

‘Violence against women is always a violation of human rights; it is always a crime; and it is always unacceptable. Let us take this issue with the deadly seriousness that it deserves.’

Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary General



## WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

# Violence against women



South Korean women used as sex slaves by the Japanese Imperial Army in World War II demand compensation and redress © AP

# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

From birth to death, in times of peace and war, women face discrimination and violence at the hands of the state, the community and the family. Violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of deep-rooted inequality between women and men. It is a violation of women's fundamental human rights, including the right to life, the right to health and physical and mental integrity, and the right to be free from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment.

While men and children also suffer violence in the home and the community, violence against women is a global problem of epidemic proportions. It devastates lives, fractures families and communities, and hinders progress towards development and prosperity.



A young survivor of sexual violence reads a poster at the centre which provides her with psychological support, Nicaragua © AI

Violence against women exists in virtually every culture in the world. In many instances, it remains hidden as it is seen as normal, or trivialised, or justified and treated as inevitable. Even in countries where laws criminalise acts of violence against women, it may still be tolerated within the wider society, making it difficult for women to report violence and to seek justice.

Statistics and data on violence against women are difficult to capture, with incidents of violence notoriously under-reported. Studies suggest at least one out of every three women around the world has experienced being beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime – with the abuser usually someone known to her. Perhaps the most pervasive human rights violation that we know today, violence against women inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms equally to men, and to live their lives with dignity and respect.

#### WHAT IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

Violence against women can be defined as any act of violence that leads to physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, or the threats of such acts, including the use of force and the arbitrary deprivation of liberty in public or private life.

It includes:

- domestic violence
- sexual abuse and rape
- trafficking in women
- dowry-related violence
- female genital mutilation and other traditional harmful practices
- intimidation and harassment at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere
- forced prostitution
- forced marriage and early marriage
- female foeticide
- so-called honour crimes
- stalking

For years, Amnesty International has worked with women's organisations to campaign against violence against women, holding governments accountable for upholding women's human rights and ending violence against women. Amnesty International's research has highlighted the human rights impact of violence against women in the family, as well as in times of conflict and instability.

#### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE FAMILY

**'A woman is like wool, the more you beat her, the softer she will be.'**

Armenian folk saying

Domestic violence has been a historically widespread and unacknowledged social issue in many countries. In the UK alone, an average of two women a week are murdered by their partners or former partners. Sometimes their children are also killed. For each of these cases, many more women live their lives in fear on a daily basis.

Behind closed doors, sometimes in secret, women are subjected to violence by their partners and other family members. They are often too afraid to report it, and seldom taken seriously when they do.

And even though there may be laws against domestic violence and battery, in many countries police officers still write it off as a family affair, not collecting data adequately, or even properly documenting complaints.

#### VIOLENCE IN THE FAMILY IN VENEZUELA

On 21 May 2004 at around 4pm Alexandra Hidalgo was kidnapped at gunpoint while leaving the offices of the Central Bank of Venezuela in the capital, Caracas. She was dragged out of her car and bundled into the back of a van. She was then blindfolded and driven to an isolated spot where she was repeatedly raped and tortured by a group of men over a period of approximately seven and a half hours. Alexandra recognised her former husband among the attackers.

She told Amnesty: 'You can recover physically but the scars on the soul do not heal... Yes, [my former husband] was there because I saw him.'

Less than two months before the attack, Alexandra had obtained a divorce from her husband of 14 years, Ivan Sosa Rivero, who was at the time a lieutenant-colonel in the Venezuelan army. During the marriage, he repeatedly abused her – physically, psychologically and sexually.

Ivan Sosa Rivero was charged with kidnapping, rape and being an accomplice to aggravated vehicle theft in July 2004 and was arrested in December 2004. He was detained for over four months at the Centro Nacional de Procesados Militares de Ramo Verde, a military prison, but was never brought before a court. Fourteen court hearings were postponed by his lawyers. In April 2005 he was released conditionally and promptly went into hiding. Following a further court decision another warrant was issued for his re-arrest but he has not been recaptured. He was dismissed from the army only in August 2008 for failure to respond to charges pending against him by the military.

