersectionality — who have been hit hardest.

Even today, the pandemic continues to [impact women and girls disproportionately](#) and this will remain the case amid looming food insecurity, increased energy prices and high levels of inflation.

Russia's war in Ukraine means that Ukrainian women have now joined the ranks of millions more who have suffered the unrelenting human costs of armed conflict from [Syria to Yemen and Afghanistan](#) and far beyond.

Sexual violence as a tactic of war, terrorism and political repression is on the rise, [warns UN Women](#).

Afghan women and girls risk facing an even darker future unless there is a ["more concerted international effort"](#) to push the Taliban to respect women's rights.

To be effective, however, those putting the pressure on the Taliban must put their own houses in order.

Which brings us back to the damaging global fall-out of the US Supreme Court decision including concerns that it will [embolden anti-abortion movements](#) elsewhere.

Fearing just that, a group of MEPs has asked that anti-abortion lobbyists be banned from the European Parliament.

Metsola from Malta — where all abortion is illegal

European Parliament president Roberta Metsola, who is from Malta, is believed to have an [anti-abortion voting track record](#) and Malta is the only EU country where abortion is [not allowed under any circumstances](#).

Poland's government has adopted a [near-total ban on abortion](#) with limited exceptions in the cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother's life.

And there is the unhappy fact that EU members [Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia](#) have [yet to ratify the Istanbul Convention](#), the first legally-binding international instrument on preventing and combating violence against women and girls at the international level.

The Polish government may withdraw from the agreement and despite widespread public protests and legal pushbacks, Turkey's Council of State [recently ruled to uphold](#) president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision to take Turkey out of the convention.

In contrast, [Ukraine has ratified the agreement](#) as part of its efforts to meet EU membership criteria.

There is no denying that advances in women's rights are being made by governments, international organisations, businesses and civil society actors.

But as recent events illustrate, there is much hard work ahead.

Ending [centuries of discrimination, deep-rooted patriarchy and misogyny](#) as well religious extremism and far-right populism which fuel the war on women requires counter-actions on multiple fronts.

Glib references and occasional mentions of gender equality in speeches and in long, rambling documents are not enough.

U.N. : Gender Parity in UN's Treaty Bodies: Challenges and Solutions

By Judge Aruna Devi Narain and Ms. Marcia Vaune Jocelyn Kran O.C.

Diplomat Magazine (03.04.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3v4VN2r> - Women have a right to participate in public and political life and the work of international organizations under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ([CEDAW](#)). This right extends to [membership in all UN bodies](#), including the 10 [treaty bodies](#) that are meant to help countries protect international human-rights obligations. Although the first committee was set up in 1977, gender equality has not been achieved in the membership of most of them.

These bodies monitor a country's compliance with the [UN human-rights treaties](#) that collectively cover civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights; the rights of women, people with disabilities, migrant workers and children; and the right to freedom from torture, disappearance and discrimination. The committees function separately from the Human Rights Council, and committee members are independent experts rather than national officials. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) acts as the secretariat for the committees, providing the staff that is needed to organize and support committee meetings, most of which are held in Geneva.

The committees establish frameworks for national policies, law and programs, ultimately affecting the everyday lives of their citizens, including women. Without an equal number of women experts on board, however, the treaty bodies are more likely to overlook critical issues and perspectives that should be part of their legal agenda.

In [June](#) 2021, the Human Rights Council considered a [report](#) exploring the impact of women's underrepresentation in UN bodies and mechanisms — including the treaty bodies — and the overall challenges to gender parity. The report flagged four treaty bodies with low numbers of women among their membership: the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers (14 percent); the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (28 percent); the Committee against Torture (30 percent); and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (30 percent). The representation of women across all treaty bodies is 48.83 percent but concentrated in only four of the 10 committees. Two of these address women's rights and children's rights: the CEDAW Committee and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Currently, gender parity has been achieved only in the 18-member Committee, CRC.

One reason for the lack of gender parity in the treaty bodies is that countries have [not nominated](#) enough women as candidates for the committees. Countries that have ratified the relevant treaties nominate candidates and [elect members](#) for four-year terms at the UN in New York City. Sadly, most nomination processes are informal and lack transparency, resulting in qualified women candidates left unaware of such vacancies.

This [gender gap can be solved](#) by countries and the OHCHR taking the action recommended in the report to the Human Rights Council. For example, countries could identify women candidates for treaty body membership and, where appropriate, give women preference. They also could incorporate gender as an explicit feature in nomination processes, as was done in Canada's [call for application](#) for membership in the Committee of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. They could track their progress on these gender parity measures across the 10 committees.

While the nomination of more women candidates would be a step forward, we also need to ensure that countries vote for and elect such candidates. Elections during the Covid-19 pandemic have relied on virtual campaigns, and candidates now also reach out to civil society organizations to lobby their governments to vote for qualified women candidates. In addition, an informal group of former women chairs and members of treaty bodies could be set up to mentor women candidates and advise them on their campaigns. Countries that have adopted a feminist foreign policy, like Canada, France, Luxembourg, Mexico and Sweden, could also play a leading role in promoting women candidates.

OHCHR could advertise upcoming treaty body elections in women's networks, and track the number of women and men serving as independent experts, making this information public in a format similar to the [gender parity dashboard](#) used to measure staff composition in the UN Secretariat. It could also help countries design ways to achieve gender parity during the nomination and election processes.

We believe that High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Michelle Bachelet](#), is in a unique position to urge countries to take concerted action to push for gender parity in the treaty bodies. She could make a policy statement giving high priority to the achievement of gender equality in the committees and call for parity in nominations of candidates.

It is paradoxical that the [treaty bodies](#) entrusted with upholding the principle of non-discrimination based on sex use a process to select expert members that can result in discrimination. Now that the treaty bodies have been functioning for many years, it is long overdue for countries and the UN Secretariat to put their gender equality commitments into action.

Note: Thanks to Ms. Bhavya Mahajan, a lawyer and mediator from India, who helped with the research for the article.

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