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The Tragic Reality of Violence

Facing the Facts of Violence Against Women and the Millennium Development Goals

Research shows that violence against women is frighteningly common.

Introduction








Violence against women (VAW) is a gross violation of human rights. It is also an obstacle to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The last twenty years have seen unprecedented progress in the political attention paid to violence against women and girls as well as in the number and scope of laws and policies that extend the state's duty to prevent and respond to gender-based violence into the home and the family. Grass-roots women's organizations and international coalitions have upended the notion that violence against women is a private matter, an aberrant individual act, or an inevitable fact of life, especially during war; they have successfully reframed violence as a human rights issue.

Yet despite the progress at the policy and political levels, violence against women persists, unabated, in all parts of the world. According to World Bank estimates, VAW kills and incapacitates as many women of reproductive age as cancer does.¹ A rigorous study in ten countries from different regions and involving interviews with 24,000 women revealed that domestic violence against women is "frighteningly common" and that, far from being a safe haven, home is too often a place of pain, fear, and humiliation for women and girls. Between 15 per cent and 71 per cent of women reported having experienced violence by a partner over the course of their lifetime, and up to nearly a third had reported violence in the past year. The rate of sexual violence in particular ranged from 10 per cent to 50 per cent. Most acts of violence by an intimate partner were part of an ongoing pattern of abuse.²

Intimate partner violence is the most common type of violence against women, but VAW takes many other forms, as well. The 1993 UN General Assembly *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*³ defined VAW as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." The forms of violence against women are many, and there is no fixed, exhaustive list. VAW includes violence in the family and community, such as female infanticide, sexual abuse of girls, marital rape, battering, and emotional abuse like isolation and humiliation. It also includes harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation, child and forced marriage, dowry-related violence, femicide, rape, forced sexual initiation, date rape, acid throwing, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in schools, and in public places, trafficking and forced prostitution, and forced sterilization.

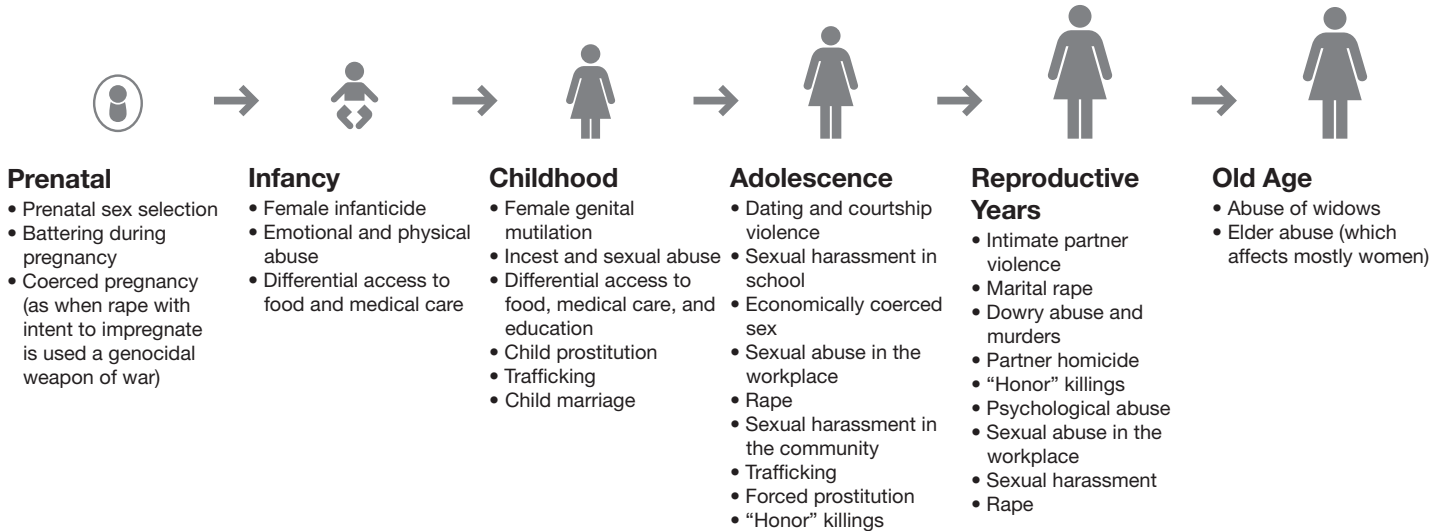
Violence against women also includes violence in times of war or when governance systems have collapsed; the systematic use of sexual violence to terrorize whole communities or ethnic groups is a chilling feature of conflict that has received increasing recognition in recent years. The unanimously adopted June 2008 UN Security Council resolution 1820 on women, peace and security calls for the "immediate and complete cessation by all parties to armed conflict of all acts of sexual violence against civilians" and affirms that "rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide."

