The intolerable status quo: Violence against women and girls

Charlotte Bunch

Violence against women and girls is the most pervasive violation of human rights in the world today. Its forms are both subtle and blatant and its impact on development profound. But it is so deeply embedded in cultures around the world that it is almost invisible. Yet this brutality is not inevitable. Once recognized for what it is—a construct of power and a means of maintaining the status quo—it can be dismantled.

Imagine a people routinely subjected to assault, rape, sexual slavery, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, verbal abuse, mutilation, even murder—all because they were born into a particular group. Imagine further that their sufferings were compounded by systematic discrimination and humiliation in the home and workplace, in classrooms and courtrooms, at worship and at play. Few would deny that this group had been singled out for gross violations of human rights.

Such a group exists. Its members comprise half of humanity. Yet it is rarely acknowledged that violence against women and girls, many of whom are brutalized from cradle to grave simply because of their gender, is the most pervasive human rights violation in the world today.

Gender violence is also a major health and development issue, with powerful implications for coming generations as well as society in general. Eliminating this violence is essential to constructing the paradigm of human security—and by that I mean peace, peace at home and peace at large. Without it, the notion of human progress is merely a fantasy.

At first glance, this brutal litany of statistics might seem wildly exaggerated. Yet while it is true that gender violence is a new field of research and studies are often limited in size, it is nonetheless clear that these crimes are, in the main, vastly under-reported. As social scientists are now discovering, the sheer scope and universality of violent acts against women and girls defy even the most educated perceptions.

Equally shocking is the fact that most gender violence not only goes unpunished but is tolerated in silence—the silence of society as well as that of its victims. Fear of reprisal, censorship of sexual issues, the shame and blame of...
As the second millennium draws to a close, there have been reprisals against the progress in the field—rightly regarded as a challenge to male primacy. Some studies even suggest that certain forms of violence against women and girls are on the rise. For gender violence, in all of its varied manifestations, is not random and it is not about sex. It serves a deliberate social function: asserting control over women’s lives and keeping them second-class citizens. Constant vigilance is needed to protect the fragile gains made thus far, to continue along the road to equality—and to bring an end to the torrent of daily violence that degrades not only women but humankind in its entirety.

The intimate enemy

For tens of millions of women today, home is a locus of terror. It is not the assault of strangers that women need fear the most, but everyday brutality at the hands of relatives, friends and lovers. Battering at home constitutes by far the most universal form of violence against women and is a significant cause of injury for women of reproductive age. Yet it is not the sort of act that commands headlines because it happens behind closed doors and because victims fear speaking out. Even in a comparatively open society like the US, research shows that only 1 in 100 battered women ever reports the abuse she suffers. Crime statistics reveal that most women who are raped know their attackers, as do 40 per cent of female murder victims.

Indeed, domestic violence is tragically commonplace. It occurs across education, class, income and ethnic boundaries. A World Bank analysis of 35 recent studies from industrialized and developing countries shows that one quarter to one half of all women have suffered physical abuse by an intimate partner. And while there are not yet enough data to make accurate country-by-country comparisons, the prevalence and pattern of domestic violence are remarkably consistent from one culture to the next. Statistics on rape from industrialized and developing countries show strikingly similar patterns: Between one in five and one in seven women will be victims of rape in their lifetime.

One might assume that the spreading emancipation of women would have diminished the reach of violence. Yet violence in the home has been stubbornly resistant to advances in women’s rights. In many Western countries, domestic violence is targeted by law and the media, but it has not summoned the sort of insistent public campaigns as have issues such as driving while intoxicated or smoking.

Further, in most countries today, domestic abuse is officially regarded as a private family matter. While sexual and physical assault are broadly accepted as crimes outside the home, the law in most countries is mute when it comes to attacks within the family nest. Laws that stop at the doorstep of the family are a form of moral hypocrisy. And there are other equally compelling reasons why the issue cries out for urgent and fervent public attention.

