

What is violence against women?

The term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence 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 deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of 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.

- UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993

Around the world, women are faced with an epidemic of violence; regularly experiencing violence against them in their homes, communities, schools, workplaces, streets, markets, police stations, hospitals; in all spheres and institutions.

This violence, or the threat of it, not only causes physical and psychological harm to women, but also limits their access to and participation in society.

In addition, and increasingly, women are dealing not only with violence itself but also with its devastating side-effect; HIV&AIDS. The pandemic is claiming more and more women, with violence further fuelling their susceptibility to it. The exponential growth of HIV infections amongst women, in turn makes them more vulnerable to violence and stigma from their partners, families and communities.

What makes women more vulnerable to HIV&AIDS?

Women are more vulnerable to HIV&AIDS

- 51% of all people living with HIV&AIDS today are women (UNIFEM, 2003).
- Over 60% of HIV-positive youth between the ages of 15-24 are women (UNAIDS, 2003).
- 55% of the 16 000 new infections occurring daily are women (UNAIDS, 2003).
- AIDS now ranks as one of the leading causes of death among women aged 20 to 40 in several cities in Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and North America (UNAIDS, 2003).
- In South Africa nearly four times as many adolescent girls and young women (15-24) are HIV-positive than their male counterparts (Dorrington, et al., 2002).
- In South-east Asia, 30% of HIV-positive adult infections are in women and in Thailand 50% of those living with HIV&AIDS are women (WHO, 2000).

In Tanzania, a study of voluntary counselling and testing services in the capital found that only 57% of women who tested HIV-positive reported receiving support and understanding from partners. In Botswana women have admitted to health professionals that they are afraid of their partner's reaction if he finds out they are HIV-positive. That fear has kept them from being tested, from returning for their results if they are tested, from participating in Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) and treatment programmes, and for those who agree to be treated, from adhering to the regimen because they are trying to hide their pills (UNAIDS).

Women are two to four times more likely to contract HIV during unprotected sex than men as their sexual physiology places them at a higher risk of injury. The virus is also present in greater amounts in semen than in vaginal fluids. However, much more central to women's vulnerability, is the fact that they are at the receiving end of forced sex, which makes injury, and consequently HIV infections, more likely.

Forced sexual initiation makes women vulnerable to HIV&AIDS

Studies show that many women's first sexual encounter itself is likely to be forced (Moreno 2003). Forced sex in many societies is not only allowed but socially sanctioned. Underage married girls, for instance, are locked in relationships where forced sexual initiation is likely to occur, and be repeated (Sharma and Sharma, 1998). Although most countries consider 18 as the age for legal marriage, it is estimated that over 100 million underage girls will be married in developing countries (excluding China) over the next decade (Population Council, 2004).

Percentage of adolescents reporting forced sexual initiation

Country	Age group	Women	Men
Ghana	(12 – 24)	21%	5%
Mozambique	(13 – 18)	19%	7%
Peru	(16 – 17)	40%	11%
South Africa	(15 – 18)	28%	6%
Tanzania	(12 – 19)	29%	7%

Source: WHO World Report on Violence and Health

Forced sex in marriages is common even for adult women, but the situation is worse for adolescent married girls who are sometimes much younger than their husbands. In sub-Saharan Africa, research shows that adolescent wives (15-19) are on average 10 years younger than their husbands (UNICEF, 2001). The relative powerlessness of adolescent wives places them at a higher risk of contracting HIV. Studies from Kenya and Zambia show that young married girls are more likely to be HIV-positive than their unmarried peers because they have sex more often, use condoms less often, are unable to refuse sex, and have partners who are more likely to be HIV-positive (ICRW and AIDSMARK, 2002).

Domestic/partner violence makes women vulnerable to HIV&AIDS

Women around the world face physical, sexual, economic, social and psychological violence at the hands of their intimate partners/husbands. The statistics from across the world are staggering, and so are the consequences of violence. The link between physical and sexual violence and HIV&AIDS is self-evident – women are unable to refuse or negotiate safer sex in abusive relationships. But, HIV infection is a reality even for women who are not physically and sexually abused. Psychological and emotional violence itself can eliminate women's ability to control whether, when and how they will have sex.

For economically-dependent married women in Uganda, the threat of disinheritance and/or abandonment holds great terror and compels them to ignore their husbands' adultery and the risk of HIV infection, and submit to unprotected sex (HRW, 2003).

