



Introduction

In this special issue of *Atlantis*, readers are offered a selection of articles on violence against women that have already been published in Feminist Knowledge Network member journals based around the world. Because it is so widespread, and yet can manifest itself so differently in diverse social, cultural and political contexts, the problem of violence against women is one which occupies feminist activists and academics wherever we work. As a result, finding ways to expose, agitate against, and otherwise resist the violence that women face daily has been a significant site of negotiation and coalition-building among women working locally, regionally, and internationally.

Feminists have insisted that violence against women, whatever guise it takes, is a fundamental violation of our human rights, and have fought for the creation and implementation of regional, national and international tools to tackle it. Twenty-three years have passed since the groundbreaking Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified, during which time women activists have continued to bring to light the specific ways in which women are targeted and victimised by exclusionary structures in both the private and the public realms. In that time, newer and increasingly more purposeful international agreements have continued to be crafted and implemented, such as the 2000 UN Resolution 1325, which came about in response to the fact that women and girls, while they may or may not be actively drafted into fighting, have experienced a disproportionate amount of insecurity in recent armed conflicts.

As a result of these efforts, the past few years have seen the global women's movement implement substantive changes in governments and in national and international non-governmental organisations, and make truly remarkable progress

in establishing effective institutions such as the International Criminal Tribunals that were set up to address crimes committed in the wars in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda. Globally, women have raised awareness of our human rights, and set in motion processes to bring to justice those who violate them.

Yet, as any feminist activist will attest, a daunting amount of work remains to be done before we shall have brought into being our vision of a world in which women live free of violence and the threat of violence. One piece of this work, to which this special issue of *Atlantis* hopes to contribute, is to share our experiences of addressing and resisting gender-specific violence in its multiple manifestations. An ongoing challenge is to find practical means to bring our stories to each other's attention. All too often, geographical remoteness, discrepancies in access to resources, language barriers, and inadequate information about women's indigenous efforts to resist violation, prevent us from knowing what women are facing in other parts of the world, contributing to and learning from their resistance, and sharing their tears and triumphs.

This issue has been conceived in response to our understanding that our capacities as a global movement are diminished when we cannot share our experiences and mobilise ourselves as a unified force against patriarchal oppression. Seven diverse pieces are collected together here, reflecting the frightening variety of ways in which cultural, political and social structures condone and even promote violence against women all over the world.

The first article, originally published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, is a collectively written comparative anthropological account of the processes by which women become categorized as "witches or harbourers of evil" in rural communities in India and China. Dev Nathan, Govind Kelkar and Yu Xiaogang consider the widespread cultural phenomenon of witch-hunting as the manifestation



of a struggle between men and women for social and political power in regions which have only recently been incorporated into states. Demonising women in order to exclude them from religious and cultural practises, they observe, has explicit political implications as it impacts on women's ability to own land or participate in community decision-making processes. It is "conducive to the social process of controlling women" because the threat of being declared a witch restricts non-conformism or deviance from the rules that men are inventing as the old order changes and a new one is established.

The next two articles, which were originally published in the *Ahfad Journal* in the Sudan, are also about social and cultural mechanisms instituted to control women. Both articles describe the effects on women's health of the practice of genital mutilation, which is on the increase in the Sudan despite years of public campaigning to oppose it. The authors see genital mutilation as a "synonym for an endemic, epidemic and fatal disease specific to girls and women." By recognising genital mutilation as a violation of human rights rather than something that should be forgiven as a manifestation of indigenous cultural practices, the authors contribute to the global battle to have the practice banned.

The first piece reprinted here, by Ahmed Abdel Magied and Suad Musa Ahmed, describes how Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) destroys the health of women living in the Sudan, where women may know how to manage its effects but cannot do so properly because healthcare services have been severely compromised by decades of conflict. The second piece, by Amna M. Badri and Ahmed Abdel Magied, discusses how, in the diaspora, even in the presence of good public health systems, women fare little better because healthcare providers are ignorant about, or ill equipped to manage the effects of genital mutilation, thus providing inadequate care. In sum, both pieces explore the continuum of violence that faces genitally mutilated women as a result of the failure of political, cultural and social institutions either to protect them from harm, or to offer appropriate redress for that harm.