First, domestic violence reaches menacingly into the next generation. Children of violent fathers are often physically abused alongside their mothers. In addition, studies show that children of violent parents are more apt not only to repeat that behaviour with their own offspring but to commit violent acts in the larger society. This dangerous cycle must be broken.

Second, there are clear parallels between behaviour within and outside the home. If the systematic oppression of women and girls is tolerated widely at the family level, society at large will be shaped accordingly. Studies strongly indicate that domestic violence is a key component of social problems, including street children, child labour and prostitution.

Third, it is a matter of public health. Violence debilitates women and girls physically, psychologically and socially, sometimes with lifelong results.

Fourth, family violence affects the healthy development and productivity of all societies. Women are now widely accepted as the
cornerstone of sustainable development; protecting their rights and raising their status is essential to endeavours ranging from family planning to food production. Women’s aspirations and achievements are powerfully inhibited, not just by the injuries of physical attacks but by the implicit threat of male violence.

This is a lesson learned early, when the shadow of violence begins to restrain a girl’s imagination of what she can do and be. The lesson is never forgotten. Where is the woman who has not felt a whisper of fear in the face of male aggression—and limited her activities accordingly?

**Harmful traditions**

In all societies, poverty, discrimination, ignorance and social unrest are common predictors of violence against women. Yet the most enduring enemies of a woman’s dignity and security are cultural forces aimed at preserving male dominance and female subjugation—often defended in the name of venerable tradition.

In industrialized societies like the US, where institutions formally frown on gender violence, behaviour belies official pronouncements: rap music insulting women as ‘whores’; a popular men’s magazine that celebrates gang rape and depicts female bodies being fed into meat grinders; sexual harassment of women trying to integrate into the armed forces; and societal pressures that induce young women to starve themselves or use technology to create ‘ideal’ bodies, often destroying their health in the process.

In developing countries, violent practices against women are often recognized and defended as strands of the cultural weave. Wife-beating, for example, is considered part of the natural order in many countries—a masculine prerogative celebrated in songs, proverbs and wedding ceremonies.

At their most extreme, expressions of gender violence include ‘honour’ killings, female genital mutilation and dowry deaths, as well as a deep-seated, even murderous, preference for male children.

In courts of law, the ‘honour defence’ is institutionalized in some Middle Eastern and Latin American countries, allowing fathers or husbands to walk away from murder. In 12 Latin American countries, a rapist can be exonerated if he offers to marry the victim and she accepts. In one country, Costa Rica, he can be exonerated even if she refuses his offer. The family of the victim frequently pressures her to marry the rapist, which they believe restores the family’s honour.

The concept of male honour—and fear of female empowerment—also underlies the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). This excruciating procedure removes part or all of a girl’s external genitalia and causes lifelong health problems for some women. It is aimed at preserving female chastity and marriage prospects and achieves its purpose at the expense of a woman’s sexual pleasure and bodily integrity. Up to 130 million women and girls today in at least 28 countries, mostly in Africa, have had their genitals excised to some degree.

Defenders of the rite, who include many women, call FGM a traditional cultural practice of no business to outsiders. This is an old song. Throughout history, ‘culture’ has been invoked to justify abhorrent practices ranging from slavery to binding women’s feet. FGM must be eradicated because it is a grave human rights violation and a public health menace that transcends any and all cultural boundaries.

Traditions also feed the practice of ‘dowry death’, in which a woman is killed because she is unable to meet her in-laws’ demands for dowry. In India, over a dozen women a day die as a result of such disputes, mostly in kitchen fires designed to look like accidents.

‘Son preference’ is another insidious force directed against women, particularly in Asia. Genetic testing for sex selection, though officially outlawed, has become a booming business in China, India and the Republic of Korea. Anecdotal evidence suggests that outright infanticide, usually of newborn girls, takes place in some communities in Asia, while discrimination in health care also cuts short the lives of unwanted girl children in some regions.

