

## Violence against Women – Facts and Figures

*“Gender-based violence knows no colour and nationality. It devastates lives and fractures communities, impeding development in every nation. In every country, the well-being, promise and gifts of millions of women and girls are destroyed by violence. ... To work together to end it, we must understand that it can be stopped.”*

—Noeleen Heyzer, UNIFEM Executive Director

At least one out of every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime — with the abuser usually someone known to her (1). Violence against women and girls is a universal problem of epidemic proportions. Perhaps the most pervasive human rights violation that we know today, it devastates lives, fractures communities, and stalls development.

Statistics paint a horrifying picture of the social consequences of violence against women — in 2002, the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation declaring violence against women a public health emergency, and a major cause of death and disability for women 16 to 44 years of age (2). In a World Bank report, it was estimated that violence against women was as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer, and a greater cause of ill-health than traffic accidents and malaria combined (3). The economic cost is also considerable — a 2003 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the costs of intimate partner violence in the USA alone exceed \$5.8 billion per year: 4.1 billion are for direct medical and health care services while productivity losses account for nearly \$1.8 billion (4).

### **DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

Domestic and intimate partner violence involves physical and sexual attacks against women in the home, within the family or within an intimate relationship. Women are more at risk of experiencing violence in intimate relationships than anywhere else.

In no country in the world are women safe from this type of violence. Out of ten countries surveyed in a 2005 study of the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 50 percent of women in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Tanzania reported having been subjected to physical or sexual violence by intimate partners, with figures reaching staggering 71 percent in rural Ethiopia. Only in one country (Japan) did less than 20 percent of women report incidents of domestic violence (5). An earlier WHO study puts the number of women physically abused by their partners or ex-partners at 30 percent in the UK, and 22 percent in the US (6).

Based on several surveys from around the world, half of the women who die from homicides are killed by their current or former husbands or partners. Women are killed by people they know and die from guns violence, beatings and burns among numerous other forms of abuse (7). A study conducted in Sao Paulo, Brazil reported that 13 percent of deaths of women of reproductive age were homicides, of which 60 percent were committed by the victims' partners (8).

In the USA, 700,000 women are raped or sexually assaulted each year (9), with 14.8 percent of women reporting having been raped before the age of 17 (10). In a randomly selected study of nearly 1,200 ninth-grade students in Geneva, Switzerland, 20 percent of girls revealed they had experienced at least one incident of physical sexual abuse (11). This form of sexual violence also extends beyond the domestic domain.

Although many countries now have legislation that addresses domestic violence, high levels of violence still persist. There is clearly a need for greater focus on implementation and enforcement of legislation, and an end to laws that emphasize family reunification over the rights of women and girls.

In many societies, the legal system and community attitudes add to the trauma rape survivors experience. Women are often held responsible for the violence against them, and in many places laws contain loopholes which allow the perpetrators to act with impunity. In a number of countries, a rapist can go free under the Penal Code if he proposes to marry the victim and she consents (12). In Pakistan and many other Islamic countries, ordinances require women reporting rape to provide a set number of credible male witnesses to verify the crime. Victims unable to provide these witnesses are often charged instead with adultery.

### **HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES**

Harmful traditional practices refer to types of violence that have been committed against women in certain communities and societies for so long that these abuses are considered a part of accepted cultural practice. These violations include female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM), dowry murder, so-called honour killings, and early marriage. They lead to death, disabilities, and physical and psychological dysfunction for millions of women annually.

#### **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**

FGM refers to several types of traditional cutting operations performed on women and girls. Often part of fertility or coming-of-age rituals, FGM is sometimes justified as a way to ensure chastity and genital ‘purity’. FGM occurs primarily in over 25 African countries (13), among some minorities in Asia and immigrant communities in Europe, Australia, Canada and the US. An estimated 130 million women today have undergone FGM, and an additional 2 million girls and women are being subjected to it each year. Since the late 1980s, opposition to FGM and efforts to combat the practice have increased. Some countries have passed legislation to regulate or ban FGM.

