



Ending Violence against Women and Girls

A Human Rights and Health Priority

“[Violence against women] cuts across social and economic situations and is deeply embedded in cultures around the world — so much so that millions of women consider it a way of life.”¹

Gender-based violence — in various forms including rape, domestic violence, “honour” killings and trafficking in women — exacts a heavy toll on mental and physical health. Increasingly, gender-based violence is recognized as a major public health concern and a serious violation of basic human rights.²

Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way — most often by someone she knows, including by her husband or another male family member; one woman in four has been abused during pregnancy.³

Millions of women require medical attention or otherwise suffer the impact of gender-based violence; fear of violence inhibits discussion and constrains the health choices and life opportunities of many millions more.

Psychological abuse almost always accompanies physical abuse. In addition, one third to one half of all cases involve sexual abuse. A high proportion of women who are beaten are subjected to violence repeatedly.⁴

Violence against women is a pervasive yet under-recognized human rights violation. Accordingly, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, gave priority to this problem.

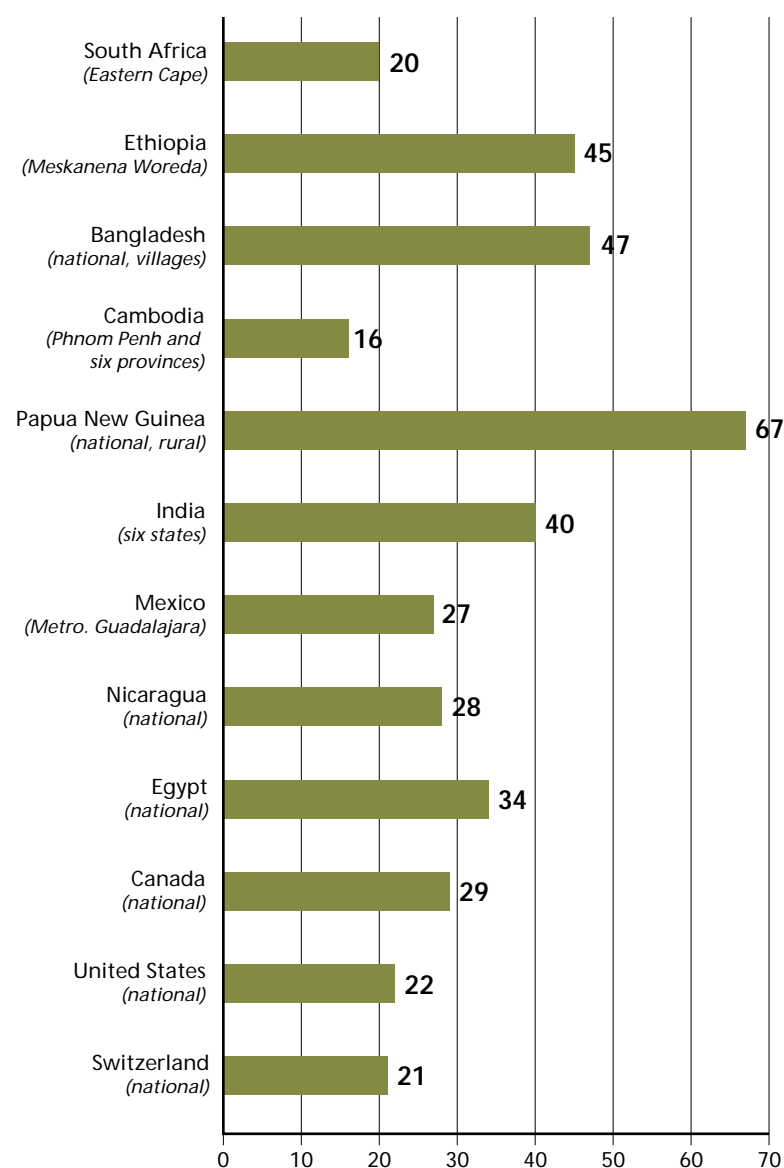
Violence against women and girls takes many forms:

- At least 60 million girls who would otherwise be expected to be alive are “missing” from various populations, mostly in Asia, as a result of sex-selective abortions, infanticide or neglect;
- Studies suggest domestic violence is widespread in most societies and is a frequent cause of suicides among women;

PHOTO: Indian prostitutes. Many women and girls are lured into prostitution by traffickers who target the poor and vulnerable.

