

# VOICES FOR EQUALITY



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# FOREWORD

PHOTO: THE PALME CENTER



When equality increases, poverty diminishes. Within development cooperation, increased equality is a goal in itself but it is also a prerequisite for democracy, peace and equal rights for all.

The Palme Center is a feminist organisation. The work we do is based on our conviction that all people are created equal, with equal rights irrespective of gender, class affiliation, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. To achieve equality, it is essential to adjust the structural imbalance in the power relations that exists between women

and men. This includes political, financial, social and cultural aspects of power. The objective is for men and women to have the same power to enable them to shape their communities and their own lives.

"The principle of equal rights for women is self-evident. However, when it comes to applying the self-evident in practice, you often encounter difficulties," said Olof Palme in a speech at the congress of the Social Democratic Women in Sweden in 1972. Unfortunately, the principle is far from self-evident and opposition to gender equality is still strong in many parts of the world.

Discrimination and oppression dominate the everyday lives of far too many women and girls. Most people living in poverty are women. They tend to have fewer resources and rights than men, and are less able to make decisions that shape their lives. A majority of those who cannot read or write are women. Women are also hardest hit by conflicts around the world, but are severely under-represented in, and often completely excluded from, peace processes and rebuilding programmes. Rape and sexual assault are often used as weapons in conflicts worldwide, or are perpetrated as a consequence of the lawlessness that often arises during conflicts. To come up with sustainable solutions, women must be accorded a role in peace work.

The Palme Center believes that equality is a prerequisite for democracy, peace, sustainable development and the work to fight poverty, and it cannot be reduced to being an issue for women alone. Both men and women have a responsibility to ensure equality – equality benefits all.

We hope that this publication will help to increase knowledge and provide inspiration by showcasing examples of equality work in practice. It can be used in trainings by active project participants both in Sweden and in our partner countries.

**Anna Sundström**

Secretary General of the Olof Palme International Center

## **GENDER EQUALITY – A part of the sustainable development goals**

The global goals constitute a shared worldwide plan to create a fair and sustainable future. They were drawn up by the UN and are binding for all member states. Goal number 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.



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Mu Sel, Htet Htet Aung and Yin Myo discusses legislation on violence against women at BWU's office in Yangon.

# PRACTICAL GENDER EQUALITY WORK IN BURMA

Despite the democratisation of recent years, Burma remains a male-dominated country. Women are under-represented in politics, disadvantaged in the legal system, and subjected to sexual assault and domestic violence.

TEXT & PHOTO: AXEL KRONHOLM

**APPROXIMATELY 30 WOMEN** are sitting in a semi-circle on the floor, facing Daw Hla Hla Ye. Listening and taking notes.

– Make sure to film and record as much evidence as you can on your mobile phones and keep the material safe until you can get in touch with the police, says Daw Hla Hla Ye, a lawyer from the Legal Clinic Myanmar, an organisation that provides legal assistance.

The women in her audience come from various parts

of the country: from rural villages and large cities. Many of them are politically active at local level, others are housewives who have taken on a kind of leadership role for other women in their home towns. A number of them have already attended some of Daw Hla Hla Ye's courses, but want to find out more about what they can do when women in their local communities are assaulted or abused by their husbands.



The conversation revolves around practical issues: the women discuss specific legal texts and the sections they can use when they contact the police. We are on the outskirts of Yangon, the largest city in Burma, at the office of the Burmese Women's Union. The union organises training courses like this one every other week.

Even though Burma, following half a century of military dictatorship, now has a largely popularly elected government, women are still severely under-represented in all positions of power.

– The number of female members of parliament increased significantly in the most recent elections, but most of them have little political experience and aren't particularly active in women's issues, explains Yin Myo Hlaing, head of the local branch of the BWU.

– We know there are gifted women at all levels in the parties, but they need support. Through workshops like this one, we aim to support both the politicians and the

grass-roots members who, in turn, can assist their elected representatives, she adds.

Mu Sel is assistant coordinator at the BWU; she believes she can see a change in the women she meets through her work.

– The women we work with here are more self-confident; they start to get involved in politics at local level and dare to come forward, she says.

Today's workshop focuses on sexual assault and domestic violence. One of the participants is Wah Wah Wiu. She is currently helping a young village girl who was kidnapped at the end of September by a group of men who held her captive for five days and raped her repeatedly. The girl managed to escape, but has received no help from the police. She is now living in hiding in Yangon.

– Almost all the police are corrupt. We had to battle long and hard to convince them to bring in some of these men for questioning. To start with, they threatened to prosecute the young woman for slander if she continued



The women share stories from their local communities about rape, assault, abuse and other violations.

making these accusations. In these cases, it's essential that we stick together, take the fight and attempt to give the victims and their relatives as much help as we can, says Wah Wah Wuu.

Even in cases where women dare to report an assault – and are actually taken seriously – the outcome is often disappointing. The Burmese legal system is a travesty of justice; the sections of the penal code relating to crimes against women have not been updated in ages.

– A man who abuses his wife risks a fine of 500 Burmese kyat (approximately 0.4 USD) or a maximum of three months in prison. Nor is there any legal statute concerning marital rape. As assault is associated with social stigma and the penalties are utterly ineffectual, many women feel there is no point bringing a case before the courts. That is why it's so important for us to get involved and educate the politicians so that they can change the law, says Mu Sel.

The protracted civil war in Burma between the military forces and a variety of armed ethnic groups has also contributed to making women vulnerable, particularly in ethnic minority areas. Organisations such as the Women's League of Burma – another of the Palme Center's partner organisations – have prepared multiple reports documenting hundreds of cases of rape perpetrated by the Burmese military forces since 2010.

Yin Myo Hlaing herself grew up as a refugee from Karen State in the east of Burma. She relates how, at the age of

## BURMESE WOMEN'S UNION

The Burmese Women's Union (BWU) is a multi-ethnic women's organisation established in 1995 to promote women's rights in Burma and to create working relationships across ethnic boundaries. The project has been run with the support of the Hallsberg branch of the Social Democratic Women in Sweden since 2006, and is now also backed by the Workers' Education Association (ABF) in Örebro. BWU works to train key players in the peace process – especially women – to support active participation by women in the ongoing work for peace. BWU also organises workshops for journalists on issues that concern women.

five, she had to flee with her mother as the bullets flew.

– I was so scared. I'll never forget it. During my childhood, I saw for myself how women bear the brunt of conflict. I heard stories of women being raped by the military forces, and saw how they were left with the responsibility for keeping their families together in the refugee camps. This experience, more than anything else, motivated me to work with women's issues, she says. \*

## BURMA/MYANMAR

Population	53 million
Life expectancy	64.2 years for men and 69.2 years for women (2016)
Global Gender Gap Index	No information
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	85 out of 187
Proportion of women in the lower house of parliament	9.9 percent
Proportion of women in the government	10 percent
Legal abortion	No – only if the woman's life is at risk
Legislation against domestic violence	No
Marital rape illegal	No



Mon Mon Aung.



# MON MON AUNG KEEPS ORDER IN YANGON

TEXT & PHOTO: AXEL KRONHOLM

– **THIS IS WHERE THE DRUG** addicts usually sit, says Mon Mon Aung, shining her pocket torch into the bushes.

The branches cast long shadows across the ground; a few empty beer cans and a cigarette pack or two sparkle in the light.

– They must have heard us coming and run off, she adds.

Every night, Mon Mon Aung patrols the streets of the Nga area of North Okkalapa, a township in the outskirts of Yangon. She is one of the first female district directors in the Yangon district, and one of only a handful in the entire country. Following the most recent elections, only 68 of the 16 785 district directors in Burma are women.

The security in this area of the city calls to mind a kind of neighbourhood watch. Volunteers – usually men

– patrol the area to prevent and deal with street fights and other disturbances. Mon Mon Aung is responsible for organising and managing the work, and she herself performs two safety rounds every night, checking in with all the watchers at their posts, and making sure that everything is calm.

– This used to be a really rough area. Taxi drivers wouldn't pick people up here. We've now been patrolling for two months, and we've drastically cut criminality by confronting the drug dealers and troublemakers, says Mon Mon Aung.

When she stood for election in autumn 2015 as the only woman among five candidates, few people in the district believed in her.

– They attacked me for being divorced. How could I get things done without a husband? Others questioned my



ability to maintain the roads in the area when I don't know how to use the tools. 'You can't even carry a sack of rice,' was one of the comments I heard. My response was to say that instead, I can lead and organise the work so that hundreds of sacks of rice get carried, says Mon Mon Aung.

When the votes were counted, she was declared as the proud winner – with a margin of just nine votes. Mon Mon Aung only became politically active relatively recently. Around four years ago, she began to take an interest in women's issues. She attended a number of courses and seminars organised by the Burmese Women's Union. The more she learned, the more self-confident she became. She joined what was then the opposition party – now the governing party – the National League for Democracy, and climbed through the ranks to become the party's deputy-president for her district.

In addition to the nightly patrols, Mon Mon Aung has opened the doors to her office to local residents. They can come in at any time if they have a problem. A couple of times a week, women who have been abused by their husbands, step through the door. This is not common practice. In other district offices, there are signs on the wall stating "don't come here with your marital problems" explains Mon Mon Aung.

When women come in with stories of violence and assault, the staff listen, write a report and attempt to make contact with the people involved and invite them in for counselling.

– If it's not very serious, we attempt to deal with it here, but in other cases we have to involve the police, says Mon Mon Aung.

In many cases, women do not have divorce as an option, and they are reluctant to go to the police because they are dependent on their husbands.

– In such cases, we could only save the evidence in the event something worse might happen to the woman – if he kills her or something, relates Mon Mon Aung.

At the beginning of her tenure, she received a lot of letters from local residents – both men and women – questioning her ability to handle the job. Over time, however, the criticism has subsided and Mon Mon Aung says she feels that she has succeeded in convincing those who did not vote for her.

– I hope that in my role as a leader I can encourage other women to get involved in the local community and to step up. They often think that all they can do is run their households, but we're capable of doing so much more! \*



Tea and batons.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- Marital rape is not a crime in Burma. What legislation exists in your country to protect women against domestic violence? How could these laws be improved?
- In Burma, corruption is widespread; one of the groups worst affected are women who are victims of domestic violence. What is the relationship between corruption and the oppression of women in your country? In what other ways can corruption result in a less equal society?
- The civil war in Burma has also contributed to making women vulnerable, particularly in areas where ethnic minorities live. What is the link between conflict and oppression of/discrimination against women in your country? In what ways is it possible to make women less vulnerable in conflict situations?
- Women in Burma often choose not to report violence or sexual abuse because it is associated with social stigma, and they do not want to be ostracised and/or because the punishment is so mild that there is no point reporting these crimes. Discuss the conditions for reporting crimes of violence and sexual abuse in your country.



Conversation groups for vulnerable women make up a major part of Ilitha Labantu's work.

