



Violence against women

Rape and sexual assault

Large-scale studies of rape and sexual assault are scarce. Those that do exist, however, consistently report high prevalence rates. Research conducted in industrialized countries has shown that the likelihood of a woman being raped or having to fight off an attempted rape is high. In developing countries, research suggests that rape is an ever-present threat and reality for millions of women.

Six separate investigations suggest that between 14% and 20% of women in the United States will experience a completed rape at least once in her lifetime.^{1,2}

In a random sample of 420 women in Toronto, Canada, 40% reported at least one episode of forced sexual intercourse since the age of 16.³

Although rape and sexual assault may be perpetrated by strangers, evidence from many sources indicates that a high percentage of rapists are acquaintances, "friends", relatives, and those in positions of trust or power. Another consistent finding is the high percentage of young, and often very young, rape victim (see table). Many sexual assaults are perpetrated by more than one attacker. "Gang rape", where two or more men subdue and penetrate their victims, is not uncommon.

Women are also subject to what has been termed "non-contact" sexual abuse in which, for example, men expose their penises or make obscene telephone calls. Where non-contact abuse has been studied, it has been discovered that a high percentage of women have experienced this type of abuse; in some cases up to 50% of all women questioned.

Statistics on sex crimes^a

Country	Attackers known to victim (%)	Victims aged 15 or less (%)	Victims aged 10 or less (%)
Peru (Lima)	60	-	18 ^b
Malaysia	68	58	18 ^c
Mexico (City)	67	36	23
Panama (City)	61	40	-
Papua New Guinea	-	47	13 ^d
Chile (Santiago)	72	58	32
United States	78	62	29

Adapted from: Heise, L. Violence against women: the hidden health burden. *World health statistics quarterly*, 1993, **46**(1): 78-85.

^aIncludes attempted and completed rape and sexual assaults such as molestation, except for the US data which is for completed rape only.

^bPercentage of survivors aged nine or less.

^cPercentage of survivors aged six or less.

^dPercentage of survivors aged seven or less.

Women in custody

Often, women who enter prisons are already victims of violence.

In a study of more than 300 women in federal prisons in Canada, 68% of all women, and 90% of Aboriginal women reported physical abuse at some time in their lives.⁴

Violence against women who are in custody in institutions and prisons may be widespread. The nature of abuse ranges from physical or verbal harassment to sexual and physical torture. Various reports on women in custody have shown that women are stripped, shackled and their body cavities searched by male guards. Women from many countries report being raped while in detention centres.⁵ Incarceration, intended as a time for reform from criminal activities, then becomes one more episode of victimization. The psychological and physical sequelae of this violence are further compounded by feelings of helplessness, and a general unavailability of medical care and support services.

Trafficking in women, forced prostitution

Each year, thousands of women throughout the world are tricked, coerced, abducted or sold into slavery-like conditions and forced to work as prostitutes, domestic workers, sweatshop labourers or wives. Reports of involvement in international trafficking by state officials and police were routinely received by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women during her investigation into this issue.⁶

Violence against women domestic workers

Domestic workers are vulnerable to violent assaults, including physical abuse and rape, by their employers. Migrant women are especially at risk as employers may withhold salaries, passports and personal documents. This limits workers' movement in those countries where aliens are required to carry proof of their legal status, thus impeding any

attempts to claim protection at their embassies.

In some countries, domestic workers are not covered by labour laws. Where laws are in place, workers may not be informed of their rights, especially in countries where the host language is unknown to them or they are separated from their social group.⁷

Many women keep the violence a secret

Women who are the victims of sexual violence are often reluctant to report the crime to police, family or others. In countries where a woman's virginity is associated with family honour, unmarried women who report a rape may be forced to marry their attacker. Some may be murdered by their shamed fathers or brothers, as a way of restoring family honour. In some countries, a woman who has been raped may be prosecuted and imprisoned for committing the "crime" of sex outside of marriage, if she cannot prove that the incident was in fact rape.

Some responses to the problem

Women who do disclose abuses are often advised to restrict their movements or adapt their clothing so as to avoid "tempting" men to attack them. This approach is inadequate because it wrongly assumes that men are unable to control their sexual impulses. It also ignores the fact that many rapes are committed in women's own homes, frequently by men whom they know.

A review of Commonwealth government initiatives to combat violence against women has pointed to the relative paucity of campaigns dealing with rape and sexual assault, as compared, for example with wife-battering and sexual harassment.⁸ However, women's groups in many countries are offering support across a range of women's issues, including rape and sexual assault, along with domestic violence and child sexual abuse.

- *Survivor groups and rape crisis centres* have been set up in some countries where women can work together to try and overcome their trauma

- *Special rape crisis rooms* have been set up in hospitals in El Salvador and police stations in the United Kingdom for victims to be examined and questioned in privacy
- *Woman police officers* have been recruited and trained specifically to deal with victims of rape and sexual abuse in Bangladesh and Malaysia
- *Theatrical performances followed by discussions* in school and community settings are exploring issues relating to rape in Jamaica
- *Rape crisis telephone lines* have been established in many countries, providing anonymous counselling and support for victims
- *Complaints about violent sexual themes* on television and radio, and in the press are fuelling public debate on these issues in Jamaica.

(See *What health workers can do* for ways in which health workers can help women and girls who are victims of violence.)

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3. Randall M, Haskell L. Sexual violence in women's lives: findings from The Women's Safety Project, a community-based survey. *Violence against women*, March 1995, 6-31.
4. Shaw M. *The survey of federally sentenced women*, as cited in The Harbour Report, Correctional Services of Canada, 1996.
5. United Nations, Economic and Social Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences*, 22 November 1994, E/CN.4/1995/42.
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