Violence against Women as a Human Rights Concern and Security Issue

Background Guide

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“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”
~ Article 3, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

“Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of equality, development and peace... [and] constitutes a violation of the rights and fundamental freedoms of women...”
~ Preamble, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993

Background

Violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent and pervasive forms of human rights violations present throughout the world today. It is perpetrated within every political, economic, cultural, or societal region across the globe. Up to 7 in 10 women around the world will experience physical and/or sexual violence within their lifetime.

Violence against women can manifest in a multitude of ways, including, but not limited to: physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. It can threaten women in the immediate as well as long-term, and can result in temporary or permanent consequences for women and girls, and, in some cases, death. There are several different forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls, with one of the most prevalent being intimate partner violence. According to the World Bank, women age 15-44 are more at risk of experiencing rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war, and malaria. Several global surveys have discovered that half of all women who die from homicide are killed by current or former partners.

Although abuse is usually committed by a close relation or partner, violence against women and girls can be used as an instrument of terror and destruction during armed conflicts. These atrocities are often executed by armed groups as a conscious strategy to humiliate opponents and destroy societies. Rape and violence against women has long been used as a tactic
of war, with reports of incidents during or after every international or non-international armed conflict. For example, during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped.

Violence against women is also a product of a long history of social, religious, and political institutions that promote the belief that women are inferior and thus subservient to men. There are currently 603 million women residing in countries where domestic violence is not considered a crime. Additionally, there are over 60 million child brides worldwide – young girls who are married before the age of 18, sometimes as young as 8 – a cultural custom that eliminates the ability of young girls to decide their own futures. The continued prevalence of this pandemic demonstrates that the requisite political commitment, action, and resources have yet to be fully realized.

History

When the UN was founded in 1945, female delegates believed there needed to be a permanent body to deal with women’s rights issue, thus the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was established in 1946. The Commission was tasked with drafting a Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which was adopted in 1967. However, the reporting procedures for the Declaration’s implementation were voluntary, thus the level of response from Governments was low.

The limited response to the Declaration led the commission to decide to form a legally binding Convention – the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – that was ultimately adopted by the General Assembly in 1979. CEDAW is one of the most widely ratified treaties, requiring all signatories to take: “all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the basis of equality with men” (article 3).

Prior to the late 1980s and early 1990s, violence against women was seen as a private, domestic matter rather than as a public or human rights issue that needed to be addressed in an official capacity. However, during the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, violence against women was recognized as a human rights violation by the Commission on Human Rights, and a special Rapporteur was appointed and given a mandate to investigate, collect, and analyze data regarding all aspects of violence against women. The Special Rapporteur contributed to linking the Commission on Human Rights, the Commission on the Status of Women, and CEDAW, and brought the issue of eliminating violence against women to the front of the international agenda.

Also in 1993, the CSW began drafting the Declaration for the Elimination of Violence against Women, which was adopted by the General Assembly on December 20, 1993. The Declaration defined 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” (article 1). The Declaration became the first framework for national and international action for addressing violence against women.

In 1999, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 54/134 declaring the 25th of November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, a day to invite worldwide organizations to participate in activities to raise awareness of the problem of violence against women. Since the problem was brought to the international forefront, the UN Human Rights Council annually adopts resolutions on accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women. The UN General Assembly adopts bi-annual resolutions addressing violence against women, the most recent being the intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and trafficking in women and girls in 2012.

Recent UN Involvement

In 2008, the United Nations Secretary-General launched a public campaign to raise awareness entitled UNiTE to End Violence Against Women. As an ongoing effort, UNiTE brings together a host of UN offices and agencies to collaborate to end violence against women: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The UNiTE campaign is working to mobilize individuals and communities throughout governments, civil societies, women’s and men’s organizations, and the private sector to cooperatively address the pandemic of violence against women. UNiTE aims to: produce and enforce national laws addressing punishment for committing violence against women in accordance with international human rights standards; to adopt and implement cross-national plans to emphasize methods of prevention; to collect and analyze data on the prevalence of the various forms of violence against women and girls; encourage engagement by community stakeholders to actively participate in preventing violence as well as offer support to women and girls who have been abused; and address sexual violence perpetrated in conflict situations or as a tactic of war against women and girls with systemic prevention efforts.

In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly created the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). The formation of UN Women was an historic step towards accelerating the goals of gender equality by merging and building on four previously distinct parts of the UN system: Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). UN Women was created to be an advocate for women and girls in promoting gender equality and spreading awareness of women’s issues like violence against women. The main roles of UN Women are to
support inter-governmental bodies in the formulation of policies and global standards, to provide technical and financial support to Member-States when needed to aid in implementing these standards, and to monitor system-wide progress of the UN system for its commitment to advancing gender equality.

**Status of Violence against Women around the World**

**African Region:** Female genital mutilation/cutting is a common cultural practice among many African countries, even though it can cause bleeding, infections, difficulty with childbirth, and death. The WHO estimates that 130 million women and girls worldwide have undergone the procedure globally, and that 2 million girls are at risk each year, despite the fact that there are internationally recognized agreements banning the practice. Many countries in Africa report high instances of domestic abuse against women, probably partially because the “right of a husband to beat or physically intimidate his wife” has been shown to be a widely held cultural belief. In April, over 200 schoolgirls were kidnapped by Boko Haram militants in Nigeria and have been held ever since. Conflict regions have a much higher risk of rape for women and girls: 250,000 to 500,000 during 1994 Rwandan Genocide, 200,000 since 1996 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and 50,000 to 64,000 in refugee camps in Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2001.

**Latin American Region:** Between one forth to one half of all women in Latin American and Caribbean countries reported experiencing intimate partner violence (physical, sexual, and/or emotional). In countries like Columbia, women are attacked with acid as revenge for perceived slights like being too pretty or independent. Several Latin American nations report the highest rates of femicide worldwide, with El Salvador leading at around 600 cases per year, up to five times higher than overall homicide rates in Northern, Western, and Southern European countries. Extreme brutality is evident in many of these cases: hands and feet bound, parts of the body burned, some beheaded, with autopsies showing that a majority are tortured or sexually abused before being killed.

**Asian Regions:** There are roughly 60 million women “missing” – never born due to the widespread gender discrimination preference of a male child over a female child – in South and West Asia, China, and North Africa. In India, 5,000 women are killed each year because their dowries are considered inadequate. One out of every two women in South Asia faces domestic violence at home. Accurate figures are hard to come by, but it is estimated that 200,000 Nepali women and girls are trafficked for sex work in India. In Bangladesh, approximately 10 women per week suffer from acid attacks that leave them disfigured, blind, and/or disabled.

**Western European and North America Region:** In the United States, 83% of school-aged girls report some form of sexual harassment at school and between 40-50% of women in the European Union have received unwanted sexual advances while in the work place. Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women in the United States; 22-35% of emergency room visits by women are for that reason. One in three women in U.S. armed forces have been sexually assaulted, twice the rate of the civilian population. An average of 52% of people in European countries believe a woman’s “provocative behaviour” can cause domestic violence.