# ENDING TOLERANCE FOR VIOLENCE

The Ilitha Labantu organisation is working to reduce the widespread violence against women in some of the most impoverished areas of South Africa.

TEXT & PHOTO: ANDREAS KARLSSON

**STATISTICALLY, SOUTH AFRICA** is one of the most violent countries in the world. And even though the majority of violent crimes are committed in a relatively small number of police districts, the fact remains: many South Africans run the risk of falling victim to violence. The risk is particularly high for women.

– Unfortunately, the official statistics don't tell the whole story. For example, they don't include incidents of

domestic violence – the type of crime that affects women the most – which makes it difficult even to gain support for appropriate measures, says Ella Mangisa, director of Ilitha Labantu.

The organisation's offices are located in the poor suburb of Gugulethu, just outside Cape Town and only a stone's throw from the Nyanga area, which records the highest number of murders in the entire country. The day after

## ILITHA LABANTU

Ilitha Labantu is a non-profit organisation founded in 1989. They offer education and social service with the emphasis on combating violence against women and children. The organisation is also a trusted advisor to public authorities and societal actors on issues that relates to violence against women.

The target group for the project, which is funded by the Palme Center, are women, elderly people and children in the shanty towns who are subjected to gender-related violence. Through counselling and psychological support, the project aims to help women to break their co-dependency by leaving their aggressors, building up a strong sense of self-worth, and becoming financially independent.



Gladys Fuzane.

our meeting, Mangisa and her colleagues are to launch a two-week campaign to combat violence against women in Nyanga itself.

– We have plenty of experience and a good overview of the situation based on our own work with vulnerable women. Unfortunately, the outlook is rather bleak: around 200 women come to us every month, and around 50 of them are first-timers, she explains.



Ella Mangisa,  
director of Ilitha  
Labantu.

Mangisa confirms that in the poorest South African suburbs, many of which were originally created by the Apartheid regime as a kind of urban reserve for the non-white population, violence is a part of everyday life. People have become desensitized, see violence as a natural aspect of society, and learn to live with it.

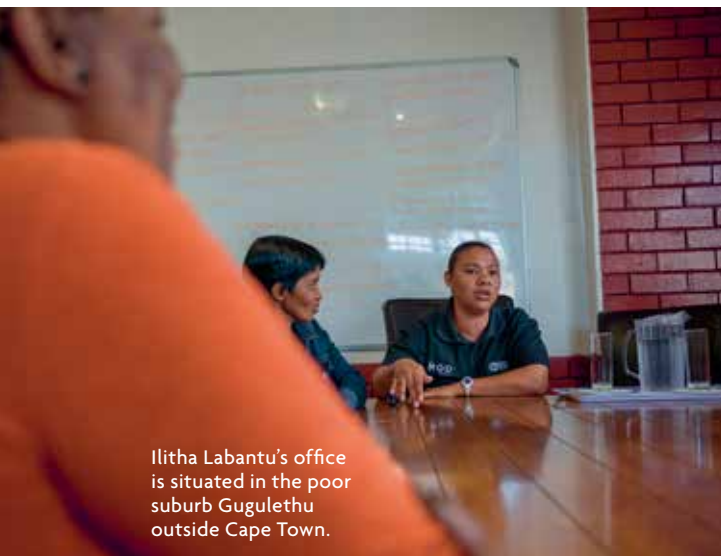
– It's terrifying. And it's disgusting that so many people, more than two decades after the fall of Apartheid, still live such risky and violent everyday lives, she says.

Mangisa explains that the reason why the violence primarily affects women is because of the patriarchal structures of society, a fact which, combined with high unemployment, poverty and a widespread culture of violence, makes for a potential lethal combination.

– A part of the problem is the deep-rooted tradition of placing the man as head of the family, with the responsibility of providing for his wife and children. If he cannot do so – which is the case for many men in vulnerable areas – he feels that his position is under threat. It's not unusual for this frustration to cause him to turn to violence.

In one of the rooms at Ilitha Labantu seven women are sitting with one of Mangisa's colleagues, recounting their experiences. This is part of the group and conversation therapy offered by the organisation. They confirm that support from others in the same situation has played a vital role.





Ilitha Labantu's office is situated in the poor suburb Gugulethu outside Cape Town.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- The widespread violence in South Africa primarily affects women on account of the patriarchal structures that govern society. But what, exactly, is a »patriarchal structure«? How does it affect the situation for women in your country?
- The article presents examples of how traditional gender roles can exacerbate inequality and contribute to domestic violence. Can you think of any other examples of this in your country?

– Before I made contact with Ilitha Labantu I felt alone and worthless. I've spent years battling for justice for my daughter, who was abused on multiple occasions by various men – until she finally died of her mistreatment, says Gladys Fuzane, adding that she wishes all women affected had access to the same support.

Ilitha Labantu also works with information campaigns and education. Ella Mangisa explains that, for example,

they are helping to educate the police, to equip them to approach survivors of gender based violence with dignity and respect.

– Our biggest challenge is to end the tolerance for violence. Organisations like ours cannot do it alone. We need the support of local and national politicians, and above all, we have to have the backing of South African men. And this is a huge challenge.\*

SOUTH AFRICA	
Population	53 million
Life expectancy	61.6 years for men and 64.6 years for women
Global Gender Gap Index	15 out of 144
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	83 out of 187
Proportion of women in the lower house of parliament	42 percent
Proportion of women in the government	43 percent
Legal abortion	Yes
Legislation against domestic violence	Yes
Marital rape illegal	Yes





The project aims to offer psychological support and legal advice and encourage that violation of women's and children's rights are being reported.

