

Ending Violence against women

Summary of the United Nation's Secretary General's study Ending violence against women: from words to action October 2006



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Violence against women is a form of discrimination and a violation of human rights. It harms families across the generations, impoverishes communities and reinforces other forms of violence throughout societies. Violence against women stops them from fulfilling their potential, restricts economic growth and undermines development. It can only be eliminated, therefore, by addressing discrimination, promoting women's equality and empowerment, and ensuring that women's human rights are fulfilled. All of humanity would benefit from an end to this violence.

Violence against women was drawn out of the private domain into public attention and the arena of State accountability largely because of the grass-roots work of women's organizations and movements around the world. This work drew attention to the fact that violence against women is not the result of random, individual acts of misconduct, but rather is deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men.

The knowledge base

There is compelling evidence that violence against women is severe and pervasive throughout the world: in 71 countries at least one survey on violence against women has been conducted. But:

- Many countries lack reliable data and few carry out regular data collection, which would allow changes over time to be measured.
- Information is urgently needed on how various forms of violence affect different groups of women and impact of measures taken to combat violence against women.
- Ensuring adequate data collection is part of every State's obligation to address violence against women. A set of international indicators on violence against women should be established using comparable methods to define and measure violence.

Causes and risk factors

- The roots of violence against women lie in historically patriarchal disparities of power, discriminatory cultural norms and economic inequalities serve to deny women's human rights and perpetuate violence. Violence against women is one of the key means through which male control over women's agency and sexuality is maintained.
- Violence against women is not confined to a specific culture, region or country, or to particular groups of women within a society but are shaped by factors such as ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, disability, nationality and religion.

Forms

- Forms of violence against women include: physical, sexual, psychological and economic. Some increase in importance while others diminish as societies undergo demographic changes, economic restructuring and social and cultural shifts. For example, new technologies may generate new forms of violence, such as internet or mobile telephone stalking and trafficking.
- Women are subjected to violence in a wide range of settings: family, the community, state custody, and armed conflict across the lifespan of women, from before birth to old age.
- The most common form of violence experienced by women globally is intimate partner violence, sometimes leading to death. On average, at least one in three women is subjected to intimate partner violence. Between 40 and 70 per cent of female murder victims are killed by husbands or boyfriends in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States.
- Within the community settings, femicide (gender-based murder of women), sexual violence, sexual harassment and trafficking in women are receiving increasing attention.
- Also widespread are harmful traditional practices, including early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation/cutting.

- Women are also subjected to violence in police custody. Violence against women while in police custody or in prisons includes sexual violence; inappropriate surveillance; strip searches conducted by or in the presence of men.
- Violence perpetrated by the State, through its agents, through omission, or through public policy, spans physical, sexual and psychological violence. It can constitute torture.

Consequences

- Both women and children suffer a range of health problems, and their ability to earn a living and to participate in public life is diminished. Children significantly suffer poor school performance and behavioural disturbances. Reproductive health consequences include gynaecological disorders, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies and problems with childbirth.
- Women who have experienced violence are at higher risk of contracting HIV. Fear of violence also prevents women from accessing HIV/AIDS information and receiving treatment and counselling.
- Domestic violence and rape account for 5 per cent of the total disease burden for women aged 15 to 44 in developing countries and 19 per cent in developed countries.
- Violence against women impoverishes women, their families, communities and nations.
- While even the most comprehensive surveys to date underestimate the costs, they all show that the failure to address violence against women has serious economic consequences. These costs include the direct costs of services to treat and support abused women and their children and to bring perpetrators to justice. The indirect costs include lost employment and productivity.
- Depression is one of the most common consequences of sexual and physical violence against women. Women subjected to violence are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs and to report sexual dysfunction, suicide attempts, post-traumatic stress and central nervous system disorders. Witnessing chronic domestic violence can lead to a lifelong pattern of violence in personal relationships.
- Girls who are targeted for violence are less likely to complete their education.

State responsibility

- 102 States have no specific legal provisions on domestic violence.
- Marital rape is not a prosecutable offence in at least 53 States.
- Only 93 States have some legislative provision prohibiting trafficking. Where legislation exists it is often inadequate in its scope and coverage and/or not effectively implemented.
- Many States do not have sufficient support measures in place for women victims of violence.
- They also lack systematic and reliable data on violence against women that is needed to inform strategies to overcome such violence.
- When the State fails to hold the perpetrators of violence accountable, this not only encourages further abuses, it also gives the message that male violence against women is acceptable or normal thus reinforcing inequalities that affect other women and girls as well.

Promising practices

Many States have developed good or promising practices to prevent or respond to violence against women. Women's NGOs in many countries have engaged in innovative projects and programmes, sometimes in collaboration with the State.

Common principles include: clear policies and laws; strong enforcement mechanisms; motivated and well-trained personnel; the involvement of multiple sectors; and close collaboration with local women's groups, civil society organizations, academics and professionals. Many governments use national plans of action — which include legal measures, service provision and prevention strategies — to address violence against women.

The way forward: a question of priorities

- The most effective weapon to fight violence against women is a clear demonstration of political commitment, such as statements by high-level government officials, backed by action and the commitment of resources by the State.
- States should take urgent and concrete measures to secure gender equality and protect women's human rights.
- States must close the gaps between international standards and national laws, policies and practices.
- States should build and sustain strong multisectoral strategies, coordinated nationally and locally. They should also build on the work done by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), scale up and institutionalize it and share experiences with other countries.
- Strong institutional mechanisms are required at national and international level to ensure action, coordination, monitoring and accountability.
- Men have a role, especially in preventing violence, and this role needs to be further explored and strengthened.
- States should allocate adequate resources and funding to programmes to address and redress violence against women.
- The United Nations should take a stronger, better coordinated and more visible leadership role to address violence against women and increase resource allocation.

For additional information please visit: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw>