

Since the beginning of creation women have been the fabric of human existence. Yet, unfortunately, they have been subjected to discrimination, endured different forms of abuse, and their human rights have been violated, often on a daily basis. Unhappily, prevailing cultural practices and existing or lack of specific governmental policies addressing the needs of women and girls translate into an increased incidence of women's morbidity and mortality worldwide.

This section discusses the profound impact gender-based violence, conflict, discrimination, terrorism, and trafficking have on the lives of women and girls. Women and girls need to be cherished and their human rights recognized—not violated.

SECTION II

Impact of Gender-Based Violence, Conflict, Discrimination, Terrorism, Environmental Factors, and Transnational Trafficking on Women and Girls

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

—Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization

INTRODUCTION

Historically, women have served as nurturers and caregivers in society. Yet they have been subjected to different forms of abuse, and violence against women and girls is a global pandemic that affects women in all walks of life and in all societies. Women have been abused, tortured, and have their human rights violated daily. Globally women's health issues and human rights have been neglected by various stakeholders, and this has translated into an increased incidence of women's mortality and morbidity. These acts of violence against women and girls are often invisible as they can occur behind closed doors and are often culturally acceptable in many societies.

The direct and indirect impact of violence and gender discrimination against women and girls often cannot be measured; however, the resulting economic burden on the society is enormous. According to studies, between 10% and 69% of women report having been assaulted by an intimate male partner at some time in their lives.¹ A comparison of the prevalence of violence among different countries is alarming. A study conducted by Buvinic, Morrison, and Shifter found that in Latin America the proportion of women who were assaulted by their partners is between 10% and 35%, while in sub-Saharan Africa, it is between 13% and 45%.¹ Furthermore, acts of violence against women are often underreported since many women are afraid, ashamed, or often hold themselves accountable for these acts.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is predominantly a crime against women and represents a violation of women's human rights. The cyclic nature of GBV can be described as "cradle to grave."

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, Article 1, defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.²

Societal acceptance of male superiority, domination, and control of women, and reinforcement of such by the family, schools, policy makers, and

CHAPTER 2

Violence Against Women and Girls: A Silent Global Pandemic

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religious institutions contribute to the prevalence of gender-based violence worldwide.

Forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Violence can be classified into four categories:

- Physical violence
- Sexual violence
- Psychological and emotional violence (including coercive tactics)
- Threats of physical or sexual violence

Examples of gender-based violence throughout the life of a woman include:^{2, 3}

- Prebirth—Sex-selective abortion.
- Infancy—Female infanticide, physical abuse, neglect, poor nutrition, and lack of immunization and medical care.
- Girlhood—Child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), trafficking, child prostitution, sexual abuse, poor nutrition, lack of immunizations and medical care, and minimal or lack of educational opportunities.
- Adolescence—Forced marriages, date rape, FGM, limited or lack of social interaction, acid throwing, dowry deaths, sexual harassment at school and workplace, mass rape during war and civil unrest, lack of safe motherhood facilities, forced prostitution, and trafficking. Other types of violence include economic and social discrimination.
- Young and middle-aged women—Intimate partner abuse, marital rape, dowry abuse, psychological and sexual abuse of women at the workplace, rape, widow abuse, and lack of access to health care including access to safe motherhood facilities.
- Elderly women—Physical and mental abuse of elderly woman and widows including rape and neglect.

Factors that make women more vulnerable to gender discrimination and violence include the following:

- Status (for example, single women, including unmarried women and widows).
- Women with disabilities.
- Physical weakness—Women tend to be physically weaker than men and, as such, are often preyed upon or forced to undergo horrific procedures such as genital mutilation, forced marriage, rape, forced abortion, and sexual enslavement.
- Sociocultural factors such as low economic status due to unemployment or low-paying jobs, as well as lack of basic rights that prohibit women from owning property, making women dependent on men.
- Male-dominated societies—When women and girls are restricted from enjoying the same educational opportunities as their male counterparts, their income-generating capacity and standard of living are adversely affected.
- Sexual coercion and lack of empowerment are important contributors to the increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS among women globally. According to the 2007 UN AIDS report the number of women living with HIV in 2007 is 15.4 million, which is an increase of 1.6 million from 2001.³ Violence against women, including sexual coercion and unsafe sexual practices, are some of the contributing factors to this growing pandemic.
- Mass and systemic rape as a result of war and civil unrest. In times of war or civil unrest, often women and girls are forcibly recruited into armed groups, which can expose them to sexual violence and discrimination. A report released by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1995 reported that 250,000–500,000 women were raped in Rwanda during the genocide in 1994.⁴
- Lack of access to health care—Girls and women often do not have access to medical care, including safe motherhood facilities, reproductive health care, and informed consent, which contribute to gender inequality and discrimination. Barriers such as poverty, unequal power relationships between men and women, and lack of education and empowerment prevent millions of women worldwide

