

# Violence against women

is the most pervasive form of human rights abuse in the world today. It includes assault, battery, rape, sexual slavery, mutilation, and murder. It is not a new phenomenon. It is not tied to poverty or economic upheaval. It is not related to the social displacement of peoples. Instead, it cuts across social and economic situations and is deeply embedded in cultures around the world—so much so that millions of women consider it a way of life.

Over the past decade, national and international groups have turned a spotlight on the hidden brutality of violence against women. They have called on the international community to value a woman's right to be free from violence as a human right. This focus on violence against women has spurred the development of strategies and programs to address the problem. Still, efforts to eradicate violence remain in their infancy and most societies continue to consider violence against women a private, so-called "family" matter.

## ABUSED AT HOME

The highest percentage of violence against women occurs at home. A recent World Bank analysis indicates that one-quarter to one-half of all the world's women have been battered by an intimate partner. Regional studies confirm the level of violence. Statistics from Latin America show that between 26 and 60 percent of adult women have been beaten at least once in their lives. In Asia, 60 percent of all women have been assaulted. In sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 42 percent of women report being battered regularly by an intimate partner.

## VICTIMS OF RAPE

Data on rape provides another chilling picture: One out of five women worldwide is a victim of rape. Most of them

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know their attackers. Young girls are the most frequent targets. Forty to 60 percent of all known sexual assaults are committed against girls aged 15 years and younger.

And although rape as a weapon of war has been internationally condemned since the Nuremberg trials following World War II, armies continue to use it in conflicts around the world. In 1992, as many as 20,000 women were raped in

the first months of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Rwanda, between 2,000 and 5,000 rape-related pregnancies were reported in 1994. Over the past 10 years, mass rape has been documented in Peru, Myanmar, Liberia, Cambodia, Somalia, and Uganda.

## OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE

Female infanticide and sex-selective abortions are also forms of violence against

women. Demographers estimate that 60 million women are "missing" from the populations of South and West Asia, China, and North Africa, as a result. In India, particularly the northern regions, and in China and the Republic of Korea, genetic testing for sex has grown into a booming business. A recent study of amniocentesis procedures in a Bombay hospital found that 95.5 percent of aborted fetuses are female. UNICEF reports anecdotal evidence of the practice of female infanticide in some Asian communities.

Another fatal practice, "dowry killing," occurs in India. There, women are killed because they cannot meet the dowry demands of husbands' families. More than a dozen women are reported killed each day in dowry-related incidents—higher than 5,000 per year.

Female genital mutilation, practiced in at least 28 countries, mainly in Africa, is another form of violence against women. Considered a rite of passage for young girls, an estimated 130 million women and girls alive today have undergone a procedure in which all or part of the outer genitalia is removed. Two million girls each year undergo the operation, which is not only painful but also often results in a lifetime of health-related problems.

#### **RESPONDING TO THE VIOLENCE: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

The international community has a role to play in re-

ducing the violence against women. The 1979 approval by the United Nations of the Convention on the Elimination of Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) marked a significant beginning in addressing the problem. Today, 160 countries have ratified the con-

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Jennifer Lynn Shafer

vention. Although it is a milestone in international efforts to reduce violence against women, nearly one-third of the signatory countries have declared that they will not be subject to several CEDAW provisions. These include equal rights to nationality and citizenship, equal ownership of family property, and an equal role in marriage and family life.

#### **NATIONAL CONSTITUTIONS AND CRIMINAL CODES**

At the national level, many countries have constitutions and laws intended to protect women against violence. Constitutions include bans on violence against human beings and the right to the integrity of

the body and the right to life. Most prohibit discrimination against citizens.

Brazil's new constitution requires the state to combat violence against women. Colombia declares violence in the family destructive and provides for penalties by law. Equality under the law is written into most constitutions. Some refer specifically to women, like the constitutions of China, Greece, and Poland. These types of provisions are important because, in the absence of other laws or regulations, they can be used to protect women from violence.

National laws that protect against violence are usually part of the penal code. However, only 44 countries worldwide have laws that specifically protect women against domestic violence. Of these, some have expanded the law to cover cultural practices. For example, 12 countries have now criminalized the practice of female genital mutilation.

Most countries have laws against sexual assault and rape. The problem lies, however, in the level of protection guaranteed by the law. Efforts to reform rape law have been ongoing for decades and have centered on determining what constitutes rape. Only 17 countries now consider marital rape to be a criminal offense. Twelve Latin American countries still allow a rapist to escape prosecution if he marries his victim.

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