



Beating violence against women

A US road safety campaign used the slogan "Belt your wife and save her life".

Many people thought it was clever and humorous. But although the slogan meant well, it inadvertently condoned the concept that hitting one's wife may actually be funny.

Such brand of humor is not confined to American, or Western society. Women throughout the world have been victims of violence aimed especially at them. Figures from the United Nations (UN) show that in Asia, for instance, violence against women has been in-

creasing. In the case of Thailand, a UN-sponsored seminar entitled Violence Against Women, which was held in Bangkok in 1993, confirms this.

A speaker for the seminar, Siriporn Skrobanek, executive director of the Thai Foundation for Women, noted the

marked rise in violence committed against the women. "Last year, for example, our telephone counseling service received calls from 240 women who had been beaten up, raped or abused. In the majority of cases the perpetrator of the violence was the boyfriend, husband or some relative of the victim."

Statistics from the Foundation for Children's Nutrition Centre compiled in 1985 (latest figures) also confirmed the Thai society's increasing violence against women. Mothers of 25 percent of children at the home said they were beaten up or assaulted by their husbands. Many said their children were also abused.

Across classes

Dr. Saisuree Chutikul supported Siriporn's observation that more Thai women are experiencing violence, adding that she was dismayed to observe that it occurs in all classes of society. "It is not, as you may think, confined to the uneducated. It happens even among so-called educated people.

Just recently, I learned of a woman who was badly beaten by her husband. I won't name him but if I did, you would probably recognize him immediately. He is a well-known doctor."

The incident is not an isolated one. "There are many like it," continued Saisuree. "Another case I know involves a Thai diplomat with a C6 ranking. Those who are familiar with the civil service system will know that this means he is a fairly high-ranking diplomat. But that didn't stop him from literally kicking his wife out of his car in a moment of anger. And do you know where he did it? In front of the Justice Ministry!"

Prostitution

In some countries, the forms of vio-

lence perpetrated against women include infanticide, the abortion of female fetuses, female circumcision and what is known in India as dowry burning. But in Thailand, the women sold into prostitution or as mail-order brides are most likely to experience violence.

"Both are problems in Thailand," Siriporn told *Focus* after the seminar. "Thai women and girls are sold into prostitution and forced by brothel owners to have sex with as many clients as possible.

The girls have no choice in the matter. So, the sex amounts to rape. Often they are also beaten up by the clients or brothel owners."

Various studies on prostitution in Thailand estimate the number of prostituted women in the country at between 100,000 and 200,000.

Mail-order brides

Peril awaits girls who are sold overseas as prostitutes and mail-order brides. "These girls are usually tricked into going abroad with the promise of a well-paid job and often don't realize what awaits them."

Once in a foreign country, the mail-order bride is even more defenseless. "The law in some foreign countries is particularly unfair because it does not offer protection to prostitutes. The law says that if a woman's status has been determined as that of a prostitute, she has knowingly allowed herself to have sex with a customer and it therefore cannot be rape," Siriporn pointed out.

Psychological abuse

The definition of violence must also include various forms of psychological violence, including the verbal abuse of women by their spouses.

"This is another common problem in Thailand, but it is rarely recognized. Many people think that shouting at their wives or insulting them is a normal thing," said Siriporn

The other forms of psychological abuse often overlooked, she cited, are cases of husbands keeping their wives locked up at home or constantly scrutinizing and restricting their movement.

Psychological violence is particularly cruel and women who are abused by men are often forced to accept it because they are financially or physically dependent on them. "They may be afraid to leave their husbands because they have no means of surviving on their own or because they want to keep the family together for the sake of the children," Dr. Chutikul said.

A published UN report on domestic violence against women says that in all societies, responses to domestic violence are influenced by social values.

"The family is considered a private place where outsiders should not intervene, even when problems are serious. The maintenance of the family as a unit may take precedence over the safety of women. Social inequality between the sexes leads to women's subordinate position within the family. As a result, many societies condone the disciplining of wives, and tend to ignore or trivialize severe incidences of domestic violence," reads the report.

Search for solutions

If the subject is difficult to come to reckon, finding measures to solve the problem of violence against women can be just as complex. There are no easy remedies and even experts in the field are divided as to how to approach the problem, with some arguing that the problem should not be regarded as gender-specific.

“We should approach it as a human rights problem and not as one that affects women. After all, men are also victims of violence and men find themselves in many of the same situations that you have described. There are male prostitutes who are abused, men who are raped by other men, and even men who are battered and/or verbally abused by their wives,” a participant of the UN seminar said.

Others consider violence against women an issue in itself.

True, not enough studies have been made on the relationship between violence against women and violence in societies in general.

Worse, few women’s groups address the problem of violence against women. The government and the community as a whole have yet to recognize the issue as a real and serious social problem.

source: *Voices of Thai Women*, No. 9, June 1993; Foundation for Women, P.O. Box 47, Bangkok 10700

Forms of Violence Against Women

PSYCHOLOGICAL isolation, restricting freedom, threats, humiliation, abuse of privilege, denial of love and attention, denial of support, threat or act of abandonment, threat of harm

ECONOMIC destruction or snatching of property, forced dependency, neglect of other person’s needs

SEXUAL incest, molestation, forced sexual activity, inappropriate sexual attention, unwanted touching or intercourse after assault

PHYSICAL pushing; shoving; punching; slapping; the use of arms, feet, objects or weapons for discipline’ personal controls on clothing, behavior, association and action.

(Taken from Gladys Gwashure, Program Director, Musasa Project, at the Seminar on Violence Against Women, 31 August-3 September 1993, in Harare, Zimbabwe)

source: *Speak Out/Taurai/Khulumani*, No.27, 1994; Women’s Action Group, P.O. Box 135, Harare, Zimbabwe

Why, pray tell?

Reasons why women remain in abusive relationships

Emotional

- lack of inner strength
- fear of the future
- hope for change
- loving him even though he hurts her
- belief in the myth “I asked for it”

Economic

- unemployment
- no family to go to
- the children’s economic well-being

Social

- advice from family, friends and the church to stay
- lack of support from the community
- poor response from the police

source: *Speak Out/Taurai/Khulumani* No. 27, 1994