

Fempower

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Focus

Poverty and Violence Against Women

2010 has been designated as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. Poverty disproportionately affects women, especially those who are affected by violence, the reasons for that being diverse. Further those women who are suffering violence are not being adequately considered in the public debate.

The reasons for poverty and the interdependence between poverty and violence will be examined in-depth within the present issue of Fempower.

The term "poverty" generally describes two forms of economic hardship: In the case of so-called "absolute poverty" a person is struggling to meet basic needs like food, housing or clothing. According to the European Commission, the term of "relative poverty", applies if a person's "resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live."¹ Women's shelters play a crucial role in preventing victims of domestic violence from suffering from poverty and thus act as poverty prevention services.

¹ Joint Report by the Commission and the Council on social inclusion as adopted by the Council (EPSCO), 4 March 2004



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The articles shed a light on the preconditions and consequences which apply to the situation of female victims of violence facing poverty. They also give examples on how to break the mutual conditioning of both. Attention is also given to factors that can have an aggravating effect, like motherhood, migration or a divorce. WAVE hopes that the Year against Poverty will account for a sustained change of poverty's female face and bring the interdependence between poverty and violence against women into the public debate. For more information please visit www.2010againstpoverty.eu

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Migrant Victims in the Netherlands



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Women have a higher risk to become victim of domestic violence than man. Women with low economic and social status have a higher risk than women with a higher status. The most vulnerable people are female immigrants with a residence permit that is dependent on their husbands and illegal female immigrants without documents. They are by far at the highest risk to become a victim of domestic violence, honour related violence or human trafficking. The women's shelters in the Netherlands, joined together in de Federatie Opvang, are lobbying to improve the position of these women. Our minimum goal is the possibility to offer them shelter in a crisis situation and the possibility to apply for a resident permit. There should also be the possibility to wait for the reply to their application for residency in a safe environment. Our lobbying has not been without results. Although the position of many immigrants is still difficult and dangerous, at least we can offer help when they have become a victim of violence.

The legislation in the Netherlands has improved recently, as has the cooperation between the women shelters and the IND, the Immigration- and Naturalisation Service. In this article I want to inform you of these developments as it might be a good example for other European countries and maybe even for European legislation.

The biggest problem we faced with regard to the former legislation was that women without a residence permit could not apply for social benefits and did not have a right to shelter. The view of the Federatie Opvang is that according to international law all victims are entitled to shelter and a support program regardless of their nationality and location. Some women's shelters have always accepted women and their children without residence permit when

they were in need of help. It was difficult to find funding for these cases, the organizations being totally depending on private donors.

Since June 2009 legislation has changed. Women's shelters can now offer shelter to all victims, regardless of their nationality or legal position in the Netherlands. As soon as they are in a shelter they can apply for a residence permit on humanitarian grounds at the IND. During the procedure, women can apply for benefits by making use of the Regulation on the provision of Asylum Seekers and other categories of aliens. The allowance that they will receive is equal to welfare in the Netherlands. They are thus able to take care of themselves and their children and pay the contribution to the shelter. The IND will decide on the application for a residence permit. In this decision they take into account the amount of violence that the woman has experienced and how safe it is for her to return to her home country. The civil servants that are making these decisions are specialists in gender issues and have substantial background knowledge in gender-specific violence. They understand the difficulties and the dynamics that come with this type of violence.

A migrant woman that arrives in the Netherlands to live with her partner receives a temporary residence permit with the restriction that she lives with her partner. When she leaves her partner, she can lose the permit. But if she leaves her partner because of violence, she can apply for an independent residence permit. She will get this automatically if she has been married and living in the Netherlands for more than three years. When she is leaving her partner due to violence within three years she needs to convince the IND that she is a victim of violence, by a report from the police,

a doctor or a social worker. For illegal women it is more difficult to get a residence permit, but the IND can decide in their favour if it is convinced that the women are victims of violence and that it is dangerous for them to go back to their home country.