# — HERE, I FEEL THAT I EXIST

At the age of five, Fiona barely escaped being raped by one of her relatives. From that day forward, she says, her life has been one long struggle. When she told her parents what had happened, they sided with the perpetrator and placed all the blame on Fiona.

TEXT & PHOTO: ANDREAS KARLSSON

AS **ONE OF SIX BROTHERS** and sisters, she was the one who was always given the least attention while growing up, and she was subjected to both physical and psychological assault.

– I grew up with the feeling of being unwanted. And then I met a boy and saw my chance to create a life for myself. My parents were opposed to the relationship, but at that time I hated them so much that I married him anyway. It was the stupidest thing I've ever done.

She says that the marriage was fine for a few years, and that they had a daughter together. And then one day she caught him cheating on her; she confronted him and he hit her.

– It was the natural way for him to deal with a woman who was being "difficult". I managed to push through an extremely messy divorce, and he was allowed custody of our daughter every second weekend.

Despite the parents' strained relations, the daughter – like most children – always looked forward to spending time with her father. Until one day, when she suddenly didn't want to go there any more.

– She didn't want to tell me why, and it took months and months before I finally realised that he'd been abusing her sexually. Immediately afterwards, one of my parents' acquaintances tried to do the same thing one afternoon when she was home alone. Fortunately, some of the boys from the neighbourhood saw what was happening and stopped him.

Fiona explain that she has spent years trying to get professional help both for herself and for her daughter, but that no-one was prepared to recognise their problem. She has been bounced around the system, and says that it was not until she made contact with Ilitha Labantu that she could start dealing with her situation.

– From the first time I met the group, I encountered nothing but warmth and respect. Here, I feel that I exist.

That my problems and my daughter's problems are real. Here, we've both begun to process what's happened to us. It's not all good, but we are both much more confident now, we can actually face our everyday lives and we're learning not to care what other people think and say. I have Ilitha Labantu to thank for this, she concludes.\*



Fiona Adriaanse.



Town meeting in Drimiopsis, organised by WLC. The focus is on women's rights and traditional San culture.

# OPTIMISM DESPITE GREAT CHALLENGES

The Women's Leadership Centre (WLC) in Namibia is working to help and support the most vulnerable members of society: girls and women from the San minority.

TEXT & PHOTO: ANDREAS KARLSSON

**THE CULTURE OF THE SAN** people could be traced back over centuries. They began to inhabit southern Africa around 150 000 years ago.

Traditional San culture has a high degree of equality between women and men but these traditions have been eroded over the centuries as a consequence of colonialism and other degenerative factors. Elizabeth IKhaxas is the founder and director of WLC in Namibia. She says that there can be no doubt that the San people are at the very

bottom of the social hierarchy, and that San women are particularly vulnerable.

– The San people have been marginalised for centuries. This has resulted in widespread unemployment and poverty. Moreover, it has shattered traditional San culture and created internal frictions. In many cases, it is the women who – as the last resort – succeed in providing for their families through small-scale farming. This leads to frustration among the men which, combined with ram- »





Young San girls are particularly vulnerable, and the WLC girls' groups have attempted to remedy the situation.

pant substance abuse, leads them to assault women – both within and outside their families, says Elizabeth IKhaxas.

We meet in the small town of Drimiopsis, around 250 kilometers east of Windhoek, the capital city, on the border of the Kalahari Desert. During the morning, the WLC has organised a meeting to discuss gender equality under

## THE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP CENTER

The Women's Leadership Centre (WLC) organisation was founded in 2004 with the aim of developing female leadership and of supporting women from a variety of ethnic groups in Namibia. The main target group are young San women. The project, which is supported by the Palme Center, aims to help achieve a more equal society through teaching, establishing capacity and forming opinions.

the branches of the huge tree in the centre of town. The minister of the local congregation, Michael Kandovazu, explains that substance abuse, violence and sexual exploitation are major problems for the 2 000 or so residents of the town.

– Violence has become normalised. I, personally, have struck women in several of my previous relationships. However, I now realise how wrong and despicable this is, and I am trying my best to work for a society in which women's rights are respected, he says.

Adeline Karabo Madi agrees. She is a former teacher and now runs the local women's organisation in Drimiopsis, which is linked to the WLC programme.

– Another major problem is that parents don't understand how important schooling is for their children, simply because they never went to school themselves. And if children are kept at home and forced to spend their days in a dysfunctional environment, the situation is likely to be worst of all for girls because they're at greater risk of being subjected to sexual assault, she says.

A key part of the work WLC is doing to promote



## NAMIBIA

Population	2.3 million
Life expectancy	62.1 years for men and 65.1 years for women
Global Gender Gap Index	14 out of 144
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	81 out of 187
Proportion of women in the lower house of parliament	41.3 percent
Proportion of women in the government	25 percent
Legal abortion	No, only in exceptional cases to preserve the woman's health
Legislation against domestic violence	Yes
Marital rape illegal	Yes

women's rights involves teaching history in an attempt to revive the traditional values of respect and equality of the San culture. Another aspect has to do with providing information about the laws and international conventions which emphasise that all people are created equal.

On paper, Namibia has relatively progressive laws prohibiting discrimination against both women and marginalised ethnic groups – including the San people. Elizabeth IKhaxas explains that the problem is that they are not enforced consistently, and the reason for this is both simple and disheartening: the politicians are part of the same patriarchal structure that is the very source of the problem.