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In countries where people have adequate health care and food, 105 boys are born on average for every 100 girls, but fewer male babies survive the first year of life, reflecting the female’s inherent biological advantage. In some nations, mostly in Asia, the sex ratio drops dramatically. All told, violent discriminatory practices directed at girls and women have driven an estimated 60 million females off the face of the earth. Yet, instead of an international uproar over these disappearances, the plight of the so-called ‘missing women’ is usually noted briefly in the women’s section of development reports.

As war becomes less a battle between countries and more a struggle for supremacy between ethnic groups, women and girls increasingly face rape and forced pregnancy in times of conflict. Well over 20,000 Muslim women were known to be raped in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Balkan war, and more than 15,000 women were raped in one year in Rwanda. Just in recent years, mass rape has also been reported as a weapon of war in Cambodia, Liberia, Peru, Somalia and Uganda. These are but a few of the ways...
that society drives home the message that a woman’s life and dignity—her human rights—are worth less than a man’s. From the day of their birth, girls are devalued and degraded, trapped in what the late UNICEF Executive Director James P. Grant poignantly termed ‘the apartheid of gender’. Long after slavery was abolished in most of the world, many societies still treat women like chattel: Their shackles are poor education, economic dependence, limited political power, limited access to fertility control, harsh social conventions and inequality in the eyes of law. Violence is a key instrument used to keep these shackles on.

**Changing the status quo**

There is nothing immutable about the violent oppression of women and girls. It is a construct of power, as was apartheid, and one that can be changed. But because it has been so deeply ingrained, for so long, in virtually every culture remaining on earth, the effort to dismantle the societal structures that tolerate it, or patently refuse even to see it, will require creativity, patience and action on many fronts.

Stopping violence against women and girls is not just a matter of punishing individual acts. The issue is changing the perception—so deep-seated it is often unconscious—that women are fundamentally of less value than men. It is only when women and girls gain their place as strong and equal members of society that violence against them will be viewed as a shocking aberration rather than an invisible norm.

The old saying that the longest journey begins with a single step applies here. All over the world, many people have begun to take small steps towards establishing full citizenship for women and girls in a just society. They include the husband and wife who refuse to subject their daughter to FGM; the judge who metes out the maximum penalty to a rapist; the young man who participates in a ‘take back the night’ rally; and the parliamentarians who reform their countries’ laws in fulfilment of women’s and girls’ human rights.

Globally, that first step must be implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by 190 countries as of May 1997) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, or CEDAW (ratified by 160 countries). Although beliefs and practices do not change magically with the ratification of treaties, they are a vital first step because they lay the groundwork for ongoing social and legal reform.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is critical because of the broad overlay between women’s and children’s rights. Gender violence becomes a feature of a girl’s life long before adulthood, whether in the home or as part of a broader social pattern of abuse. The Convention obliges ratifying States to take all appropriate measures to protect children from “all forms of physical or mental violence.” Specific injunctions target harmful traditional practices, sexual abuse and trafficking in children.

Now that the Convention has been ratified by all but three countries on earth, actions are underway in many nations to make it a real force in children’s lives. For example, juvenile justice systems are being reformed in about half the countries in Latin America, and a number of countries, most notably the Philippines, have strengthened laws protecting children against sexual exploitation.

Similar efforts are under way to bring CEDAW to life. In Botswana and Zimbabwe, judges have used CEDAW to prevent discrimination against women in citizenship laws. Brazil has drafted a new Constitution reflecting CEDAW’s goals, and Tanzania has reversed a discriminatory customary law relating to clan land. Several Latin American countries and Sweden have established ombudswomen to address women’s concerns. At least six countries have set up police stations just for women, and Mexico has appointed a special prosecutor for sex crimes. Cameroon and China recently opened their first shelters for domestic abuse victims. These institutions not only protect women but serve as a constant reminder to all of society that women’s rights are an issue of state concern.