The Federatie Opvang has worked closely together with the ministry of Justice to improve the position of female migrants. Together with the ministry we organise annual meetings between the gender specialists at the IND and the staff of the women's shelters. Through the years we have seen that the two organisations are getting to know each other better and have more understanding about each others work and position. The staff of the women's shelters has seen that the IND is willing to give a resident permit to victims, but that they need information that can confirm the victim's story.

The women's shelter can help to collect the information by working on a safety file. The staff of the IND has seen that women's shelters can be critical about women who try to use the system for the wrong reasons. They know now that the information that is given by the women's shelter is reliable and the women's shelters know that the IND is doing the right thing with the information that is given.

The two organisations seem to have different goals but at the end of the day they both have the same objective: to protect victims of violence and to give them an opportunity for a peaceful life.

Not all the problems are solved and we still have a long way to go. But we are moving in the right direction and hopefully this article will be an inspiration for others.

X Violence against Women and Poverty Prevention The Austrian Example



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Women affected by violence aren't necessarily threatened with poverty in the first place, but due to different factors the risk of becoming poor is very high. WAVE has focused on these poverty risks in the frame of an EU-project and has written a report on the situation in Austria. Women who are experiencing violence are at an increased poverty risk. In the light of the European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010 WAVE would like to highlight this fact and wants to bring this issue into the debate.

Violence and Poverty go Hand in Hand

Just like gender-related violence, poverty is also a socio-structural problem. The root causes for violence and poverty often lie in

patriarchal power relations. The UN Declaration of 1993 states that: 'violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men...'

Many women around the world can only dream of equal opportunities and women's equality. Neither in the public nor in the private sector has the division of rights and responsibilities between men and women on a partnership basis and in a gender-sen-

sitive manner yet been achieved.¹ This imbalance is especially visible on the labour market. The Gender Pay Gap, that is the pay imbalance between men and women, is quite alarming in Austria. According to the Global Gender Report 2009, conducted by the World Economic Forum, Austria ranks on place 122 out of 134 countries, as regards the equality in income between men and women for equal work or work of equal value in international comparison. In 2006 Austria still held the 104th place out of 115 countries. The EU Gender-Report 2009 also acknowledges this fact: Austria occupies the penultimate place in the EU-ranking; only in the Republic of Estonia is the pay gap between men and women higher. The gender pay gap for gross hourly earnings is 25.5 percent for Austria. This means that women receive a quarter less pay per hour than their male colleagues.

According to the Official Representation of Employees (Arbeiterkammer)² the inequalities in pay persevere throughout working-life of women and men, from the start until the end. While men's income increases continuously during their working life until retirement and often even doubles, women achieve their highest income in the 25-30 age-group.

Women perform the bigger share (66 percent) of unpaid household and child-care duties, often have long periods of maternity leave and frequently work part-time without any realistic opportunities of advancement, whereas family fathers often spend more time at the office than with their family.

Far from a 'Fifty-Fifty' Split of Household-Chores

15 years ago the former Austrian Minister of Women's Affairs, Helga Konrad, launched a Campaign with the title: „Ganze Männer machen Halbe-Halbe“ in order to emphasize the unequal division of household-labour between men and women. But it is still a long way to go to reach the goal of an equal division of child-care and household duties between men and women.

1 Equality between men and women is indeed written down in the Austrian Constitution but is still far from being achieved.

2 Wirtschafts – und Sozialstatistisches Taschenbuch der AK 2009.

According to the latest Time-use study 2010 and the women's report 2010¹ 85 to 89 percent of women are in charge of household chores like ironing and laundry. 59 percent of the time devoted to playing or learning with the children is spent by women while 41 percent is by men. Only 4 percent of child care benefits recipients are men. It is only when it comes to cooking that the percentage of men has increased; this work is being carried out by 30 percent of men. Furthermore, caring for elderly or sick relatives is mainly carried out by women – most of the time unpaid.

