10.15: Violence Against Women (Part 1)

Violence against women (VAW) is, collectively, violent acts that are primarily or exclusively committed against women. Sometimes considered a hate crime,[1][2][3] this type of violence targets a specific group with the victim’s gender as a primary motive. This type of violence is gender-based, meaning that the acts of violence are committed against women expressly because they are women. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women states that:

“violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women” and that “violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.”[4]

Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, declared in a 2006 report posted on the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) website that:

Violence against women and girls is a problem of pandemic proportions. 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.[5]

Violence against women can fit into several broad categories. These include violence carried out by “individuals” as well as “states”. Some of the forms of violence perpetrated by individuals are rape; domestic violence; sexual harassment; coercive use of contraceptives; female infanticide; prenatal sex selection; obstetric violence and mob violence; as well as harmful customary or traditional practices such as honor killings, dowry violence, female genital mutilation, marriage by abduction and forced marriage. Some forms of violence are perpetrated or condoned by the state such as war rape; sexual violence and sexual slavery during conflict; forced sterilization; forced abortion; violence by the police and
authoritative personnel; stoning and flogging. Many forms of VAW, such as trafficking in women and forced prostitution are often perpetrated by organized criminal networks.[6]

The World Health Organization (WHO), in its research on VAW, categorized it as occurring through five stages of the life cycle: “1) pre-birth, 2) infancy, 3) girlhood, 4) adolescence and adulthood and 5) elderly”[7]

In recent years, there has been a trend of approaching VAW at an international level, through instruments such as conventions; or, in the European Union, through directives, such as the directive against sexual harassment,[8] and the directive against human trafficking.[9]

**Impact on Society**

![Women's Physical Security](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Cultural_Anthropology/Book%3A_Cultural_Anthropology_(Evans)/10...

According to an article in the Health and Human Rights Journal,[47] regardless of many years of advocacy and involvement of many feminist activist organizations, the issue of violence against women still “remains one of the most pervasive forms of human rights violations worldwide.”[48] The violence against women can occur in both public and private spheres of life and at any time of their life span. Many women are terrified by these threats of violence and this essentially has an impact on their lives that they are impeded to exercise their human rights, for instance, the fear for contribution to the development of their communities socially, economically and politically. Apart from that, the causes that trigger VAW or gender-based violence can go beyond just the issue of gender and into the issues of age, class, culture, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and specific geographical area of their origins.

Importantly, other than the issue of social divisions, violence can also extend into the realm of health issues and become a direct concern of the public health sector.[49] A health issue such as HIV/AIDS is another cause that also leads to violence. Women who have HIV/AIDS infection are also among the targets of the violence.[48] The World Health Organization reports that violence against women puts an undue burden on health care services, as women who have suffered violence are more likely to need health services and at higher cost, compared to women who have not suffered violence.[50] Another statement that confirms an understanding of VAW as being a significant health issue is apparent in the recommendation adopted by the Council of Europe, violence against women in private sphere, at home or domestic violence, is the main reason of “death and disability” among the women who encountered violence.[48]
In addition, several studies have shown a link between poor treatment of women and international violence. These studies show that one of the best predictors of inter- and intranational violence is the maltreatment of women in the society.\[51][52]

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### Who's Typology Table\[53\]

**Throughout the Life Cycle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Type of violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-birth</td>
<td>Sex-selective abortion; effects of battering during pregnancy on birth outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infancy</td>
<td>Female infanticide; physical, sexual and psychological abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlhood</td>
<td>Child marriage; female genital mutilation; physical, sexual and psychological abuse; incest; child prostitution and pornography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescence and adulthood</td>
<td>Dating and courtship violence (e.g. acid throwing and date rape); economically coerced sex (e.g. school girls having sex with “sugar daddies” in return for school fees); incest; sexual abuse in the workplace; rape; sexual harassment; forced prostitution and pornography; trafficking in women; partner violence; marital rape; dowry abuse and murders; partner homicide; psychological abuse; abuse of women with disabilities; forced pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly</td>
<td>Forced “suicide” or homicide of widows for economic reasons; sexual, physical and psychological abuse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significant progress towards the protection of women from violence has been made on international level as a product of collective effort of lobbying by many women’s rights movements; international organizations to civil society groups. As a result, worldwide governments and international as well as civil society organizations actively work to combat violence against women through a variety of programs. Among the major achievements of the women’s rights movements against violence on girls and women, the landmark accomplishments are the “Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women” that implies “political will towards addressing VAW ” and the legal binding agreement, “the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).”\[54\] In addition, the UN General Assembly resolution also designated 25 November as *International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.*\[55\]
Another Typology: Over Time