from having access to health care and from attaining, enjoying, and maintaining good health.^{5,6}

- Prevailing governmental policies that are not conducive to women's health. Contributing factors include the following:
 - Lack of specific gender mainstreaming in healthcare policies targeted to serve the needs of women.
 - Lack of political will and underrepresentation of women in parliaments and policy making.
 - Lack of establishment of legal and constitutional frameworks that support both gender equality and availability of resources directed towards creating a positive effect on women's status and well-being.
 - Absence of a strong women's health and/or human rights movement and a culture of active civil society participation.⁷
- Gender inequality and perceived male superiority and the controlling nature of some men

Special Forms of Violence Against Girls and Women

Violence against women and children is not limited to discrimination, physical abuse, and emotional abuse but can take various other forms as well. The societal practices and prevailing culture in different regions of the world have contributed to the various forms of violence against women.

Harmful Practices Against Girls and Women in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas

Violence and Gender Discrimination at Birth, Infancy, and Early Childhood According to a report released by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), there has been a gender imbalance in many regions of Asia as a result of harmful practices against women. In India, according to the data released by UNFPA in 1901, there

were 972 women for every 1000 men, but a hundred years later in 2001, this ratio between women and men dropped dramatically to 933 women for every 1000 men.⁵ This decrease has been due to special forms of violence against girls and women such as sex selective abortions, female infanticide, and other harmful practices.

According to a study conducted by UNFPA, the abuse against women, girls, and unborn female fetuses has resulted in a shift in the male-to-female ratio in Asia. In Southeast Asia, the female deficit has increased from 7.6% to 8.5% as a result of such practices.⁶ The sex ratio at birth (SRB), which denotes the ratio of boys born per 100 girls, has changed as is evident in the data from five countries in west and east Asia with numbers as high as 108 in India and 120 in China.⁶

Some factors contributing to this imbalance include the following:

- Selective sex abortion of female fetuses.
- Neglect of girls, which results in malnutrition. For example, girls may be breastfed less often and for a shorter period of time, while the male children in the house are given more nutritious food.
- Female infanticide, which is common in isolated and rural parts of south and east Asia. The young female infant may be choked to death or smothered by her parents or relatives since she is often perceived as a financial burden and is unwelcome. In many cases, female infanticide is falsely reported as a stillbirth.
- Immunization coverage is better for male children, and often the female children receive partial or no immunizations at all.
- Parents tend to seek medical aid for a sick male child, and often a sick female child is neglected and can die since she does not receive the necessary medical attention.

In many parts of Asia in both urban and rural areas, there is immense pressure from society and families to produce sons. Some of the reasons for male preference are lineage continuation, perceived support provided to parents in their old age, and source of income from employment and marriage. This marked male preference has resulted in the discrimination and violation of the human

rights of girls, and often girls start their lives at a disadvantage.

Acid Attacks Another harmful practice against women and girls is acid throwing. In an acid attack, which is one of the most heinous of crimes, acid is thrown, usually by a man, onto the face of a girl or woman with the intent of disfiguring her. The most commonly used acid is sulfuric acid as it is easily available, being found in car batteries. One of the most common reasons for this act is a rejected marriage proposal by the victim. Some of the other reasons for acid attacks are refusal by the wife to have sex with the husband or the perceived lack of adequate dowry.