Poverty of Women

At EU-level 17 percent of women are at risk of long-term poverty. In Austria 569.000 (14 percent of the female population) women and 451.000 men are said to be threatened by poverty.² Even though the difference of 3 percent doesn't seem that serious, the threat of becoming poor is higher for women than for men, due to the criterion already mentioned. Single mothers' poverty risk is especially high. According to the poverty reports every third single mother (34 percent) is at risk of becoming poor.

Precarious employments and the growing inequalities in income are amplifying the poverty risks. The lack of childcare facilities is an additional factor that increases the poverty risk. The loss of a job is an acute poverty risk for women.

Women also have a higher poverty risk at older age. 123.000 female retirees living alone are threatened by poverty in comparison with 11.000 male retirees. The average pension for women is € 842,- and 1.419,- for men, which is a difference of € 577,- 40.7 percent respectively.

Violence as a Poverty Risk

Violence significantly increases the risk of becoming poor. Yet there is no data available regarding women who have been affected both by poverty and violence, neither in the poverty report nor in the national action plans on poverty and social exclusion. Only prevalence studies or the

1 Zeitverwendungsstudie 2010/Frauenbericht 2010

2 Sozialbericht 2007-2008 und Spezialauswertung Statistik Austria

annual statistics of the women's shelters as well as the statistics on barring orders issued against perpetrators shed light on how many women are affected by violence in their marriages or relationships. One out of five women in Austria is affected by violence by her own partner once during her life. We can assume that the dark number is considerably higher because only women having found their way to a support centre have been recorded here. In 2004 a representative study on the prevalence of violence in relationships was published in Germany¹, which can also provide valuable findings for Austria. The data of the German study can not be transferred 1:1 to Austria, but some of the results definitely allow conclusions which can give information on the extent of violence in Austria. Within the scope of this study, 37 percent of all persons being interviewed indicated having experienced physical violence at least once since the age of 16. 13 percent of the persons interviewed reported having experienced sexual violence at least once since the age of 16. Compared with an incidence rate of about 20 percent (one out of five) the figures for Germany lie substantially higher, which indicates that a conservative assessment has been made in Austria and that the real figures are probably much higher.

Violence gives rise to sickness and poverty

Violence has an impact on women's health. Health problems force women into precarious living situations, significantly increasing their poverty risk. The above-mentioned German prevalence study „Lebenssituation, Sicherheit und Gesundheit von Frauen in Deutschland“ ('Life situation, safety, and health of women in Germany') highlights the health related consequences of violence and the importance of the public health sector.

1 Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (ed.): Lebenssituation, Sicherheit und Gesundheit von Frauen in Deutschland ('Life situation, safety, and health of women in Germany'), Berlin 2004 (www.bmfsfj.de). All over Germany 10.264 women, ranged in age from 16 to 85 years were interviewed individually and given a supplementary written questionnaire which the participants interviewed filled in by themselves.

According to this survey one woman out of four from 16 - 85 years of age and living in a partnership was repeatedly confronted with physical and/or sexual violence by a male (ex)-partner. 55 percent of women having experienced physical and 44 percent of women having experienced sexual violence were seriously injured. More than a third of the women (37 percent) who were injured asked for medical assistance. The study also confirms, amongst other things, that physical and sexual violence are profoundly linked to emotional abuse and that many women are affected by different forms of violence at the same time.

The physical consequences of violence range from haematoma, bruises and burnings up to the loss of vision or hearing. These consequences lead to permanent injuries, chronic diseases, severe handicaps or even death. These health-related acute and long-term effects frequently lead to the loss of employment and to poverty. Experiences of violence also produce cognitive sicknesses like amnesia, disorientation, disorders in concentration and thinking, insomnia, depressions, eating disorders, an increased suicide risk, etc. Women who are victims of sexual violence suffer pain and injuries in the genital region and they have to deal with abdominal pain, gastrointestinal disorders, arrhythmia, complex traumatic pressure, chronic diseases, unwanted pregnancies etc. Women affected by violence often have to undergo long and uncomfortable medical treatments. Long medical treatments lead again to high costs and expenses for drugs and therapy and are very time-consuming. Negative consequences on the women's health lead to additional pressure and often hinder women from earning their own income.

