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# Fempower

Magazine published by the European Info Centre Against Violence / WAVE Office— a DAPHNE Programme Project

## FOCUS

### Migrant Women

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS

### Stoning

## NEW PROJECTS

### National Women's Line in Finland

## FOCUS

# Migrant Women

## Violence a Constant Companion

By Verena Kaselitz

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>1</sup> dedicated the 2002 World Refugee Day (June 20) to the millions of women world-wide who lead a refugee existence. Most people still associate the word “refugee” with a male dissident subject to political persecution. This image has little to do with reality. Of the 20 million refugees world-wide, more than three quarters are women. There are many different reasons for this.

Modern warfare has a severe impact on the civilian population, most notably women, children and elderly people. Women, no less than men, are subject to persecution on the grounds of the ethnic, religious, national or social groups to which they belong or their political convictions.



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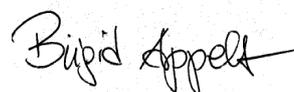
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# Editorial

**The European Union is in the process of enlarging its borders. It is at the same time reinforcing the “Fortress Europe”. Outside its walls millions of people are leading a refugee existence. The preponderant majority of them are women. It is to them that we have devoted this fifth issue of FEMPOWER, which focuses on the gender-based background of their plight and all that it entails. War and armed conflict not only reduce women to refugees, they also have an enduring impact on their lives. Nevertheless, women are consigned to a minor role in the negotiation of peace settlements and the construction of post-war societies – although they warrant a key function in these processes.**

**By contrast, there is good news to report from two of our Focal Points. Denmark has approved an Action Plan to combat violence against women which is already being implemented with the active support of L.O.K.K. And Finland has recently introduced a national emergency helpline number for women subjected to violence. The service has been installed by our Focal Point Woman Sirkka Perttu.**

**A reminder: we are always glad to receive news and articles from you relating to the field of prevention of violence.**



**The editors**

✓ In every continent poverty is spreading among women: although they perform by far the greater part of the work, their labour tends to be poorly remunerated – if at all. The money which women earn is often too little to cover even the barest necessities. If they flee from their homes, then, they may be in quest of a place in which they can physically survive.

There are, however, reasons for becoming a refugee which apply only to women. Previous issues of FEMPOWER have focused on two of these manifestations of violence against women: genital mutilation and so-called “honour killings”.

One of the obstacles with which many women refugees have to contend is that they tend to become “only” displaced persons in their own countries (IDPs), so that they fail to comply with the conventional definition of refugee status. This is because women are generally less mobile (not least because of their children), so that they often do not make it even as far as the nearest border. Women are under-represented in the asylum seeker statistics because the family will usually have money enough only to pay the human smugglers to get one person out of the country, and it tends to be a male family member who is sent ahead.

### **The Geneva Convention on Refugees**

Refugees are protected by the Geneva Convention on Refugees, which dates from 1951. During the international deliberations which marked the Convention’s 50-year anniversary, the issue of the gender-specific grounds behind displacement was again raised.

Women’s and human rights organisations have criticised this internationally important Convention for not making any specific reference to the specific plight of women refugees. The UNHCR does not share this criticism. Speaking to FEMPOWER, Birgit Einzenberger<sup>2</sup> of the Vienna UNHCR office explains: “In the UNHCR’s view, the Geneva Convention on Refugees provides comprehensive protection.

If the Convention is correctly interpreted, it also includes gender-based persecution. There is therefore no need to supplement it with gender criteria.” Women generally receive refugee status

on the grounds that they belong to a “specific social group”, says Einzenberger, although women are also persecuted for the other reasons that relate to recognition of refugee status. It would thus not be expedient to incorporate gender-based violence against women in the category of violence against a specific social group and to grant asylum on this basis, she argues. This would entail the risk of “ghettoising women”. The UNHCR advocates interpreting the grounds for refugee status in a gender-sensitive but not delimiting manner.

