



Violence against women

In families

The most common form of violence against women is domestic violence, or violence against women in families. Research consistently demonstrates that a woman is more likely to be injured, raped or killed by a current or former partner than by any other person.¹

Men may kick, bite, slap, punch or try to strangle their wives or partners; they may burn them or throw acid in their faces; they may beat or rape them, with body parts or sharp objects; and they may use deadly weapons to stab or shoot them. At times, women are seriously injured, and in some cases they are killed or die as a result of their injuries.

The nature of violence against women in families has prompted comparisons to torture.² The assaults are intended to injure women's psychological health as well as their bodies, and often involve humiliation as well as physical violence. Also like torture, the assaults are unpredictable and bear little relation to women's own behaviour. Finally, the assaults may continue week after week, for many years.

Physical abuse

In every country where reliable, large-scale studies have been conducted, results indicate that between 16% and 52% of women have been assaulted by an intimate partner (see table). Although national data are scarce, there are a growing number of community-based and small-scale studies which indicate widespread violence against women is an important cause of morbidity and mortality.

It is likely that these studies, from both industrialized and developing countries, underestimate the problem for many reasons.

Some women may believe that they deserve the beatings because of some wrong action on their part. Other women refrain from speaking about the abuse because they fear that their partner will further harm them in reprisal for revealing "family secrets", or they may be ashamed of their situation. Furthermore, in many countries there are no legal or social sanctions against violence by an intimate partner. Considering these factors, estimates of the prevalence of physical abuse by a partner are probably conservative.

Rape in intimate relationships

Physical attacks by a partner may include rape and sexual violence. Women in many societies, however, do not define forced sex as rape if they are married to, or living with, the attacker. Although some countries have now recognized marital rape as a criminal offence, others still argue that husbands have a legal right to unlimited sexual access to their wives.

Surveys in a number of countries show that from 10% to 15% of women report being forced to have sex by their intimate partner. Among women who are physically assaulted in their relationship, the figures are higher.

Psychological or mental violence

Psychological violence includes repeated verbal abuse, harassment, confinement, and deprivation of physical, financial and personal resources. For some women, the incessant insults and tyrannies which constitute emotional abuse may be more painful than the physical attacks because they effectively undermine women's security and self-confidence. A single occurrence of physical violence may greatly intensify the meaning and impact of emotional abuse. Women have

been reported as saying that the worst aspect of battery was not the violence itself but the “mental torture” and “living in fear and terror”.

Failures of detection

There has been a failure in most countries to identify and provide support to women suffering from domestic violence. This is due, in part, to the fact that if women do seek help it is from neighbours or family members, not the police or health services. A number of studies have shown that shame or fear of reprisal often prevents women from reporting an attack to authorities, or even speaking to friends about it. Some fear that if their injuries are reported, their children will be taken away by child protection services. Those services which could provide support, such as the police or health care, often do not identify women suffering from violence, or they are unable to respond adequately. They may not be trained to deal with the problem or know where to refer women seeking help. They may be afraid of confronting the problem, or be ill-equipped to deal with the complex situation surrounding the woman who has suffered violence.

Health consequences

The consequences of violence against women may be non-fatal in the form of physical injuries, ranging from minor cuts and bruises to chronic disability, or mental trauma. They may also be fatal, resulting from either intentional homicide or injuries sustained or from AIDS. In the case of mental trauma, women may commit suicide as a last resort to escape violence. In this package, the sheet on *Health consequences* discusses this issue in more depth.

Initiatives against violence

A growing awareness of the issue of violence against women in families, spearheaded by the efforts of hundreds of women's organizations from around the world, has resulted in a range of initiatives dealing with the problem at almost every level of society. Many of these are under-funded endeavours which are able to help a fraction of the women

who need them. Despite this, they do indicate what can be achieved on a wide scale, given the political will.

- *Support groups* where battered women can share experiences have proved, in Argentina, Australia, Costa Rica, India, Japan, Liberia and other countries, to be an effective way of helping women end or cope with their violent relationships.
- *Local community involvement* in the reporting and rebuking violent husbands is having some success in Belize, India and among Aboriginal people of Canada.
- *Women's police stations* have been set up throughout Latin America and in a number of Asian countries to provide a more committed and concerned response to crimes against women.
- *Courses in non-violent parenting* and conflict resolution, for adults and children, are available in an increasing number of countries, including Jamaica and Canada.
- *Legal literacy programmes* and free legal advice encouraging battered women to press charges is being tried in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Uganda.
- *Sensitivity training* for health professionals and the police, and the adoption of new protocols for dealing with the victims of domestic violence, has been introduced in Zimbabwe, the United States, Brazil and elsewhere.
- *Safe-houses and shelters*, for women leaving abusive partners, have been set up in Egypt, Paraguay, El Salvador, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Canada and other countries.

1. Council on Scientific Affairs, American Medical Association, Violence against women: relevance for medical practitioners, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1992, **267**(23): 3184-3189.

2. United Nations Economic and Social Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women*, E/CN.4/1996/53, February 1996.