This similar typology from an academic journal article on violence against women shows similarly the different types of violence perpetrated against women according to what time period in a women’s life the violence takes place. However, it also classifies the types of violence according to the perpetrator. One important point to note is that more of the types of violence inflicted on women are perpetrated by someone the woman knows, either a family member or intimate partner, rather than a stranger.

Types

Violence against women can take a number of forms:

Rape

Rape is a type of sexual assault, usually involving sexual intercourse. Rape is usually perpetrated by men against boys, women, and girls; women are usually assaulted more often than boys and girls and usually all by someone they know.

Internationally, the incidence of rapes recorded by the police during 2008 varied between 0.1 in Egypt per 100,000 people and 91.6 per 100,000 people in Lesotho with 4.9 per 100,000 people in Lithuania as the median. According to the American Medical Association (1995), sexual violence, and rape in particular, is considered the most underreported violent crime. The rate of reporting, prosecution and convictions for rape varies considerably in different jurisdictions. Rape by strangers is usually less common than rape by persons the victim knows.

Victims of rape can be severely traumatized and may suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder; in addition to psychological harm resulting from the act, rape may cause physical injury, or have additional effects on the victim, such as acquiring of a sexually transmitted infection or becoming pregnant.

Violence Against Victims

Following a rape, a victim may face violence or threats of violence from the rapist, and, in some cultures, from the victim’s own family and relatives. Violence or intimidation of the victim may be perpetrated by the rapist or by friends and
relatives of the rapist, as a way of preventing the victims from reporting the rape, of punishing them for reporting it, or of forcing them to withdraw the complaint; or it may be perpetrated by the relatives of the victim as a punishment for “bringing shame” to the family. This is especially the case in cultures where female virginity is highly valued and considered mandatory before marriage; in extreme cases, rape victims are killed in honor killings. Victims may also be forced by their families to marry the rapist in order to restore the family’s “honor”.  

Marital Rape

Marital rape, also known as spousal rape, is non-consensual sex perpetrated by the victim’s spouse. Once widely condoned or ignored by law, spousal rape is now repudiated by international conventions and increasingly criminalized. Still, in many countries, spousal rape either remains legal, or is illegal but widely tolerated and accepted as a husband’s prerogative. The criminalization of marital rape is recent, having occurred during the past few decades. Traditional understanding and views of marriage, rape, sexuality, gender roles and self determination have started to be challenged in most Western countries during the 1960s and 1970s, which has led to the subsequent criminalization of marital rape during the following decades. With a few notable exceptions, it was during the past 30 years when most laws against marital rape have been enacted. Some countries in Scandinavia and in the former Communist Bloc of Europe made spousal rape illegal before 1970, but most Western countries criminalized it only in the 1980s and 1990s. In many parts of the world the laws against marital rape are very new, having been enacted in the 2000s.

In Canada, marital rape was made illegal in 1983, when several legal changes were made, including changing the rape statute to sexual assault, and making the laws gender neutral. In Ireland spousal rape was outlawed in 1990. In the US, the criminalization of marital rape started in the mid-1970s and in 1993 North Carolina became the last state to make marital rape illegal. In England and Wales, marital rape was made illegal in 1991. The views of Sir Matthew Hale, a 17th-century jurist, published in The History of the Pleas of the Crown (1736), stated that a husband cannot be guilty of the rape of his wife because the wife “hath given up herself in this kind to her husband, which she cannot retract”; in England and Wales this would remain law for more than 250 years, until it was abolished by the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords, in the case of R v R in 1991. In the Netherlands marital rape was also made illegal in 1991. One of the last Western countries to criminalize marital rape was Germany, in 1997.