### **The issue of non-state persecution**

A further criticism of the Geneva Convention on Refugees also relates to the plight of women. There is a widespread belief that, by the terms of the Convention, refugees are primarily persons who flee state persecution. In the view of the UNHCR, says Einzenberger, someone who flees a country that fails to provide adequate protection from persecution is just as eligible for refugee status. The British House of Lords recently arrived at the verdict that Pakistani women fleeing from violence on the part of their husbands should be granted asylum in the United Kingdom on the grounds that the Pakistani state is not prepared to protect them<sup>3</sup>.

### **Violence during migration / in camps**

That women (and children) are exposed to sexual violence throughout the phase of migration recently again provided material for media headlines. Refugee camps can be high-risk zones for women migrants if women are not actively involved in the administration and running of the camps.

The relevant guidelines were improved last year during the UNHCR’s Global Consultations and the Dialogue with Refugee Women. The most important preventive measures include: individual registration and hence the abolition of family papers; the involvement of women in the planning of camps to avert danger when women collect firewood or fetch water; the allocation of about eighty per cent of the foodstuffs to women; and the provision of hygienic supplies for women.

✓

## > Asylum procedures

In the European context, the UNHCR's work focuses on monitoring compliance with the legal requirements. The countries within the "Fortress Europe" sometimes "forget" that asylum seekers do not need to provide **proof** of persecution; it is enough if they can give credible grounds for **fearing** persecution. It is therefore unnecessary even to cite statistics documenting the extent of, for instance, gender-based or sexual violence in a given country. The UNHCR provides training programmes for state authorities involved in the asylum process. These concentrate on sensitising the participants to the specific plight of migrants. Other aspects dealt with in these training programmes include: enhancing the quality of interviews; further training on gender-specific grounds for migration; and lobbying for the rights of refugees.

### The situation in the EU

In the meantime the EU has issued a directive specifying minimum standards for accepting refugees. The directive will come into effect shortly. At present the way refugees are treated in the individual EU states diverges widely. The Dublin Convention only stipulates which country is responsible for a refugee. Within the EU only one state can assume responsibility for the asylum process, so that asylum seekers cannot apply in more than one country. Little account is taken of kinship, although this is an important factor for refugees. Only if a spouse, a minor or a parent of a minor has received refugee status in a country is a migrant entitled to refugee status. Other degrees of kinship are not recognised. As a result, in the case

of, for instance, a migrant family from Afghanistan which has become separated during migration and whose members are stranded in three different countries, they have no right to asylum in the same country. Responsibility for them is assigned to the country through which they entered. (The only exception: if a country has issued a visa to an asylum seeker, it is responsible regardless of the travel route taken.)

The case of non-state persecution provides further evidence of the urgent need for common standards. For example, non-state violence is not always recognised as grounds for asylum in Germany and France, but migrants who have been refused asylum in these countries have been granted asylum in the United Kingdom on the grounds of non-state persecution because they were not safe in Germany or France. In the event of their repatriation they were in danger of torture and inhumane treatment, according to the view taken in Britain. If there is a threat of torture and inhumane treatment, this is grounds for granting asylum. Migrants have the right to appeal to the European Court of Justice against their repatriation, but few asylum seekers are in a position to do so without help.

<sup>1</sup>[www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch), [www.unhcr.de](http://www.unhcr.de); [www.unhcr.at](http://www.unhcr.at)

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Birgit Einzenberger, UNHCR Legal Department in Vienna; Focal Point for Refugee Women in Vienna, women-related training topics

<sup>3</sup><http://www.parliament.the-stationary-office.co.uk/pa/ld199899/ldjudgmt/jd990325/islam01.htm>

**Women Against Violence in Europe**  
**[www.wave-network.org](http://www.wave-network.org)**

# Women's resistance during the 1990's

by Biljana Bijelić and Vesna Kesić

**The war in former Yugoslavia left indelible marks on women's lives and gender relations. The victory of nationalistic politics in the early nineties resulted in the re-patriarchalisation of political and social life and institutions, with ethnicity and gender the central focus.**

