

Being born a girl means clearing a lot of hurdles

8 March – International Women's Day

Memo - 7 March 2016 -



On 8 March women are celebrated around the world. One day out of 365. One day in a world wherein from the time they are born until they die, women experience discrimination and violence at every stage of their life. Too often they continue to face discriminatory laws and practices, obstacles to accessing justice or government inaction which allows crimes to continue unabated and go unpunished, rendering them commonplace.

To be or not to be born: “the preference for sons” in India

In India, where girls require a dowry in order to marry, they are often still seen as a financial burden, whereas boys are viewed as offering financial support for the future. Sex-selective abortion of female foetuses is therefore common. These practices reflect and perpetuate inequality, discrimination and violation of women’s rights. According to the United Nations, there are 43 million women demographically ‘missing’ from that country.¹

According to the United Nations, there are up to 200 million women demographically ‘missing’ from the global population.²

¹ UNFPA, Sex Imbalances at Birth: Current trends, consequences and policy implications, August 2012 [http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Sex%20Imbalances%20at%20Birth.%20PDF%20UNFPA%20APRO%20publication%202012.pdf]

² United Nations [http://www.un.org/events/women/iwd/2007/factsfigures.shtml]

Growing up with the threat of female genital mutilation in Somalia

In Somalia, 98% of girls have suffered genital mutilation.³ The practice of cutting female external genitalia is perpetuated in the name of tradition. This is despite the disastrous consequences for the health of young girls who risk infection, haemorrhage, complications and even death during childbirth.

According to UNICEF, at least 200 million girls and women in 30 countries have suffered genital mutilation.⁴

Off to school? A daily challenge for Afghan girls

Going to school is a real challenge for many Afghan girls in a country where only 10% of women can read and write.⁵ Aside from rampant insecurity, Afghan girls attending school also face the threat of acid attacks or poisoning or of their schools being attacked.

Nelson Mandela used to say that: "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world". Educating girls is crucial to improve their health, their autonomy, their emancipation, their political participation and also equality between women and men. Educating girls also has a significant impact on the whole of society by breaking the cycle of poverty.

According to UNESCO, 63 million girls around the world receive no schooling.⁶

They should be playing in the playground. In Pakistan, They are already married.

In Pakistan, vast numbers of early and forced marriages exist between young girls and much older men. Despite legislation, 70% of women are married before age 18 and 20% before age 13.⁷ Some are 'offered' as a way of settling family or tribal disputes or of paying off a debt.

According to UNICEF, it is currently estimated that more than 700 million women married during childhood. More than a third of these women were married before reaching 15 years of age.⁸

³ UNICEF, Global Report, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Global Concern, 5 February 2016 [http://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGMC_2016_brochure_final_UNICEF_SPREAD.pdf]

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ FIDH, Open Letter to His Excellency President Mr Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, 2014, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/20141202_afgh_london_conference_ol_en_final.pdf]

⁶ UNESCO, July 2015 [<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/fs-31-out-of-school-children-en.pdf>]

⁷ UNICEF, Situation analysis of children and women in Pakistan, 2012 [http://www.unicef.org/pakistan/National_Report.pdf]

⁸ UNICEF, No time to lose: New UNICEF data show the need for urgent action on female genital mutilation and child marriage, July 2014 [http://www.unicef.org/media/media_74524.html]

Access to abortion in Senegal: “I don’t want this child; I want to go to school!”

In Senegal, women cannot terminate a pregnancy, even if it is the result of rape. This ban leads women to abort illegally putting their health and even their life at risk. Unwanted pregnancies have devastating psychological consequences. Too often, young pregnant girls are forced to give up their schooling. Women who abort illegally run the risk of up to two years in prison.⁹ Read the FIDH report on the consequences of the ban on abortion in Senegal.

According to the United Nations, 47 000 women die each year from an unsafe abortion, contributing to 13% of maternal mortality.¹⁰

Sierra Leone: for every 100 000 children born, 1360 mothers die giving birth¹¹

Sierra Leone has the highest rate of maternal mortality in the world. A combination of poverty, a lack of information and access to contraception and family planning and difficulties with accessing healthcare services often has fatal consequences.