Violence, Loss of Job and Homelessness

Frequent sick leaves, difficulties in concentrating and a low ability to work under pressure are most of the time leading to a dismissal by the employer. Some women are also being molested by their husbands at work and most employers do not show any understanding for this. The perpetrator is often not being held accountable for his behaviour, instead the female employee is. The loss of a work place can also mean the loss of everything

for these women.

Some women who are separating from the abuser end up being single-mothers with an increased poverty-risk. After leaving the women's shelter many women can't afford an apartment because of unaffordable deposits, commissions and rents. In Austria the most important social benefits are family-based.

The social benefits entitlement and the level of social benefits like the welfare assistance or the emergency benefits (i.e. benefits for long-term unemployment) are dependent on the income of the family or partner. Since these benefits are dependent on the family status, they lead to renewed dependency on the violent partner. In violent relationships it is mostly men who have all financial means and employ them as a way to put pressure on the women. Income like child care benefits and family benefits are often spent by men - not always for the good of the family.

Immigrant Women and Asylum-Seekers

Immigrant women are affected by multiple discriminations due to their roles as women, mothers, due to their origin and because of the restrictive legislation applying. The above-mentioned German Prevalence Study has also shown that immigrant women are more often affected by health problems, due to the difficult social situation they are in. A low level of education combined with a low income, bad professional and social integration, the absence of close social relationships, as well as bad alimentation, inadequate housing conditions and underpaid work can lead to chronic diseases and poverty.

The access to health services is often limited or missing for immigrant women. They often have no health insurance and have language- and communication problems which form a further access barrier. Sometimes immigrant women cannot read official letters and interpreting services are not always provided. Not all persons having immigrated to Austria are entitled to welfare assistance and the regulations differ from province to province. In Vienna immigrants are only entitled to receive these benefits if they have been living here for at least five consecutive years and have a permanent

residence permit. Immigrants are only entitled to receive social benefits (child care benefits, family allowance) if they have a proof of residency for which again you have to possess a proof of income stating a salary of about € 780,-.

Many immigrant women cannot afford psychotherapy, and therapy is hardly ever offered in the women's native languages. Immigrant women are often living in hidden homelessness due to unaffordable apartments. Access to council housing (Gemeindewohnung) is possible for immigrants, but the waiting lists are very long. With the Aliens Act being tightened and because of additional obstacles to acquiring visa and residence permits immigrants are further pushed into precarious conditions.

Female immigrants coming to Austria for family reunification do not even have their own residence permit. This is again increasing their dependency on the perpetrator since immigrant women without an independent income and their own job have to remain with their partner for five years. Because of their difficult economic situation some immigrant women have to return to their violent partner after a stay at a women's shelter.

For asylum seekers the situation is even worse. Access to the labour market is de facto not possible because employment permits are only seldomly granted and when they are it is only for seasonal or sex work. Also, asylum seekers are not eligible for social benefits.

Women's Shelters are also Poverty Prevention Centres

During the last three to four decades a nationwide network of women's shelters and victim's protection centres was established throughout Austria. Women's shelters do not only protect women from violence but also help women in building up a future for themselves and earning their own living. Comprehensive psychosocial, medical and judicial counselling, accompaniment to public authorities, as well as support in finding a job or job placement and an apartment are part of the services offered by the women's shelters.



Is Poverty 'Different' For Women Experiencing Violence?