These horrific attacks lead to severe disfigurement due to second and third degree facial burns and even blindness in some instances. In Bangladesh the number of acid attacks on women and adolescents has been increasing since 2000. The data released by the Dhaka-based Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) estimates that 150 women were subject to acid throwing in 2006 and 133 women in 2007.⁷ Unfortunately, most of these victims do not have access to immediate medical care due to lack of facilities. Naripokkho, a women's advocacy organization formed in 1995, and the ASF, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) founded in 1999, have been actively working with the Bangladeshi government and other international agencies to stop this practice.⁷

Dowry Deaths A dowry is defined as money or property a bride's family gives a groom and his family at the time of the wedding. Unfortunately the practice of dowry abuse, which is a violation of human rights against women, has been increasing in south Asian countries, especially India. A woman is subjected to ill treatment by her husband and in-laws when the dowry she has brought is considered insufficient. She may be abused verbally, physically, or be subjected to humiliation. In severe cases she may be burned alive. According to a UNIFEM report, more than 12 women die every day as a result of being burned alive by their in-laws or husbands due to dowry disputes. Most of these incidents are reported as accidental burnings or suicides.^{8,9}

A study conducted in Chandigarh in northern India, reported that married women made up 78% of total female fatalities and that many of

these were the result of dowry disputes.⁹ In spite of the Indian government recognizing as a criminal offence dowry acceptance and harassment of women as a result of dowry disputes, only a fraction of the perpetrators of these crimes are brought to justice. Some of the reasons for lack of prosecution include underreporting due to fear of social isolation, lack of sufficient evidence to pursue legal action, and the complacent attitude of law enforcement officials.^{9,10}

United Nations agencies such as the UNIFEM, UNFPA, UNICEF, and WHO are partnering with local nongovernmental organizations to address the issue of special forms of violence against women including "bride burning," which can occur as a result of dowry disputes. In 2000, UNICEF launched a global campaign to address issues of violence against women including special forms of violence such as dowry-related harassment and deaths.¹⁰

Child Marriages and Forced Marriages

The ancient tradition of marrying young girls before they attain puberty is still prevalent in many parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. A recent PBS documentary, *Child Brides*, highlighted the plight of young girls forced into arranged marriages against their will.¹¹

In some rural areas in northern India girls as young as 6 are married in spite of the fact that marriages performed before the age of 18 are illegal and are punishable under the Indian penal code.¹² According to a report released in 2006, almost 4 million girls below the age of 18 were married against their will by their families in India.¹¹

Rajasthan in India has some of the highest rates of child marriages and, according to a report released by UNICEF in 2001, mass child marriages were solemnized between young boys and girls including some who were two or three years old.^{13,14} The report also highlights the practice of child marriages in poor neighborhoods of rural Albania where the culture encourages early marriages for their daughters to young men before they migrated to the city in search of better employment.¹³

In Africa, early marriage is common throughout much of the continent with the highest rates of child marriages occurring in Niger.^{11,12} According to the World Health Organization:

The probability that a 15-year-old girl will die from a complication related to pregnancy and childbirth during her lifetime is highest in Africa: 1 in 26. In the developed regions it is 1 in 7300. Of all 171 countries and territories for which estimates were made, Niger had the highest estimated lifetime risk of 1 in 7.^{12,1}

Some of the adverse effects and consequences of early marriage include prevalence of low literacy rates for women, lack of empowerment, and reduced access to health care. Additional health risks women face as the result of early marriage and child bearing are increased incidence of pregnancy-induced hypertension, eclampsia, molar pregnancy, and delivery of low birth weight and preterm infants.¹⁴

The rationale behind forced marriages for young girls is to prevent premarital sex since virginity is prized in many societies. Often young girls are restricted from attending coeducational schools and must adhere to a strict dress code. Often girls are not allowed to have social interactions with their peers.¹³ Girls who have been forced to marry early are at a psychosocial disadvantage because of a loss of adolescence, forced sexual relations, and the denial of freedom that restricts their personal development. The impact of this trauma can be subtle, prolonged, and often hard to assess since these girls do not have access to counseling services.^{13, 14} Thus the practice of child marriage is a violation of the human rights of girls who are deprived of their dignity and self-respect.

