

Ending violence against women

From words to action

Study of the Secretary-General



UNITED NATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Violence against women is a form of discrimination and a violation of human rights. It causes untold misery, cutting short lives and leaving countless women living in pain and fear in every country in the world. It harms families across the generations, impoverishes communities and reinforces other forms of violence throughout societies. Violence against women stops them from fulfilling their potential, restricts economic growth and undermines development. The scope and extent of violence against women are a reflection of the degree and persistence of discrimination that women continue to face. It can only be eliminated, therefore, by addressing discrimination, promoting women's equality and empowerment, and ensuring that women's human rights are fulfilled.

All of humanity would benefit from an end to this violence, and there has been considerable progress in creating the international framework for achieving this. However, new forms of violence have emerged and, in some countries, advances towards equality and freedom from violence previously made by women have been eroded or are under threat. The continued prevalence of violence against women is testimony to the fact that States have yet to tackle it with the necessary political commitment, visibility and resources.

Violence against women is neither unchanging nor inevitable and could be radically reduced, and eventually eliminated, with the necessary political will and resources. This study identifies ways to close the gap between States' obligations under international norms, standards and policies and their inadequate and inconsistent implementation at the national level. It calls for efforts to eradicate violence against women to become a higher priority at the local, national and international level.

Overview

Violence against women was drawn out of the private domain into public attention and the arena of State accountability largely because of the grass-roots work of women's organizations and movements around the world. This work drew attention to the fact that violence against women is not the result of random, individual acts of misconduct, but rather is deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men. The interaction between women's advocacy and United Nations initiatives has been a driving factor in establishing violence against women as a human rights issue on the international agenda.

There has been significant progress in elaborating and agreeing on international standards and norms. International and regional legal and policy instruments have clarified the obligations on States to prevent, eradicate and punish violence against women. However, States around the world are failing to meet the requirements of the international legal and policy framework.

Causes and risk factors

The roots of violence against women lie in historically unequal power relations between men and women and pervasive discrimination against women in both the public and private spheres. Patriarchal disparities of power, discriminatory cultural norms and economic inequalities serve to deny women's human rights and perpetuate violence. Violence against women is one of the key means through which male control over women's agency and sexuality is maintained.

Within the broad context of women's subordination, specific causal factors for violence include the use of violence to resolve conflicts, doctrines of privacy and State inaction. Individual or family behaviour patterns, including histories of abuse, have also been correlated with an increased risk of violence.

Violence against women is not confined to a specific culture, region or country, or to particular groups of women within a society. The different manifestations of such violence and women's personal experiences are, however, shaped by factors such as ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, disability, nationality and religion.

Forms and consequences

There are many different forms of violence against women—physical, sexual, psychological and economic. Some increase in importance while others diminish as societies undergo demographic changes, economic restructuring and social and cultural shifts. For example, new technologies may generate new forms of violence, such as internet or mobile telephone stalking. Some forms, such as international trafficking and violence against migrant workers, cross national boundaries.

Women are subjected to violence in a wide range of settings, including the family, the community, state custody, and armed conflict and its aftermath. Violence constitutes a continuum across the lifespan of women, from before birth to old age. It cuts across both the public and the private spheres.

The most common form of violence experienced by women globally is intimate partner violence, sometimes leading to death. Also widespread are harmful traditional practices, including early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting. Within the community setting, femicide (gender-based murder of women), sexual violence, sexual harassment and trafficking in women are receiving increasing attention. Violence perpetrated by the State, through its agents, through omission, or through public policy, spans physical, sexual and psychological violence. It can constitute torture. The high incidence of violence against women in armed conflict, particularly sexual violence including rape, has become progressively clearer.

Violence against women has far-reaching consequences for women, their children, and society as a whole. Women who experience violence suffer a range of health problems, and their ability to earn a living and to participate in public life is diminished. Their children are significantly more at risk of health problems, poor school performance and behavioural disturbances.

Violence against women impoverishes women, their families, communities and nations. It lowers economic production, drains resources from public services and employers, and reduces human capital formation. While even the most comprehensive surveys to date underestimate the costs, they all show that the failure to address violence against women has serious economic consequences.

