

## **Roks Report to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, Reem Alsalem**

The National Organization for Women's Shelters and Young Women Shelters in Sweden is Sweden's oldest national organization exclusively bringing together women's shelters and young women shelters. For nearly 50 years, the organization has worked against men's and boys' violence towards women, girls, and children. Our knowledge is based on long-standing practical experience in supporting women, girls and children subjected to violence, as well as on analysis of the structures that enable and sustain such violence.

### **The Fragmentation of Violence and the Shift to Gender-Neutral Policies**

Sweden's policies to prevent and combat violence against women have undergone a significant shift. Previously, these policies were based on a "women's peace" approach, which took its starting point in the gender power structure, where men as a group hold more power than women as a group—both in shaping their own lives and in influencing societal development. Violence against women and girls was seen as the ultimate consequence of this structural power imbalance. In recent years, this analysis has gradually been replaced by a more gender-neutral understanding of violence, where gender, power, and violence play an increasingly marginal role.

This development has, among other things, resulted in a fragmentation of violence, where it is described using gender-neutral concepts. The government's gender equality policy targets have shifted from a clear goal that men's violence against women should end to dividing violence into separate categories, such as men's violence against women, intimate partner violence, prostitution, and human trafficking. Furthermore, so-called "honor-related violence" has been completely separated into its own gender equality policy target.

Honor-related violence is increasingly treated as distinct from men's violence against women, despite the fact that it fundamentally stems from control, gender norms, and men's power over women's and girls' lives and sexuality. This separation obscures common causes and patterns, hampers effective interventions, and ultimately weakens protection and support for women and girls who are subjected to violence.

In summary, we argue that the shift from a structural, gender-power-based analysis to a gender-neutral and fragmented understanding of violence has significant negative consequences. It undermines the state's ability to fully comply with its international obligations, including under CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention, and

risks weakening efforts to prevent and combat men's violence against women in all its forms.

## **Men's violence Against Mothers**

The combined experiences of women's shelters and young women shelters show that men's violence against women often intensifies during pregnancy and motherhood. The violence is not directed solely at the woman, but is used deliberately to harm, control, and threaten both her and the unborn or already-born child. Pregnancy is therefore not a protection against violence; in many cases, the violence becomes more severe.

Women's shelters and young women shelters report that men and boys physically assault pregnant women, including hitting and kicking the abdomen. Psychological and material abuse is also common, for example when the man hides or withholds the woman's medication, food, or other necessities, intending to harm her by endangering the child's health in the womb. The unborn child is used as a tool for control, threats, and punishment.

After the child is born, the violence often continues, with men systematically using the children to exert power over the mother. This can include threats to harm the children, threats to take them away, or exposing them to violence if she attempts to leave or does not comply with the man's demands. The children thus become instruments in the man's ongoing abuse of the mother.

Women's shelters also report the most extreme cases, where men have killed their shared children in order to inflict lifelong harm on the mother. These acts are not isolated tragedies, but must be understood as part of men's violence against women, where filicide represents the ultimate expression of control, revenge, and power directed at the mother.

Overall, these experiences show that men's violence against mothers and pregnant women is deeply intertwined with men's violence against children.

## **Law (2024:79) on the Placement of Children in Sheltered Housing**

Law (2024:79) on the placement of children in sheltered housing came into force on April 1, 2024. Previously, children routinely accompanied their mothers when placed in shelters. Under the new law, children must have separate, individual placement decisions. If the child's father does not consent to the placement, social services are required to make a decision on placing the child in sheltered housing, effectively similar to a forced placement. However it is important to understand that social services should decide if the children should be placed in a shelter or not.

Women's shelters' experiences show that this system has had serious consequences. The law has become a tool for violent men, who use the requirement for consent and separate decisions to threaten and control the woman—for example, by saying that the children will not be allowed to join her in the shelter. Each child must also have an individual placement decision, which in practice means that siblings may not receive the same placement.

Furthermore, shelters report a decrease in the number of women and children actually placed in shelters. It is more common for mothers to be granted placement while their children are not. In these situations, women are forced to forgo the shelter and return to the perpetrator, as they refuse to leave their children with the perpetrator.

It is evident to us that the legislation is also based on holding mothers accountable for the violence they experience, and on the assumption that mothers are not considered adequate parents when the father is violent and must be separated from the children.

### **Custody Disputes and Parental Alienation**

Women's and young women's shelters' experiences show that custody disputes often mean that men's violence against abused mothers continues, now within the framework of state institutions. The violence takes new forms through legal proceedings, interactions with authorities, and requirements for cooperation, where the woman is expected to engage with the violent father despite abuse. For many women, this means that the violence does not stop when the relationship ends, but rather becomes institutionalized.

