THE FACES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

"In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture… Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms."

BEIJING DECLARATION AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION, PARAGRAPH 112

HAVE SEX WITH THE TEACHER or fail the class. Have sex with an HIV-positive husband without protection, or be forced out of the house with no income, no education. Drench oneself with kerosene and light a match, or face continual beatings. These are just a few of the violent choices women around the globe are forced to make every day, simply because they were born female.

At least one out of every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime – with the abuser usually someone known to her. Violence against women and girls is a universal problem of epidemic proportions. In 2002 the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation declaring violence against women a public health emergency, and a major cause of death and disability for women 16 to 44 years of age. According to a World Bank report, violence against women and girls throughout the world causes as much death and disability among women 16 to 44 as cancer, and more than malaria and traffic accidents combined.

Because violence against women is so intrinsically woven into the fabric of our societies, it has become a given – an unfortunate but eventual outcome of a world rife with poverty, economic instability and war. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called violence against women the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights abuse in the world.

And, it takes many forms.

DOMESTIC AND INTIMATE ABUSE

"I was in shock for several weeks. I could not get away from the idea of committing suicide. I was looking for an easy way of death: I thought of plunging into the river or hanging myself – anything not to live in this world."

Zuhra, from Tajikstan, faced deep despair after her husband of six years made her abort their third child in her fifth month of pregnancy against her will.

Fortunately, Zuhra challenged the generally accepted view that only death can wash away disgrace and went to a crisis centre for support. However, many desperate women still choose the ultimate protest.

From 2001-2004 nearly 450 women took their own lives in Tajikstan to escape abuse; and self-immolation – to kill as a sacrifice, often by setting oneself on fire – is on the rise among women in Afghanistan.[1] A Herat regional hospital recorded 150 attempted suicides among women between the ages of 12 and 50; doctors fear the real number is much higher as many don't seek medical attention.[2] In the US, a woman is assaulted – usually by her husband – every 15 seconds. In India, more than 20 percent of married men acknowledge abusing their wives.[3]

What is being done?

At least 45 countries have legislation against domestic violence; 21 more are drafting new laws, and many more have amended criminal assault laws to include domestic violence. By 2000, 118 countries had developed national action plans to implement their commitments to the Beijing Platform for Action, a number that is expected to increase in 2005.[4]

See Page 8 to read what one Zonta Club is doing to address Domestic Violence.

In no country in the world are women safe from Domestic or Intimate Violence.

% of women abused by partners	
Cambodia	16
Nicaragua	21
United States	22
Canada	29
United Kingdom	30
West Bank	52

Source: UNIFEM

HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

"… Our parents told us it was an obligation, so we went," remembers 22-year-old Zainab of her and her sisters' infibulations. She was 8. "We fought back; we really thought we were going to die because of the pain. You have one woman holding your mouth so you won't scream, two holding your chest and the other two holding your legs. We were lucky, I suppose, we gradually recovered and didn't die. But the memory and the pain never really goes away."

Infibulation, a more radical version of *Female Genital Circumcision* (FGC), is aimed at preserving female chastity and marriage prospects, at the expense of a woman's sexual health and bodily integrity. At least 130 million women have been forced to undergo FGC. Another 2 million are at risk each year. Although FGC is now on the international agenda and is condemned by most governments, it is still common in 28 countries, and is unofficially sanctioned in many communities despite the law.[5]

Thousands of young women are victims of *honor killings** every year, mainly in Western Asia, North Africa, the Middle East and parts of South Asia, as well as non-Muslim countries like Ecuador and Brazil.

*Forced marriage, sex-selective abortions and dowry murders** are also common forms of gender-based violence. There are close to 15,000 dowry deaths in India every year and more than 350 in Bangladesh last year.[6]

What is being done?

In January, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf signed a bill making honor killing an explicit criminal act punishable by death. Last May, the Special Court for Sierra Leone approved a motion to add a new count of "forced marriage" to indictments against six defendants, prosecuting forced marriage as a crime against humanity for the first time.

Zonta International has been at the forefront of the fight against FGC. The Zonta International Foundation funded an International Service Project (1998-2002) to decrease the incidence of FGC in Burkina Faso. Visit www.zonta.org/isp_archives to Read More.