Practice of Sati and Devadasis *Sati* and *devadasis* are special forms of cultural violence against women and girls prevalent in the Indian subcontinent. The horrific practice of *sati*, or self-immolation, was prevalent in ancient India where the widow was burned on the funeral pyre along with her dead husband. This practice was outlawed by Indian reformers and the British authorities in 1829, and the Indian penal code deemed it an offense punishable by rigorous imprisonment, heavy fines, and even the death penalty.^{15,16}

Devadasi tradition is prevalent in south India where the term *devdasi* is derived from Sanskrit and translates as “servant of god.” Devadasis are adolescent girls who are lured into prostitution in the name of religion. UNICEF estimates that there are around 300,000 young girls who have become prostitutes in this way.¹⁷ Unfortunately many of these girls are at an increased risk of contracting Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) due to the practice of unsafe sex and often do not have access to reproductive health services. One of the contributing factors to the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in rural India is the result of unsafe sexual practices between the young devadasi girls and their clients.¹⁸

According to the Indian Health Organization, devadasis compose nearly 15% of India’s approximately 10 million sex workers. The number of devadasis is highest in the states of Karnataka and Maharashtra, where they constitute 80% of all sex workers. By 1994, it had become clear that adherence to the tradition had exacted a deadly toll: in Pune, a city of 2.5 million people in Maharashtra, already more than half the devadasis had become HIV infected.^{18(p1)}

These young girls may suffer from depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and injuries as a result of physical violence. They are also at increased risk for indulging in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, increased alcohol intake, and drug use. It is devastating that many of these young girls have been initiated into the devadasi practice by their family members in the name of culture and tradition.

Sexual Violence The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as:

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.^{19(p149)}

The following are forms of sexual violence:¹⁹

- Marital rape
- Date rape
- Rape by strangers

- Systematic rape during armed conflict
- Sexual harassment, which includes demanding sex in return for favors
- Sexual abuse of physically and mentally disabled people
- Sexual abuse of children
- Denial of the right to use contraception or adopt safe sex practices
- Forced abortion
- Female genital mutilation
- Forced virginity inspections
- Forced prostitution and trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation
- Forced sexual initiation of young girls

A multicountry study on women's health and domestic violence conducted by the World Health Organization shows that many women worldwide have been the victims of sexual assault by an intimate partner. For example, 22–25% of women surveyed in London, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and Zimbabwe reported that they experienced some form of sexual violence by an intimate partner.¹⁹ A study conducted in South Africa among school children found that 32% disclosed rapes committed on school children were by their teachers.¹⁹

Forms of Cultural and Gender-Based Violence Prejudices against women are seen in the language, attitude, and practices of people. Discussed here are a few such prevalent cultural practices which have deleterious effects on the health and well-being of African women.¹⁹⁻²⁹

In Zimbabwe there is a custom known as *ngozi* in which a young girl is given as a compensation for the death of a man caused by her family. This custom is a violation of her human rights since on attaining puberty the young girl is forced to have sex with male members of the dead man's family in order to beget a male heir to replace the man who was killed by her family.¹⁹

Another prevailing custom in some African societies is *chimutsa mapfiwa* or wife inheritance, where according to this custom, when a married woman dies, her sister is expected to take her place and have sexual relations with the dead sister's husband.¹⁹

In some African cultures, wife beating is considered acceptable by both males and females as a

method for disciplining one's wife for reasons such as not preparing food on time or refusing sexual advances. A study, conducted in 2005 on the perceptions of Nigerian women on domestic violence, revealed that a large percentage of Nigerian women support wife beating, as evident from 66.4% and 50.4% of never-married and unmarried women respectively who agreed that a husband is justified for hitting or beating his wife under the conditions examined in the paper. The 2003 NDHS revealed that more than 61% of males also supported wife beating. The high level of support expressed for wife beating by both males and females confirms that violence against women is accepted as a cultural norm among Nigerians.²⁰

Levirate This is a practice whereby a widow is passed on to the next surviving male relation against her wish. In cases where a man has died of AIDS or where the actual cause of death was unknown due to poor access to health care, the widow may actually be a danger to her inheritor. The effects are even worse in a polygamous marriage.