These are important steps for women’s rights in general and for stopping violence in particular, but so far there are too few steps taking place in too few countries. The majority of countries that have ratified CEDAW have yet to incorporate its principles into domestic law and practice. CEDAW faces deep resistance, as indicated by the fact that it has more substantive reservations entered against it than does any other international treaty. *(See accompanying news story.)*

Implementing these rights must start with the education of girls. Their unequal access to education is one of the most fundamental abridgements of human rights and one that perpetuates their weakened position, making them vulnerable to oppression and ultimately to violence. In addition to the obvious benefits of literacy and numeracy, education gives girls the confidence to make the most of their abilities. The educational system also provides a forum for challenging attitudes about violence—for both boys and girls. In addition, having girls in the classroom sends a potent message to boys about equality.

Girls’ education is the assured route to women’s economic empowerment. Earning money elevates a woman’s self-esteem and her standing in her home and community. It can also propel a woman out of a destructive relationship or encourage her to change its terms.

Building on the famous example of Bangladesh’s Grameen Bank, schemes that establish revolving funds to give women small business loans are springing up in all regions. More than 20 countries have begun microcredit programmes that often link loans to social and health services, helping women to care for themselves and their children. The credit is used for such projects as livestock raising, opening small shops and paying school fees. More than 15,000 Cambodian women have obtained small loans, for example, and Viet Nam has seen a dramatic increase in the number of women in microbusinesses. Women’s economic advancement is also a route to women’s political empowerment. The first steps have been taken in more than 20 countries to address the issues relating to clan land. Several Latin American countries and Sweden have established ombudswomen to address women’s concerns. At least six countries have set up police stations just for women, and Mexico has appointed a special prosecutor for sex crimes. Cameroon and China recently opened their first shelters for domestic abuse victims. These institutions not only protect women but serve as a constant reminder to all of society that women’s rights are an issue of state concern.

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increase in school enrolment among daughters of borrowers.

Efforts are also under way to end traditional practices that violate women and girls. A number of groups are beginning to have some success in persuading both men and women that FGM claims too high a price. Some clerics have begun to speak out against it, and efforts are under way in the Gambia and Kenya to develop a coming-of-age ritual that does not involve any cutting. Another hopeful sign is recent action by Canada and the US to grant political asylum to some women threatened by FGM in their home countries, thereby defining the practice as a legitimate criterion for refugee status.

Political power is also crucial to women’s empowerment. Although a female Head of State does not guarantee equal rights for her sex, women in positions of authority throughout political systems clearly have a beneficial effect, not least by the example they set. But there is far, far to go. And while women have the right to vote everywhere except in six Middle Eastern countries and Brunei Darussalam in South-East Asia, worldwide they hold just 7 per cent of high-level elected and appointed offices in government. (See league table.)

Women’s climb into the halls of power challenges the existing power structure, and replacing that structure will require the collective efforts not just of women but also of supportive men. The State and other institutions of authority can be indispensable allies.

The 1990s have been a decade of unprecedented achievement in women’s human rights. But international recognition of violence against women as a human rights issue did not happen without a struggle. Women had to organize in a global campaign to demonstrate the extent of violence and its impact on their ability to exercise their human rights. The international community was called to witness its own failure to protect women’s fundamental right to personal security.

The defining moment of this campaign—the Global Tribunal on Violations of Women’s Human Rights—came during the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, where participants sounded a call to eliminate “violence against women in public and private life” and declared that the rights of girls and women are “an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.” For an entire day in Vienna, many delegates and others at the Conference listened as 33 women gave riveting personal testimony to the abuses they had suffered.

On the scale of what takes place every day in every community of the world, it was a minuscule but emblematic summary of the anguish long faced by women. But it was apparent, looking around the room, that facts and figures had been transformed into flesh and blood, and the rapt audience was profoundly changed by the experience. The Tribunal marked an official end to the centuries-old cover-up of these atrocities, and it awakened many women and men to the international community’s responsibility to protect women from such abuse.