— UNIFEM supported a project in Kenya, which involved local communities developing alternative coming-of-age rituals, such as ‘circumcision with words’ — celebrating a young girl’s entry into womanhood with words instead of genital cutting (14). A joint initiative by UNICEF, WHO, and UNFPA seeks to drastically decrease the incidence of FGM, including assisting governments to develop and implement national policies to abolish the practice.

#### **Dowry Murder**

Dowry murder is a brutal practice involving a woman being killed by her husband or in-laws because her family is unable to meet their demands for her dowry — a payment made to a woman’s in-laws upon her engagement or marriage as a gift to her new family. It is not uncommon for dowries to exceed a family’s annual income.

While cultures throughout the world have dowries or analogous payments, dowry murder occurs predominantly in South Asia. In India, for example, there are close to 15,000 dowry deaths estimated per year (15) and mostly in kitchen fires designed to look like accidents (16). In Bangladesh, there have been many incidents of acid attacks due to dowry disputes (17), leading often to blindness, disfigurement, and death. In 2002, 315 women and girls in Bangladesh were victims of acid attacks (18).

— In India, women’s organizations have successfully advocated for changes to the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act, including amendments in the 1980s to hire community members as ‘dowry prohibition officers’. In addition, the country’s murder law has been revised to define and punish dowry death. However, these changes have not been enforced widely throughout the nation (19). Undoing the dynamics of dowry deaths requires change at a deep level, within the context of globalization and economic restructuring, where dowry ceases to be an economic institution and women’s lives the commodity that is traded.

### **Honour Killings**

In many societies, rape victims, women suspected of engaging in premarital sex, and women accused of adultery have been murdered by their male relatives because the violation of a woman's chastity is viewed as an affront to the family's honour.

According to a 2002 UN human rights report, more than 1,000 women are killed in Pakistan in the name of honour every year (20). In a study of female deaths in Alexandria, Egypt, 47 percent of the women were killed by a relative after the woman had been raped (21). In Jordan and Lebanon, 70 to 75 percent of the perpetrators of these so-called honour killings are the women's brothers (22). It is not only in Islamic countries that this act of violence is prevalent. Brazil is cited as a case in point, where killing is justified to defend the honour of the husband in the case of a wife's adultery (23).

— In the West Bank and Gaza, UNIFEM's TFEVAW supported a project that documented honour killing cases in Palestinian society and recommended strategies to protect potential victims and strengthen the legal system to deter such practices. The project involved men in the family to protect the woman from harm and recorded this action with a family contract.

### **Early Marriage**

The practice of early marriage is prevalent throughout the world, especially in Africa and South Asia. This is a form of sexual violence, since young girls are often forced into the marriage and into sexual relations, which jeopardizes their health, raises their risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS and limits their chance of attending school.

Parents and families often justify child marriages to ensure a better future for their daughters. Parents and families marry off their younger daughters as a means to gain economic security and status for them as well as for their daughters. Insecurity, conflict and societal crisis also support early marriage. In many African countries experiencing conflict, where there is a high possibility of young girls being kidnapped, marrying them off at an early age is viewed as a means to securing their protection. In some countries, a rapist can be exempt from punishment if he is prepared to marry the victim, and the law can allow judges to lower the age of marriage in cases where the rape victim is a minor (24).

In the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan, for example, young girls are 'sold' by their parents into marriage for money. This is done without the consent of daughters; and often the husbands are wealthy older men. This is no longer permitted by law, but still practiced. Girls fleeing such marriages can be put in jail and are shunned by society. If they are released, they are either killed by their own family or their in-laws, or sold again (25).

### **TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN AND GIRLS**

Trafficking involves recruiting or transporting another person in order to place them in a situation of abuse or exploitation such as forced prostitution, slavery-like practices, battering and extreme cruelty, sweatshop labour, or exploitative domestic servitude (26).