Bartholomew/Liaison

Figure 5: Percentage of Adult Women Reporting Physical Assault by a Male Partner
(In any intimate relationship; Selected studies)



Source: Heise, L., M. Ellsberg and M. Gottemoeller, 1999. "Ending Violence against Women." *Population Reports*, Series L, No. 11, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Population Information Program.

- Rape and other forms of sexual violence are increasing. Many rapes go unreported because of the stigma and trauma associated with them and the lack of sympathetic treatment from legal systems. Estimates of the proportion of rapes reported to authorities vary — from less than 3 per cent in South Africa to about 16 per cent in the United States;
- Two million girls between ages 5 and 15 are introduced into the commercial sex market each year;

- At least 130 million women have been forced to undergo female genital mutilation or cutting; another 2 million are at risk each year from this degrading and dangerous practice;
- So-called "honour" killings take the lives of thousands of young women every year, mainly in Western Asia, North Africa and parts of South Asia. At least 1,000 women were murdered in Pakistan in 1999.

In the United States, a woman is battered, usually by her intimate partner, every 15 seconds.⁵ Physical violence is nearly always accompanied by psychological abuse, which can be just as demeaning and degrading. Among 613 abused women in Japan, for instance, close to 60 per cent had suffered from physical, psychological and sexual abuse at the hands of their partners; only 8 per cent had experienced physical abuse alone.⁶ Similarly, in Leon, Nicaragua, researchers found that of 188 women abused by their partners, only 5 had not been sexually assaulted.⁷

Measuring acts of violence against women and girls does not, of course, describe the atmosphere of terror that often permeates abusive relationships. For instance, in a nationwide domestic violence survey in Canada in 1993, researchers discovered that a full one third of all women who had been subjected to domestic violence had feared for their lives at some point in the relationship.⁸ Women often assert that prolonged psychological abuse and degradation are more difficult to bear than physical pain.⁹

Many cultures condone or at least tolerate a certain amount of violence against women. In parts of South Asia, Western Asia and Africa, for instance, men are seen as having a right to discipline their wives as they see fit. The right of a husband to beat or physically intimidate his wife is a deeply held conviction in many societies.

Even women often view a certain amount of physical abuse as justified under certain conditions. For instance, 80 per cent of women surveyed in rural Egypt said that beatings were common and often justified, particularly if the woman refused to have sex with her partner.¹⁰

Justification for violence stems from gender norms — distorted views about the roles and responsibilities of men and women in relationships.

Worldwide, studies have shown a consistent pattern of events that trigger violent responses. These include: not obeying the husband, talking back, refusing sex, not having food ready on time, failing to care for the children or home, questioning the man about money or girlfriends or going somewhere without his permission.¹¹



Impacts on Reproductive Health

Violence in all its forms causes immense damage to the reproductive health and well-being of women and girls throughout the world, in direct and indirect ways:

- Unwanted pregnancies and restricted access to family planning information and contraceptives;
- Unsafe abortion or injuries sustained during a legal abortion after an unwanted pregnancy;
- Complications from frequent, high-risk pregnancies and lack of follow-up care;
- Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS;
- Persistent gynaecological problems;
- Psychological problems, including fear of sex and loss of pleasure.

Violence as a barrier to family planning

Though most contraceptive use is accepted by both partners, researchers have found that abused women tend not to use family planning services, even if readily available, for fear of reprisals from husbands. Women in Zimbabwe and Kenya, for instance, often hide their contraceptive pills because they are terrified of the consequences should their husbands discover that they no longer control their wives' fertility.¹² Similarly, abused women who participated in focus group discussions in Peru and Mexico said they did not discuss contraceptive use with their husbands out of fear that the men would turn violent.¹³

In a study in Ghana, close to half of all women and 43 per cent of men said a man was justified in beating his wife if she used a family planning method without his expressed consent.¹⁴

Abortion

Women who are abused or afraid to raise the issue of family planning with their partners are at risk of repeated unwanted pregnancies. Many abused women seek abortions.

High-risk pregnancies

Violence has been linked with increased risk of miscarriages, premature labour, foetal distress and low birth weight.¹⁵ A study in Leon, Nicaragua, found that violence against pregnant women was associated with a threefold increase in low birth-weight babies.¹⁶ Blunt abdominal trauma can lead to foetal death or

BOX 17

Killings in Sweden Spark Debate about Domestic Violence

Calls for action to stop domestic violence against women escalated in Sweden in October 1999, after the fourth case in a month in which police questioned or charged a man after his wife or partner's death.