Two of the other five attackers were found guilty of kidnap and rape and sentenced to eight years in prison. Two others were found not guilty and another is also in hiding.

Despite fears for her own life and the lives of her three children, Alexandra speaks out about her case to raise awareness about violence against women and prevent similar attacks.

Violence against women, wherever it takes place, and whoever the perpetrator, is a fundamental violation of women's human rights and therefore States can be held responsible for failing to protect women or respond effectively. Their obligations include ensuring they have adequate laws in place criminalising domestic violence, and procedures to bring perpetrators to justice. They must ensure women can obtain protection and support appropriate to their needs, including emergency refuge in safe houses. And they must take measures to prevent domestic violence by tackling societal attitudes that tolerate and justify acts of violence. Governments are expected to



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report regularly on their progress to UN bodies, including to the UN Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ARMED CONFLICT

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### **'It is now more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier in modern conflict.'**

Major General Patrick Cammaert, former UN Peacekeeping Operation commander in DR Congo, 2008

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Instability and armed conflict have always led to an increase in all forms of violence, including genocide, rape and sexual violence. Despite the Geneva Convention protecting against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault, women and girls continue to face threats and acts of violence wherever there is conflict. Of course, men and boys are also victims of violence in war, not only as combatants, but as civilians. In some recent conflicts men and boys have been separated out in towns and villages and then killed, raped, forcibly conscripted, or made to commit acts of violence against women. However, as conflict brutalises all sides, women and girls face additional risks both in their homes and in their communities as domestic violence increases, and rape and sexual violence become weapons of war to dehumanise women, or to persecute their community.

Women make up the majority of refugees and internally displaced people, yet research consistently shows that women and girls are also vulnerable to violence in refugee camps. Reports by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) together with Save the Children documented serious allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation of women and children by humanitarian workers in camps for refugees and displaced people in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. Allegations included humanitarian workers deliberately withholding food and services for sexual favours.

Even the presence of peacekeeping troops has heightened risks of sexual violence. Some incidents of trafficking of women and girls into prostitution have been linked directly to the presence of peacekeeping forces.

Violence does not necessarily decline once armed conflict has abated. The World Health Organisation has noted that 'in many countries that have suffered violent conflict, the rates of interpersonal violence remain high even after the cessation of hostilities – among other reasons because of the way violence has become more socially acceptable and the availability of weapons'.

All too often, violence against women is relegated to the sidelines in peace talks. Peace processes have routinely failed to include women and to deal with violations of their human rights. Their experiences are therefore rendered invisible in peace agreements and their needs subsequently ignored.

However, the international human rights framework has at least identified the particular risks facing women in conflict as a priority. The UN Security Council adopted resolution 1325 in 2000 focussing on increased involvement of women in post-conflict peace building and reconstruction, and resolution 1820, adopted in 2008, on sexual violence in conflict. While these resolutions help provide a framework to uphold women's human rights in armed conflict more effectively, they must be translated into action.

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## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE UK

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### **Each year across the UK, 3 million women experience violence**

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Violence against women is also a major human rights concern in the UK. Each year across the UK, 3 million women experience violence, and many more live with the legacy of abuse experienced in the past. In the UK its forms include: domestic violence, rape and sexual violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, crimes in the name of honour, trafficking and sexual exploitation. These are mostly committed by men known to the woman.

Amnesty's work to stop violence against women in the UK has focussed on issues including the trafficking of women into forced prostitution, and the particular risks facing women from minority communities who cannot access critical services like refuges.

## TRAFFICKING

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### **The trafficking of women and girls happens all over the world yet remains hidden from public view**

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Trafficking involves the recruitment and transportation of people, using deception, coercion and threats in order to keep them in a situation of forced labour, slavery or servitude.