The outbreak of war added extreme violence against women to this picture. The mass rape of women during the war in Bosnia as the most extreme form of violence against women during the conflict made the issue visible to the domestic and international public. The media attention given to wars in former Yugoslavia in some cases resulted in manipulation with the numbers, the ethnic origin of the victims, using the victimisation of women to serve nationalistic war goals. With the beginning of war in Croatia in 1991, the media showed images of attractive young uniformed women in combat situations. On occasions, even such pictures paled against the images of weeping mothers defending their families. Such pictures were broadcast as a means of promoting national homogenisation. On the other hand, women victims of sexual war violence became embodied symbols and turned into national metaphors ("*A raped Croat woman stands for the raped Croatia*"<sup>1</sup>). Women were established as victims on whose bodies nationalism(s) inscribed their state-building projects and embodied their violent dreams. Ironically, immediately after the war stopped in Croatia, the suffering of women and their sexual abuse ceased to be an issue, and the benefits and honours heaped on the male war veterans became highly exaggerated, proving once again that even as patriotic symbols women were used as only a temporary commodity.

However, when political transition exploded into ethnic conflicts, gendered nationalism(s) silenced and de-politicised women. Feminist, non-nationalistic women's groups throughout former Yugoslavia mobilised and resisted war violence against women and nationalism from a perspective which respects women's dignity and helps them to regain strength and empower their own lives. Women's groups from the whole of

former Yugoslavia co-operated across ethnic and national lines together with other anti-war civil initiatives in an attempt to stop conflicts and promote peace. The response from the political mainstream was extremely hostile, and those feminist women's groups that did not conform to state-sponsored nationalism were pronounced national traitors and "un-womanly."

The Center for Women War Victims (CWWV) was founded in 1992, in the midst of bloody war raging in Bosnia and a frail peace imposed by the International Community in Croatia. Its mission was to help and support women refugees from the countries of former Yugoslavia "regardless of their ethnic backgrounds and other differences"<sup>1</sup> and to advance and empower women in general by enhancing women's human rights. Throughout its existence, CWWV has worked with thousands of refugee and displaced women, organising self-help groups in refugee camps, distributing humanitarian help, organising psychological and legal counselling, sheltering, and other forms of feminist social work. At the same time, the Center worked across the new national states' borders, maintaining pre-war ties and contacts with feminist groups whose networks were rapidly spreading despite the ideological and physical obstacles in communication. Activists from the Center fought numerous social and political battles opposing warmongering, hate speech, nationalism, and in particular denouncing the militarised war violence against women and further abuse of women victims for the purposes of the nationalistic Tudjman regime.

Although peace now reigns, the role of the women's groups that opposed war and nationalism<sup>1</sup> is not generally acknowledged. The policy of forgetting and quick-fixing



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is once again winning over the politics of "coming to terms with the past." While peace activists and theorists are developing the models which would lead to reconciliation, the women of the Center for Women War Victims are playing their part in these processes as keepers of women's memories. Reviving repressed or silenced memories is the next phase of women's pacifist engagement on the path of social reconciliation and reconstruction.

The CWWV this year celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Events that we plan to organise are publications and meetings that will revive the repressed and almost forgotten memory of women's resistance. We start from the historical lesson that erasure or the one-sidedness of representation of collective memory may cause the repetition of the trauma of exclusion and facilitate the restoration of the "old balance of power" in

which patriarchally funded nationalism and violence gain the day. In the meantime, the Center has changed its name from the Center for Women War Victims to the Center for Women Rosa. In the last decade we have learned that women are victims of war and its violence, but women also know and learn millions of ways to survive and to win and bring about social change.

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Initiative

## Denmark Launches New National Action Plan against Violence against Women

**On March 8, 2002 the Danish government launched a National Action Plan to halt violence against women. The Plan identifies male violence against women as a manifestation of gender inequality and sets out to combat it by means of comprehensive preventive action to be taken at the earliest possible stage by health and social services agencies with the involvement of the police.**

The envisaged activities target both victim support and the sensitisation and training of the most important professional groups concerned. The Action Plan also provides for the compilation of statistical material and studies on the prevalence of violence against women. And finally it calls for pilot projects designed to help in drawing up effective perpetrator programmes.

LOKK, the Danish umbrella organisation for shelters and crisis centres for battered / abused women, has welcomed the Action Plan as a step in the right direction while pointing out that it does not cover every aspect of violence against women. LOKK rates the funding provided (€ 1,250,000 annually) and the time limit of three years as inadequate. Despite these reservations, LOKK is playing an active part in the implementation of the Action Plan, co-operating with the Danish Ministry of Gender Equality. The women's shelter network is making such important contributions as a joint shelter helpline and training seminars for members of the police force.