A 32-year-old woman died after falling from a fifth-floor balcony. Police questioned her husband, 35, after neighbours reported seeing the couple fighting on the balcony before the fall. In one week in September, three other women were murdered and their partners were the prime suspects. One man admitted he had killed his wife. A 19-year-old was beaten to death in her home after having reported her former boyfriend for threatening her.

In Sweden, about 16 women are killed by their partners every year, about one sixth of all murders. Some 20,373 cases of abuse of women were reported between January and September 1998.

Research into domestic violence in 1991-1996 showed that men who killed their wives or partners were often drunk or had psychological problems. Jealousy and separation were the most common reasons.

Authorities are being urged to pay more heed to warning signs. "In many cases neighbours and friends know that the man is beating the woman, and the woman has even reported threats or assault to the police, but not enough is done," said a spokesman from the National Council for Crime Prevention.

3

BOX 18

Women's Attackers Seldom Punished in Pakistan

Women in Pakistan face spiralling rates of gender-based violence, a legal framework that is deeply biased against women, and a law enforcement system that re-traumatizes female victims instead of facilitating justice," according to a 1999 report by Human Rights Watch. Citing domestic violence rates as high as 90 per cent, at least eight reported rapes every 24 hours nationwide, and an alarming rise in so-called "honour" killings, the report states that such crimes continue to be perpetrated with near total impunity.

The report says law enforcement authorities routinely dismiss domestic violence as private disputes. Female victims attempting to register complaints of abuse are invariably turned away, and are regularly advised and sometimes pressured by the police to reconcile with their abusive spouses or relatives.

Women who report rape or sexual assault by strangers are often disbelieved and treated with disrespect. They must contend with abusive police, forensic doctors who focus on their virginity status instead of their injuries, untrained prosecutors, sceptical judges, and a discriminatory and deficient legal framework. "Only the most resilient and resourceful complainants can manoeuvre such hostile terrain," says the report. "And those who do seldom see their attackers punished."

Pakistan's rape law, the Offence of Zina Ordinance, allows marital rape, does not establish the crime of statutory rape, and in some cases does not permit the female victim to testify.

The report says women's rights advocacy organizations have been subjected to intimidation, including government surveillance and threats that they would be banned.



Violence causes immense damage to women's reproductive health and well-being.

low birth weight by provoking pre-term delivery.¹⁷ Violence may also affect the outcome of pregnancies indirectly by increasing a woman's likelihood of engaging in harmful behaviour such as smoking and alcohol and drug abuse, all of which have been linked to pregnancy complications and low birth weight.¹⁸ Stress and anxiety brought on by persistent violent behaviour during pregnancy can reduce a woman's ability to obtain adequate nutrition, rest, exercise and medical care; this may retard foetal growth.¹⁹

Violence and STDs

Forced or unprotected sex puts women at risk of acquiring STDs, including HIV/AIDS. Many STDs and reproductive tract infections could be prevented if men routinely wore condoms when engaging in sex and refrained from having sex when the woman complained of soreness or other problems. Many women are afraid to ask their partners to wear condoms during sex for fear of violent reactions.

Rape victims are especially at risk of infection. Up to 30 per cent of women raped in the United States every year, for instance, develop an STD as a result.

Molestation of young girls is another profoundly disturbing aspect of this problem. A study in Zaria, Nigeria, for example, found that 16 per cent of hospital patients with sexually transmitted infections were under age 5.²⁰ At the Genito-Urinary Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe, doctors discovered that more than 900

children under age 12 had been treated for an STD in 1990 alone.²¹

Persistent gynaecological problems

Physical and sexual abuse also increases a woman's risk for a number of common gynaecological disorders, including chronic pelvic pain. In many countries, chronic pelvic pain accounts for up to 10 per cent of all visits to gynaecologists and one quarter of all hysterectomies.²² Although chronic pelvic pain is normally caused by adhesions, endometriosis or infections, about half the cases treated have no identifiable pathology. A number of studies have found that women suffering from pelvic pain are consistently more likely to have a history of childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault or physical and sexual abuse by their partners.²³

Other gynaecological problems associated with sexual violence include vaginal bleeding, vaginal discharge, painful menstruation, pelvic inflammatory disease and sexual dysfunction.²⁴ Sexual assault also increases the risk for premenstrual distress, a condition that affects up to 10 per cent of menstruating women and causes physical, mood and behavioural changes.²⁵

