

Violence against women

A neglected pandemic

At least one in three women worldwide is beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. One in five women will become the victim of actual or attempted rape. According to the World Health Organization, women worldwide have a higher rate of dying between the ages of 15 and 44 from rape or sexual violence than from causes such as cancer, war or road accidents.

Violence against women is pandemic. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned on International Women's Day this year: 'No country, no culture, no woman, young or old, is immune.'

The many faces of violence against women

Every week in the UK, two women die as a result of **domestic violence**. One in four women in the UK is **sexually assaulted** during her lifetime. These crimes often go unreported, their perpetrators protected by social acceptance and legal advantage. A recent survey by Amnesty International suggested that 74 per cent of men in the UK would report a dog being beaten but only 53 per cent would report domestic violence.

Earlier this year, the UN Office on Drugs & Crime released the first global assessment of **human trafficking**, another form of violence against women. The report, which evaluated 155 countries, confirmed that 80 per cent of victims are female and that most are exploited sexually. It also found that a significant proportion of traffickers are women. In Georgia and Azerbaijan for instance, females make up over 80 per cent of convicted traffickers.

Many acts of violence against women are accepted as a form of cultural expression. These '**harmful tradi-**

tional practices' include female genital mutilation, dowry murders, honour killings and early marriage. Around 130 million women alive today have undergone genital cutting, a non-medical operation performed by other women as part of a coming-of-age ritual. The practice can cause infection, infertility and even death. Other forms of marriage-related violence include honour killings and dowry murders, in which a bride is killed by her husband or in-laws – male and female – because her dowry is judged insufficient.

Violence against women manifests itself with staggering brutality during **conflict**: 500,000 women were raped during the Rwandan genocide, 64,000 in the civil war in Sierra Leone and 40,000 as part of the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo over a thousand women are raped every month; perpetrators enjoy near total impunity.

A crime, a human rights violation, and a barrier to development

Violence against women is a crime and a human rights violation. Victims suffer injuries and traumas. They are unable to work or look after their families. They contract diseases such as HIV and give birth to unwanted babies. They are ostracised. They are murdered or die as a result of their injuries.

Violence against women also does serious damage beyond the victim, hurting families and societies, draining public resources and shrinking economic output. A 2008 study by New Philanthropy Capital, a British charity, put the total economic cost of sexual violence to England and Wales in 2003-04 at £23 billion. Women do two-thirds of the world's work, including in the pivotal areas of food production,

child-rearing and education. Healthy, educated, empowered women generate more money for their communities and bring up healthier, more educated children.

UNIFEM, the UN's fund for women, claims that countries with a high incidence of gender-based violence and discrimination are also more conflict-prone. This correlation has particular lessons for peace-makers: in countries emerging from conflict it is essential that women are brought from the margins to the centre of peace processes. Otherwise, the cultures and structures associated with violence against women risk getting recycled into the post-conflict set-up, increasing chances that the country will slide back into strife. The determinative role of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding gained formal international recognition in 2000 when the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1325.

Women and men united to end violence against women and girls

Last year, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched an international campaign entitled 'UNite to End Violence against Women'. A central plank of the campaign is its bid to promote leadership among men and boys in the global effort to end violence against women and girls.

Though broadly targeted at individuals, civil society, the private sector, the media, the UN system and governments, the campaign is aimed primarily at the latter. Governments are asked to do the following by 2015:

- enact and enforce national laws to tackle violence against women and girls
- adopt and begin to implement programmes to eliminate violence against women and support the abused
- institutionalise the collection of data on the prevalence of different forms of violence against women
- mobilise a range of civil society actors to help raise awareness, prevent violence and support victims

- ensure that policies and funding in conflict situations are calibrated to address systematic rape

The UNite campaign builds on long-running efforts by various parts of the UN system. UNIFEM has given technical and financial support to local initiatives in over 100 countries aiming to end violence against women and girls. UNICEF, the global agency for children, plays an important role in data collection by tracking the impact of violence against women on development and the Millennium Development Goals. And the Security Council has in recent years stepped forward to provide stronger political leadership: in 2008, for example, it passed resolution 1820, committing the international community to ending the deployment of rape as a weapon of war.

The UN has also taken steps to reform its own systems and practices, to strengthen its capacity to defend women and girls against violence. Up for decision this year, for instance, is a proposal to overhaul the UN's gender architecture and equip it with a high-level, high-clout body to represent and champion women. The head of this new 'super agency' would be appointed to the rank of under-secretary-general and furnished with a bigger, stabler budget than that currently spread across the assortment of organisations working on gender in the UN system.

The shameful participation of UN peacekeepers in sexual abuse has presented a serious challenge to the UN's credibility in the fight against violence against women. The UN has adopted a zero-tolerance, zero-impunity policy to stamp out these violations. It has also made notable progress in increasing female representation in peacekeeping: women occupy 45 senior positions, up from 27 in 2007. In Liberia an all-female peacekeeping force is contributing in very tangible ways to the continued recovery of that country. In addition to carrying out standard policing functions, the force raises awareness of rape and is helping to boost female police recruitment.



A female member of the Nigerian battalion of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

Photo © UN/Christopher Herwig

A universal truth

Statistics show that violence against women remains on the rise in many parts of the world. In part this is because efforts to improve reporting are bearing fruit. But the numbers are also proof that governments have not been doing anything near what is required to eliminate violence against women. For some women, limp political leadership will be costly. In March Afghanistan's president approved a recidivist law effectively legalising rape in marriage and preventing women from leaving the house without their husband's permission. UNIFEM estimates that over 60 per cent of marriages in Afghanistan are forced: nearly 90 per cent of Afghani

women, according to the UN Development Programme, are illiterate.

There is no blanket approach to ending violence against women. Each country must decide and devise its own strategies. But, as Ban Ki-moon has said, 'There is one universal truth, applicable to all countries, cultures and communities: violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable.'

Read more and take action:

www.endviolence.un.org
www.unifem.org
www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk
www.unicef.org



1 in 3: the number of women worldwide who are beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused over the course of their lives

1 in 5: the number of women who will be raped or subjected to attempted rape in their lifetimes

1,000: the number of women who are raped every month in the DRC

47: the average life expectancy of a woman in the DRC

Do something.

Visit www.una.org.uk/dosomething to support the UN's campaign to end violence against women.