In the next two pieces, we are offered analyses of the impact of violence on women in India and Sweden. It would be difficult to imagine two more diverse societies, and yet, as these pieces reveal, there are similarities in the ways in which national structures and laws can fail women (and their children) who are caught up in domestic violence, wherever they are.

The Indian women's movement has successfully lobbied for significant amendments to laws discriminating against women, especially with regard to the dowry system. However, observes Madhu Kishwar in an article first published in the feminist journal *Manushi*, the implementation of these laws has been unsatisfactory as a result of ignorance, antagonism and corruption in the police and judiciary. Despite their apparent stringency, the laws are not working as they should. Kishwar observes that the dishonesty with which officials respond to cases of wife battery has even led to instances where women put forward bogus claims of abuse as a means of blackmail or vengeance, thus undermining the hard-won progress of the women's movement.

Contemporary Swedish policy is among the most gender equal in the world, yet the women's movement in that country, as in the Sudan and India, continues to face new challenges to its goal of ending discrimination against women. The Swedish women's movement successfully developed new laws and policies to overcome violence against women in the early 1990s, as part of a comprehensive set of initiatives to eradicate gender inequality from the society. Sweden has been particularly proactive in finding ways to equalise parenting roles as a means to overcome women's exclusion from public life, but, writes Maria Eriksson in an article originally published in *NORA: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, there has been a curious unwillingness among feminist analysts to focus on the issue of violence among men who are fathers. As a result, she argues, the effects on children of male violence have been silenced. In a context in which men gain social status from parenting - even if they are habitually violent towards women - Eriksson argues that a



refusal to develop a public discourse about violent fathers means that an opportunity is being missed to challenge the identity work of males who believe that masculinity should be expressed as dominance. Ultimately, this compromises the goal of transforming gender relations in which Swedish society is so actively engaged.

In an article first published in the *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* on the subject of the murder of Fadime Şahindal in Sweden in 2002, a different challenge to Sweden's stated commitment to gender equality is offered. Their account of "honour killing" among Kurds in the diaspora and the Middle East is a plea from Shahrzad Mojab and Amir Hassanpour to Western researchers and activists to rethink the real political impact of not criticising cultural and religious "difference" for fear of appearing racist. When such a response effectively condones practices that violate women, they observe, all feminist activism is compromised because patriarchal ideologists have then succeeded in imposing silence on anyone who would resist brutality towards women. Western feminists, they argue, cannot allow themselves to be paralysed by the complexities of undertaking cross-cultural resistance to violence against women: instead, they should make a concerted effort to learn about "the ability of non-Western, non-White women to understand the conditions of their subordination" and support their determination to overcome it. Such an approach, argue the authors, is a vital iteration of collective resistance without which no effective challenge can be launched to end women's suffering, wherever it takes place.

While it, too, takes as its subject the impact of violence on children, the final piece in this issue, first published in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, moves us away from analyses of country-specific experiences into a global discussion of how girls are impacted by violence, especially in conflict zones. Drawing from her ethnographic explorations of girls caught up in wars, Carolyn Nordstrom concludes that "the violence they face is far greater than traditional definitions of war indicate," since girls are subject not only to the organised violence that characterises

armed conflict, but also to violence within their own communities. Yet girls are invariably invisible in analysis of war and in reconstruction and reparations processes. Nordstrom argues, then, that the silence that surrounds their experiences is in itself a manifestation of the violence they endure: it is an actively constructed "not knowing" that upholds traditions of violence and ensures its continuation in the future.

The overall picture that emerges from this special issue is that decades of local and global feminist activism against gender-specific violence has afforded us some progress even while it continues to remind us of how much work remains to be done. As an international women's movement, we have gone a long way towards breaking the silence that has always made violence against women possible. We need to remain vigilant, aware of each other's initiatives, and mutually supportive in order for the momentum of our work to continue to grow.

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