Psychological problems

Violence distorts the emotional lives of women and families. In Nicaragua, for instance, focus group studies found that many women considered the persistent psychological effects of domestic violence to be more severe and debilitating than the physical ones. Violence can also lead to suicide.²⁶

Table 1: Gender Violence throughout a Woman's Life

Phase	Type of Violence
Prenatal	Sex-selective abortions, battering during pregnancy, coerced pregnancy (rape during war)
Infancy	Female infanticide, emotional and physical abuse, differential access to food and medical care
Childhood	Genital mutilation, incest and sexual abuse, differential access to food, medical care and education, child prostitution
Adolescence	Dating and courtship violence, economically coerced sex, sexual abuse in the workplace, rape, sexual harassment, forced prostitution
Reproductive	Abuse of women by intimate partners, marital rape, dowry abuse and murders, partner homicide, psychological abuse, sexual abuse in the workplace, sexual harassment, rape, abuse of women with disabilities
Old Age	Abuse of widows, elder abuse (which affects mostly women)

Source: Heise, L. 1994. *Violence Against Women: The Hidden Health Burden*. World Bank Discussion Paper. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.



Serious episodes of depression affect about one third of battered women in the United States.²⁷ One study found that one fourth of all suicide attempts were preceded by abuse. Data in the United States suggest that women who were sexually abused as children tend to end up in abusive relationships and have a higher than normal risk of becoming involved in prostitution and drugs.²⁸

Another U.S. study found that women who had been sexually molested as children were three times more likely to be pregnant by age 18 than women who had not been abused. Women who had been abused as children were also twice as likely to put themselves at risk of acquiring an STD or HIV infection by having unprotected sex with multiple partners.²⁹

Trafficking in Women and Girls

An estimated 4 million women and girls are bought and sold worldwide, either into marriage, prostitution or slavery.³⁰ Many are lured into the hands of traffickers by promises of jobs. In some countries, traffickers target poor, vulnerable communities. They may arrive during a drought or before the harvest, when food is scarce, and persuade poor families to sell their daughters for small amounts of money.

Each year, at least 10,000 girls and women enter Thailand from poorer neighbouring countries and end up in commercial sex work, according to UNICEF. Some 5,000 to 7,000 Nepali girls are trafficked across the border to India each year, mostly ending up as sex workers in Mumbai or New Delhi.³¹

Although the greatest volume of trafficking occurs in Asia, Eastern European women are increasingly vulnerable.

“Honour” Killings

Throughout the world, perhaps as many as 5,000 women and girls a year are murdered by members of their own families, many of them for the “dishonour” of having been raped, often as not by a member of their own extended family.

Many forms of communally sanctioned violence against women, such as “honour” killings, are associated with the community’s or the family’s demand for sexual chastity and virginity. Perpetrators of such wanton acts often receive light sentences or are excused by the courts entirely because defence of the family’s honour is treated as a mitigating circumstance.

“Honour” killings are on the rise worldwide, according to Asma Jahangir, the United

Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions. Ms. Jahangir is working closely with United Nations special investigators on violence against women and on the independence of judges and lawyers to address the issue.

“The perpetrators of these crimes are mostly male family members of the murdered women, who go unpunished or receive reduced sentences on the justification of having murdered to defend their misconceived notions of ‘family honour,’” Jahangir wrote in her 2000 annual report to the Commission on Human Rights.³² Such killings have been reported in

BOX 19

Trafficking in the United States Rarely Punished, Report Says

As many as 50,000 women and children from Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe are brought to the United States under false pretences each year and forced to work as prostitutes, abused labourers or servants, according to a report by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. But over the past two years, the Government prosecuted cases involving no more than 250 victims.

Based on interviews with officials, law enforcement officers, victims and legal experts, the report says there has been evidence for years of widespread trafficking in immigrant women and children, some as young as 9 years old. Officers generally do not like to take on these cases because they are difficult to investigate and prosecute and penalties often are insubstantial.

The report describes case after case of foreign women who answered advertisements for au pair, sales clerk, secretarial or waitress jobs in the United States but found, once they arrived, that the jobs did not exist. Instead they were taken prisoner, held under guard and forced into prostitution or peonage. Some of them were sold outright to brothel owners. The primary sources for traffickers are Thailand, Viet Nam, China, Mexico, Russia and the Czech Republic, the report says.

