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## Violence against Women – Facts and Figures

*Violence against women and girls continues unabated in every continent, country and culture. It takes a devastating toll on women's lives, on their families, and on society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence — yet the reality is that too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned.*

— UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 8 March 2007

Violence against women and girls is a problem of pandemic proportions. 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]. 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 and health consequences of violence against women. For women aged 15 to 44 years, violence is a major cause of death and disability [2]. In a 1994 study based on World Bank data about ten selected risk factors facing women in this age group, rape and domestic violence rated higher than cancer, motor vehicle accidents, war and malaria [3]. Moreover, several studies have revealed increasing links between violence against women and HIV/AIDS. Women who have experienced violence are at a higher risk of HIV infection: a survey among 1,366 South African women showed that women who were beaten by their partners were 48 percent more likely to be infected with HIV than those who were not [4].

The economic cost of violence against women is considerable — a 2003 report by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the costs of intimate partner violence in the United States alone exceed US\$5.8 billion per year: US\$4.1 billion are for direct medical and health care services, while productivity losses account for nearly US\$1.8 billion [5]. Violence against women impoverishes individuals, families and communities, reducing the economic development of each nation [6].

In 1996, the United Nations General Assembly established the [UN Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women](#). The Trust Fund is managed by UNIFEM and is the only multilateral grant-making mechanism that supports local, national and regional efforts to combat violence. Since it began operations in 1997, the Trust Fund has awarded more than US\$19 million to 263 initiatives to address violence against women in 115 countries. Raising awareness of women's human rights, these UNIFEM-supported efforts have linked activists and advocates from all parts of the world; shown how small, innovative projects impact laws, policies and attitudes; and has begun to break the wall of silence by moving the issue onto public agendas everywhere.

### DOMESTIC AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Domestic and intimate partner violence includes 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 by 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 [7]. An earlier WHO study puts the number of women physically abused by their partners or ex-partners at 30 percent in the United Kingdom, and 22 percent in the United States [8].

In a recent survey by the American Institute on Domestic Violence, 60 percent of senior executives said that domestic violence, which limits women's workplace participation, has an adverse effect on company productivity. The survey found that domestic violence victims lose nearly 8 million days of paid work per year — the equivalent of 32,000 full-time jobs [9].

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 gun violence, beatings and burns, among numerous other forms of abuse [10]. A study conducted in São 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 [11]. According to a UNIFEM report on violence against women in Afghanistan, out of 1,327 incidents of violence against women collected between January 2003 and June 2005, 36 women had been killed — in 16 cases (44.4 percent) by their intimate partners [12].

According to the Secretary-General's [In-Depth Study on All Forms of Violence against Women](#), by 2006 89 States had some form of legislative prohibition on domestic violence, including 60 States with specific domestic violence laws, and a growing number of countries had instituted national plans of action to end violence against women. This is a clear increase in comparison to 2003, when UNIFEM did a scan of anti-violence legislation and found that only 45 countries had specific laws on domestic violence. Yet high levels of violence against women 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.

Limited availability of services, stigma and fear prevent women from seeking assistance and redress. This has been confirmed by a study published by the WHO in 2005: on the basis of data collected from 24,000 women in 10 countries, between 55 percent and 95 percent of women who had been physically abused by their partners had never contacted NGOs, shelters or the police for help [13].

The UN Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women supported a project to combat domestic violence in Nigeria. The project aimed to sensitize the general public by producing and airing a TV drama series on VAW, entitled "Trauma." It also held workshops and advocacy meetings with stakeholders and legislators in order to support the adoption of a pending domestic violence bill. During project implementation, the bill was adopted in several states in Nigeria.

## **SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

Although women are more at risk of violence from their intimate partners than from other persons, sexual violence by non-partners is also common in many settings. According to the 2006 In-Depth Study of the Secretary-General: "Sexual violence by non-partners refers to violence by a relative, friend, acquaintance, neighbour, work colleague or stranger. Estimates of the prevalence of sexual violence by non-partners are difficult to establish, because in many societies, sexual violence remains an issue of deep shame for women and often for their families. Statistics on rape extracted from police records, for example, are notoriously unreliable because of significant underreporting" [14].

It is estimated that worldwide, one in five women will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime [15]. 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 [16]. According to the 2005 multi-country study on domestic violence undertaken by the WHO, between 10 and 12 percent of women in Peru, Samoa and Tanzania have suffered sexual violence by non-partners after the age of 15. Other population-based studies reveal that 11.6 percent of women in Canada reported sexual violence by a non-partner in their lifetime, and between 10 and 20 percent of women in New Zealand and Australia have experienced various forms of sexual violence from non-partners, including unwanted sexual touching, attempted rape and rape [17].

In many societies, the legal system and community attitudes add to the trauma that 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 [18].

## **HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES**

Harmful traditional practices are forms of violence that have been committed against women in certain communities and societies for so long that they are considered 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, disability, physical and psychological harm for millions of women annually.