**The full National Action Plan can be downloaded from the Ministry of Gender Equality  
website: <http://www.lige.dk>**

**For information on the activities of LOKK, contact: Jytte Mejnholdt, Chair of LOKK,  
[sekretariat@lokk.dk](mailto:sekretariat@lokk.dk)**

# Women and Peace

## The importance of feminist analyses for sustainable peace

by Chris Corrin

**From 1994 the UN system began to encourage contributing countries to include more women in their peacekeeping military units and this has been part of the gender mainstreaming agenda. This short piece considers some of the feminist considerations of this new international regime mandating gender mainstreaming, arguing that a feminist analysis of peace-keeping and reconciliation is vital to successful progress from war to sustainable peace.**

Women's inclusion in peace-making became legally binding with the Security Council's Resolution 1325 (October 2000) that includes the involvement of women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individual women in official capacities in peace negotiations and implementation of peace-building processes. Feminist research themes range broadly from retrospective views of relations between women and war to looking at peacekeeping from gender perspective.

Central to much analysis is how community organisations run and managed by women in conflict situations provide basic needs, occupy 'advocacy space' and foster trust essential in reconciliation processes. This is something that has taken UN agencies some time to recognise. Additional considerations are of the UN developments in policy on gender mainstreaming and how this is gradually turning into established international norms.

Peacekeeping has evolved into areas of humanitarian relief, human rights monitoring, refugee return, civilian policing, de-mining, demobilisation, elections and nation building. These activities directly affect women and women have opportunities to direct these new aspects of peacekeeping more in accordance with gender mainstreaming policies. Kari H. Karame (Olsson and Tryggestad 2001) studies the constructive role women played in peacekeeping operations in Lebanon with the United National Interim Force (UNIFIL). Karame notes arguments often used against women in peacekeeping operations is the importance of paying respect to local cultures,

especially when deployment takes place in Muslim countries. Yet with many female-headed households and numbers of Lebanese women participating in the war, the women UN soldiers liaised with local women and contributed to a good mission environment as well as increased access to local information. In similar ways, Louise Olsson considers the United National Transitional Assistance Group in Namibia (UNTAG) 1989-90 as successful, especially from a gender perspective. The Mission had fairly gender-balanced staff and was successful in implementing its mandate to the benefit of both women and men. This was not developed by leadership but by field staff, predominantly female, who realised that the implementation plan had major flaws with regard to gender sensitivity. It took 10 years for a study to be commissioned in which the gendered lessons learned from Namibia were systematically documented. Yet, the substantial number of women recruited by the leadership to the UNTAG operation seems to have been crucial to its development of gender-sensitive policies and so to its success.

In attempting to provide a conceptual rationale for a gendered framework, in an operations context, to ensure that violence-reduction initiatives incorporate a gender perspective, Moser argues for the incorporation of agency and identity (Moser and Clark 2001). This requires policymakers and planners recognise the importance of including gender analysis as a component for effective violence reduction, by identifying concrete, operationally relevant issues for those designing policy or programme-level

interventions. Key aspects of such a framework involve: introducing a gendered continuum of conflict and violence; identifying the gendered causal factors; examining gendered costs and consequences; and developing an integral policy approach. Meeting practical needs and taking account of underlying strategic interests, this framework aims to be globally applicable while recognising the importance of context specificity.

Cynthia Cockburn (Moser and Clark 2001) shows that the importance of gender differentiation and local constructions of masculinities and femininities is rooted in issues of agency and diversity. Relative positions of women and men act as ordering principles in systems of power relations and different readings are produced when differences in power relations are either taken for granted, ignored or problematised.

Cockburn applies a feminist view of gender, as an issue of power, to four 'moments' of conflict - before armed violence, during war and repression, peace making and finally the gendered features of post-war situations. Shifts in the ways identities are presented and the gendered features of various situations are key for Cockburn's argument that 'just as using a gendered lens makes a difference to what you see of war and peace, so applying a gender analysis in decision-making could make a difference to what you do about it (p.28). This has proved to be the case in those successful projects in post-war situations that use gender analysis for their activities rooted in local communities.