The knowledge base

There is compelling evidence that violence against women is severe and pervasive throughout the world: in 71 countries at least one survey on violence against women has been conducted. However, there is still an urgent need to strengthen the knowledge base to inform policy and strategy development.

Many countries lack reliable data and much of the existing information cannot be meaningfully compared. Few countries carry out regular data collection, which would allow changes over time to be measured. Information is urgently needed on how various forms of violence affect different groups of women—this requires data that has been disaggregated according to factors such as age and ethnicity. Little information is available to assess the measures taken to combat violence against women and to evaluate their impact. Ensuring adequate data collection is part of every State's obligation to address violence against women, but inadequate data does not diminish State responsibility for preventing and eliminating violence against women.

A set of international indicators on violence against women should be established, based on widely available and credible data collected at the national level, using comparable methods to define and measure violence.

State responsibility

States have concrete and clear obligations to address violence against women, whether committed by state agents or by non-state actors. States are accountable to women themselves, to all their citizens and to the international community. States have a duty to prevent acts of violence against women; to investigate such acts when they occur and prosecute and punish perpetrators; and to provide redress and relief to the victims.

While differing circumstances and constraints require different types of action to be taken by the State, they do not excuse State inaction. Yet States worldwide are failing to implement in full the international standards on violence against women.

When the State fails to hold the perpetrators of violence accountable, this not only encourages further abuses, it also gives the message that male violence against women is acceptable or normal. The

result of such impunity is not only denial of justice to the individual victims/survivors, but also reinforcement of prevailing inequalities that affect other women and girls as well.

Promising practices

Many States have developed good or promising practices to prevent or respond to violence against women. State strategies to address violence should promote women's agency and be based on women's experiences and involvement, and on partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors. Women's NGOs in many countries have engaged in innovative projects and programmes, sometimes in collaboration with the State.

Generic aspects of good or promising practices can be extracted from a variety of experiences around the world. Common principles include: clear policies and laws; strong enforcement mechanisms; motivated and well-trained personnel; the involvement of multiple sectors; and close collaboration with local women's groups, civil society organizations, academics and professionals.

Many governments use national plans of action—which include legal measures, service provision and prevention strategies—to address violence against women. The most effective include consultation with women's groups and other civil society organizations, clear time lines and benchmarks, transparent mechanisms for monitoring implementation, indicators of impact and evaluation, predictable and adequate funding streams, and integration of measures to tackle violence against women in programmes in a variety of sectors.

The way forward: a question of priorities

Violence against women is complex and diverse in its manifestations. Its elimination requires a comprehensive and systematic response by States, the United Nations, and all stakeholders. Local communities also have a responsibility for addressing violence against women and they should be assisted in doing so. Men have a role, especially in preventing violence, and this role needs to be further explored and strengthened.

Strong institutional mechanisms are required at national and international level to ensure action, coordination, monitoring and accountability.

■ **States should take urgent and concrete measures to secure gender equality and protect women's human rights**

Violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of discrimination against women. States have an obligation to respect, protect, promote and fulfill all human rights, including the right of women to be free from discrimination. Failure to do so results in and exacerbates violence against women. For example, if States fail to criminalize certain forms of violence against women or allow discriminatory penal laws to remain in force, then these acts may be perpetrated with impunity.

■ **The exercise of leadership is essential to end violence against women**

Leadership is critical at all levels (local, national, regional and international) and by all sectors (including politicians and government officials, opinion formers, business leaders, civil society organizations and community leaders).

■ **States must close the gaps between international standards and national laws, policies and practices**

Ending impunity and ensuring accountability for violence against women are crucial to prevent and reduce such violence. Impunity for violence against women (by both state and non-state actors) results from the failure of States to implement international standards at the national and local level. States have a responsibility to act with due diligence to prevent violence against women; to investigate such violence; to prosecute and punish perpetrators, whether they are state or non-state actors; and to provide access to redress for victims.

■ **States should build and sustain strong multisectoral strategies, coordinated nationally and locally**

Work to end violence against women requires not only a clear demonstration of political commitment but also systematic and sustained

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