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

FGM refers to several types of deeply-rooted 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.” It is estimated that more than 130 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM, mainly in Africa and some Middle Eastern countries [19], and two million girls a year are at risk of mutilation. Cases of FGM have been reported in Asian countries such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, and it is thought to be performed among some indigenous groups in Central and South America [20]. FGM is also being practiced among immigrant communities in Europe, North America and Australia [21].

Since the late 1980s, opposition to FGM and efforts to combat the practice have increased. According to the Secretary-General’s In-Depth Study, as of April 2006, 15 of the 28 African States where FGM is prevalent made it an offence under criminal law. Of the nine States in Asia and the Arabian Peninsula where female genital mutilation/cutting is prevalent among certain groups, two have enacted legal measures prohibiting it. In addition, ten States in other parts of the world have enacted laws criminalizing the practice [22].

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. The project involved close cooperation with circumcisers, religious leaders, and men and boys in the communities [23]. Another project in Mali, with support from the UN Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women, is currently working to foster dialogue and build capacities among government ministries, parliamentarians, civil society and traditional and religious leaders that can lead to changes in harmful practices and attitudes.

### **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 similar payments, dowry murder occurs predominantly in South Asia. According to official crime statistics in India, 6,822 women were killed in 2002 as a result of such violence. Small community studies have also indicated that dowry demands have played an important role in women being burned to death and in deaths of women being labelled suicides [24]. In Bangladesh, there have been many incidents of acid attacks due to dowry disputes [25], leading often to blindness, disfigurement, and death. In 2002, 315 women and girls in Bangladesh were victims of acid attacks [26]; in 2005 that number was 267 [27].

### **“Honour Killings”**

In many societies, rape victims, women suspected of engaging in premarital sex, and women accused of adultery have been murdered by their relatives because the violation of a woman’s chastity is viewed as

an affront to the family's honour. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that the annual world-wide number of "honour killing" victims may be as high as 5000 women [28].

According to a 2002 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, "honour killings" take place in Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Morocco and other Mediterranean and Gulf countries. It also occurs in countries such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom within immigrant communities. It is not only in Islamic countries or communities 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 [29].

According to a government report, 4,000 women and men were killed in Pakistan in the name of honour between 1998 and 2003, the number of women being more than double the number of men [30]. 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 [31]. In Jordan and Lebanon, 70 to 75 percent of the perpetrators of these so-called "honour killings" are the women's brothers [32].

In Sudan, the UN Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women supported a project to combat "honour killings" in the Nuba Mountains region. The project trained local and religious leaders, women leaders and teachers to become advocates in their communities against "honour killings" and other forms of violence against women. They organized trainings and group discussions, as a result of which "honour killings" were for the first time discussed in public. The project led to positive changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices among community members who increasingly began to regard "honour killings" as a crime, rather than a legitimate means to defend a tribe's honour.

### **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 by claiming it ensures a better future for their daughters. Parents and families marry off their younger daughters as a means of gaining economic security and status for themselves as well as for their daughters. Insecurity, conflict and societal crises 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 way to secure their protection [33].

According to a 2006 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women on her mission to Afghanistan, an estimated 57 percent of girls in Afghanistan are married before the age of 16. Economic reasons are said to play a significant role in such marriages. Due to the common practice of "bride money," the girl child becomes an asset exchangeable for money or goods. Families see committing a young daughter (or sister) to a family that is able to pay a high price for the bride as a viable solution to their poverty and indebtedness. The custom of bride money may motivate families that face indebtedness and economic crisis to "cash in" the "asset" as young as 6 or 7, with the understanding that the actual marriage is delayed until the child reaches puberty. However, reports indicate that this is rarely observed, and that young girls may be sexually violated not only by the groom, but also by older men in the family, particularly if the groom is a child too [34].

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

Trafficking involves the recruitment and transportation of persons, using deception, coercion and threats in order to place and keep them in a situation of forced labour, slavery or servitude. Persons are trafficked into a variety of sectors of the informal economy, including prostitution, domestic work, agriculture, the garment industry or street begging.

While exact data are hard to come by, estimates of the number of trafficked persons range from 500,000 to two million per year, and a few organizations have estimated that up to four million persons are trafficked every year [35]. Although women, men, girls and boys can become victims of trafficking, the majority of victims are female. Various forms of gender-based discrimination increase the risk of women and girls becoming affected by poverty, which in turns puts them at higher risk of becoming targeted by traffickers, who use false promises of jobs and educational opportunities to recruit their victims. Trafficking is often connected to organized crime and has developed into a highly profitable business that generates an estimated US\$7-12 billion per year [36].

Trafficking is in most cases a trans-border crime that affects all regions of the world: according to a 2006 UN global report on trafficking, 127 countries have been documented as countries of origin, and 137 as countries of destination. The main countries of origin are reported to be in Central and South-Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Asia, followed by West Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. The most commonly reported countries of destination are in Western Europe, Asia and Northern America [37]. By 2006, 93 countries had prohibited trafficking as a matter of law.