Various studies (Corrin 2000-2) show that the most successful outcome for women's inclusion within Kosovo since the end of the war has been that of the Kosovo Women's Network, which initially received very little UN support. Their active website and newsletters testify to an amazing array of activities including hit pop records and successful community performances of plays highlighting issues of violence and trauma suffered by women (see [www.womensnetwork.org](http://www.womensnetwork.org)).

Bi-lateral involvement of international feminist groups who regularly engage feminist analysis

can sometimes form an important bridge linking local women's groups with aspects of UN Missions.

Feminist analyses of violence recognise a continuum through economic, political and social interactions, arguing the need for gender analysis to see the varying implications for women/girls and for men/boys. These studies contribute to a more comprehensive, global understanding of the complex roles, responsibilities and interests of women and men, whether as victims, perpetrators or actors, in armed conflict and political violence. Such work also acknowledges how power relations shift and change, recognising the role of community activism by women as playing a crucial role throughout conflict situations with 'social capital' vital in struggles for peace, justice and reconciliation.

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Cynthia Cockburn 'The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict and Political Violence' in Moser and Clark op.cit. pp.13-29

Chris Corrin **Gender Audit of Reconstruction Programmes in South Eastern Europe** (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and Urgent Action Fund 2000 - [www.womenscommission.org](http://www.womenscommission.org))

Chris Corrin 'Engendering Development in Kosovo: From Grassroots to Government' in Karen Ross (ed) **Women, Politics and Change** (Oxford University Press 2002)

Kari H. Karame 'Military Women in Peace Operations: Experiences of the Norwegian Battalion in UNIFIL 1978-98' in Olsson and Tryggestad op.cit. pp.85-96

Caroline O.N. Moser 'The Gendered Continuum of violence and conflict: An Operational Framework' in Moser and Clark op.cit. pp.30-52

Caroline O.N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark (eds) **Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence** (Zed 2001)

Louise Olsson 'Gender Mainstreaming in Practice: The United National Transitional Assistance Group in Namibia' in Olsson and Tryggestad op.cit. pp.97-110

Louise Olsson and Torunn L. Tryggestad (eds) **Women and International Peacekeeping** (Cass 2001)

# Violence Against Asylum Seeking Women in Europe

By Jane Freedman

**Refugee and asylum-seeking women are amongst the most vulnerable women in Europe in terms of their experiences of violence. Often having fled from violent situations in their own countries of origin, they are faced in Europe with violence both from individuals and from institutional structures.**

One of the difficulties in assessing the situation of asylum-seeking women in Europe is the lack of gender differentiated statistics on asylum applications available. It is clear, however, that women constitute a substantial proportion of those seeking asylum in Europe, and these women are entering Europe not only as dependants but as refugees in their own right. The conventions and laws governing asylum applications, together with the procedures put in place by different European states to deal with asylum seekers, are in theory gender-neutral, but in fact they have clearly gender differentiated impacts. In addition, the fact that most European countries are now seeking to limit the number of asylum applications which are both received and granted means that they have put in place structures to deter prospective asylum seekers and to make it more difficult for an application for asylum to succeed. These structures often have a particular detrimental effect on women.

## **Asylum decisions – the need for gender guidelines:**

Many women who seek asylum in Europe have been victims of violence in their countries of origin. The violence may be of the same type as that suffered by men, or it may be gender motivated and differentiated. Many women have been raped, others have suffered violence because of refusal of an arranged marriage or a sexual relationship outside marriage, for example. Still others will be victims of female genital mutilation or fleeing because of fear of FGM. These examples demonstrate the ways in which persecution may be gender specific. However, because women are not recognised as a social group under the Geneva Convention (1951), grounds for refugee status may

be difficult to establish. Women may be judged to have been victims of discrimination rather than of persecution as defined by the Convention, and therefore, even though they have experienced violence in their countries of origin, they may not be granted refugee status in Europe. Moreover, the procedures for hearing women's asylum claims are usually not propitious to a fair evaluation of their claims. They may be forced to detail their violent experiences, including experiences of rape and sexual abuse, to male immigration officials. These officials may not be sensitive to the human rights situation of women in their country of origin.