According to the International Labour Organisation globally at least 12.3 million people are victims of trafficking. Women, men and children are trafficked into a variety of sectors of the informal economy, including prostitution, domestic work, agriculture, the garment industry or street begging. The majority of victims are female. In 2006, the UN reported that women and girls accounted for 79 per cent of victims of human trafficking.

Women trafficked into forced prostitution are often abducted, raped, unlawfully deprived of their liberty and their right to freedom of movement at the hands of traffickers, pimps, brothel owners and others. Many victims of trafficking also suffer repeated psychological threats, physical beatings, and sexual slavery.

Victims of trafficking who escape or are found by police or immigration officers may have their rights violated further by law enforcement officers, officials and a criminal justice system ill-equipped to support and protect them.

Trafficking denies individuals some of their most fundamental human rights, including:

- freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment
- freedom from torture
- freedom of movement
- right to liberty and security
- right to be free from slavery or servitude
- and in extreme examples, the right to life.



In December 2008 the UK ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. The Convention came into force in April 2009 and sets out minimum standards for protecting trafficked people:

- a breathing period ('reflection period') of at least 30 days during which they can receive support to aid their recovery, including safe housing and emergency medical support;
- temporary residence permits for trafficked people who may be in danger if they return to their country, and/or if it is necessary to assist criminal proceedings.

Although the ratification of the Convention was a positive move towards protecting the human rights of trafficked people – the protection it affords has yet to be translated into practice. Victims of trafficking in the UK remain vulnerable to exploitation and at risk of violence and abuse.

#### WOMEN EXCLUDED FROM VITAL SERVICES

Most women in violent relationships find it hard to seek help or leave. Women from minority communities often face greater pressure to remain with an abusive partner, and more obstacles in getting help and protection. This is particularly the case for women who have travelled to the UK on visas such as spousal visas, and are therefore reliant on their husbands or 'visa sponsors'.

Under the 'no recourse to public funds' rule, women who arrive in the UK on temporary work permits, student visas, spousal visas or who come to the UK to marry are not entitled to state benefits, including housing benefit and income support. As a direct consequence, many women are trapped in a violent marriage, or find themselves homeless and destitute as refuge services cannot access the funds to support them.

In November 2009, following a mass lobby of Parliament by Amnesty activists and women's organisations, the government launched a three-month pilot scheme setting up a limited fund to help women in this position. The scheme provides a fixed amount of funding to pay for four weeks in a refuge. Following campaigning and lobbying, the project was extended until August 2010 and then to March 2011, with a permanent solution expected.



Top left: A footballer at a match between Istanbulspor and Besiktas wears a t-shirt promoting the Stop Violence Against Women campaign. The t-shirt says 'Red card for violence against women' © Radical Above: Women at a meeting of the Campaign for Equality, which works to end legal discrimination against women in Iran, 2007 © Campaign for Equality/R Asgarizadeh Left: Volunteers collect signatures on a petition demanding change to laws discriminating against women in Iran, 2008 © photoforchange.com

### TACKLING ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN A STRATEGIC WAY

Ending violence against women requires the involvement and support of men and boys, as well as girls and women, and it needs strong leadership from a government committed to tackling all forms of violence against women in a strategic and coherent way.

When governments signed up to the UN Beijing Platform for Action on women's human rights in 1995, they made commitments to a whole raft of measures to reduce gender inequality, and to take all measures necessary to end violence against women.

For over 15 years, the United Nations has made repeated calls for governments, including the UK, to take 'integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women'.

Since 2004, Amnesty International UK has campaigned alongside the End Violence Against Women Coalition for an integrated strategy to end violence against women in the UK. All three political parties have signed their support for this, with the coalition government pledging to introduce its strategy in spring 2011.

This is encouraging. However, support services such as refuges and rape crisis centres face crippling funding cuts, while the public attitude is often to blame victims of rape rather

than the perpetrators. And despite new initiatives to support women through the judicial system, the UK has one of the lowest conviction rates for rape across Europe.

### OUR WORK

Amnesty International UK will continue to campaign against violence against women both overseas and in the UK, working in partnership with women's organisations to ensure governments honour their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil all women's human rights.