Despite the challenges, however, Elizabeth IKhaxas is optimistic about the future, and says that visits like

the one to Drimiopsis serve to strengthen her conviction that it is possible to make a difference. The girls' group established in the town around a year ago has already made great progress, and she smiles broadly as the girls take turns in picking up the microphone to read – in their native language and in English – the rights they have as San girls in modern day Namibia.

– It makes me so happy. I was involved in starting this programme, but the further I can stay in the background, the better. In fact, it wasn't until today when I could actually listen to the girls that I realised what we have achieved with and for them. They are sure to grow up with a completely different set of conditions to those of their parents, she concludes.\*



Adelinde Karabo Madi, leader of the local women's organisation in Drimiopsis.



Michael Kandovazu, church minister in Drimiopsis.



Elizabeth IKhaxas, founder and Director of WLC in Namibia.



## – WE WOMEN ARE STRONG IF WE STAND TOGETHER

**MARIA GARISES EXPLAINS** that she was previously a typical San woman: shy and subservient to men in her surroundings. She was beaten and raped while growing up, and has been forced into destructive relationships.

– As San girls, we learn to be silent and to do what we're told. The fact that we are San is bad enough in the eyes of society. And the fact that we're women in a male-dominated society makes it even worse, she says.

Maria relates that she got pregnant at a young age, without being married, and that the teachers at her school both bullied and hit her.

– A lot of people despise all aspects of our culture

and our lifestyle; they think we're primitive. And as we cannot receive a reasonable education in our own language, many of us – including me – simply drop out of school. Their vulnerability combined with pervasive poverty and lack of education reproduces new problems such as drug and alcohol abuse – as well as gender based violence.

At the same time, the story of her upbringing stands in stark contrast to the woman she has become today. During a manifestation in the town of Drimiopsis, it is Maria, dressed in traditional San costume, who grips the microphone and proudly proclaims the rights of women

and girls to around a hundred local residents, including a large group of young girls.

– It was the Women’s Leadership Centre that opened my eyes to the fact that violence and exploitation are not normal, that we women have rights, and that we can be strong as long as we stand together for our rights.

She adds:

– What is finally starting to happen is absolutely crucial: namely that even the men are beginning to listen. They can see that we stand united and they are beginning to respect us. They are realising that we no longer accept being exploited. Thus far, we have not managed to reach everyone – far from it – but we are making progress in the right direction, and things are moving faster than I’d dared to hope. \*

## DISCUSSION POINTS

Maria is discriminated against for two reasons: she belongs to a marginalised ethnic group and she is a woman. The feminist concept of »intersectionality« is an analytical tool for studying the interaction between different power structures in society. The text above illustrates this. Discuss conditions in the society you live in from the perspective of intersectionality.



Young San girls are particularly vulnerable, and the WLC girls' groups have attempted to remedy the situation. Here, young girls are reading their rights aloud.

# DEBATE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE MAKING A CHANGE

Hanin Othnani, Dalia Alahmad and Dujana Abu Alrab agree. The »Palestinian Debate Program« has helped them understand that women and men can act together to change society. All three are in their twenties and are either at university or have just completed their studies.

TEXT: AGNETA CARLESON PHOTO: SONDOS AL-FAQIH & MAJDI FATH

– I’VE ALWAYS BEEN TOLD that women should take care of the home and obey their husbands. We’re not to think for ourselves or have our own opinions, explains Hanin Othnani, who lives in Gaza and is studying journalism at the Islamic University.

– But I have now realised that men and women can live on equal terms and respect one another – even when we think differently. And that together, we can change our society.

The project is being run with the support of the Palme Center at 12 Palestinian universities in Gaza and on the West Bank. Students can apply to take a debate course, and six participants – three women and three men – are selected from each university. Following the course, the students take part in a national debate competition with quarter finals, semi-finals and a grand final round. The winner is the person who makes the best use of relevant

facts and convincing arguments to make his/her case – while simultaneously respecting the opinions of his/her opponent. The debates are open and usually take place in front of an enthusiastic and involved audience.

– Previously I’ve never learned how to have discussions in this way, neither at school nor at the university. The only thing I’d been told was to learn from my elders, says Dujana Abu Alrab, who has finished studying journalism and now runs her own morning show on Palestinian TV.

»Previously I’ve never learned how to have discussions in this way, neither at school nor at university. The only thing I’d been told was to learn from my elders.«

– When different groups meet, it often deteriorates into rows and conflicts. If we can create a debate culture based on respect for different viewpoints, we have the chance to develop our society!

The jury in the competition comprises journalists, researchers and students who have previously taken part in the project. They are also actively involved in teaching the new debaters.

The Palme Center’s partner in this initiative is the Palestinian organisation Filastinyat, which is devoted to encouraging women and young people to play a more active role in society. The founder and director is Wafa Abdel Rahman, journalist and media analyst.

– We want to encourage the younger generation to take a critical approach, to respect others’ opinions and to argue objectively on the basis of facts.

## PALESTINA

The West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip were occupied by Israel after the Six-Day War in 1967. In the 1990s the Palestinians got limited autonomy in the West Bank. Israel left Gaza in 2005 but retained control of the access roads. The Palestinian leadership in 2007 split between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank. The peace process is on a standstill and Israel continues to build settlements on occupied land. The Israeli occupation is illegal under the UN and international law.



## FILASTINIYAT

Filastiniyat is a non-governmental organisation founded by young women. The objective is to give women and young people a louder voice in the public debate. Since 2006, Filastiniyat has, for example, helped establish a journalist club for women, a training programme for young people, and has worked to shape opinion.