While exact data is hard to come by, estimates on the number of trafficked women and girls range from 700,000 to two million per year (27). More than 200,000 Bangladeshi women have been trafficked from 1990 to 1997; and 5000 to 7000 Nepali women and girls illegally trafficked to India. In Europe for example, 10 to 15 percent of foreign prostitutes in Belgium were trafficked from other countries and sold into prostitution rings. These women and girls were mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, Colombia, Nigeria and Peru (28). Illegal trafficking in persons frequently involves organized crime, and efforts to combat it can involve serious risks.

— With support from United States Assistance to International Development (USAID), UNIFEM's South Asia Regional Office, located in New Delhi, India, has established the South Asian Regional Anti-Trafficking Programme to reduce the incidence of trafficking in women and children in the South Asian region. As part of this initiative, the first-ever regional resource centre on anti-trafficking has been set up for the region (29).

## **HIV/AIDS AND VIOLENCE**

Women's inability to negotiate safe sex and refuse unwanted sex is closely linked to the high prevalence HIV/AIDS. Unwanted sex — from being unable to say “no!” to a partner and be heard, to sexual assault such as rape — results in a higher risk of abrasion and bleeding, providing a ready avenue for transmission of the virus. Both realities obliterate women's ability to protect themselves from infection.

Violence is a cause as well as a consequence of HIV/AIDS: for many women, the fear of violence prevents them from declaring their HIV-positive status and seeking help and treatment. They have been driven from their homes, left destitute, been ostracized by their families and community, and subjected to extreme physical and emotional abuse. In 1998 Gugu Dhlamini was stoned to death by men in her community in South Africa, after she declared her positive status on radio and television on World AIDS Day.

Young women are particularly vulnerable to coerced sex and are increasingly being infected with HIV/AIDS. Over half of new HIV infections world-wide are occurring among young people between the ages of 15 to 24, and over 60 percent of HIV-positive youth between the ages of 15 to 24 are women. A study conducted in Tanzania in 2001 found that HIV-positive women were over 2 and half times more likely than HIV-negative women to have experienced violence perpetrated by their current partner (30).

A 2002 UNIFEM-sponsored report on the impact of armed conflict on women underscores how the chaotic and brutal circumstances of armed conflict aggravate all the factors that fuel the crisis. Tragically and most cruelly, in many conflicts, the planned and purposeful HIV infection of women has been a tool of war, often pitting one ethnic group against another, such as what occurred in Rwanda (31).

## **CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN IN WAR AND ARMED CONFLICT**

The victims in today's armed conflicts are far more likely to be civilians than soldiers. Some 70 percent of the casualties in recent conflicts were non-combatants — most of them women and children. Women's bodies have become part of the battleground for those who use terror as a tactic of war — they are raped, abducted, humiliated and made to undergo forced pregnancy, sexual abuse and slavery. In Rwanda, up to half a million women were raped during the 1994 genocide. The numbers are as high as 60,000 in the war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Equally, in Sierra Leone, the number of incidents of war-related sexual violence among internally displaced women from 1991-2001 is as high as 64,000 (32).

A 2002 UNIFEM-sponsored report on the issue quoted a UN official in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on the terror of daily life for people in the region: “From Pweto down near the Zambian border right up to Aru on the Sudan/Uganda border, it's a black hole where no one is safe and where no outsider goes. Women take a risk when they go out to the fields or on a road to a market. Any day they can be stripped naked, humiliated and raped in public. Many, many people no longer sleep at home, though sleeping in the bush is equally unsafe. Every night, another village is attacked. It could be any group, no one knows, but they always take away women and girls” (33).

Protection and support for women survivors of violence in conflict and post-conflict areas is woefully inadequate. Access to social services, protection, legal remedies, medical resources, places of refuge is limited despite the valiant efforts of numerous local NGOs to provide assistance. A climate of impunity further exacerbates the situation, ensuring that perpetrators go unpunished and free to continue their acts of violence. It is glaringly evident that much further effort is needed from governments and the international community to strengthen procedures and mechanisms to investigate, report, prosecute and remedy violence against women.

## Notes

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