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Violence against women: forms, consequences and costs

Violence against women takes many forms – physical, sexual, psychological and economic. They are inter-related and affect women from before birth to old age. As societies change, patterns of violence alter and new forms emerge. Some forms of violence, such as trafficking, cross national boundaries.

Women who experience violence suffer a range of health problems and their ability to participate in public life is diminished. Violence against women harms families across generations, as well as communities and reinforces other violence throughout societies.

Violence against women also impoverishes women, their families, communities and nations. It lowers economic productivity, drains resources from public services and employers, and reduces human capital formation.

Violence against women is complex and diverse in its manifestations, with far-reaching and long-lasting consequences and costs. Its elimination requires a comprehensive, systematic and determined response.

According to the Secretary-General's in-depth study on violence against women:

- There is compelling evidence that violence against women is severe and pervasive throughout the world. Surveys on violence against women conducted in at least 71 countries show that a significant proportion of women suffer physical, sexual or psychological violence.
- The most common form of violence experienced by women globally is physical violence inflicted by an intimate partner. On average, at least one in three women is subjected to intimate partner violence in the course of their lifetimes.
- Many women are subjected to sexual violence by an intimate partner. A WHO study in 11 countries found that the percentage of women who had been subjected to sexual violence by an intimate partner ranged between 6 per cent in Japan and Serbia and Montenegro and 59 per cent in Ethiopia.
- Psychological or emotional violence by intimate partners is also widespread. The proportion of women found to have suffered severe psychological violence ranged from 10 percent in Egypt to 51 per cent in Chile. The first French national survey on violence against women found that 35 per cent of women had experienced psychological pressure by an intimate partner over a 12-month period.
- Femicide – the murder of women – has different characteristics from murders of men and often involves sexual violence. Between 40 and 70 per cent of female murder victims are killed by husbands or boyfriends in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States. In Colombia, one woman is reportedly killed by her partner or former partner every six days. Hundreds of women were abducted, raped and murdered in and around Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, over a 10-year period.
- More than 130 million girls have been subjected to female genital mutilation/cutting. The practice, most prevalent in Africa and some countries in the Middle East, is also prevalent among immigrant communities in Europe, North America and Australia.
- Female infanticide, prenatal sex selection and systematic neglect of girls are widespread in South and East Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.
- Women experience sexual harassment throughout their lives. Between 40 and 50 per cent of women in the European Union reported some form of sexual harassment in the workplace. In Malawi, 50 per cent of schoolgirls surveyed reported sexual harassment at school.
- The majority of the hundreds of thousands of people trafficked each year are women and children, and many are trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation.



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- Women are also subjected to violence in police custody. Violence against women while in police custody or in prisons includes sexual violence; inappropriate surveillance; strip searches conducted by or in the presence of men; and demands for sexual acts in exchange for privileges, goods or basic necessities.
- Violence against women in armed conflict often includes sexual violence. Between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda; between 20,000 and 50,000 women were raped during the conflict in Bosnia in the early 1990s.
- Many women face multiple forms of discrimination and an increased risk of violence. Indigenous women in Canada are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence. In Europe, North America and Australia, over half of women with disabilities have experienced physical abuse, compared to one-third of non-disabled women.
- Women subjected to violence are more likely to suffer physical, mental and reproductive health problems. Physical injuries include broken bones and chronic health conditions. Reproductive health consequences include gynaecological disorders, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies and problems with childbirth.
- Domestic violence and rape account for 5 per cent of the total disease burden for women aged 15 to 44 in developing countries and 19 per cent in developed countries. Violence places women at higher risk of poor physical and reproductive health outcomes, and abused women also show poorer mental health and social functioning.
- Violence before and during pregnancy has serious health consequences for both mother and child. Violence leads to high-risk pregnancies and pregnancy related problems, including miscarriage, pre-term labour and low birth weight.
- Women who have experienced violence are at higher risk of contracting HIV. Fear of violence also prevents women from accessing HIV/AIDS information and receiving treatment and counselling.
- Depression is one of the most common consequences of sexual and physical violence against women. Women subjected to violence are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs and to report sexual dysfunction, suicide attempts, post-traumatic stress and central nervous system disorders.
- Witnessing chronic domestic violence can lead to a lifelong pattern of violence in personal relationships.
- Violence against women may prevent women from fully participating economically and hinder opportunities for employment.
- Girls who are targeted for violence are less likely to complete their education. A study in Nicaragua found that children of female victims of violence left school an average of four years earlier than other children.
- The costs of violence against women – both direct and indirect – are extremely high. These costs include the direct costs of services to treat and support abused women and their children and to bring perpetrators to justice. The indirect costs include lost employment and productivity, and the costs in human pain and suffering.
- In Canada, a 1995 study estimated the annual direct costs of violence against women to be Can\$684 million for the criminal justice system, Can\$187 million for police and Can\$294 million for the cost of counselling and training, totalling more than Can\$1 billion a year. A 2004 study in the United Kingdom estimated the total direct and indirect costs of domestic violence, including pain and suffering, to be £23 billion per year or £440 per person.

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