Social services often place an impossible burden on mothers: to simultaneously cooperate with the violent father and protect the children from his abuse. When this is not possible, the responsibility is placed on the mother rather than the man committing the violence. In the most extreme cases, shelters have experience of men killing their shared children as a form of revenge against the mother—an ultimate expression of ongoing violence in the context of custody disputes.

Mothers' mental health, which is a direct consequence of prolonged abuse, is repeatedly used against them in custody proceedings. The woman's trauma and ill-health are interpreted as a lack of parenting ability, while the violent father is portrayed as a stable and necessary parent who "needs to help." This means that the consequences of violence for the mother worsen her legal situation, instead of being understood as a result of the man's actions.

Roks is highly critical of the use of the pseudoscientific concept of parental alienation in custody disputes. The concept lacks scientific foundation and is in practice used to cast suspicion on mothers who try to protect their children from violence. When children's fear or unwillingness to have contact with a violent father is interpreted as manipulation by the mother, both men's violence and the children's own experiences are rendered invisible. Parental alienation thus becomes a tool that shifts focus away from violent men and instead directs suspicion and sanctions against protective mothers. In Swedish courts, this is applied both through parental alienation and more subtle concepts such as "cooperation difficulties" or "conflict."

Women's and young women's shelters see particularly serious consequences for mothers who are subjected to violence and who live with disabilities (such as deaf or visually impaired women), mothers with limited Swedish language skills, and migrant women. These groups face an increased risk of being questioned as parents and having their children placed with violent fathers, rather than receiving the support and protection to which they are entitled.

The government has made changes to the Parental Code so that violence is now to be considered a central factor in custody disputes. The problem is that we have not seen any changes in the legislation regarding how violence is addressed, as it simply gets renamed.

In Sweden, there is no legislation prohibiting the use of surrogate.

## **Violence Against Older Women**

Violence against older women is largely forgotten and rendered invisible. The experiences of women's shelters show that many older women subjected to violence are mothers and grandmothers, and that the abuse often occurs within the family. It is not uncommon for children and grandchildren to exploit and control older women through economic abuse, for example by taking control of their finances, indebting them, or restricting their ability to manage their own money.

This form of violence often occurs alongside dependency, isolation, and inadequate societal protection, making it particularly difficult for older women to seek help. As a result, the violence often continues in silence, without being detected or addressed by responsible authorities.

Consequently, older women are largely absent from official statistics, particularly crime statistics.

## **Girls and Young Women as Mothers**

Girls and young women who become mothers often face a combination of violence, control, and lack of protection. Young women's shelters' experiences show that those exposed to gang-related environments are subjected to sexualized violence, threats, and control, which in many cases leads to pregnancy and motherhood. Even girls placed in institutions, such as residential care homes (HVB) or special youth facilities, experience violence and sexual abuse both before and during placement. In these situations, pregnancy is a consequence of violence rather than a freely made choice.

Despite this, young mothers are often met with strong blame. They are held responsible for their own victimization and are told that they "should have known better" or that they brought the situation upon themselves. This perspective leads to their need for protection and support being minimized, and interventions from social services and other authorities are limited or conditional.

Shelters observe that young mothers' age, life circumstances, and prior experiences of trauma are used against them in interactions with authorities. Instead of being offered long-term protection, trauma-informed support, and opportunities for recovery, they risk being quickly questioned as mothers. This creates a situation where young women are expected to take full responsibility for their child while simultaneously being denied the support needed to do so safely.

Roks argues that this treatment reflects a lack of understanding of how violence, gender, age, and power intersect. For young mothers and their children to receive genuine protection, the state must recognize their vulnerability as a result of violence and structural inequality, rather than as individual failings.

## **Mothers and Surrogacy**

Roks is critical of surrogacy, including altruistic surrogacy, which the organization views as a practice based on the exploitation of women's bodies and reproductive capacities. Surrogacy separates pregnancy, birth, and motherhood, and commercializes these processes, which disproportionately affects women in socioeconomically vulnerable situations. These women are reduced to carriers of children, with their health, autonomy, and rights subordinated to the desires of others for parenthood. It also limits their right to access safe and free abortion.

From Roks' perspective, surrogacy is incompatible with women's human rights. Women who act as surrogates are often subjected to extensive control during pregnancy, including restrictions on their freedom of movement, bodily integrity, and self-determination. The risk of violence, coercion, and economic exploitation is significant, especially in transnational surrogacy arrangements.

Roks also emphasizes the child's perspective. Surrogacy deliberately separates children from the woman who has carried and given birth to them, raising serious concerns about the child's right to their mother, their origin, and protection against child trafficking. The practice thus risks normalizing a view in which both women and children are treated as means to satisfy others' interests.

In summary, Roks argues that surrogacy reinforces gender-based power structures and global inequality. The state should refrain from legitimizing or facilitating such arrangements and must clearly safeguard the human rights of both women and children

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