Later that year, in response to the momentum generated in Vienna, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, considered a formal elaboration of CEDAW, which did not itself specifically address gender violence when it was drafted in 1979. This Declaration was a landmark document in three ways: It framed violence against women within the dialogue on human rights; it identified being female as the primary risk factor for violence; and it broadened the definition of gender violence to include all aspects of women’s and girls’ lives. Another milestone was the 1994 appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.

A systematic effort to raise the profile of violence against women must involve every sector of every society—the judicial system, the media, educators, health care authorities, governmental and non-governmental agencies, politicians, religious leaders and, of course, individual women and men. For the most part, it is women’s movements with their many non-governmental organizations working across national, cultural, religious and class lines that have initiated and energized the effort.

Few social movements have registered as great an impact in as short a time—and with such remarkably peaceful methods. And yet, these small, determined groups continue to work largely alone. How many government officials have staked their careers on resolving the problem of gender-based violence?

It is time for them to do so.
Bureaucracy has traditionally been a male preserve, and while women are slowly inching their way into government positions, the number of women at senior decision-making levels remains pathetically low. But numbers, though powerful indicators, are not an absolute barometer of inequality. Discrimination against women can end only when there is a sea change in attitudes, when women’s inferior status at all levels of society—economic, social and political—is recognized as a travesty and not the norm.

Women make up only 7% of ministerial positions, globally. Even within this small percentage, they remain heavily concentrated in the areas of social affairs, including education, health and family. The total number of women ministers worldwide in the social category is 14%, whereas the total for political ministerial positions is only 3%, and for executive posts, 4%. Within the economic category, women hold 4% of ministerial positions. They fare slightly better in the areas of law and justice, with 10% of posts.

Source: Derived from data provided by the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, based on January 1996 information from World Wide Government Directory, Inc.
Women’s climb into the halls of power challenges the existing power structure, and replacing it will require the efforts of both women and men.

WHAT THE TABLE RANKS
Percentage of ministerial-level posts, both elected and appointed, held by women.

Women’s climb into the halls of power challenges the existing power structure, and replacing it will require the efforts of both women and men.
Outlawing violence against women: A first step

Legislation against domestic violence has been enacted in 44 countries around the world; 17 have made marital rape a criminal offence; 27 have passed sexual harassment laws; and just 12 countries have laws against FGM.

The few laws that do exist vary significantly in strength and enforceability from one legal system to another. In countries that have not enacted specific laws, it may be possible to prosecute offenders under more general criminal statutes.

Some governments have introduced accessible and well-integrated legal provisions, such as Ecuador’s 1995 law against domestic violence—a clear-cut prohibition of physical and mental abuse. Currently, however, many countries lack laws specifically prohibiting domestic violence.

In recent years, sexual harassment has been publicly acknowledged as harmful to women, and many countries are taking the first steps by adopting legislation prohibiting it. In the last two years, legislation that directly addresses sexual harassment has been passed in Belgium, Belize, Costa Rica, Finland, France, Ireland, Paraguay, the Philippines and Switzerland. Similar legislation has been proposed in Chile, Italy, Jamaica and South Africa.

Laws that criminalize gender-based violence are positive steps but they offer no guarantees. Worldwide, even where laws are in place, prosecution of perpetrators is rare, and successful prosecutions uncommon.

Other laws are more vague: New Zealand has enacted family violence legislation without specific reference to women or girls; in Malawi, a constitutional provision makes a general commitment to implementing policy on domestic violence.

In 17 countries, women face at least a 1-in-10 chance of dying from pregnancy-related causes sometime during their lives. In 16 countries the lifetime risk is 1 in 4,000 or less. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth kill about 585,000 women each year. A woman faces that danger each time she becomes pregnant, so the more pregnancies she has, the greater the total risk. Lifetime risk of maternal mortality is based on both the risk of dying from maternal causes and the average number of births. No public health problem shows greater disparity between rich and poor countries than maternal mortality.