Confinement Confinement is a period from 28 days to 3 months when the widow should not be seen anywhere outside the gate of her home. During this time, the widow may not leave the confines of her home to pursue income-generating activities such as going to the market or to seek needed medical attention for herself and her children. Studies have shown that it is usually during this period that widows and their children are most vulnerable to ill health. Unfortunately, there have been instances of widows and their children dying from neglect during this period of mandatory seclusion.

Widow Cleansing Widow cleansing is one of the most heinous forms of cultural violence perpetrated against women. In some communities in Africa and Asia, such cleansing generally involves a widow having sexual relations either with a designated village cleanser or with a relative of her late husband. It has traditionally been seen as a way to break with the past and move forward, as well as an attempt to establish a family's ownership over the late husband's property, including his wife. In cases where a husband died of AIDS, this practice is just as risky for the men who are cho-

sen to cleanse as the women who are cleansed. These harmful cultural practices have contributed to the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS among women in Africa and Asia. This practice also prevents women from inheriting the property that has been their family's main source of support.²⁰ Widows may also be exposed to physical violence in disputes over inheritance and property rights.

Honor Killings Globally, hundreds or even thousands of young girls and women are murdered each year by their families in the name of family honor. These crimes are committed because these girls are perceived to have brought shame upon or tarnished the reputation of their family, and the killing of the girls will restore the lost honor.

Honor killings are perpetrated for a wide range of offenses. Marital infidelity, premarital sex, flirting, inappropriate attire, or even failing to serve a meal on time can all be perceived as impugning the family honor.^{22(p2)}

It is ironic that these acts of horrific violence are not regarded as a crime but are justified in many societies. Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to get the exact numbers on the phenomenon of honor killing since these murders frequently go unreported or are reported as suicides or accidental deaths.²²

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) has reported the occurrence of honor killings in Bangladesh, Great Britain, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan, Morocco, Sweden, Turkey, and Uganda.²² A report, released in early 2008 by the Centre for Social Cohesion in the UK, discussed the prevalence of forced marriages and the occurrence of 10–12 cases annually of honor killings among the South Asian immigrant community living in the UK.²³ However, the exact number of deaths attributed to honor killings worldwide is difficult to access because it is difficult to define what constitutes an honor killing. The report further highlights that lack of education and low socioeconomic status are not contributing factors for honor killings that have occurred in the United Kingdom. Families in the developing countries and the Western world are driven by a common force, which is to uphold the honor and tradition of their families. Whenever the women in these families are perceived as “violators,” they are then killed to protect the families and restore the lost traditions.

Wife Battering Researcher P.C. Herbert described wife battering as “violent acts—psychological, sexual and/or physical assault—by an assailant against his wife and/or partner made with the intent of controlling the partner by inducing fear and pain.”^{24(p1)} Wife battering occurs among women of all ages and social strata, and often there is a close association between wife battering and child abuse. This has serious implications on the health of the women and children who are subjected to and witness this act of violence.

Incest Incest describes sexual activity between closely related persons (often within the immediate family). In many cultures, it is considered illegal and socially unacceptable.

Unfortunately, many young girls and adolescents worldwide are coerced into such relationships, which have long-term adverse effects on their health and well-being.

Street Children According to the Human Rights Watch:

The term *street children* refers to children for whom the street more than their family has become their real home. It includes children who might not necessarily be homeless or without families, but who live in situations where there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults.^{25 (p1)}

Child abuse, children orphaned as a result of wars, civil unrest, AIDS, divorce, lure of city life, peer pressure, and desire for economic advancement are the major causes for children leaving home. Unfortunately, a majority of these children do not have the necessary education or skills to earn a living and end up on the streets. Young girls and adolescents who end up as street children are at risk of being trafficked or lured into prostitution. Street children throughout the world have been ill-treated by the police and are often viewed as a blot on society by governments that do not offer them the protection and nurturing that children are entitled to. In countries where there is civil unrest or ongoing wars, street children face a higher risk of being recruited as gang members, trained as militants, or recruited as child soldiers. A UNICEF report describes the plight of young street children

in Latin America, who are often seen roaming the streets begging or committing petty crimes or selling drugs to earn their living. The Colombian term used for runaway or abandoned children or street children who live on their own is *gamine*. These children often live in urban slums and store their belongings in a cardboard box and sleep on plastic sheets.²⁶ This illustrates the pathetic plight of these children, and the lack of social welfare programs in this region is a significant hindrance to achieve Millennium Development Goals 1, 2, and 4 (Goal 1—Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 2—Achieve universal primary education; and Goal 4 Reduce child mortality).²⁷