Table 1: Violence Against Women: An Obstacle to the Millennium Development Goals

Goal	The link to violence against women
 <p>1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger</p>	<p>Violence against women is a drain on the productive workforce; WHO found that abused women in Nicaragua earned 46 per cent less than women who did not suffer abuse. The World Bank estimated that domestic violence and rape accounted for nearly one in five disability-adjusted life years (DALYS) lost to women aged 15-44.⁴</p> <p>Violence against women diverts scarce societal resources in poor countries; studies from several countries show that women who have been assaulted use health services more than women with no history of violence. According to WHO, rape or assault is a stronger predictor of health care use than any other variable, with medical care costs of victims more than twice that of non-victims.⁵</p> <p>In some countries, in poor families, girls' share of food is diverted to boys, resulting in disproportionate malnutrition among girls – leading to stunting, anemia, micronutrient deficiencies, greater vulnerability to a host of diseases, and reduced school performance.</p>
 <p>2. Achieve universal primary education</p>	<p>Girls who are victims of violence are less likely to attend or complete school, and the long-term educational achievement of children who witness violence is lower than that of other children.⁶</p> <p>Sexual harassment of primary school girls by teachers, peers, and others in school and on the way to and from schools is common.⁷</p>
 <p>3. Promote gender equality and empower women</p>	<p>Sexual harassment and assault of adolescent girls by teachers or other students as well as on their way to and from school is commonplace in many countries.</p> <p>Lack of separate sanitary facilities in schools exposes girls to harassment and assault.</p> <p>Concerns about physical safety impel some parents to keep their daughters out of secondary school, especially after they start to menstruate, in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.⁸</p> <p>Violence and the threat of violence limit women's freedom to participate in public life, in politics, in employment, and in decision-making.</p>
 <p>4. Reduce child mortality</p>	<p>Girls are more likely than boys to die in a number of countries in South and East Asia, North Africa and the Middle East, resulting in adverse sex-ratios.⁹</p> <p>Excess female mortality causes some 250,000 preventable deaths among girls under age 5 every year. Female infanticide, malnourishment, and systematic neglect fuel higher under-five death rates for girls than for boys.¹⁰</p> <p>Research in Nicaragua found an under-five death rate six times higher among children whose mothers were physically and sexually abused by their partners than among other children.¹¹</p> <p>Harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, dietary restrictions for female children, female genital mutilation or cutting, and excessive workloads at home also contribute to excess morbidity and mortality among girls.</p>
 <p>5. Improve maternal health</p>	<p>Evidence suggests that violence against women is commonplace during pregnancy, with rates in developing countries ranging from 4 per cent to 32 per cent;¹² it can lead to high-risk pregnancies, miscarriages and stillbirths, pre-term labour, low birth weight, other complications during pregnancy and delivery, and the death of the mother or newborn child.</p> <p>Higher levels of rape and sexual abuse are recorded during conflict, which can lead to unwanted pregnancies, gynecological disorders, and sexually transmitted diseases. Sexual violence as a weapon of war, including rape designed to cause pregnancy and thus advance genocidal aims, has been a chilling feature of many conflicts.</p> <p>Harmful practices like child marriage lead to too-early childbearing. This can result in fistula as well as cephalopelvic disproportion, which can cause severe birth complications, including the death of the mother or child. Genital cutting, to which more than 130 million girls have been subjected, also poses increased risks to the health of the mother and baby during delivery.¹³</p> <p>Abused women are less likely than other women to use family planning services and are more likely to face unwanted pregnancy.¹⁴</p>
 <p>6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease</p>	<p>Rape can expose women to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.</p> <p>Child marriage increases the risk of HIV infection.¹⁵</p> <p>Women often do not insist that their partner wear a condom for fear of negative or violent response (there are also many other reasons, such as women's limited negotiating power).</p> <p>Some evidence suggests that women are targeted for violence when their HIV-positive status becomes known to an intimate partner or family or community member and that fear of violence can prevent HIV-positive women from seeking treatment.</p> <p>Conflicts may increase the risk of HIV and AIDS by dislocating communities and bringing combatants into contact with civilians. This can make women and girls highly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation.</p>
 <p>7. Ensure environmental sustainability</p>	<p>Environmental degradation and poor basic water, sanitation and energy services force women to travel longer distances from home to secure water, obtain food and fuel, or to move about at night in search of privacy to defecate, all of which increase their vulnerability to assault.</p>
 <p>8. Develop a global partnership for development</p>	<p>Despite the normative advances in the area of violence against women, the international community, national governments, and local leaders have failed to allocate sufficient resources toward the elimination of violence against women. Part of the global partnership for development must be adequate financial resources for ending violence against women.</p>