The project is funded by the Palme Center and the Swedish Union for Professionals (SSR). Through courses and by organising public debates and social media campaigns, the project aims to raise the profile of women and young people in the public debate and in the media.

– It is particularly important to support young women so that they have the confidence to form their own opinions and participate in the social debate, she says.

The debate competition has attracted a great deal of attention in Palestine. Today, numerous organisations are contacting Filastiniyat to learn about this method of debating.

The project was initially intended to create youth groups with the capacity to influence local policy.

– After a few years, however, we realised that the young people's blinkered view of the world is the main problem. They don't dare oppose the traditional view, and simply swallow pretty much everything their older male relatives and religious leaders tell them. So we changed direction to teach the young people how to have an objective debate.

The debate topics are chosen with care. The organisers attempt to zoom in on issues that are normally taboo, such as sexuality and religion. The lack of female representation in media, social media and societal change are some of the topics up for debate this year, as well as Palestine and global politics. During practice sessions behind closed doors, participants can also discuss more daring issues such as same-sex marriage and "honour based violence".

Thus far it has proven to be remarkably simple to introduce the more objective form of debate. Society in general largely respects the young people's new way of expressing their own opinions and arguments. Tareq Albzour comes >>



Dalia Alahmad.



Wafa Rahman.



Dujana Abu Alrab.

PALESTINE	
Population	4.68 million (2015)
Life expectancy	70.7 years for men and 74.7 years for women (2010–2015) <sup>1</sup>
Global Gender Gap Index	No information
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	0.860 (2015)
Proportion of women in parliament	12.9 percent (2006)
Proportion of women in the government	17 percent (2014)
Legal abortion	No
Legislation against domestic violence	No
Marital rape illegal	No

<sup>1</sup> UN Data Country Profile

from a deeply religious family, and always used to caution his friends to “listen and learn from the elders”.

– Now even my father is proud that I’m thinking for myself. I think our society is ready for this change. We need to move forward, and free debate is an important tool in this regard.\*

## DEBATING TIPS:

- Be clear about your main argument – choose one or a few messages that are clear. Avoid ambiguous terms or complicated concepts. Repeat your main argument.
- Refer to facts that are provably correct – have sources for all the facts you use.
- Read up before the debate – be fully familiar with the topic. Practice listening to your opponent’s opinions and even trying to argue in favour of them – this will help you prepare for the kind of arguments you are likely to encounter.
- Attack the argument, not the person – there is no place for insulting statements in a constructive debate. Avoid emotional argument.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

The text above outlines a number of creative and practical approaches to increasing equality. Being able to debate on the basis of your opinions is a fundamental aspect in standing up for your rights. Are both women and men represented in the media debate in your country?

Tareq Albzour, Dujana Abu Alrab and Dalia Alahmad plans how to put up the next debate.





Discussion between SSU and the sister organisation Demokratska omladina during a study visit in Stockholm.

# MEETINGS BETWEEN YOUNG WOMEN FROM SERBIA AND SWEDEN

– To improve one's life, you have to leave your home in your village and move to Belgrade – that's where you'll find work, education, and like-minded people. But to continue to develop, you have to leave Belgrade as well. At least periodically, says one of the Serbian girls and gives a lopsided smile.

TEXT: JOHANNA WESTER, OLOF PALME INTERNATIONAL CENTER'S EXPERT GROUP  
PHOTO: SOFIA FANBERG

**LIKE THE OTHERS AROUND** the table, she is a member of the youth association Demokratska omladina (Democratic Youth). Her group is visiting Stockholm as part of a project that is being run by their association and the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League (SSU), their

sister organisation. The project can trace its roots back to a European conference for young socialists back in 2007. The intention is to highlight gender equality issues in Serbia and Sweden, and to empower women who are politically active in the two countries. »

## DEMOKRATSKA OMLADINA

The project is a partnership between SSU in Stockholm County, and Demokratska omladina (Democratic Youth – the youth organisation of the Democratic Party) in Serbia. The intention is to support politically active young women in politics.

As a result of the project, a network for women has been established within the organisation, and women have reinforced their role in the youth movement. The project provides a platform for the exchange of experience between SSU and Demokratska omladina by organising events such as conferences and study visits.

– A lot of young Serbs have never been outside their own country, says one of the Serbian women who is attending today's meeting to talk about women's rights.

During this year, psychological ill health is one of six topics the group has tackled within the project, along with topics on segregation, women's safety, LGBTQ, education and working life.

It feels valuable to spend a morning exchanging knowledge and opinions. I take time to reflect on what the Serbian women have said about their home country. The legal system, which is not effective enough to protect women living in troubled and threatening conditions, the problem of sexual assault on young girls, and the lack of sanctuaries and shelters for victims of violence. Then I think about what we have told our guests about Sweden – exactly the same things.

A month later, the Swedish and Serbian delegations meet again, but this time in Belgrade. There are more of us than the last time, around 15 women in all. It's the week before Christmas, and the capital is "painted" in various shades of grey from the clouds, exhaust fumes, mist and building façades. It is utterly beautiful and freezing cold. This time, I am facilitating a workshop on mental health, with the topics for discussion being about women's rights to care, information and protection. Once again, the topics are just as relevant in both countries.

During the discussion, I'm told that 35 Serbian women were killed in their own homes in the past year alone. Every year, the Autonomous Women's Center receives

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- According to Autonomous Women's Center almost 40 percent of Serbs know a woman who has been dismissed from her job for getting pregnant. Is there legislation in your country that protects pregnant women in working life?
- Do you know anyone who has been dismissed from her job for falling pregnant?
- Discuss the most critical political reforms for increased gender equality in your country.

more than 10 000 calls to its hotline from women who are survivors of gender based violence. Almost 40 percent of Serbs know a woman who has been dismissed from her job for getting pregnant.