Effects of Violence

The effects of violence on children, adolescents, and women can be devastating to their physical, emotional, and social well-being.^{19,20,28,29} Violence has both a direct and indirect consequence on women's health, and it can increase women's risk of future ill health and disability.^{23,29} Children who witness violence suffer from anxiety, low self-esteem, and other behavioral problems including depression, physical complaints, and eating disorders.²⁷ The more severe and prolonged the abuse, the greater the impact on the victims.

Physical Consequences of Violence

The effects of physical trauma can be minor or life threatening and can result in permanent disability or death of the victims. Globally an estimated 40–70% of homicides against women are committed by intimate partners.²⁷

Effects of physical abuse include:^{19,20}

- Injuries to the abdomen and thorax, which can result in damage to the tissues and vital organs such as the heart, lungs and spleen
- Bruises, welts, contusions, and fractures
- Bleeding or hemorrhage (internal and external)
- 1st-, 2nd-, or 3rd-degree burns
- Chronic pain and chronic fatigue syndromes
- Fibromyalgia

- Functional and organic gastrointestinal disorders, which are common in women who have been in chronic abusive relationships²⁸
- Ocular damage, which may result in retinal detachment leading to blindness
- Reduced physical movements and body functions that result in abused women missing more days at work than non-abused women²⁰

Furthermore, women who have been subjected to physical trauma often do not have access to medical care since they are not permitted to seek assistance by their abusers and must suffer in silence.

Psychological Trauma

The damage caused by psychological abuse is often invisible but the resulting trauma can be far more devastating than that resulting from physical trauma.

Effects of psychological abuse include the following:^{19,20,27,28}

- Depression and anxiety—According to a study conducted in Australia, women who are abused by their partners suffer more from depression and anxiety when compared to women who are in non-abusive relationships.²⁷
- Eating and sleep disorders—Abused women and girls tend to overeat and suffer from nightmares and insomnia.
- Feelings of shame and guilt—Abused women and children often blame themselves for the violence to which they are subjected.
- Phobias and panic disorder.
- Physical inactivity.
- Poor self-esteem.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD (domestic violence, childhood abuse, and rape are among the most common causes of PTSD among women).
- Psychosomatic disorders.
- Smoking, alcohol, and drug abuse—Women who are in chronic abusive relationships and those who have been sexually abused as chil-

dren are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs even after other risk factors have been controlled. A 2-year US study found that abused women abused alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism to deal with the abuse.²⁹

- Suicidal behavior and self-harm—Multicountry studies conducted in the United States, Nicaragua, and Sweden have shown that violence against women is closely associated with an increased risk of suicide and self-harm.²⁰
- Unsafe sexual behavior.
- A slight increase in the incidence of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)—Abused women tend to blame themselves for being abused and this can lead to an increase in stress levels which in turn exacerbates the symptoms of IBS.³⁰
- Sexual dysfunction—Women who have been sexually abused may develop an aversion to sex.

Other Health Outcomes of Violence Against Girls, Adolescents, and Women

Effects of Violence on Reproductive Health

Violence has been shown to affect a woman's reproductive health in many ways.

Unwanted or Unintended Pregnancies

Abused women are at a higher risk for unwanted or unintended pregnancies as these women lack reproductive rights and are often forced to have sex without contraceptive use. Sexual abuse of adolescents can lead to unwanted pregnancies.