BOX 20

Two “Honour” Killings in Jordan

Kifaya, a Jordanian girl of 12, was intelligent and full of curiosity. But when she returned home one evening from a walk in the neighbourhood with some friends, she was confronted by her enraged father. Shouting that she had dishonoured the entire family, her father proceeded to beat Kifaya with sticks and iron chains until she was dead. He told police he killed his only daughter because she went for walks without his permission.

About the same time, Hanan, 34, was shot dead by her brother for the “crime” of marrying a Christian. Her brother left her body in the street and smoked a cigarette while he waited for the police to arrive. Every year between 25 and 50 women and girls are the victims of “honour” killings in Jordan.



Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Sweden, Turkey, Uganda and the United Kingdom, according to the report.

On the order of clerics, an 18-year-old woman was flogged to death in Batsail, Bangladesh, for “immoral” behaviour, according to the report. In Egypt, a father paraded his daughter’s severed head through the streets shouting, “I avenged my honour.”

The report says that “honour” killings tend to be more prevalent in, but are not limited to, countries with a majority Muslim population. It adds, however, that Islamic leaders have condemned the practice and say it has no religious basis.

NGOs Work against Gender Violence

NGOs’ work worldwide on violence against women is one of the most important contributions to ending gender-based oppression.

Through the work of African NGOs, with the support of international organizations, FGM is being challenged and the practice outlawed, giving millions of girls and women hopes for a life with rights, health and security. The Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, a network of affiliates in 26 African and 3 European countries, has led the increasingly successful fight against FGM through public awareness campaigns and training in schools and communities, with traditional and trained medical staff.

NGOs are also on the front line in work with women survivors of violence and rape in war. The *Corporación Grupo de Apoyo* in Bosa, **Colombia**, shelters women suffering from domestic violence and sexual violence so they can rebuild their self-esteem and reassert their own power. In San Cristóbal de las Casas, a city in the Chiapas highlands of **Mexico**, the *Centro de Apoyo a la Mujer* (Women’s Support Centre) provides training and support for women living in extreme poverty and uncertainty, seeking particularly to change practices such as forcing girls as young as 10 to marry and traditions that condone wife abuse, domestic violence and incest.

In **Bosnia**, where after years of conflict women suffer not only sexual violence but also mental and physical damage and stress, a German gynaecologist set up *Medica Zenica*. In its first five years it has provided 20,000 women and children with counselling, and reached women in isolated villages through a mobile outpatient clinic. Isis–Women’s International Cross Cultural Exchange in **Uganda** supports survivors of sexual violence in Burundi, Rwanda, the Sudan and Uganda through an exchange programme in which women share their experiences in a supportive and healing atmosphere.

NGOs campaigning against gender-based violence are increasingly using the Internet. For example, in Rajasthan, **India**, when members of the Bal Rashmi Society — which actively opposes sexual exploitation, rape, and dowry-related deaths and torture — were jailed, an Internet alert led to suspension of their trials.

B.a.B.e., a strategic lobbying group in **Croatia**, has used the Internet to raise awareness of women’s experience of violence during war, and to bring about a new family law that includes restraining orders against men in domestic rape cases. Women’s International Network–Emergency and Solidarity uses the Internet to share experiences among women working in situations of conflict, war, ecological disaster or extreme poverty.

Women Living Under Muslim Law has mounted a World Wide Web campaign around the denial of women’s rights in Islamic societies; it directs support to the Association of the Women of Afghanistan, among others. Women-Net in **South Africa** used the Internet for a Stop Rape campaign supported by international signatories.

In the **Philippines**, women’s NGOs initiated the National Family Violence Prevention Programme; it promotes the innovative “Voices of 2001: Breaking the Silence Campaign”, which has collected stories of 2,001 women’s experiences.

BOX 21

Women Foreign Ministers Seek End to Human Trafficking

In October 1999, 14 women foreign ministers wrote to United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan seeking to end the widespread practice of trafficking in women and children.

“On the edge of the 21st century, it is unacceptable that human beings around the world are bought and sold into situations—such as sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and debt bondage—that are little different from slavery,” wrote the ministers from the Bahamas, Barbados, Bulgaria, El Salvador, Finland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Mexico, Mongolia, Niger, South Africa, Sweden and the United States.

“We recognize the importance of close international cooperation to defeat the traffickers at every stage of their criminal activities,” the letter stated. The ministers pledged their governments’ support for the proposed convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the protocol on trafficking in persons, both of which are currently under negotiation.