

Violence against women may be carried out in the name of tradition, culture or religion, but it takes place in every country in the world. Discriminated against in their access to economic and social rights and far from full and equal participation in the world of politics and decision-making, women have yet to make it understood that human rights apply to them too.

RIGHTS DENIED: SOME STATISTICS

- At a global level, at least 20% of women have suffered physical abuse and sexual assault.
- In all probability, in Western Europe alone 500,000 women are victims of human trafficking and driven into prostitution.
- Worldwide, a United Nations' estimate puts the number of victims of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) at around 130 million, with another 3 million or so girls being subjected to the procedure each year.
- According to data collected by the Council of Europe in every European country, between a fifth and a quarter of all women have suffered physical violence at least once in their lives and over a tenth have been raped.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF ABUSE

Violence against women is not an accidental side effect of war, it's a weapon used for many purposes: to breed terror, undermine society and eliminate resistance, to reward soldiers, to extort information. This is evident from the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Kosovo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Afghanistan or in Rwanda – to name but a few – where **the combatants and their sympathisers use kidnapping of women as a weapon, with complete impunity.**

In Pakistan, in South Africa, in Peru, in Russia, in Uzbekistan, but also in Hungary, domestic violence has reached daunting proportions, but the governments of those countries refuse to intervene to protect women and punish those who ill-treat them. Owing to the lack of sexual equality in their countries of origin, women from Ukraine, Moldova, Nigeria, the Dominican Republic, Burma and Thailand are trafficked as slaves and forced to work as prostitutes.

In other countries, such as Guatemala, South Africa and Mexico, opportunities for women to enter and remain in the workforce are also hampered by discriminatory employment legislation.

In American schools there are reports of attacks on lesbians, bisexuals or transsexuals, or girls who do not conform to the norms of female behaviour set by men. In Morocco, in Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia it is the State itself that creates discrimination: men and women are not equal before the law and women's par-

ticipation in public life is restricted. In Saudi Arabia, there is an extremely grave phenomenon: **female domestic workers are made to live in prison-like conditions, locked up and segregated in the house where they work and where they are subject to violence of various kinds.**

THE WORST ENEMY IS AT HOME

The most widespread attacks against women anywhere in the world are domestic, a term which covers every type of abuse that occurs at home or within the family.

Women of every social class, race, age and religion are subject to horrendous abuse by the men they share their lives with. Domestic violence is a violation of women's right to physical and psychological integrity and takes a number of different forms: physical and psychological abuse, beatings or torture, marital rape, incest, forced or premature marriage and honour crimes. The latter include torture, permanent facial disfigurement by acid attack, and murder. Many such cases are reported in regions like the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America. Among the countries where such violence is most common are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey, but also in innocent-seeming Europe. Data collected by the Council of Europe demonstrate that this form of violence occurs in all the countries in the continent where, according to the figures, from 12% to 15% of women over 16 years of age have suffered abuse within the family. As if that were not enough, the social cost of domestic violence is enormous for society. A number of national studies have come up with sums ranging from 2.4 billion euros a year in Spain to 34 billion euros in the U.K.

WOMEN AND TORTURE

Torture practised on women is part of a global culture which denies women equal rights with men and legitimises the violent appropriation of women's bodies for personal gratification or political ends. **Amnesty International has denounced countless cases of torture or cruel treatment of women in the custody of police, prison officers, soldiers** and other representatives of official agencies. These women are beaten,



subjected to electric shocks, simulated executions and death threats, sleep and sensory deprivation. Recently, Amnesty International documented cases of this type in countries including Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, China, Ecuador, Egypt, the Philippines, France, India, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Italy, Kenya, Lebanon, Nepal, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Russia, Spain, Sri Lanka, the United States of America, Sudan, Tajikistan and Turkey.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

According to the World Health Organisation, at least 135 million girls have been subjected to sexual mutilation and another three million are added each year. FGM is practised mainly in Africa, and in some Middle Eastern countries (Egypt, Yemen, the Arab Emirates). Some cases also occur in parts of Asia, the Americas and Europe, within immigrant communities. Work has also been going on for over ten years in Western countries to reinforce women's rights and eradicate the practice: in Holland, Belgium, the UK and France, but also in Canada, the USA and Australia. Since 2006, in addition to making it a crime, Italy has fostered a number of initiatives on the subject of FGM: courses to provide pregnant infibulated women with information, current awareness programmes for teachers in compulsory education and health workers and information campaigns targeted at immigrants with the aim of promoting wider awareness of the fundamen-

tal rights of the person, in particular the rights of women and girls. **Last in chronological order, last April the Rwandan Government banned female genital mutilation.**

International efforts to eliminate female genital mutilation have a long history, but it is only in this century, thanks to growing pressure from African women's organisations, that concrete results have been achieved.

ANCIENT CUSTOMS AND HONOUR CRIMES

Honour crimes include torture, permanent facial disfigurement by acid attack and murder. Numerous cases are recorded in Middle Eastern countries, in South Asia and Latin America. Among the countries where the practice is most widespread are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey.

In places like rural China such ancient customs still persist, including – and this is the most appalling – the killing of newborn baby girls. In fact, in the past, the family planning policy encouraged the birth of boys, and families which conformed to the so-called “one-child policy” often stopped at nothing in order to be sure of having a male child. In some parts of the People's Republic this practice has created a major imbalance between the sexes. **One final extraordinary tradition in rural China is the sale of wives and daughters.** UNICEF has reported on the seriousness of the problem and has started to take action, especially in the south-western region of Yunnan.