Unsafe and Forced Abortions Abused women also have a higher incidence of unsafe and forced abortions. Sexually abused adolescents and women who get pregnant may be forced to abort their pregnancies. They also face a higher risk of unsafe abortions due to lack of access to trained healthcare providers; such abortions can have serious implications, often leading to death and disability. According to a report released by WHO in 2005, of the estimated 46 million induced abor-

tions annually, almost 19 million of them are performed in unsanitary and unsafe conditions by unskilled providers. Such horrific procedures result in the death of almost 68,000 girls and women worldwide. Most of these deaths (almost 99%) occur in developing countries. Unsafe abortions account for 13% of all pregnancy-related deaths that occur each year.³¹

Pregnancy Complications Maternal complications brought on by violence can include preterm labor, vaginal infections, and insufficient maternal weight gain during pregnancy as a result of maternal malnutrition. Trauma during pregnancy can also lead to bleeding and precipitate a condition known as "abruptio placenta," which can increase maternal and fetal mortality. A study conducted in British Columbia, Canada, found that women in abusive relationships were 3.5 times more likely to experience hemorrhage as a result of trauma during pregnancy compared to women who were not abused.^{32,33}

Fetal Complications Fetal complications brought on by abuse can include low birth weight. In addition, abuse can increase stress that predisposes the mother to maternal hypertension preeclampsia, preterm labor resulting in an abortion, or small-for-age infants. Fetal injury can also occur resulting in preterm birth and intrauterine fetal death. There have been several studies conducted globally that have focused on the relationship between violence in pregnancy and low birth weight outcomes. One such study conducted in Nicaragua found that after controlling for other factors, violence against pregnant women was associated with almost a three-fold increase in the incidence of low birth weight infants born in that particular health center where the research was conducted.²⁰

STIs and HIV Sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections. Sexually abused children and adolescents are also at higher risk for indulging in high-risk sexual practices, which further increases their chances of contracting STIs and HIV.²⁶

Research undertaken by UNAIDS, WHO, and UNFPA has established links between violence against women and their risk for contracting HIV infections. The following are a few examples that

demonstrate the link between HIV infection and violence:³²

1. Women who have been raped have their risk increased for acquiring HIV infection as a result of the trauma caused to their genitalia, which results in lacerations.
2. Fear of violence and social stigma prevents women from getting tested for HIV, revealing their HIV status, and availing themselves of treatment.
3. Findings from a study conducted on pregnant women in South Africa who attended a health clinic for their prenatal checkup showed that women who are abused and are subjected to controlling behavior by their partners are 1.5 times more likely to be infected by HIV compared to those who are not in abusive relationships.²⁰

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease and Infertility

Complications of repeated STIs give rise to pelvic inflammatory disease and lead to infertility, which in turn can increase the risk for women being abused and becoming social outcasts for not being able to bear children.

Effects of Violence on Society

The effects on society of violence against women and girls are both direct and indirect.^{19,28,34} A national survey conducted in Canada on violence against women reported that 30% of abused married women could not carry out their daily activities due to the injuries they sustained. Their children who witnessed such abuse were themselves victims of abuse and performed poorly at school.²⁸ A study of abused women in Managua, Nicaragua, found that abused women earned 46% less than women who did not suffer abuse, even after controlling for other factors that affect earnings.²⁰ One of the reasons for this was their frequent absenteeism from work as a result of the physical and mental trauma sustained by them.³⁴ A survey conducted in Nagpur in India found that 13% of working women missed work due to abuse, and this led to a decrease in their earnings.¹⁹ The above exam-

ples are just one of the effects of violence and the economic impact on global society.

Strategies to Reduce and Prevent Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence differs from other forms of interpersonal violence since the patterns of violence against women are different from those experienced by men. Women are more likely to experience violence at the hands of men or members of their family, and often the violence extends over a long period of time. It is important to understand these variations when designing interventions to prevent violence against women. Unfortunately, in spite of more than 20 years of activism in the area of gender-based violence, there have been very few interventions or programs that have been implemented to address this growing pandemic.^{19,28,35}

When considering programs to combat this problem, it is critical to include the following components:

