INTENDED FOR DOMESTIC CONSUMPTION. On the influence of women’s and human rights movements on discourse and measures on violence against women.

Inaugural lecture Prof. Renée Römkens (Director of Atria), professor by special appointment in Gender Based Violence at the University of Amsterdam, 3 March 2017.

Abstract

In the field of international human rights we currently face a paradox. Even with regional human rights instruments like the European Convention of Human Rights, or the recent Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) many Dutch consider human rights mainly as intended for foreign consumption. In the field of violence against women this creates a stark contrast between national and international developments. In this inaugural speech, delivered on the occasion of the acceptance of the first Chair on gender based violence at the University of Amsterdam, several of the core issues in the social and legal debate on gender based violence are explored.

The women’s movements in the 1970s have been writing history when violence against women was reframed as a political concern instead of a personal problem. The recognition that the epidemic proportions of violence against women worldwide, regardless of culture, are both cause and effect of gender-based inequalities, was underlying this paradigm shift. The call on governments was to take measures against violence and simultaneously to address wider inequality concerns. Both social discourse and policy and legal measures in the 1980s and 1990s were resting upon these premises.

In the new millennium this very paradigm shift has become the subject of increasing debate in the Netherlands. Three intersecting counter-narratives on violence against women have evolved: minimization, culturalization (foregrounding violence against women in migrant muslim communities) and gender neutralization (foregrounding the domestic victimization of men by women in native white Dutch communities). These discourses have entered policy research and policy measures, as reflected in current social support structures as set up by local authorities. The net effect implies a de-politicization of violence against women since the recognition that violence against women is a form of discrimination is considered neither relevant nor valid anymore.

It is argued that these narratives illustrate a profound ambiguity that entered public Dutch discourse and policies. This ambiguity has become more manifest with the Netherlands ratifying the Istanbul Convention early 2016. This human rights convention unambiguously frames violence against women as a form of gender based discrimination, requiring a coherent gendersensitive set of policy and other measures. In recent years jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, has increasingly underlined the discriminatory nature of domestic violence and how it obliges States to specifically address women’s needs when victimized by their partner or ex-partner.

It is concluded that two crucial questions deserve more attention in research. What is the impact of the tendency to minimize severity and gender neutralize domestic violence against white women, while selectively culturalizing violence against migrant women? A more fundamental question concerns the meaning and impact of binding international human rights law, when on a national level the relevance of gender to understand violence against women is contested.