



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

Background on Violence Against Women February 2010

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 UN, October 13, 2005

MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM

Gender-based violence and trafficking against women and girls are tragically common. As UN 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. 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.

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.”¹ 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). For example, from January to September 2009, “the UN recorded over 7,500 cases of sexual violence against women and girls across North and South Kivu in eastern Congo, nearly surpassing the figures recorded for all of 2008, and probably representing only a fraction of the total.”²

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, with 80% being women and girls, and 50% being minors. 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.

The effects of violence against women are widespread. Not only do women and girls suffer great physical and mental trauma, but the repercussions reverberate throughout society and may be felt from generation to generation. For example, violence which results in pregnancy often leads to poor health for both the woman and her unborn child throughout their lives as it is both a cause and consequence of HIV. HIV-positive women are more likely to

¹ World Health Organization Fact Sheet No. 239 on Violence against women, revised November 2008.

² “‘You Will Be Punished’ – Attacks on Civilians in Eastern Congo,” Human Rights Watch, December 2009.

have experienced violence than their HIV-negative counterparts. Without access to proper care and treatment, an HIV-positive woman may pass on the virus to her baby. Men who perpetrate violence are more likely to engage in higher risk sexual behaviors, including having multiple sexual partners, that increase the risk of HIV transmission overall. 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. Overall, violence against women increases their risk of acquiring HIV and thus contributes to high HIV prevalence.³ Health costs for treatment are high. 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 In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo where widespread rape occurs, survivors face debilitating injuries, HIV infection, psychological trauma, and ostracism from their communities for life.

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. Domestic violence, lack of educational opportunity and limited employment prospects often make women vulnerable to traffickers who offer enticing jobs. Instead they end up trapped and stigmatized, their families and communities broken. Thus, violence against women contributes to disability, disease, and even death at great social and economic costs not only to girls and women, but to society as a whole.

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).

Msgr. Celestino Migliore, speaking in October 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 previous Congress, International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) legislation was introduced, focused on helping women/girls who survived violence, holding perpetrators accountable, and supporting prevention programs. In the current Congress, hearings on violence against women have been held, but no IVAWA bills have been reintroduced. A related bill, H.Res.22 encourages the Senate to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which the U.S. became a signatory in 1980. As implemented in other countries, CEDAW has promoted abortion. Should these pieces of legislation advance, USCCB will try to shape the bills to reflect Catholic social teaching on human life and dignity.

In addition, both the Senate Congo Conflict Minerals Act (S.891) and the House Conflict Minerals Trade Act (H.R.4178) include provisions that address some of the underlying causes of the conflict in eastern Congo and call for additional funding to support the recovery of women and communities affected by violence.

For information: Contact *Virginia Farris*, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3182 (phone), vfarris@usccb.org; or *Francisca Vigaud-Walsh*, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence Program Manager, Catholic Relief Services, 410-951-7455 (phone), fvigaud@crs.org.

³ Anderson, N. et al. Gender-based violence and HIV: relevance for HIV prevention in hyperendemic countries of southern Africa. *AIDS* (2008), 22 (suppl 4):S73–S86

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