

## Women the Target of Fundamentalists

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Recently, we experienced the drama of Safiya Hussein, sentenced to death by stoning by the Islamic court of Sokoto in Nigeria, for committing the "crime" of having an extra-marital child. It was followed by the death penalty for Abok Alfa Akok, a pregnant southern Sudanese woman. These two incidents brought to the public debate the issue of the violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms for millions of women around the world. Although the international outcry, the mobilization of the civil society and the European Parliament managed, in the last minute, to save the lives of the two women, the issue of violence against women remains.

Unfortunately, despite the United Nation's international conferences and the various ambitious action plans, a frustrating backlash is being observed, due mainly to the resurgence of Islamic fanaticism and ultra-conservatism. The rise of Taliban and the latest events in Afghanistan is a characteristic example. The most fundamental human rights - access to education, to work, to health services, to politics - were taken away from women overnight. The Taliban, like any despotic and antidemocratic regime, founded their power on

the subjugation of women and the 'return to fundamentals'. In such regimes, sexual behavior, the reproductive functions of women, and their clothing, are usually controlled by the religious leaders, in the name of the - so-called - holy rules and cultural traditions. At the same time, practices of cruel, inhuman and humiliating punishment, such as whipping or stoning are an every day phenomenon.

In September 2000, the United Nation's Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated that approximately 5,000 women are murdered every year by male members of their families to protect the family 'honor'. In countries where such a form of violence is considered as an acceptable way of controlling women's behavior and not as a serious crime, the perpetrators remain unpunished.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 130 million women worldwide are subject to mutilation of their genital organs, while 2 million women are exposed to such practice yearly. What is tragic is that, at least half of the African countries that uphold this tradition have either adopted laws which prohibit it completely or partly, or have com-

mitted themselves through Partnership with the European Union, without the latter being respected. Obviously, in those countries, the power of prejudices and social rules is higher than the rule of law. In Europe, it is feared, not without cause, that these criminal practices have been imported to the countries of E.E. through the immigration waves. According to the British Medical Association, 3,000 cliterodectomies are carried out every year in the United Kingdom. However, among the countries of E.E. only the United Kingdom and Sweden have laws prohibiting this practice.

Undoubtedly, irrationalism and intolerance impede every effort for women's emancipation. Women's rights, in the eyes of fanatics, represent a threat to the existing male-centric order and a destruction of family values. Even today, fundamentalists all over the world put as their main political objective the control of women's reproductive abilities. The penalization of abortions was one of the primary issues of the political agenda of the USA over the last presidential elections. Usually, those who are 'pro-life' are those supporting with the same zeal the death penalty, the armaments and the warrior foreign policy.

Without any doubt, the most adequate defense against the forces of intolerance is the reinforcement of the secular state and the democratic rule of law. No political regime, no religious movement, no tradition, or custom comes above the respect of fundamental human rights, the democratic freedoms and the rule of law. The full respect of women's rights and the issue of gender equality constitute one of the greatest political challenges of our era. The promotion of a global campaign for the consolidation of these rights would be the most suitable political response to those longing for the Middle Age.