Russian NGO, Syostri, used a grant from the Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women to create a website that has become a hub of information on trafficking. The site lists organizations involved in combating the problem and includes facts and figures along with policy recommendations, national laws and international anti-trafficking agreements. The project also focused on preparing analytical reports for each country, revealing that many women are vulnerable to trafficking within the CIS, not only from the CIS to other areas, as often assumed. This knowledge was used in educational material, including brochures for adolescents explaining how trafficking can happen and ways to guard against it [38].

## **HIV/AIDS AND VIOLENCE**

Women's inability to negotiate safe sex and refuse unwanted sex is closely linked to the high prevalence of 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. A study conducted in Tanzania in 2001 found that HIV-positive women were over 2.5 times more likely to have experienced violence at the hands of their current partner than other women [39]. Young women generally know significantly less about HIV/AIDS than their male counterparts. Just 1 in 5 married women in Bangladesh had heard of AIDS; in Sudan only 5 percent of women knew condom use could prevent HIV infection [40]. Both realities — lack of knowledge and lack of power — obliterate women's ability to protect themselves from infection.

Violence is also 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. A clinic in Zambia reported that 60 percent of eligible women opt out of treatment due to fears of violence and abandonment resulting from disclosing their HIV-positive status [41]. Such women have been driven from their homes, left destitute, 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 HIV-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 worldwide are occurring among young people between the ages of 15 and 24, and more than 60 percent of HIV-positive youth in this age bracket are female.

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 AIDS crisis. Tragically and most cruelly, in many conflicts, the planned and purposeful infection of women with HIV has been a tool of war, often pitting one ethnic group against another, as occurred during the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 [42].

The UN Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women supported a project in Haiti that trained community-based human rights workers (*ajan*) who work with women victims of rape, on the connection between HIV/AIDS and violence against women. The project helped to increase *ajan*'s understanding of their role in promoting women's health and human rights, and contributed to a process of catharsis and empowerment of *ajan* members, many of whom had been victims of rape themselves.

### **CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN IN SITUATIONS OF 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 have been 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. The 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is the first treaty to expressly recognize this broad spectrum of sexual and gender-based violence as among the gravest breaches of international law. Today, almost half of all persons indicted by the ICC and other international tribunals - such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia; the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; and the Special Court for Sierra Leone — are charged with rape or sexual assault, either as perpetrators or their superiors. Violence against women during or after armed conflicts has been reported in every international or non-international war-zone, including Afghanistan, Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Peru, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Chechnya/Russian Federation, Darfur, Sudan, northern Uganda and the former Yugoslavia [43].

In Rwanda, up to half a million women were raped during the 1994 genocide. The numbers were 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 to 2001 was as high as 64,000 [44]. When the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women visited the Darfur region in Sudan in 2004, she received testimonies of women and girls who had suffered multiple forms of violence committed by government-backed militia and security forces, including rape, killings, the burning of homes and pillage of livestock. Displaced women and girls living in refugee camps have reported rapes, beatings and abductions that occur when they leave the camps for necessities. Victims of rape have faced numerous obstacles in accessing justice and health care, for instance, being accused of having made false accusations, having had consensual sex before marriage, or having committed adultery in violation of the Penal Code [45].

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" [46]. Recently, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes described the situation of rape victims in a hospital in the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo, saying that he saw evidence and heard stories from survivors of "sexual violence so brutal it staggers the imagination." He reported that more than 32,000 cases of rape and sexual violence have been registered in South Kivu Province alone since 2005 — though this represents just a fraction of the total number of women subjected to such extreme suffering [47].

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, and places of refuge is limited despite the valiant efforts of numerous local NGOs to provide assistance. A climate of impunity further exacerbates the situation, and serves as an incentive to ongoing violence. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security of 2000 calls for women's equal participation in peace and security issues, yet seven years later it is evident that much more effort is needed to strengthen mechanisms to prevent, investigate, report, prosecute and remedy violence against women in times of war, and to ensure their voices are heard in building peace.

The UN Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women supported a project to train female ex-combatants in Rwanda — many of whom had been victims of sexual violence during the armed conflict — on women’s human rights and violence against women. The training provided participants with a safe space to speak about their experiences of violence and trauma. It also empowered the women to play a leading role in the fight against sexual violence and HIV/AIDS in their communities.

### **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AS A HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION**

In 2006, the Secretary-General’s In-Depth Study confirmed that violence against women — whether in the home, workplace or elsewhere — is a particularly egregious human rights violation that must be eradicated. Although the 1981 [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW) does not explicitly mention violence against women [48], the Committee to Eliminate Discrimination against Women, which is responsible for interpreting and monitoring the implementation of CEDAW, has clarified in its [General Recommendation No. 19](#) (1992) that States Parties to the Convention are under an obligation to take all appropriate means to eliminate violence against women [49].

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