According to the World Health Organisation, around 830 women die each day worldwide during or following pregnancy or childbirth. The majority of these deaths are avoidable.¹²

Targeted for their sexual orientation in South Africa

“They told me they were going to kill me, that they were going to rape me and, after they’d raped me, I was going to become a woman. A heterosexual woman.”¹³

Although South Africa is the first and only African country to have legalised same-sex marriage, actually living with one’s sexuality can prove fatal for lesbian women. They may be targeted for their real or supposed sexual orientation. ‘Corrective’ rape is a practice which involves raping lesbians to punish them but also, the argument goes, to ‘cure’ them and force them to submit to certain social norms. In 2016, 76 countries continue to criminalise relationships between consenting adults of the same sex. Such relationships incur the death penalty in at least five countries.¹⁴

⁹ FIDH, Report/Senegal: I don’t want this child, I want to go to school!, 2014 [<https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/senegal/report-senegal-i-don-t-want-this-child-i-want-to-go-to-school> <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/senegalfemmes651f2014web.pdf>]

¹⁰ WHO, Preventing unsafe abortion, 2009 [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/unsafe_abortion/magnitude/en/]

¹¹ World Bank Statistics, 2015 [<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT>]

¹² WHO, Factsheet No. 348 on maternal mortality, November 2015 [<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/fr/>]

¹³ Testimony of Zakhe, 28 years old, recorded by Action Aid in Soweto in 2009. See Action Aid, Hate crimes: the rise of ‘corrective’ rape in South Africa, 2009, at: [https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/hate_crimes_the_rise_of_corrective_rape_in_south_africa_a_september_2009.pdf]

¹⁴ United Nations, 2015 [http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/pressreleaseandstatementarchive/2015/september/20150929_LGBTI]

Condemned to flogging for Adultery in Sudan

In Sudan, adultery (*zina*) is punished with one hundred lashes if the accused is unmarried. For married people, the sentence is stoning. While in theory this punishment applies both to men and women, the justice system targets women in particular.

In May 2014, Meriam Yahya Ibrahim, then aged 27 and eight months pregnant, was condemned to flogging for adultery and to death for apostasy.¹⁵ The court declared her marriage to a Christian null and void and viewed the relationship as adultery. She was subsequently freed after the international community had mobilised in her support.

Unilateral Divorce in Yemen

In Yemen, a husband can divorce by declaring three times “I repudiate you” (*talaq*). He is not obliged either to pronounce these words in front of his wife or to notify a court. A woman on the other hand must prove that her husband has caused her harm or must ask for a no-fault divorce (*kholé*), which cannot be obtained without her husband’s consent.¹⁶

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women: (...) (T)he same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution.” (United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979, Article 16)

Nationality cannot be transmitted to one’s children in Lebanon

In Lebanon, nationality laws prevent women from transmitting their nationality to their foreign spouse and their children.¹⁷

“States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children.” (United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979, Article 9.2)

Worth half the value of a man in Iran

In Iran, a woman’s testimony is worth half that of a man in legal proceedings.

“States Parties shall accord to women, in civil matters, a legal capacity identical to that of men and the same opportunities to exercise that capacity. In particular, they shall give women equal rights (...) and shall treat them equally in all stages of procedure in courts and tribunals.” (United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979, Article 15)

¹⁵ FIDH, Condemned to death for apostasy, 20 May 2014 [<https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/sudan/15355-sudan-death-penalty-pronounced-in-apostasy-case>]

¹⁶ FIDH, Women and the Arab Spring: Taking Their Place?, 2012 [<https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/femmesarabangbassdef.pdf>]

¹⁷ FIDH, Position Paper, Les femmes francophones ne sont pas sur un pied d’égalité: des mesures urgentes nécessaires pour réduire les disparités, November 2014 [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/note_fidh_femmes_xv_sommet_francophonie.pdf]

Inheriting less than a man in Tunisia

Do women inherit? Yes, but two times less than men. In Tunisia, inheritance laws are discriminatory and particularly unfavorable to women and girls. A man receives twice what a woman does.

In countries where Sharia is the source of law, women and girls inherit less than their male counterparts.

Earning less than men in Finland

Scandinavian countries are often touted for their practices of gender equality and non discrimination. Nonetheless, in Finland, the salary gap between men and women is 18.7%.¹⁸

In OECD member states, women's salaries are on average 15% less than those of men.¹⁹

Access to land, a daily challenge for Kenyan women

In Kenya, women represent 75% of agricultural laborers, but possess only 6% of the land. Cultural and traditional practices, as well as the legislative framework that is in force, hinder women's access to property and control over land.²⁰ Read the FIDH Dossier of Claims to eliminate discrimination and violence against women in Africa.

According to the United Nations, in the world, only 20% of property owners are women. In North Africa and Western Asia, this figure falls below 5%.²¹

Taking “ Anti Mexico” birth control, knowing that they will be raped On their migration through Mexico.

Migrant women fleeing insecurity in the Central America's Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala) to go to the United States are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence during their journey through Mexico. Some estimates indicate that 8 in 10 are raped, with virtual impunity.²² This excruciating reality forces many migrant women to take a form of birth control known in Central America as the “Anti-Mexico Injection” (*inyección anti-México*) to avoid becoming pregnant in case of rape.

¹⁸ OCDE, 2014 [<http://www.oecd.org/gender/data/genderwagegap.htm>]

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ FIDH, Dossier of claims, 2010 [<https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/dossierofclaims0803eng.pdf>]

²¹ UN Women, Facts & Figures, 2012 [<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/commission-on-the-status-of-women-2012/facts-and-figures>]

²² Animal político, Estiman que 80% de mujeres migrantes centroamericanas son violadas en México al intentar cruzar a EU, 2014 [<http://www.animalpolitico.com/2014/09/80-de-mujeres-y-ninas-migrantes-centroamericanas-son-violadas-en-mexico-al-intentar-cruzar-eu/>]

The vulnerability of Tajik women emigrating to Russia or left behind by their migrant partner

Every year, the poor economic situation in Tajikistan contributes to the departure of thousands of men and women for Russia. Migrant women, particularly those leaving the country unaccompanied, are accused of challenging traditional gender roles, and are often stigmatized by their families and communities in Tajikistan. In Russia, they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence by their countrymen or by Russian citizens. These women receive neither health care nor social assistance to care for their children, and some are forced to abandon their children in orphanages.

Simultaneously, thousands of women are left in Tajikistan to raise their children, and to work in the fields or markets while remaining financially dependent on their partner's family. Those whose husbands stop sending them money, or disappear completely, often find themselves destitute and even rejected by their community.²³ Read the the 2011 and 2014 FIDH reports on the situation of Tajik women.

Sexual violence as a weapon against political participation in Egypt

In Egypt, harassment and sexual violence are a major obstacle to women's participation in public affairs.²⁴ Read the FIDH report on sexual violence in public spaces in Egypt.

Since the army took power in July 2013, security forces are responsible for a wave of sexual violence on civil society. Men and women arrested in or near demonstrations against the regime are subject to quasi-systematic sexual violence. Sexual blackmail, virginity tests, the electrocution of genitals, and rape are increasing, with an impunity that contributes to the repetition and trivialization of these crimes.²⁵ Read the FIDH report on sexual violence committed by Egyptian security forces.

Sexual violence in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: survivors rarely obtain justice, and never receive reparation

Described as "the world capital of rape", the Democratic Republic of Congo is the site of a conflict that has lasted 20 years. This conflict has been characterized by widespread and systematic perpetration of sexual and gender-based violence that amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Isolation of women, social stigmatization, fear of retaliation, financial deprivation, discrimination in law and in fact, and the disregard of rights are all obstacles in victims' demands for justice. These women rarely obtain justice, and never reparation.²⁶ Read the FIDH report on access to justice for victims of sexual violence in the DRC.

"Sexual violence in conflict needs to be treated as the war crime that it is; it can no longer be treated as an unfortunate collateral damage of war." Zainab Hawa Bangura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the issue of sexual violence in conflict.

²³ FIDH, "From Tajikistan to Russia: Vulnerability and Abuse of Migrant Workers and their Families", October 2014 [<https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/russie641uk2014hd.pdf>]; FIDH, "Tajikistan : Exporting the Workforce – At What Price ? Tajik Migrant Workers Need Increased Protection", September 2011, pp. 8-9, 21-22 [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/taj_report-2.pdf]

²⁴ FIDH, Egypt : Keeping Women Out. Sexual Violence In the Public Sphere, April 2014 [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_women_final_english.pdf]

²⁵ FIDH, Egypt, 2015, Stifling Egyptian civil society: Sexual violence by security forces surges under el-Sisi [<https://www.fidh.org/en/region/north-africa-middle-east/egypt/stifling-egyptian-civil-society-sexual-violence-by-security-forces>]

²⁶ FIDH, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Victims of sexual violence rarely obtain justice and never receive reparation - Major changes needed to fight impunity. [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_rdc_.pdf]

More than 70 years after the end of the war, the battle for justice continues for the “comfort women” of South Korea

Since 1992, they have been gathering in front of the Japanese Embassy in search of justice. Who are they? These women are the former "comfort women" of South Korea. Their title is a gentle euphemism for an atrocious reality: a sexual slavery system organized by the Imperial Army of Japan from 1932 until the end of the Second World War.²⁷

For decades, the Japanese government refused to acknowledge its responsibility and to officially apologize. At the end of 2015, South Korea and Japan negotiated an agreement described as "historic", which was supposed to provide a "final" and "irreversible" resolution to the issue. However, the survivors, who were not consulted, rejected this agreement. While the Japanese prime minister, a longtime revisionist on this issue, presented his "apology and repentance, from the depths of his heart," the government is still wary of acknowledging its legal responsibility for the acts committed.²⁸ The battle for justice continues.