Tamara Tripic, Deputy President of the Demokratska Stranka (the Serbian Democratic Party), tells us that just nine percent of the people in the country who have some form of disability are employed, and that more than 60 percent of the Roma population is unemployed. In the LGBTQ community, 70 percent have suffered verbal harassment and same-sex couples are not legally entitled to marry.

Like most countries, Serbian society is heavily patriarchal, which has an effect in all areas: the public sector, the business community and private homes.

– Within the party, we have to dare to state plainly that we are feminists. Gender equality is the goal, feminism is the tool, explains one of the Serbian women.

Another woman tells me that through the project she has become less shy.

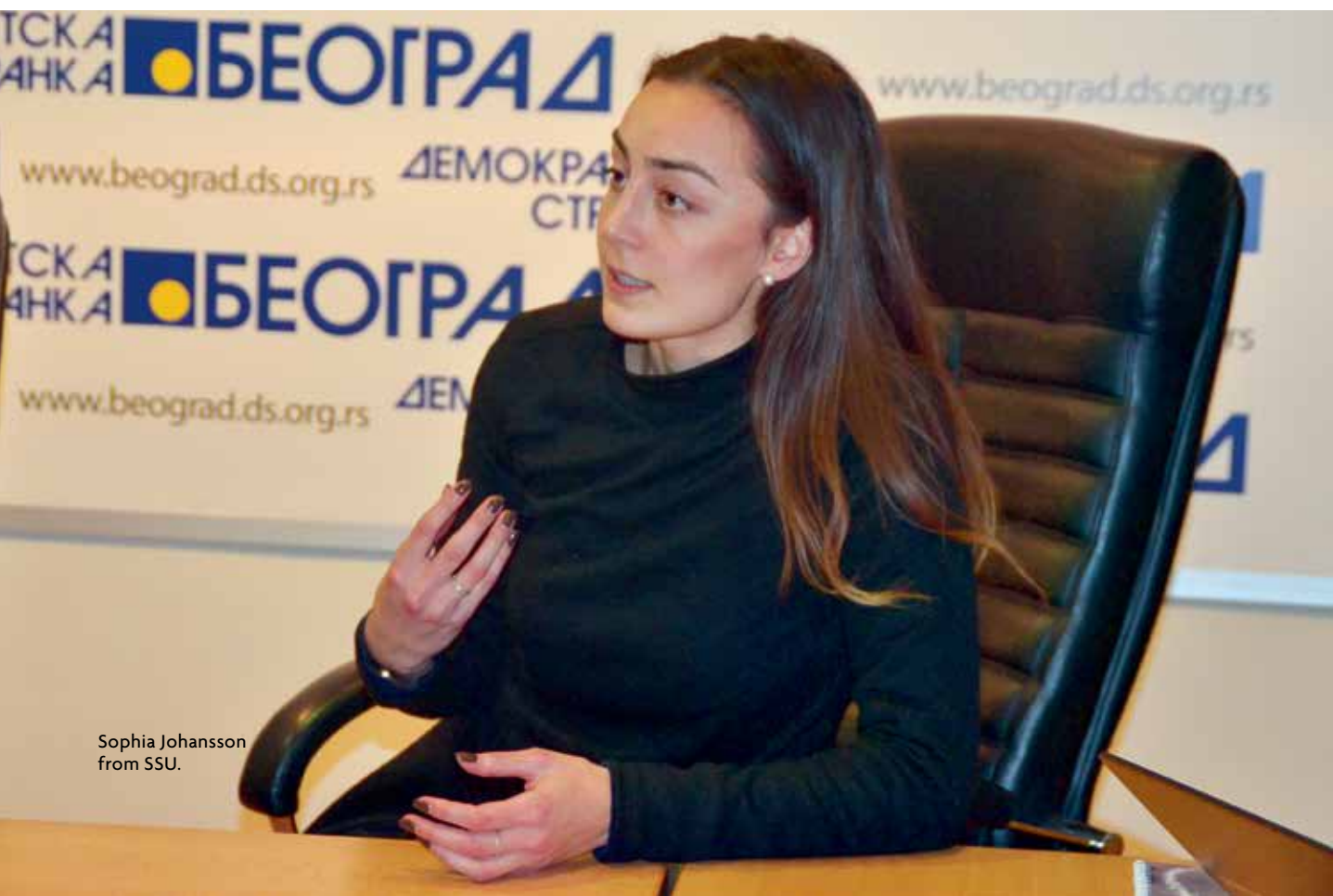
– Now I know more about rights and I am confident to talk in front of other people. The two aspects are inter-related. Previously, I didn't know much about violence against women, for example. But after this year, with all the conversations I've had, I've started to talk more about these issues and I'm eager to learn more.

The Swedish participants also feel they have learnt more and developed through participating in the project.

– I'm grateful for all the people I've met during the project, and for the opportunity to be a part of these young women's lives. The project has given me a great deal, first and foremost awareness of true sisterhood, says Tania Braimok, Project Manager from SSU. \*



SERBIA	
Population	7 million
Life expectancy	72.6 years for men and 78.5 years for women
Global Gender Gap Index	48 out of 144
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	38 out of 187
Proportion of women in the lower house of parliament	34 percent
Proportion of women in the government	26 percent
Legal abortion	Yes, but consent required from the woman's parents if she is underage
Legislation against domestic violence	No
Marital rape illegal	Yes



Sophia Johansson  
from SSU.

