

Imaging Mercy Today

Are women human? A Mercy response

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! This month has begun with two Sisters of Mercy at the United Nations leading a panel discussion on violence against women, especially the use of rape as a weapon of war. Deirdre Mullan rsm, who heads Mercy Global Concern, and Carol Rittner rsm, professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at a New Jersey tertiary college were joined on the panel by two women scholars who have researched gender-based violence in Guatemala and the Congo. The panel, which coincides with a session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, was followed by the release of a new book, *Are Women Human? Violence Against Women and Girls*, launched by Mercy Global Concern and co-authored by the two Sisters of Mercy named above.

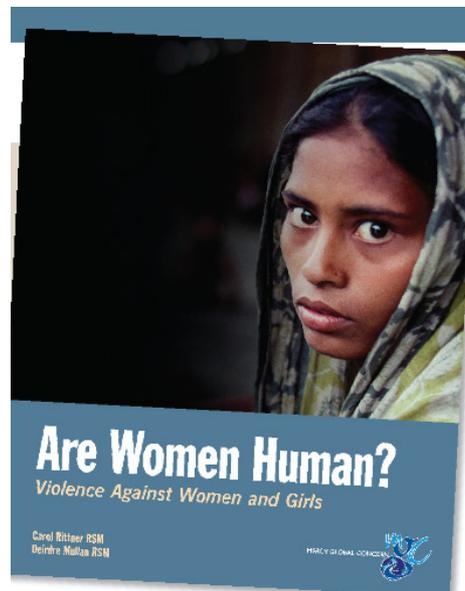
The UN is keen to see rape recognised as a crime against humanity that will be excluded from amnesty provisions as local conflicts are resolved. In places like the Congo – arguably the epicentre of sexual violence against women today – health officials estimate that 40 women are raped every day in one province. UN special representative on sexual violence in conflict, Margot Wallstrom stresses that the scourge is not just African but global. “I have recently been to Sarajevo where 15 years ago between 15,000 and 16,000 women were held in rape camps. Rape is the weapon of choice because it is cheap, silent and very effective.”

She tells the story of a woman she met in Sarajevo who had been held in one of these rape camps. ‘They took my life without killing me,’ she said. ‘Sometimes I wish they had shot me instead.’ “It is a kind of invisible war damage, the way she has been wounded,” says Ms Wallstrom. “Others with visible wounds will be honoured as war veterans, but there is no justice for this woman. She meets her rapist in the bank, and he smiles at her.”

All of this may seem a far cry from our own peaceful shores, until we recall that 2011 began with news of a woman burned to death on a road near Huntly; pathology reports indicate that she was alive when set alight, and that

the cause of her death was the fire. There have since been a string of violent attacks against women, including one stabbed to death in a domestic incident in an east Auckland suburb, and a 59-year-old mother killed in Tauranga while trying to protect her daughter, aged 27, from an attack that left two others seriously injured.

Bryan Gould, former vice-chancellor of Waikato University wrote in the NZ Herald last month that discrimination against women, even in New Zealand, is a daily reality. He answered his 13-year-old granddaughter recently by saying that discrimination of this kind was the most damaging and pervasive of all. “What distinguishes discrimination against women from all other forms of such reprehensible behavior is that it is an integral, deliberate and entrenched element in cultures and religions around the world, and from time



MERCY TODAY: This is the latest publication from Mercy Global Concern at the UN headquarters in New York. The book was launched this month at a seminar on violence against women and girls, in which Sisters of Mercy Carol Rittner and Deirdre Mullan were panelists. Copies are expected to be available here later this month.

FOR AN END TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

E te Atua Whaea: God our mother, you call us out of silence to name the violence hidden amongst us.

We pray for all women who, despite the violence they suffer, continue to care for whanau and children, to grow and prepare food, carry water, earn a living and offer support to others.

We pray for women who are trafficked as sex workers, who are raped and do not know how to name their pain or to see a way into the future.

We pray for change in the violent way many men act towards women and think of them.

Together may we overcome violence in all its forms, and celebrate our diversity and interdependence.

We look forward to the age of peace, when both women and men can love and be loved, and when the work and wealth of our world is shared justly. Mauri ora. Amen.

immemorial.

“Men in all societies and cultures have used their physical strength and their freedom from the burdens of child-bearing and child-rearing to ensure that women are subjugated and enslaved.” Bryan Gould argued that from Eve in Eden until now, men have had to counter their fear of women’s sexuality by destroying and demeaning it, and by identifying it as the origin of sin and of many of society’s ills. “The rules that male-dominated societies have put in place.... are in the end no more than an attempt to limit the power that women should legitimately claim and exercise to everyone’s advantage.”

Today the UN is doing its bit to redress the balance, by insisting that women everywhere have access to the same educational and vocational opportunities as males, especially in the fields of science and technology. And Mercy has learnt from Catherine McAuley that the general advancement of women holds the key to a society transformed in the image of God’s own plan. - Dennis Horton