



Global Year Against Pain in Women

real women, real pain

Violence against women (Gender-based violence)

The United Nations defines violence against women, also known as gender-based violence, as ‘any act that results in, or is likely to result 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).

Violence against women is usually both a cause and consequence of discrimination against women.

Violence against women is a major health problem as well as a violation of women’s human rights.

It is prevalent worldwide with far-reaching health, economic and social ramifications and is rooted in gender inequality (1, 2).

Violence against women has significant consequences and costs for women, their families and the society as a whole. It is a major contributor to illness, death, pain, suffering, social isolation, loss of employment and productivity and restriction of freedom.

Violence against women is of various types and can take place in a variety of settings including the family, the community, state custody, and armed conflict. The most common form of physical violence experienced by women worldwide is physical violence by an intimate partner, otherwise called domestic violence. Forced or coerced sex or rape is an example of violence. Violence is an important factor in the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV, unintended pregnancies and often unsafe abortions (1-3).

Discriminatory social norms and traditional practices in some regions put women in a subordinate position, and at increased risk of reproductive health hazards and even disability and death. These harmful practices include sex selective abortions, female infanticide, female genital mutilation/cutting, neglect of the girl child, early and forced marriage, wife inheritance, violence and discrimination against widows, dowry-related violence, prostitution, and human trafficking mainly for sex exploitation.

Sexual harassment and violence is common in the workplace, educational institutions, correctional institutions, and also in sports. In areas of armed conflict and natural disasters, women are at greater risk of physical and sexual violence (1, 3)

In some societies violence against women is so common that women have come to accept that such acts are ‘normal’ and ‘acceptable’ (1-3). Abused women are often reluctant to seek help because safe and supportive facilities are usually not available. Fear and stigmatization may make women reluctant to disclose their pain and suffering (2).

There are established international laws and policies in place to address and tackle this major public health and human right issue (1-3), but the fact that the problem persists indicates that the laws and legislation, if and where they do exist, are not being effectively implemented.

To effectively curb this menace, a multi-sectoral approach, involving the health, legal and social services, must be adopted. There must be a demonstration of political commitment and availability of adequate resources to provide these necessary services. Gender-based violence can only be eradicated by addressing gender discrimination and promoting women’s equality and empowerment. Legislation must criminalize all forms of violence against women and must be properly and effectively implemented.

References:

1. United Nations General Assembly, 2006. In-depth study on all forms of violence against women: Report of the Secretary-General. United Nations, New York, 2006. (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/>)
2. WHO Multi-country study on women’s health and domestic violence against women: summary report of initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women’s responses. Geneva. World Health Organization, 2005.
3. IGWG of USAID 2006. Addressing gender-based violence through USAID’s Health Programs: A guide for Health Sector Program Officers. Washington D.C.