## **Social provisions for asylum seekers – creating insecurity:**

The aim of European governments to deter potential asylum seekers by reducing the social benefits to which they may be entitled, as well as to show their populations that they are dealing 'firmly' with asylum seekers has led to increased vulnerability to violence. Policies which are likely to increase women's vulnerability to violence are:

- Dispersal. In the UK, for example, a policy of dispersing asylum seekers away from London and the South East has been practised. For women, this often means isolation from community support and increased vulnerability to violence because of this isolation and because of being forced to live in areas where little or no provision for helping or defending asylum seekers has been made.
- Accommodation / detention centres. The increased use of accommodation or detention centres for housing asylum seekers may also make women increasingly vulnerable to violence. These centres, which are being used

V increasingly throughout Europe, usually have limited facilities, and women and men are forced to live in close proximity even when they are not related. Together with a lack of adequate supervision, this can leave women open to violence and sexual abuse.

- Poor housing. Inadequate housing provision for asylum seekers means that women may be forced to share houses and rooms with men they do not know. Again this leaves them more open to violence and sexual assault.

#### **Racism and xenophobia:**

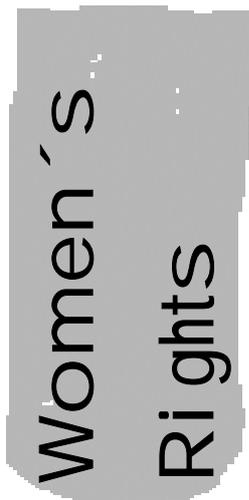
One of the most worrying phenomena is a seemingly growing trend of racism and xenophobia within European societies which governments have done little to address. This has led to an increasing incidence of violence

against asylum seekers all over Europe. Few measures have been taken to offer special protection to those vulnerable to racist attack.

Asylum seeking women can thus be seen to be vulnerable to violence in many ways. European governments need to take action to ensure that gender guidelines are introduced into their asylum procedures and to consider the effects that their policies might have on asylum-seeking women.

**Jane Freedman is lecturer in European politics at the University of Southampton, UK. The current focus of her research is on migrant women in Europe. She is organising a comparative European project on violence against refugee and asylum-seeking women.**

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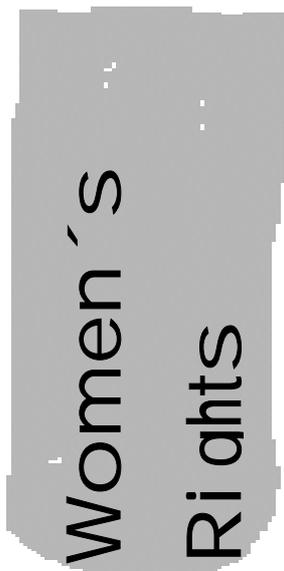
## **Women Without Borders**

**“Women Without Borders” is an international initiative on behalf of women in political life and civil society. It sets out to empower women in areas of crisis and armed conflict. The Austrian social scientists Cheryl Bernard and Edit Schläffer, the founders of Women Without Borders, attach special importance to facilitating women’s on-site involvement in politics and decision-making.**

The example of Afghanistan shows that even western diplomatic circles fail to encourage the involvement of women and in some cases actually obstruct it. Afghani women were not invited to attend the Bonn peace talks, nor did the UN envoy for Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi receive a delegation of Afghani women wishing to present him with a petition.

Besides their public relations and lobbying activities, the Women Without Borders activists focus on practical projects in the fields of training and further training, the promotion of culture and journalism, and primary health care. Their aim is to enable women to claim their right to self-determination and participation in democratic processes.