- Empowering women and making them understand that the violence they experience is unacceptable is one of the biggest challenges activists encounter.
- Educating boys from childhood that violence against women is an offense and a violation of human rights is an important step in designing preventive strategies. It is important to educate communities that women are not chattel or movable property but individuals who need to be valued and not abused.¹⁹
- Male involvement and input when implementing programs to prevent violence against women has shown to be effective. A report released by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) shows that making men aware that when women are subjected to violence it affects all the members in the family, including themselves, has been instrumental in making some men regard their wives and partners as equals in decision making. This has led to sharing of child-rearing responsibilities and allowing women

to make choices regarding their reproductive health and child bearing.³⁵

- Treatment programs for abusers are found in the United States, Australia, Canada, and in a few developing countries. These programs discuss gender roles and teach the group members skills to cope with stress and anger management issues. Research has shown that in a few programs implemented in the United States, members refrained from resorting to violence for a period of at least two years.¹⁹
- Support programs for victims have resulted in the establishment of shelters for battered women. Some of the services provided to these women include legal, emotional, and vocational training. Unfortunately women in developing countries do not have access to such services and suffer in silence.^{19,28}
- Attention must be given to legal actions and judicial interventions. Over the past two decades, the issue of violence against women and girls has received worldwide attention. The sustained efforts of United Nations agencies, nongovernmental organizations, foundations, and activists have resulted in criminalizing this act in several countries. In the past decade, 24 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have passed specific legislation on domestic violence.¹⁹ Another interesting judicial intervention that has been implemented in certain parts of India is the establishment of legal aid cells and family courts (known as *lok adalat*) and women's courts (known as *mahila lok adalat*) by the state government to specifically address the issues related to violence against women and children.¹⁹
- Alternate sanctions should also be considered. Under this intervention, an abusive male partner may be prohibited from contacting or abusing his partner and may be made to leave home by a civil court. He can also be ordered to pay child support and seek counseling and seek treatment for substance abuse.¹⁹
- Some all-women police stations have been established in recent years in some countries in Latin America and Asia. These police cells have been staffed with all women police personnel to help encourage more abused

women to come forward and seek assistance. Unfortunately, in some parts of India, women have to travel great distances to avail themselves of the services of such police stations and often do not have the immediate assistance they require.¹⁹

- Intervention by healthcare providers is also critical. A 2002 WHO report on violence and health stated:

In recent years attention has turned towards reforming the response of healthcare providers to victims of abuse. Most women come into contact with the health system at some point in their lives—when they seek contraception, for instance, or give birth or seek care for their children. This makes the healthcare setting an important place where women undergoing abuse can be identified, provided with support, and referred if necessary to specialized services. Unfortunately, studies show that in most countries, doctors and nurses rarely enquire of women whether they are being abused, or even check for obvious signs of violence.^{19(p131)}

- Community efforts include outreach work and programs where peer educators and volunteers from the local communities are in touch with women and children and make them aware of the services available to them. Lawyers, healthcare providers, social workers, and volunteers who live in the local communities often provide free services and assistance to abused women and children.^{19,28}
- In recent years women's organizations, NGOs, and other groups working in partnership with local, state, and national governments have organized campaigns to educate the public and raise awareness of the issues of violence against women and children. Such working partnerships have also resulted in raising funds to help abused women and children. United Nations agencies, such as UNIFEM and the UNFPA have partnered with celebrities to raise public awareness and launch campaigns and fund-raising activities to help these unfortunate women and children.

- A multisectorial approach to address the issue of violence against women and girls is being adopted in many countries. Partnering between the health sector, legal and judiciary departments, policy makers, and religious leaders will be effective in reducing or preventing violence. Such cooperation will also be economically and socially beneficial since there is sharing of data and best practices and will result in the development and implantation of more coordinated and strategic approaches to address this problem.¹⁹
- Finally, policy makers, activists, and all the various stakeholders must realize the importance of investing in primary prevention against violence against women and girls. Primary prevention strategies must foster the creation of a global social environment that promotes gender equity and sharing of power

between men and women. This is a daunting task, but it is of vital importance that initial acts of violence be prevented rather than trying to clean up and fix the aftermath of such attacks.

Conclusion

Violence against women and girls is an important public health issue that cannot be ignored by the global community. In spite of the recent advances made in the fields of medicine, science, and technology, as citizens of this world we cannot claim to have made progress until this silent pandemic of violence against women and girls ceases locally, nationally, and globally.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the etiology of and contributing factors to gender-based violence.
2. Discuss the role of men in working to reduce culturally acceptable practices of violence against women and girls.
3. How would you work with other members of your community in addressing the issues of gender-based violence in your region?
4. Do you agree with the term *silent global pandemic* that is often used to describe violence against women?
5. What are the profound effects of gender-based violence on the global society?

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