Why does violence against women occur?

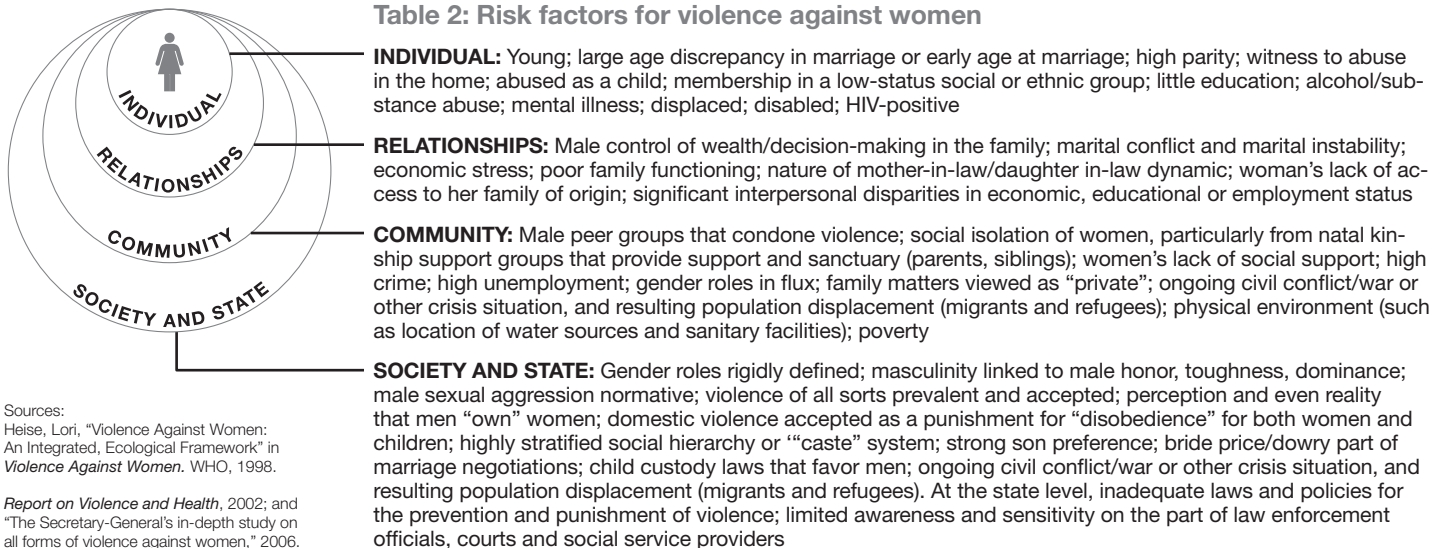
At its most basic level, violence against women is about power; it establishes the dominance of men and the subjugation of women. It is both an example of gender inequality and a means by which it is perpetuated. While violence against women is universal, there is variation in its nature and manifestation across societies as well as within societies at different times, for different groups of women, and even for the same woman at different times in her life.



Source: Heise, Lori, "Violence Against Women: The Hidden Health Burden," World Bank Discussion Paper, 1994.

Many experts use an ecological framework for understanding the varying causes and consequences of violence against women.¹⁶ An ecological framework, commonly used in the public health arena, looks at the individual and her relationship to her surroundings. This model suggests that there may not be one single cause but rather a range of variables that can increase or reduce a woman's risk factors for experiencing violence. It looks at the **individual**; her **relationships** with family members, partners and friends; the norms and circumstances of her **community**; and the larger **society**, including legal and policy frameworks, the prevalence of violence of all sorts, and the prevailing construction of masculinity and femininity. **Table 2** identifies risk factors for violence against women at each of these four levels. It is easy to see how risk factors can converge to make certain classes of women particularly vulnerable – for instance, adolescents from an impoverished ethnic minority group during a conflict situation.

