



## Violence Against Women: A Fact Sheet

Around the world at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Every year, violence in the home and the community devastates the lives of millions of women. Gender-based violence kills and disables as many women between the ages of 15 and 44 as cancer, and its toll on women's health surpasses that of traffic accidents and malaria combined.<sup>1</sup> Violence against women is rooted in a global culture of discrimination which denies women equal rights with men and which legitimizes the appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification or political ends.

### Background

- Violence against women feeds off discrimination and serves to reinforce it. When women are abused in custody, when they are raped by armed forces as "spoils of war", or when they are terrorized by violence in the home, unequal power relations between men and women are both manifested and enforced.
- Violence against women is compounded by discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexual identity, social status, class, and age. Such multiple forms of discrimination further restrict women's choices, increase their vulnerability to violence and make it even harder for women to obtain justice.
- There is an unbroken spectrum of violence that women face at the hands of people who exert control over them. States have the obligation to prevent, protect against, and punish violence against women whether perpetrated by private or public actors. States have a responsibility to uphold standards of due diligence and take steps to fulfill their responsibility to protect individuals from human rights abuses.

### International Women's Human Rights Foundations

- *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (Article 2).
- *The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* states that "violence against women means 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 in private life" (Article 1). It further asserts that states have an obligation to "exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and, in accordance with national legislation, punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons" (Article 4-c).
- *The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, defines discrimination against women as any "distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality between men and women, of human rights or fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field" (Article 1).

### Violence Against Women : A Human Rights Violation

Violence against women is rampant in all corners of the world. Such violence is a human rights violation that manifests itself in a number of ways, including:

#### ► Violence against women in custody

The imbalance of power between inmates and guards is a result of prisoners' total dependency on correctional officers and guards' ability to withhold privileges and is manifest in direct physical force and indirect abuses. Because incarcerated women are largely invisible to the public eye, little is done when the punishment of imprisonment is compounded with that of rape, sexual assault, groping during body searches, and shackling during childbirth. Women are often coerced into providing sex for "favors" such as extra food or personal hygiene products, or to avoid punishment. Furthermore, there is little medical or psychological care available to inmates. Though crimes in prison, such as rape, are prevalent, few perpetrators of violence against female inmates are ever held accountable. In 1997, for example, only ten prison employees in the entire federal system were disciplined for sexual misconduct.

#### ► Acid Burning and Dowry Deaths

Women's subjugation to men is pervasive in the political, civil, social, cultural, and economic spheres of many countries. In such societies, a woman who turns down a suitor or does not get along with her in-laws far too frequently becomes the victim of a violent

<sup>1</sup> UNFPA *State of World Population 2005: The Promise of Equality*. (2005) Pg. 65. (UNFPA drew this figure from pg. 15 and 110 of the following report: UN Millennium Project *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*. Task Force on Education and Gender Equality. London and Sterling, Virginia: Earthscan. (2005a).)

form of revenge: acid burning. Acid is thrown in her face or on her body and can blind her in addition to often fatal third-degree burns. Governments do little to prevent the sale of acid to the public or to punish those who use it to kill and maim. Similarly, the ongoing reality of dowry-related violence is an example of what can happen when women are treated as property. Brides unable to pay the high “price” to marry are punished by violence and often death at the hands of their in-laws or their own husbands.

#### ► “Honor” Killings

In some societies, women are viewed as representative of the honor of the family. When women are suspected of extra-marital sexual relations, even in the case of rape, they can be subjected to the cruelest forms of indignity and violence, often by their own fathers or brothers. Women who are raped and are unable to provide explicit evidence, are sometimes accused of *zina*, or the crime of unlawful sexual relations, the punishment for which is often death by public stoning. Such laws serve to inhibit women from pursuing cases against those who raped them. Assuming an accused woman’s guilt, male family members believe that they have no other means of undoing a perceived infringement of “honor” than to kill the woman.

#### ► Domestic violence

Violence against women is a global pandemic. Without exception, a woman’s greatest risk of violence is from someone she knows. Domestic violence is a violation of a woman’s right to physical integrity, to liberty, and all too often, to her right to life itself. When states fail to take the basic steps needed to protect women from domestic violence or allow these crimes to be committed with impunity, states are failing in their obligation to protect women from torture. One in four women experiences domestic violence at the hands of an intimate partner or family member in her lifetime.

#### ► Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female genital mutilation is the removal of part or all of the external female genitalia. In its most severe form, a woman or girl has all of her genitalia removed and then stitched together, leaving a small opening for intercourse and menstruation. It is practiced in 28 African countries on the pretext of cultural tradition or hygiene. An estimated 135 million girls have undergone FGM with dire consequences ranging from infection (including HIV) to sterility. In addition, FGM has devastating psychological effects. Though all the governments of the countries in which FGM is practiced have legislation making it illegal, the complete lack of enforcement and prosecution of the perpetrators means FGM continues to thrive.

#### ► Human Rights Violations Based on Actual or Perceived Sexual Identity

Sexuality is regulated in a gender specific way and maintained through strict constraints imposed by cultural norms and sometimes through particular legal measures supporting those norms. The community, which can include religious institutions, the media, family and cultural networks, regulates women’s sexuality and punishes women who do not comply. Such women include lesbians, women who appear “too masculine,” women who try to freely exercise their rights, and women who challenge male dominance. Lesbian women, or women who are perceived to be lesbian, experience abuses by state authorities in prisons, police, as well as private actors in their family and community. Numerous cases document young lesbians being beaten, raped, forcibly impregnated or married, and otherwise attacked by family members to punish them or “correct” their sexual identity. Lesbians in the United States face well-founded fears of persecution by police because of their sexual identity and violence against lesbians occurs with impunity on a regular basis.

#### ► Gender Related Asylum

The UN High Commission on Refugees advocates “women fearing persecution or severe discrimination on the basis of their gender should be considered a member of a social group for the purposes of determining refugee status.” (*Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women*) Such persecution may include harms unique to their gender such as, but not limited to, female genital mutilation, forcible abortion, domestic violence that the state refuses to act on and honor killings. However, since U.S. asylum adjudicators apply a restrictive interpretation of the international definition of a refugee entitled to protection, women seeking asylum in the United States rarely gain refugee status based on claims of gender-related violence. In particular, lesbian women seeking asylum from sexuality-based persecution in their countries of origin often, and legitimately, fear disclosing their sexuality to authorities.

#### The Problem of Impunity

Perpetrators of violence against women are rarely held accountable for their acts. Women who are victims of gender-related violence often have little recourse because many state agencies are themselves guilty of gender bias and discriminatory practices. Many women opt not to report cases of violence to authorities because they fear being ostracized and shamed by communities that are too often quick to blame victims of violence for the abuses they have suffered. When women do challenge their abusers, it can often only be accomplished by long and humiliating court battles with little sympathy from authorities or the media. Violence against women is so deeply embedded in society that it often fails to garner public censure and outrage.

*Violence against women is a violation of human rights that cannot be justified by any political, religious, or cultural claim. A global culture of discrimination against women allows violence to occur daily and with impunity. Amnesty International calls on you to help us eradicate violence against women and help women to achieve lives of equality and dignity.*

For more information on women’s human rights, visit <http://www.amnestyusa.org/women> or contact us at AIUSA, 5 Penn Plaza - 16th floor, New York, NY 10001 or call (212) 807-8400.