TRAFFICKING

"Eventually I arrived in a bar in Kosovo, locked inside and forced into prostitution. In the bar I was never paid, I could not go out by myself, the owner became more and more violent as the weeks went by; he was beating me and raping me and the other girls," said a 21-year-old Moldovan woman. "We were his 'property', he said. By buying us, he had bought the right to beat us, rape us, starve us, force us to have sex with clients."[7]

Approximately 2 million girls between the ages of 5 and 15 are trafficked, sold, or coerced into prostitution each year.[8]

BOUGHT & SOLD

- In Bosnia, more than 10,000 victims of trafficking are in the country at one time.
- As many as 35,000 Colombian women are trafficked each year; and 50,000 women from the Dominican Republic are working abroad in the sex industry.
- In Europe, 10-15 percent of foreign prostitutes in Belgium were forcibly sold from abroad.
- From 1990-1997 more than 200,000 Bangladeshi women were trafficked; and 5,000-7,000 Nepali women and girls were trafficked to India.

What is being done?

In India and Bangladesh, police battalions on the border have increased; 70 percent of the border is now fenced off to aid in preventing trafficking of women and girls.

UNIFEM Executive Director Noeleen Heyzer in her presentation to the UN General Assembly in October 2004 pointed out that trafficking must be seen in the larger context of increasing migration, both within and across borders, in response to the demand for labor in high-growth countries combined with the increasing restrictions on the entry of many of those who migrate to meet that demand. "The lack of protection and rights to those regarded as 'illegal,' leave them vulnerable to all forms of exploitation, including trafficking," she said.

The Zonta International Foundation has funded the International Service Project Bosnia and Herzegovina Anti-Trafficking Community Mobilization project (STAR Network) since 2002. The goal of the project is to strengthen the ability of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina to lead community mobilization campaigns to prevent trafficking in women and girls. Visit www.zonta.org/isp to Read More.

RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

"When I first spoke to [Vanny], she was practically naked. She would be in the street with hardly anything on, dancing for money, for food – anything. I thought she was crazy. One day I went up to her and [Vanny] said to me: 'I'm not crazy you know, but I have no one. I have to do this to eat.'"

Vanny, a woman in her 80s, fled her home in Liberia in 2003 with her adult daughter, to escape escalating battles during

*Visit www.zonta.org for more information on honor killings and dowry murders.

the final months of her country's 14-year civil war. Rebels found the women hiding in the bush, killed her daughter and forced her back to her home, now rubble. For months Vanny had to cook for the rebels and endured repeated rape and abuse. They eventually took everything from her – even her clothes – leaving her naked and alone.

The large-scale, organized and systematic use of rape as an instrument of war has been documented in Cambodia, Liberia, Peru, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Uganda, and now Sudan. A European Community fact-finding team estimated that more than 20,000 Muslim women were raped during the war in Bosnia. At least 250,000, perhaps as many as 500,000 women were systematically raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

"This kind of systematic rape is an effort to humiliate the targeted community. Such sexual violation of women erodes the fabric of a community in a way that few weapons can," Sarah Maguire, a United Kingdom-based lawyer and human rights consultant told Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "This type of rape is about 'cleansing' or changing the ethnic makeup of a group, which in my opinion is tantamount to genocide." Such horrors were seen in Bosnia, where Muslim women were systematically raped as part of an "ethnic cleansing" campaign. They were forcibly impregnated with half-Serbian children in order to dilute the Bosniak identity in the former Yugoslav republics.[9]

"The international community is now fully aware that rape and other forms of violence against women are systematically deployed, with the cruelest effect, as a weapon of war," Heyzer told the UN Security Council last October. "However, gender-based violence during conflict is but part of the continuum of violence that runs through women's lives, from times of peace to times of war. It only deepens with war. Discrimination and gender inequality are seeds that, during wartime, become a bitter fruit that destroys the fabric of communities and the lives of women and their families."

What is being done?

Advocacy for stronger women's participation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan has resulted in principles of equality between men and women being enshrined in its Constitution. Women's advocacy in peace negotiations for the Democratic Republic of Congo is reflected in its Constitution guaranteeing women's full participation in peace-building. Heyzer says post-conflict reconstruction is a crucial time to establish justice and the rule of law for women – including constitutions with strong and clear guarantees of gender equality.[10]

HIV/AIDS

"We see our husbands with wives of men who have died of AIDS. What can we do? If we say no to sex, they'll say pack and go. If we do, where do we go to?"

Violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of rising rates of HIV infection. Domestic violence, harmful traditional practices, trafficking and rape as a tool of war all increase women's vulnerability to HIV. Fear of violence also prevents women from accessing HIV/AIDS information, being tested, disclosing HIV status, accessing services, and receiving treatment and counseling. In South Africa, national youth surveys show that 33 percent of young women report they are afraid of saying no to sex; and between 20-48 percent of women aged 10-25 report their first sexual encounter was forced.

A young married woman engaging in monogamous heterosexual sex with her husband can also be at risk. In these circumstances traditional messages of prevention are of little relevance as condoms are less likely to be used inside marriage. A study in Zambia found that only 11 percent of women interviewed believed that a woman had the right to ask her husband to use a condom – even if he had proven himself to be unfaithful and was HIV positive. In Kisumu, Zimbabwe, the majority of HIV-positive women were infected by their husbands.[11]

What is being done?

Heyzer says funding requests to UNIFEM's Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence Against Women show that governments and civil society organizations are making the links between violence against women and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Governments are becoming aware of the need for gender-based legislation around prevention, treatment and care. In Kenya, for example, working with the Women's Political Caucus and United Nations Development Programme, UNIFEM advocated successfully to incorporate women's concerns into the Government's HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill, which was presented to Parliament at the end of 2003. What has become clear in all of these advances, however, is that laws and frameworks only go so far. To change the stark realities of women's everyday lives, laws and policies must be implemented, and *attitudes and practices must change.*

To counter the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS in Niger, the Zonta International Foundation is funding the 2004-2006 International Service Project Mata Masu Dubara (Women on the Move) (CARE International). The project includes HIV/AIDS education, self-esteem and negotiation skills training, and support networks of female peers, centered on the establishment of all-female savings groups. Visit www.zonta.org/isp to Read More.

THE ROOTS

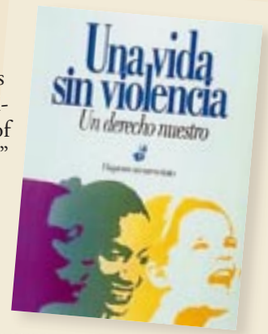
Though gender-based violence takes many forms, it is deeply rooted in one source: inequality.

Gender-based violence serves to perpetuate male power and control. It is sustained by a culture of silence and the suppression of the basic human rights of women.

Cross-cultural studies of wife abuse have found peasant and small-scale societies that are essentially free of family violence. The existence of such cultures proves that violence against women is not the inevitable result of male biology or sexuality, but more a matter of how society views masculinity.[12] Therefore, *ending gender-based violence means changing cultural concepts about masculinity, and this process must actively engage men.*

One component of the 2002-2004 International Service Project, Reinventing India: Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls focused on building alliances with men to prevent violence against women. Visit www.zonta.org/isp to Read More.

PEACE FOR WOMEN



"Women and girls everywhere want to see … a set of principles and commitments that put a priority on achieving a world free of poverty, violence and inequality," Heyzer said in her presentation to the 48th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2004. "In nearly every country and region of the world, we can point to areas in which there has been progress … Yet, this progress has been uneven and the gains remain fragile. Whether a country is at war, recovering from conflict or enjoying decades of relative peace, too many women and girls are prey to gender-based violence."

For more information on this broad ranging issue, visit www.zonta.org

ZISVAW GRANT PROJECT PROMOTES ELIMINATION OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

"We thought that Violence Against Women and Children is a private matter, and therefore we should not intervene when a neighbor gets beaten by her husband. But now we know that it is a crime and that it is alright for us to intervene – we can call the police to stop the violence."

This insight came from one of the 619 women and 319 men who participated in information, education and communication (EIC) activities dedicated to increasing awareness of Violence Against Women, sponsored by the **Zonta Club of Davao City, Philippines**. The EIC activities were just part of the Club project implemented in the urban community Barangay Lapu-Lapu of Agdao area and in the rural community Barangay Marilog to counter increasing reports of rape-slay, incest rape and domestic violence.

Partnering with other abuse prevention and support agencies, the Club established the Community Response to Violence Against Women and Children Project to:

- strengthen abilities of advocacy and support groups.
- increase community awareness.
- plan, implement, monitor and evaluate at least one community action plan on violence against women.
- strengthen the advocacy and referral system.

Participants said the project tremendously contributed to combating gender-based violence. The establishment of a Family Center provided a venue for activities that emboldened women to report abuse and served as a deterrent to abusers.

The Zonta Club of Davao City received a grant of US$24,790, in May 2003, provided by the Zonta International Foundation ZISVAW Fund.

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Photos: UN/DPI Photo