# GLOSSARY

- **Gender equality** is when women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities in all sectors of society, including economic participation and political decision-making.
- **Equality** is when all individuals have the same opportunities, rights and obligations in every area of life, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, social affiliation, sexual orientation, etcetera.
- **Feminism** is a tool intended to bring equality to society. In other words, it is an action – political and/or in everyday life – with the aim of achieving an equal society.
- **Patriarchy** refers to a societal system where the political and financial power, both in the home and in the public arena, is held by older men, and where neither women nor young men are permitted to participate in the formal decision-making process.
- **Intersectionality** comes from the word ‘intersection’, which can refer to a road junction or a meeting point. It is used to designate how different grounds for discrimination tend to merge to form something new rather than remain in separate veins.
- The **Global Gender Gap Index** is prepared annually by the World Economic Forum. It ranks 144 countries on the basis of their capacity to reduce inequality between women and men. The areas studied are women’s and men’s access to health and care services, their access to education, political participation and financial equality.
- The **Gender Inequality Index (GII)** is a measurement method that focuses on inequalities between women and men in areas such as health, empowerment and labour force participation. The index is prepared by the UN. Studying areas including reproductive health (such as maternal mortality and contraception), empowerment (women’s participation in politics), and labour force participation, makes it possible to highlight differences between men’s and women’s conditions in a given country.
- The **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** is one of the UN conventions on human rights. It was adopted by the general assembly of the UN in 1979, and more than 90 percent of UN member states have undertaken to abide by it.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes it clear that all people are born free, equal and are entitled to the same rights – irrespective of gender.

SWEDEN	
Population	10 million
Life expectancy	80.2 for men and 84.1 for women
Global Gender Gap Index	4 out of 144
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	6 out of 187
Proportion of women in the lower house of parliament	43.6 percent (2014)
Proportion of women in the government	50 percent (2014)
Legal abortion	Yes
Legislation against domestic violence	Yes
Marital rape illegal	Yes

# FIND OUT MORE

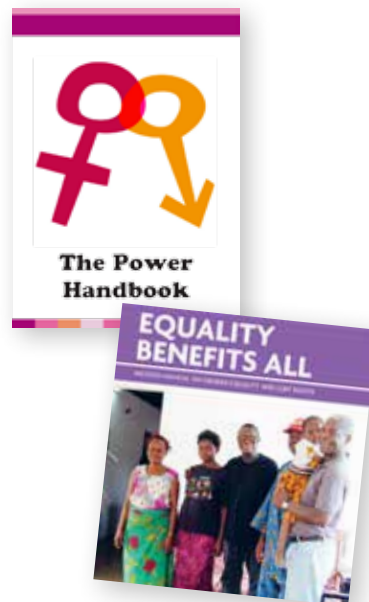
At the Palme Center's website – [www.palmecenter.se/en](http://www.palmecenter.se/en) – you can find more descriptions and articles about our work in the field of gender equality. The website also contains the method manual on gender equality and LGBT rights entitled *Gender Equality Benefits All* and the *Power Manual* prepared by the Social Democratic Women in Sweden organisation.

Gender Inequality Index [www.hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii](http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii) compiles facts and statistics that highlight inequalities between women and men in areas such as health, empowerment and labour force participation.

Visit [www.globalgoals.org](http://www.globalgoals.org) to find out more about the global sustainability goals in Agenda 2030, including goal number 5 about gender equality, and the empowerment of all women and girls.

Read the CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women at [www.sverigeskvinnolobby.se/en/](http://www.sverigeskvinnolobby.se/en/)

For statistics on female participation visiting Inter Parliamentary Union's website [www.ipu.org/WMN-e/classif.htm](http://www.ipu.org/WMN-e/classif.htm)







The Olof Palme International Center is the Swedish labour movement's organisation for international solidarity work. The Swedish labour movement was formed by people who lived under oppression and who realized that they were stronger together. Now there is a similar trend in many other countries – and we can help each other to fight for a better world.

**The Palme Center's 27 member organizations:** Association of the Labour Movement's Colleges, Graphics, Forestry and Woodworkers Union (GS-facket), Industrial and Metal Workers Union (IF Metall), National Federation of Social Democratic Women in Sweden (S-kvinnor), Religious Social Democrats of Sweden (Tro och Solidaritet), Social Democratic Students of Sweden (S-studenter), Swedish Social Democratic Youth League (SSU), Swedish Building Maintenance Workers Union (Fastighetsanställdas förbund), Swedish Building Workers' Union (Byggnads), Swedish Electricians Union (Elektrikerna), Swedish Food Workers Union (Livsmedelsarbetarförbundet), Swedish Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union (HRF), Swedish Municipal Workers' Union (Kommunal), Swedish Musicians Union (Musikerförbundet), Swedish Painters Union (Målareförbundet), Swedish Paper Workers Union (Pappers), Swedish Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna), Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), Swedish Transport Workers Union (Svenska Transportarbetareförbundet), Swedish Union of Tenants (Hyresgästföreningen), Swedish Young Falcons (Unga Örnar), The National Federation of People's Parks and Community Centres (Folkets Hus och Parker), The Swedish federation for LGBT Social Democrats (HBT-socialdemokraterna Sverige), The Union of Service and Communications Employees (SEKO), Union of Commercial Employees (Handelsanställdas förbund), Workers' Educational Association (ABF), Workers' Temperance Society (Verdandi)

Go to [www.palmecenter.se](http://www.palmecenter.se) to find out how you can contribute to the struggle for a better world.