



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Violence Against Women February 2009

Violence against women in all its forms, including domestic violence and harmful traditional practices, is a grave violation of the dignity of women and their human rights. . . . Often violence against women results from the consideration of a woman, not as a human person with rights on an equal basis with others, but as an object to be exploited. In this context, an increasing scourge is trafficking of women and girls.

-- Mons. Celestino Migliore, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, October 13, 2005

MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM

Gender-based violence and trafficking against women and girls happens all around us. As United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said in 2007, “Violence against women and girls continues unabated in every continent, country and culture. It takes a devastating toll on women’s lives, on their families, and on society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence – yet the reality is that too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned.”

The statistics are staggering. One in three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime, usually by someone she knows.¹ According to a World Health Organization 2002 report, 10 to 69 percent of women in 48 surveys around the world said they had been physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives, many while they were pregnant. One EU report says violence is a major cause of disability and death for women between the ages of 15 and 44 years of age.²

The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”³ This violence occurs in the **family** (domestic violence, dowry-related violence, child marriages, female genital mutilation, honor killings), in the **general community** (sexual harassment and abuse at school and work by authority figures, trafficking and forced prostitution) and **during armed conflict**, sometimes perpetrated by the state (rape and sexual assault as weapons of war).

Trafficking in persons is a modern form of slavery affecting mainly women and girls who are deceived or coerced into being exploited for sex, labor, or profit. The U.S. government, in a 2006 study, estimated that 800,000 people are trafficked across national borders each year. Other organizations put the annual figure at 2 to 4 million. In addition, many are trafficked within a country. UNICEF estimates that one million children, primarily girls, enter the sex trade each year.

Violence against women stems from perceptions, some long ingrained, which basically devalue and objectify females and deny their human rights. In many societies, women cannot carry on the family name, are not considered important enough to educate, cannot inherit property and are seen as an economic drain if their family has to provide a dowry upon marriage. According to a 2000 UN Study on the Status of Women, 60 million girls are “missing” due to sex-selective abortions, infanticide and neglect. In other cultures, girls are exchanged for money and goods when offered as child brides, serving as a means of better economic security for their families. As objects, women often lack power, suffer low self-esteem, and are denied education or employment opportunities.

¹ General Assembly. In-Depth Study on All Forms of Violence against Women. A/61/122/Add.1. 6 July 2006.

² Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe 2002, Recommendation 1582 (2002) on Domestic Violence against Women.

³ World Health Organization Fact Sheet No. 239 on Violence against women, revised November 2008

The effects of violence against women are widespread. Obviously the women/girls themselves suffer physical and mental trauma but their health problems can affect the entire society. HIV/AIDS is being spread by women and girls subjected to rape, sometimes intentionally by HIV-positive men. In some African countries, the myth that having sex with a virgin will cure a man of AIDS has led to the horrific rape of babies. In every armed conflict, “women’s bodies have become part of the battleground for those who use terror as a tactic of war -- they are raped, abducted, humiliated and made to undergo forced pregnancy, sexual abuse and slavery.”⁴ Pregnant, abused women are more likely to have low birth-weight babies, many of whom are infected with HIV/AIDS. This means increased health costs as women are treated and society copes with this dire disease.

The economic and social costs of violence against women are also high. When women are severely injured, they cannot work, either at home or outside. Within the U.S. alone, domestic violence is estimated to account for \$1.8 billion in lost productivity each year.⁵ One survey found that U.S. domestic violence victims are absent from paid work nearly 8 million days per year, which is equivalent to 32,000 full-time jobs.⁶ Domestic violence, lack of educational opportunity and limited employment prospects often make women vulnerable to traffickers who entice them with offers of attractive jobs. Instead they end up trapped and stigmatized, their families and communities broken.

THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE

The Church recognizes that women possess “equal personal dignity” alongside men since “both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2334). In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*, Pope John Paul II called for “a ‘new feminism’ which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination’, in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation” (No. 99). In his June 29, 1995 *Letter to Women*, the Pope noted that “women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and . . . they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude” (No. 3). He wrote, “The time has come to condemn vigorously the types of *sexual violence* which frequently have women for their object and to pass laws which effectively defend them from such violence” (No. 5). And he called for a “*campaign for the promotion of women*, concentrating on all areas of women’s life and beginning with a *universal recognition of the dignity of women*” (No. 6).

Msr. Celestino Migliore, speaking October 13, 2005 on behalf of the Holy See at the UN, reaffirmed that all forms of violence against women are “rightly to be condemned” and called for programs that would provide education, comprehensive health care, and “increasing . . . access to and control over productive resources and capital” for women so they might “play a key role in the development and well being of their family, community and society.”

POSSIBLE LEGISLATION

In the 110th Congress, the International Violence Against Women Act was introduced as S. 2279 and HR. 5927. It focused U.S. diplomatic efforts on decreasing violence against women and girls in 10 to 20 countries with high incidences of such violence by helping survivors, holding perpetrators accountable, supporting prevention programs, and incorporating best practices into U.S. foreign assistance. This bill will likely be reintroduced in the 111th Congress, but the language may change. In a related move, a resolution was introduced in the House on January 6, 2009 encouraging the Senate to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The U.S. became a signatory in 1980, but it has not been ratified. Should these pieces of legislation advance, USCCB will try to shape the bills to reflect Catholic social teaching on human life and dignity, as we did with last year’s reauthorization of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

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⁴ UNIFEM, Violence against Women – Facts and Figures, November 2007, <http://www.unifem.org>

⁵ Centers for Disease Control, 2003, Costs of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the United States, Atlanta.

⁶ American Institute on Domestic Violence, 2001. Domestic Violence in the Workplace Statistics.