Most obstetric deaths are linked to five causes: haemorrhage, sepsis (blood poisoning), eclampsia (convulsions leading to coma), unsafe abortion and obstructed labour. A number of interventions—improved emergency obstetric care
to deal with serious complications, deliveries performed by skilled birth attendants, family planning, iron folate supplements, a rich and varied diet throughout pregnancy and prompt initiation of breastfeeding—vastly improve the odds.

Risk of death in childbirth can be as high as 1 in 7

Pregnancy and childbirth complications are the leading cause of death and disability for women of reproductive age in developing countries. In Afghanistan, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Somalia, a woman faces a 1-in-7 lifetime risk of dying due to pregnancy or childbirth. But in Spain, Switzerland, Canada and Norway, the risk is 1 in 7,300 or less.

* Figure influenced by high rates of fertility and maternal mortality in Afghanistan. If Afghanistan is excluded, lifetime risk of maternal death in Central Asia is 1 in 330.

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<th>Countries that have enacted legislation against:</th>
<th>Domestic violence</th>
<th>Sexual harassment</th>
<th>Female genital mutilation</th>
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| Compil ed from various sources, January–May 1997, including J. Boland (editor, Harvard University); N. Toubia (Director of Research, Action & Information Network for Bodily Integrity of Women); J. Ackers-Hodges (International Labour Organization); and State Responses to Domestic Violence, Women, Law & Development International, Washington, DC, 1996. |
A bill of rights for women, but with reservations

Few international treaties have been as widely accepted as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). As of May 1997, 160 countries had ratified, acceded to or succeeded to CEDAW. Three—Afghanistan, Sao Tome and Principe and the United States—had signed, indicating their intention to ratify. Thirty States had neither signed nor ratified.

But CEDAW, like its companion treaty on the rights of the child, has provoked scores of reservations—indicating widespread and deep-rooted resistance to the concept of full equality for women. Nearly one third of States parties have lodged substantive reservations—indicating widespread and extension of human rights protection into the private domain and entrench the inferior role of women. Similarly undermining the purpose of CEDAW are most of the dozen reservations to article 2, which outlines legal steps to eliminate gender discrimination.

Although reservations come from every corner of the globe, a few generalizations can be drawn. The five Nordic countries comprise the only region to accept CEDAW without reservation. The Caribbean countries have lodged fewer reservations than countries in other regions.

Most of the 12 ratifying States in the Middle East and North Africa cited conflict with religious or customary law as a reason for not giving CEDAW unconditional approval. Most of the region’s nations defer to Islamic Sharia law on matters pertaining to family or the status of women. However, the CEDAW review committee has been able, through constructive dialogue, to address reservations with individual States parties.

It is encouraging that some nations have modified or withdrawn their reservations, often as a result of this constructive relationship. For example, Malawi withdrew, in 1991, its general reservation against provisions of CEDAW that required immediate eradication of certain traditional customs and practices and, in 1994, Brazil withdrew its reservations to key provisions of article 16.

Help wanted: Skilled birth attendants

 Barely half the mothers in developing countries deliver their babies under the supervision of a physician, nurse or other professional with midwifery skills, a key factor in ensuring survival of both babies and mothers.

Countries with the lowest rates of professionally attended births also share some of the world’s worst maternal mortality rates. Of the 38 countries listed, nearly two thirds have rates of at least 900 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. Somalia, the country with the lowest percentage of professionally attended births (2%), has a maternal mortality rate of 1,600 per 100,000 births. Next on the chart are Afghanistan and Nepal, both with 9% of births attended by a skilled professional and with maternal death rates of 1,700 and 1,500, respectively.

Many of these countries suffer from the common burdens of poverty and war. Despite poverty, some countries are making progress. Thirteen nations with per capita GNP of less than $300 have managed to achieve rates of 50% or more of births attended by skilled professionals.

History has shown that the presence of skilled birth attendants is a key factor in bringing down the number of maternal deaths. Of the 46 countries in which trained professionals attend 90% or more of births, only 5 have maternal death rates above 100 per 100,000 live births. In the industrialized countries, 99% of births are professionally attended.