In addition, many women around the world are socialised to believe that domestic violence is innate to marriage/intimate relationships and consider sex an obligation (HRW, 2003). A review of policies and laws around the world will show that women have little option but to believe so. Seventy-nine countries have no (or unknown) legislation against domestic violence and marital rape is recognised specifically as a crime in only 51 countries (UNIFEM, 2003).

Domestic Violence

- At least one in every three women, or up to one billion women, have been beaten, forced into sex, or otherwise abused in their lifetimes. Usually, the abuser is a member of her own family or someone known to her (L Heise, M Ellsberg, M Gottemoeller, 1999).
- Up to 70% of female murder victims are killed by their male partners (WHO 2002).
- In Kenya more than one woman a week was reportedly killed by her male partner (Joni Seager, 2003).
- In Zambia five women a week were murdered by a male partner or family member (Joni Seager 2003).
- In Egypt 35% of women reported being beaten by their husband at some point in their marriage (UNICEF 2000).
- In Bolivia 17% of all women aged 20 years and over have experienced physical violence in the previous 12 months (WHO 2002).
- In Bangladesh 50% of all murders are of women by their partners (Joni Seager, 2003).
- In Pakistan 42% of women accept violence as part of their fate; 33% feel too helpless to stand up to it; 19% protested and 4% took action against it (Government study in Punjab Province 2001).

In South Africa:

39% of the sexually experienced girls say they have been sexually forced, 33% say they are afraid of saying no to sex, 55% say they have had sex when they did not want to because their boyfriend insisted. Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

According to a study, women who are beaten or dominated by their partners are much more likely to become infected by HIV than women who live in non-violent households (Dunkle et al, 2004). The figures showed that women who were beaten by their husbands or boyfriends were 48% more likely to become infected by HIV than those who were not. Those who were emotionally or financially dominated by their partners were 52% more likely to be infected than those who were not. A smaller study in Tanzania found that HIV-positive women were over two and a half times more likely to have experienced violence at their partners' hands than HIV-negative women (Maman et al, 2002).

The Human Rights Watch report on domestic violence and HIV&AIDS in Uganda shows clearly that women married to HIV-positive men are unable to refuse sex or insist on condom usage. When they refuse sex their husbands respond with physical and sexual violence. When they demand condom usage their husbands beat them – seeing this as the wives' questioning of the husbands' fidelity or as an admission that the wives have been unfaithful themselves.

The cycle of violence spirals as women become HIV-positive. The fear of violence, eviction from their homes, and of losing their children, inhibits women from disclosing their status, or accessing information or treatment. Violence increases in discordant couples (when one is HIV-positive and the other is HIV-negative). In Uganda, an HIV&AIDS NGO found that when the man was HIV-positive and the woman not, the couple tended to stay together but when it was the other way around the woman was abandoned (HRW 2003). What is even more disturbing is that wives of HIV-positive men were being forced into unprotected sex, driven by men's sense of entitlement over them.

Rape makes women vulnerable to HIV&AIDS

Rape is one of the most pervasive and scarring forms of violence against women. Increasingly, the risk of HIV infection is becoming the supplementary consequence of rape. Rape is by definition non-consensual and therefore the probability of injury on the vagina or anus is higher, making transmission more likely. The risk of transmission increases exponentially in the case of gang-rape.

Rape

- One in five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime (WHO 1997).
- In South Africa 147 women are raped every day (South African Institute for Race Relations 2003).
- In the USA a woman is raped every 90 seconds (US Department of Justice, 2000).
- In France 25 000 women are raped per year (European Women's Lobby, 2001).
- In Turkey 35.6% of women have experienced marital rape sometimes and 16.3% often (surveys published in 2000, Women and sexuality in Muslim societies, WWHR Publications: Istanbul, 2000).

In South Africa, studies show that in 2002-03, 40% of cases were reported by rape survivors under 18 (South African Police Service, 2003). There is a growing realisation that teens and preteens are becoming more vulnerable to rape. This can also be borne out by the fact that nearly four times as many adolescent girls and young women (15-24) are HIV-positive than their male counterparts (Dorrington et al, 2002). Additionally, fear of contracting HIV is contributing to younger girls being raped because they are believed to be free of HIV. In Uganda HIV infection is six times higher among young girls than boys with the difference in rates beginning as early as nine years old and reaching a peak for the 12-19 year old age group (Ministry of Health-Uganda).

In addition, the risk of violence and sexual abuse is particularly high among girls who are orphaned by AIDS, many of whom face a heightened sense of hopelessness along with a lack of emotional and financial support. In a study in Zambia, Human Rights Watch found that among girls orphaned by AIDS, hundreds were being sexually assaulted by family members or 'guardians' or forced into sex-work to survive (HRW).