The relation between some religions (Christianity and Islam) and marital rape is controversial. The Bible at 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 explains that one has a “conjugal duty” to have sexual relations with one’s spouse (in sharp opposition to sex outside marriage which is considered a sin) and states that “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another…” Some conservative religious figures interpret this as rejecting to possibility of marital rape. Islam makes reference to sexual relations in marriage too, notably: “Allah’s Apostle said, ‘If a husband calls his wife to his bed (i.e. to have sexual relation) and she refuses and causes him to sleep in anger, the angels will curse her till morning’; and several comments on the issue of marital rape made by Muslim religious leaders have been criticized.
Domestic Violence

Figure (PagelIndex(3)) - Girl in Ethiopia. An analysis by the UN of several international studies found domestic violence against women to be most prevalent in Ethiopia\[82\]

Women are more likely to be victimized by someone that they are intimate with, commonly called “intimate partner violence” or (IPV). Instances of IPV tend not to be reported to police and thus many experts believe that the true magnitude of the problem is hard to estimate.\[83\] Women are much more likely than men to be murdered by an intimate partner. In the United States, in 2005, 1181 women, in comparison with 329 men, were killed by their intimate partners.\[84\][85] In England and Wales about 100 women are killed by partners or former partners each year while 21 men were killed in 2010.\[86\] In 2008, in France, 156 women in comparison with 27 men were killed by their intimate partner.\[87\]

According to WHO, globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner.\[88\] A UN report compiled from a number of different studies conducted in at least 71 countries found domestic violence against women to be most prevalent in Ethiopia.\[82\]

In Western Europe, a country which has received major international criticism for the way it has dealt legally with the issue of violence against women is Finland; with authors pointing that a high level of equality for women in the public sphere (as in Finland) should never be equated with equality in all other aspects of women’s lives.\[89\][90][91]

A study by Pan American Health Organization conducted in 12 Latin American countries found the highest prevalence of domestic violence against women to be in Bolivia.\[92\]

Though this form of violence is often portrayed as an issue within the context of heterosexual relationships, it also occurs in lesbian relationships,\[93\] daughter-mother relationships, roommate relationships and other domestic relationships involving two women. Violence against women in lesbian relationships is about as common as violence against women in heterosexual relationships.\[94\]
Diagnosis Planning

The American Psychiatric Association planning and research committees for the forthcoming DSM-5 (2013) have canvassed a series of new Relational disorders which include Marital Conflict Disorder Without Violence or Marital Abuse Disorder (Marital Conflict Disorder With Violence).[95]:164, 166 Couples with marital disorders sometimes come to clinical attention because the couple recognize long-standing dissatisfaction with their marriage and come to the clinician on their own initiative or are referred by an astute health care professional. Secondly, there is serious violence in the marriage which is “usually the husband battering the wife”. [95]:163 In these cases the emergency room or a legal authority often is the first to notify the clinician. Most importantly, marital violence “is a major risk factor for serious injury and even death and women in violent marriages are at much greater risk of being seriously injured or killed (National Advisory Council on Violence Against Women 2000).”[95]:166 The authors of this study add that “There is current considerable controversy over whether male-to-female marital violence is best regarded as a reflection of male psychopathology and control or whether there is an empirical base and clinical utility for conceptualizing these patterns as relational.”[95]:166

Recommendations for clinicians making a diagnosis of Marital Relational Disorder should include the assessment of actual or “potential” male violence as regularly as they assess the potential for suicide in depressed patients. Further, “clinicians should not relax their vigilance after a battered wife leaves her husband, because some data suggest that the period immediately following a marital separation is the period of greatest risk for the women. Many men will stalk and batter their wives in an effort to get them to return or punish them for leaving. Initial assessments of the potential for violence in a marriage can be supplemented by standardized interviews and questionnaires, which have been reliable and valid aids in exploring marital violence more systematically.”[95]:166

The authors conclude with what they call “very recent information”[95]:167, 168 on the course of violent marriages which suggests that “over time a husband’s battering may abate somewhat, but perhaps because he has successfully intimidated his wife. The risk of violence remains strong in a marriage in which it has been a feature in the past. Thus, treatment is essential here; the clinician cannot just wait and watch.”[95]:167, 168 The most urgent clinical priority is the protection of the wife because she is the one most frequently at risk, and clinicians must be aware that supporting assertiveness by a battered wife may lead to more beatings or even death.[95]:167, 168

Honor Killings

Honor killings are a common form of violence against women in certain parts of the world. In honor killings, women and girls are killed by family members (usually husbands, fathers, uncles or brothers) because the women are believed to have brought shame or dishonor upon the family. These killings are a traditional practice, believed to have originated from tribal customs where an allegation against a woman can be enough to defile a family’s reputation.[96][97] Women are killed for reasons such as refusing to enter an arranged marriage, being in a relationship that is disapproved by their relatives, attempting to leave a marriage, having sex outside marriage, becoming the victim of rape, dressing in ways which are deemed inappropriate.[96][98]

Honor killings are common in countries such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Yemen.[98][99][100][101][102] Honor killings also occur in immigrant communities in Europe,
In India, honor killings occur in the northern regions of the country, especially in the states of Punjab, Haryana, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. In Turkey, honor killings are a serious problem in Southeastern Anatolia.

