



International Advocacy Reports and Statements

Rape as weapon of war, an intercultural and timeless reality

September 2010, Geneva

Written by Hillevi Perraudin, IFUW Representative

The University of Geneva hosted a conference and public debate in September “Rape as weapon of war, an intercultural and timeless reality” (Le viol comme arme de guerre, une réalité interculturelle et intemporelle). The meeting was organized by the Award “Femme exilée-femme engagée” as part of its ongoing work to prevent violence against women.

Mrs. Fabienne Bugnon, director of the Geneva Human Rights Office, noted that it was in 1977 that rape as a crime against humanity was recognized. The victims are mainly women and girls. Throughout history, women’s bodies have been viewed as the “warrior’s nest”. Today, rape is used systematically to humiliate the enemy. The women violated are rejected as objects of shame. The canton of Geneva invests around CHF 200' 000 per year in rape prevention, especially in Congo.

Mrs. Perpetue Nshimiramana, Burundi, former Ambassador of Burundi to the United Nations, said that rape is planned and that many men do not see this as a crime. In Burundi, there is no word for rape. Some even believe that the rape of a young girl protects against AIDS. Society accepts this situation and conceals the violence, so there is no follow up on the acts.

Mrs. Denise Beutler-Mateso, former trade unionist and defender of women's rights in Kivu /RDC, said that the Congo can be viewed as the “capital of rape”. She described rape as inhuman and degrading, often committed in the presence of the husband and/or children. Soldiers go from house to house, systematically violating all women, young and old, with the aim of genocide. The trauma following rape takes long to overcome. Beutler-Mateso called for the torturers to be brought to justice. Unfortunately, while laws exist, there is a lack of will for application.

Mrs. Zlata Salihbegovic from Sarajevo talked about her own experience. She highlighted women’s fear of declaring rape and going to court, as this often feels like a second violation. She said that it is important to inform women of their rights and the procedures to follow. She counts heavily on NGOs for this.

Mrs. Claire Morclette, Amnesty International, presented a video of committed women activists. These women, from different cultures and educational background, take risks as they denounce cases of rape, marital violence, clandestine abortions, and detention conditions. They face threats and stigmatization within their communities, because of ignorance and lack of education, while the aggressors enjoy total impunity. Despite the commitment of these women, the lack of resources, qualifications, fatigue and doubts, they often give up.

International Federation of University Women

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Dr. Betty Goguikian-Ratcliff, a psychology professor at the University of Geneva, is concerned with the psychological after-effects of rape and on how to help women rebuild their lives in exile. Rape victims are considered to be “dirty”; their entire community thus dishonored. Rejection of the victim by their social group (husbands, children, community) often ends in exile. The children resulted from rape are also persecuted. The victims feel guilty and think it was their own fault. The assistance of psychologists facilitates speaking about the event, makes it possible to put the act in perspective.

Mrs. Maria Roth-Bernasconi, member of the Swiss parliament, spoke about the role of politicians and what they can do. She called for the support of NGOs and visits to the effected countries. Support projects can help with creating discussion groups, family mediation and micro-credits, to fight against inequality.

Mrs. Sandrine Salerno, Mayor of Geneva, concluded by a vibrant call to end these practices, so that “the rape is no longer an effective and cheap war tool”.

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| <p>The meeting was organized by the award “Femme exilée, femme engagée”, created to honor women who seek refuge in Switzerland under dramatic circumstances but continue to work for women’s rights.</p> |
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Translated from French by IFUW Staff