**Detailed information from:  
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## **Stoning: Terror against women in the name of Islam**

**The fate of a Nigerian woman who – although she had been raped and was the mother of three children – was sentenced to death by an Islamic court on the grounds of an “extramarital relationship” recently attracted the attention of the western media to an issue which had largely been ignored hitherto: death by stoning. It is, however, worth remembering that this barbaric “legal practice” in countries which have adopted Islamic jurisdiction (Shari’ah) is by no means new. We will never know how many lives it has taken. For years now women’s and human rights organisations have been taking an active stance against it. FEMPOWER spoke to Mina Ahadi, Co-ordinator of the International Committee Against Stoning.**

Stoning is one of the cruellest forms of capital punishment. The condemned person is buried in the ground up to the chest and pelted with stones until he or she is dead. The “crimes” which carry this sentence are: having an extra-marital relationship, and homosexuality. The first category is virtually only applied to women, because – as Mina Ahadi explains – men are permitted to have up to four wives as well as concubines. The Koran, she says, contains no reference to stoning, but there is enough material available to justify violating the rights of one if anyone is looking for it. Ahadi adds, though, that the basis for this barbaric practice is irrelevant: what matters is that it is enforced in many countries and that women are being murdered in a horrendous manner: terror against women in the name of Islam.

Asked why it is that stoning is practised in only some of the countries in which the majority religion is Islam, Ahadi explains that this is a result of the combination of politics and religion. Islamic governments are reactionary movements, which is why it is so important for religion and the state to kept separate in Islamic countries. She disagrees with the view that the majority of the population in countries with Islamic jurisdiction is in favour of stoning, noting that today stonings in Iran are no longer carried out publicly because of public criticism, and that the media no longer show them.

The Committee’s activists have to date received little support from the major international organisations and from western governments – economic interests evidently take precedence over human rights, Ahadi comments sardonically. The only concession that has been made is that women threatened with stoning have sometimes been granted asylum in EU countries. However, Ahadi would like to see women from Islamic countries being generally classified as eligible for refugee status. In the countries concerned women have virtually no opportunity to take a stand against this form of human rights violation. People who criticise Islam are themselves persecuted and frequently pay for their commitment with their lives.

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## **0800-0-2400: National Women's Line in Finland** **–the gateway to empowerment**

**By Sirkka Perttu**

The National Finnish Women's Line started in May 2002. It is a telephone and internet help-line which provides advice and support to girls and women who have experienced or are experiencing violence or threats of violence. The call is free of charge. The work is concentrated on informing, counselling and supporting women. At the moment Women's Line provides its services in Finnish and Swedish. Women's line also has web-pages in Finnish, Swedish and English. Questions and requests for advice may be submitted in these languages.

Women's Line is aimed at all women and girls living in Finland. We want especially to improve services so that they better meet the needs of disabled and immigrant women. That is why Women's Line is about to open an e-mail (and later telephone) service in Estonian, Russian, French, Somali, Kurdish and Turkish. Later on, Women's Line hopes to expand its services and become a drop-in centre for women that also provides legal advice. Women's Line is based on the principles of professional work although all phone workers are volunteers.

There are twenty-four Women's Line volunteers in Helsinki, but new ones are joining all the time. Volunteers are women with different backgrounds, but they all consider violence against women a severe social, health and criminal policy issue in Finland which impairs the implementation of equality in society. All phone workers receive continuous training. At the moment all the counsellors are Finnish and Swedish speakers, but the training of Russian-speaking women started in September 2002.

Women's Line is a network-project with more than ten Finnish women's organisations involved. This is the first project in Finland with such a wide range of women's organisations co-operating to provide information on violence against women and support female victims of violence. The aim of Women's Line is to make violence against women visible in Finnish society and to promote the improvement of the status of female victims. Women's Line has received financing for three years from the Finnish Slot Machine Association. The Body Shop is also co-operating with Women's Line through campaigning and publicity actions. Women's Line is run under the auspices of the Minister of Health and Social Services, Eva Biaudet.

The project is co-ordinated by The Non-Violent Choice Association, which was founded in 1999 by people working professionally on violence issues. Nowadays women survivors of violence are also working within the association as responsible persons and peer group leaders.

The telephone help-line was opened on May 15, 2002. On the first day we received calls from older women all over Finland who wanted to say thank you for this kind of service. "Now we can say what has happened to us". That was a moving experience for the workers of Women's Line. Later we received calls from women representing various age-groups all over Finland. The youngest caller was sixteen and the oldest was sixty-eight years old. Women talk mainly about violence in intimate relationships or their children acting violently.

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