As many as 200,000 Korean, Indonesian, Philippine, Chinese, Malaysian, and Timor women were forced into prostitution and subjected to rape, forced abortions and pregnancies, not to mention the serious physical and psychological trauma, and also the shame and stigmatization they encountered after the war.²⁹ Today, only 46 of these women are alive.

Dying at the hands of her partner in France

In France, every 2.7 days a woman dies at the hands of her husband.³⁰

According to the World Health Organization, nearly one in three women is a victim of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or someone else at some point in their lives.³¹

“Invisible”: the missing or murdered Amerindian women in Canada

Being an indigenous woman in Canada means having a higher risk of being abused than men and non-Aboriginal women.³² While Aboriginal women make up 4.3% of Canada's female population, they represent 16% of homicide victims. Between 1980 and 2012, more than 1,200 Indigenous women have disappeared or been murdered.³³ The Canadian government now puts this figure at 4,000 women in 30 years.³⁴ This violence, rooted in inequality and discrimination, has been evaded for too long. Canada is now waiting for the results of the national enquiry into violence against indigenous women promised by

²⁷ Report on the mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea and Japan on the issue of military sexual slavery in wartime, 1996 [<https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts>]

²⁸ Wall Street Journal, Full Text: Japan-South Korea Statement on 'Comfort Women', 2015 [<http://blogs.wsj.com/>]

²⁹ Amnesty International, Japan: Still Waiting After 60 Years: Justice For Survivors Of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery System, 2005 [<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA22/012/2005/ja/>]

³⁰ Ministère des Droits des femmes français, Vers l'égalité réelle entre les femmes et les hommes, 2014 [http://femmes.gouv.fr/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Egalite_Femmes_Hommes_T6_bd.pdf]

³¹ WHO, Factsheet N°239 Violence against women Intimate partner and sexual violence against women, January 2016 [<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>]

³² OHCHR, Canada's failure to effectively address murder and disappearance of Aboriginal women 'grave rights violation' - UN experts, 2015 [<http://www.ohchr.org/en/>]

³³ Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014, Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview [<http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/mmaw-faapd-eng.htm>]

³⁴ BBC, Questions over number of missing indigenous women in Canada, 2016, [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35590442>]

Prime Minister Trudeau.

“Racism, the indifference of the media, and political apathy mean that the disappearance of an indigenous woman moves the population less than that of a white woman,” Widia Larivière, preface to *Stolen Sisters*, investigating a femicide in Canada, Emmanuelle Walter (2014)

Sexist witchcraft killings in Papua New Guinea

In Papua New Guinea, some women, especially elderly women, are being accused of witchcraft. The accused are tortured into a forced confession of their "crimes" and then murdered. These sexist murders are at the peak of widespread discrimination against women. The charge of "sorcery" is also used to "fix" certain people or to deprive women of their land.³⁵

Sexist murders have reached alarming proportions worldwide and are the “*extreme manifestation of existing forms of violence against women. Such killings are not isolated incidents (...) but are rather the ultimate act of violence which is experienced in a continuum of violence.*”³⁶ (Rashida Manjoo, Former Special Rapporteur on violence against women)

These particularly distressing findings should not be regarded as inevitable. Women are not just victims of discrimination. Everywhere, they are also the main actors of their own emancipation. Progress at national, regional and international levels is always adopted under pressure from women's rights movements who are fighting every day for equal rights and the elimination of violence.

Being born a girl means clearing a lot of hurdles.

The struggle for women's rights can not be the fight of just one day.

FIDH is an international human rights NGO federating 178 organizations from close to 120 countries. Since 1922, FIDH has been defending all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights as set out in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights. FIDH's headquarters are in Paris and the organization has offices in Abidjan, Bamako, Brussels, Conakry, Geneva, The Hague, New-York, Pretoria and Tunis.

³⁵ Special Rapporteur on violence against women, mission to Papua New Guinea, 2013
[http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/A-HRC-23-49-Add-2_en.pdf]

³⁶ Special Rapporteur on violence against women, annual report, 2012
[http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/A.HRC.20.16_En.pdf]