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In a European Union facing the effects of the global economic crisis, poverty and financial difficulties have re-emerged at the centre of public debate. Single mothers are once more amongst the group of people that are affected the most by poverty. A crisis in the labour market generally affects women stronger than men. Women are more prone to lose their jobs and remain unemployed, due to the fact that their chances of re-employment are constrained by being a 'working mom'. This leads to – unfortunately very common – 'broken' career paths with interruptions in employment and career advancement for many women, which result in low or non-existent pension payments at an older age.

In the Italian women's shelter movement the following debate has been ongoing for a long time: Are women who are affected by violence and in a financially difficult situation disadvantaged to an even greater extent?

The question needs to be raised whether – from a feminist point of view – it should be possible to claim 'special' measures for these women, like financial support and a priority status regarding social benefits like housing allocations, childcare benefits, etc.

For the Italian women's shelters which base their work on the feminist principles it has always been and still is important to avoid giving their political claims too much of a 'charitable' dimension which would resemble the various catholic social projects in Italy.

This is to be avoided because the fear persists that it could cause women who are affected by violence to be perceived as 'fragile'.

This may result in 'those poor fragile women' being viewed as needing guidance and requiring a policy of 'guardianship'. This could lead to a type of policy without any critique of – or attempt to change – societal norms that still benefit the perpetrators.

There is also the risk of causing conflict between different groups of women in need – the poor affected by violence and other women living in poverty. The debate has been ongoing for over 10 years now and is facing an important development:

As highlighted in WAVE meetings and conferences, we are now confronted with the fact that in the last decade the target group of the women's shelters in Europe is more and more characterised by women in financial difficulty and migrant women.

These two groups of women are in a situation in which activating material, personal and social resources which could enable them to live an autonomous life becomes a growing and complex challenge. One should also not forget the numerous women affected by economic violence. This form of violence is – with regard to a general rise in precarious employment – certainly on the rise.

There is no need to carry out in-depth socio-economic studies to be able to affirm that these women do not find themselves in situations of need due to their personal inadequacy.

On the contrary: the drastic cuts and restrictions in necessary social benefits all over Europe mostly affect those people who cannot revert to a 'basket' of personal, social and public resources to find an adequate education, working conditions that are sensitive to women, socio-private support networks, etc....

Poverty mainly affects those women who – as feminism clearly emphasises since the 1970s – have to fight very hard for their access to the above mentioned resources.

Furthermore - as the movement of women's shelters continuously emphasizes - a woman also has to fight very hard to survive violence and to free herself from this situation!

Just like poverty cannot be assigned to personal failure, but is due to socio-political factors, violence against women is a public and not a private issue.

Can we therefore conclude that for a woman experiencing violence poverty equals an additional existential problem, impeding the woman's vital escape from the violent situation? Or does a higher risk of poverty create a further socio-political risk factor of being subjected to violence for women? Due to the complexity of factors affecting different women's living situations, there is of course no unambiguous response. However, there are certain characteristic situations most women face during their stay in a women's shelter which point into the same direction.

Imagine for example a migrant woman emigrating from a foreign country. Here, the applied legislation does accept diploma or professional skills acquired in her home country as comparable, impeding her professional path.

At the same time this legislation requires her to be employed and have a stable income in order to ensure her residence permit – in a labour market that is not even able to guarantee stability to nationals.

Furthermore, the woman is not eligible for social benefits (e.g. housing allocations, childcare benefits) and for the financial benefits granted by the state, since the cuts in the social policy sector cause these benefits only to be granted to people who already have resident status. The situation turns into a vicious circle of poverty.

In the light of the situation described above it requires an immense amount of strength to be still able to free oneself of a violent relationship without any social support network.

During the past years, it has therefore become a growing challenge for women in situations of violence and for women's shelters to acquire adequate support measures and resources. Bearing in mind that the social and economic policies worldwide continue to increasingly discriminate against and harm women, demands for 'special' support for women in situations of violence – also on an international level – can never be voiced strongly enough.