**Dowry Violence**

![Anti-dowry poster in Bangalore, India](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Cultural_Anthropology/Book%3A_Cultural_Anthropology_(Evans)/10%...)

The custom of dowry, which is common in South Asia, especially in India, is the trigger of many forms of violence against women. Bride burning is a form of violence against women in which a bride is killed at home by her husband or husband’s family due to his dissatisfaction over the dowry provided by her family. Dowry death refers to the phenomenon of women and girls being killed or committing suicide due to disputes regarding dowry. Dowry violence is common in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. In India, in 2011 alone, the National Crime Records Bureau reported 8,618 dowry deaths, while unofficial figures suggest the numbers to be at least three times higher.

**Acid Throwing**
Acid throwing, also called acid attack, or vitriolage, is defined as the act of throwing acid onto the body of a person “with the intention of injuring or disfiguring [them] out of jealousy or revenge”. The most common types of acid used in these attacks are sulfuric, nitric, or hydrochloric acid. Perpetrators of these attacks throw acid at their victims, usually at their faces, burning them, and damaging skin tissue, often exposing and sometimes dissolving the bones. The long term consequences of these attacks include blindness and permanent scarring of the face and body.

Women and girls are the victims in 75-80% of cases. Acid attacks are often connected to domestic disputes, including dowry disputes, and refusal of a proposition for marriage, or of sexual advances. Such attacks are common in South Asia, in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, India; and in Southeast Asia, especially in Cambodia.

Forced Marriage

A forced marriage is a marriage in which one or both of the parties is married against their will. Forced marriages are common in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The customs of bride price and dowry, that exist in many parts of the world, contribute to this practice. A forced marriage is also often the result of a dispute between families, where the dispute is ‘resolved’ by giving a female from one family to the other.

The custom of bride kidnapping continues to exist in some Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the Caucasus, or parts of Africa, especially Ethiopia. A girl or a woman is abducted by the would be groom, who is often helped by his friends. The victim is often raped by the would be groom, after which he may try to negotiate a bride price with the village elders to legitimize the marriage.

Force-Feeding

In some countries, notably Mauritania, young girls are forcibly fattened to prepare them for marriage, because obesity is seen as desirable. This practice of force-feeding is known as leblouh or gavage.

The practice goes back to the 11th century, and has been reported to have made a significant comeback after a military junta took over the country in 2008.

Mob Violence

In 2010 Amnesty International reported that mob attacks against single women were taking place in Hassi Messaoud, Algeria. According to Amnesty International, “some women have been sexually abused” and were targeted “not just because they are women, but because they are living alone and are economically independent.”

Stalking

Stalking is unwanted or obsessive attention by an individual or group toward another person, often manifested through persistent harassment, intimidation, or following/monitoring of the victim. Stalking is often understood as "course of
conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear.\[^{132}\] Although stalkers are frequently portrayed as being strangers, they are most often known people, such as former or current partners, friends, colleagues or acquaintances. In the US, a survey by NVAW found that only 23% of female victims were stalked by strangers.\[^{133}\] Stalking by partners can be very dangerous, as sometimes it can escalate into severe violence, including murder.\[^{133}\] Police statistics from the 1990s in Australia indicated that 87.7% of stalking offenders were male and 82.4% of stalking victims were female.\[^{134}\]

### Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is abusive, uninvited and unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature, typically in the work/studying place, which may include intimidation, bullying or coercion of a sexual nature, or the inappropriate promise of rewards in exchange for sexual favors. It can be verbal or physical, and it is often perpetrated by a person in a position of authority against a subordinate.\[^{135}\] In the United States, sexual harassment is a form of discrimination which violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence defines sexual harassment as: "any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment."\[^{136}\]