Table 2: Risk factors for violence against women



Sources:
Heise, Lori, "Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework" in *Violence Against Women*. WHO, 1998.

Report on Violence and Health, 2002; and "The Secretary-General's in-depth study on all forms of violence against women," 2006.

Conclusion

Data-collection, advocacy, awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts by NGOs, researchers, activists, and the international community have spurred policy-makers and others to action in many countries. The result has been important legal gains for women, such as the enactment of laws against marital rape and the repeal of laws that allow rapists to evade punishment by marrying their victims.

But clearly there is a long way to go. Working with men and with young people holds great promise as a way to stop the cycle of violence against women. In addition, the Secretary-General's in-depth study on all forms of violence against women identifies the following priority actions:

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- States should take concrete steps to secure women's human rights and promote gender equality.
- Politicians, government officials, opinion leaders, business people, civil society organizations, admired public figures in sports and entertainment, religious authorities, and influential individuals within local communities should exercise leadership to end violence against women.
- States must close the gap between international standards and national laws and practices to end impunity for violence against women. This includes acting to prevent VAW; punishing perpetrators; and providing support and access to redress for victims.
- States should create an institutional framework and multi-sectoral strategies to support systematic and sustained action to address VAW and bring to scale the successful work of NGOs.
- States should allocate adequate resources and funding to programmes to prevent as well as provide redress for violence against women.
- Governments should systematically collect and publish data that assesses the nature and extent of violence against women as well as which policies and practices are most effective in addressing it.

An important step forward was the 1996 establishment, via General Assembly resolution 50/166, of the UN Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence Against Women. The Trust Fund, managed by UNIFEM on behalf of the UN system, is the lead multilateral grant-making mechanism that supports local, national and regional efforts to combat violence. Since it began operations in 1997, the Trust Fund has distributed more than US\$19 million to 263 initiatives to address violence against women in 115 countries. Trust Fund projects conduct public education and awareness campaigns, build coalitions, involve law-enforcement, judicial and government agencies, and train educators, healthcare personnel and police officials to respond to and prevent violence. Many projects strive to alter community attitudes and involve men as allies.

In 2008, the UN Secretary-General launched UNite, a multi-year campaign that aims to secure political will and increased resources to end violence against women and girls, to galvanize world public opinion to ensure action at the highest level, and to engage men leaders and mobilize men and boys. He called it "a campaign for the women and girls who have the right to live free of violence, today and in the future, ... a campaign to stop the untold cost that violence against women inflicts on all humankind." The campaign, which will run from 2008 through 2015 to coincide with the target date for achieving the MDGs, offers a unique opportunity to make violence against women history.



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- 1 World Bank, *World Development Report: Investing in Health*, 1993.
- 2 WHO, "Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women," 2005. http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/en/. The countries in the study were Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Namibia, Peru, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, and the United Republic of Tanzania.
- 3 GA resolution 48/103 of 20 December 1993.
- 4 Bott, Sarah, Andrew Morrison, and Mary Ellsberg, "Preventing and responding to gender-based violence in middle and low-income countries: a global review and analysis," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3618, June 2005.
- 5 Heise, Lori and Claudia Garcia-Moreno, "Violence by intimate partners" in *World Report on Violence and Health*. WHO, 2002.
- 6 United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, "Good practices in combating and eliminating violence against women," <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw-gp-2005/docs/FINALREPORT.goodpractices.pdf>.
- 7 Amnesty International, "Safe Schools: Every Girl's Right." 2007.
- 8 Bott, Sarah et al. "Preventing and responding to gender-based violence in middle and low-income countries: a global review and analysis," 2004.
- 9 The Secretary-General's in-depth study on all forms of violence against women, 2006.
- 10 UN Population Division, "Health and Mortality," www.un.org/esa/population/publications/reviewappraisal/chap5rv6.doc.
- 11 Bott, Sarah et al., "Preventing and responding to gender-based violence in middle and low-income countries: a global review and analysis," 2004.
- 12 The Secretary-General's in-depth study on all forms of violence against women, 2006.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 UNFPA, "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" in *State of World Population 2000*.
- 15 The Secretary-General's in-depth study on all forms of violence against women, 2006.
- 16 Heise, Lori and Claudia Garcia-Moreno, "Violence by intimate partners."