

# Overview of violence to women and sexual exploitation and abuse of children

*Section 2 presents an overview of violence to women and the sexual exploitation and abuse of children, and includes a discussion of incidence and numbers reporting to the police, factors associated with violence and why men attack women and children. This section identifies police training as an essential part of the social transformation that is required to confront gender issues of power and control.*

## What is violence against women and children?

Violence against women and children is widespread, even in societies that have little formal knowledge of it. Globally, gender-based violence is a major issue. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1993, defined gender-based violence as a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men. Gender-based violence is directed against a woman because she is a woman or it is violence that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. It includes rape, other sexual assaults, family or domestic violence, stranger assaults and wounding, serious threats of violence, sexual mutilation, attempted murder and murder. Sexual assault can be systematically used by military forces to attack the civilian population during civil unrest and warfare and, although less well organised, often continues after the conflict ends. Women and children are the largest group of refugees. They are less likely to commit crimes of all types, including inter-personal crime, even in conditions of war.

The abusers of women are more likely to be known to their women and children victims than not, although there are specific forms of violence, in particular sexual exploitation through prostitution, that involve trade in the bodies of women and children by men who may be strangers. Promises of legitimate employment or marriage can lead to families allowing their daughters to leave villages and cities to travel to another country, while in some jurisdictions, women are empowered to make the decision themselves. Because they often do not realise they are being trafficked and, once in a foreign country they are often unable to speak the language, their chances of obtaining assistance are poor. It is therefore unlikely that information from trafficked women and children is how the police learn about their plight. Also, when passports or other travel documents are taken from them and they are locked in brothels and beaten until they comply, escape depends largely on pro-active policing. Each country must become aware of the trafficking patterns that affect the women and children of their nation state. Examined globally, some countries are more likely to receive women while others are countries of origin. This is a highly organised international criminal activity with well-developed supply routes that can be interrupted by police in countries that send or receive women and children. This requires identification of the problem and international policing cooperation.

## How common is violence against women and children?

Violence against women is a major human rights issue, a health and an economic issue. Even in countries where violence against women and children has been recognised for more than 25 years as important and relevant for policing, it is not diminishing in frequency or intensity. For example, a well-conducted, large-scale Canadian survey carried out in 1993 found that one in 10 women had experienced violence in the previous year. In this survey, violence included sexual and physical assaults and legally defined threats. The offenders were strangers, boyfriends, husbands and other

men known to the women. The survey found that the most prevalent forms of marital violence were pushing, grabbing or shoving, followed by threats, slapping, throwing objects, kicking, biting and hitting with fists. A significant number of women also reported being beaten up, sexually assaulted, choked, hit with an object, and having a gun or knife used against them. In addition, violence affects the unborn children of women who are attacked when pregnant, and miscarriage or foetal damage may occur. Women may also be forced to undergo abortion by the fathers of their children.

Both the Canadian survey and the British Crime Survey in 1992, found that repeated and ongoing abuse were more commonly reported in failed marriages. In one in three cases of wife assault the abuse or threats of abuse were so serious that women feared for their lives. In total, 2 per cent of all currently married Canadian women had at some point felt their lives were in danger. In those jurisdictions that have been attempting to respond more positively to violence against women and children, the numbers responding positively to research questions is increasing. This is less likely to mean that violence is increasing, but more likely that women now feel freer to share this knowledge with researchers.

Surveys of child sexual abuse suggest that one in two girls experience some type of sexual crime before adulthood. This can be indecent exposure, or flashing, or another less seriously regarded offence, such as touching. Research suggests one in four girls are seriously sexually assaulted on a longer term basis, including rape and incestuous assault. If genital mutilation is accepted as criminal assault, then in some societies 100 per cent of girls are sexually violated. Boys, too, are physically and sexually abused and their plight should not be ignored, although girls are in the greatest danger.

Rape and other sexual assaults are both seriously under-reported and commonplace. As with other crimes of violence against women and children, most rapists are known to their victims. In politically stable societies, the statistics on the total number of women who are raped vary from one in five to two in five. With political or social instability affecting the country as a whole or some groups of society, the proportion of women who are raped greatly increases.

## **What factors are associated with violence against women?**

To summarise, survey research in various jurisdictions agree on the direction of violence, that is, violence to women is largely from men, and men are much less likely to be the recipients of violence. When they are, their assailants are often other men. Surveys agree on the repetition of violence, the existence of relationship between assailants and victims, differential rates by age and whether women do or do not have children, times in the day and week when assaults are likely to occur, where they will occur, how many assailants will be involved, and the under-reporting of incidence to researchers and agencies, including the police. Surveys agree that:

- victims perceive violence as serious even though they do not always report it to the police
- women often assume responsibility for domestically located violence upon them
- young women are more likely to be victimised than older women
- violence against women in all social classes, ethnic and religious groups is frequent
- political and social instability increases violence against women and children.

Altering the time scale has a profound effect on the number of women and girls who report experiences of violence. The Canadian survey showed that one-half of all Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of violence since the age of 16 years and that almost one-half of women have experienced violence at the hands of a current or past marital partner. A bodily harm definition of violence suggests that 30 per cent of women in Britain over their lifetimes have experience of repeated domestic violence from partners. There are approximately half a million married women who are the victims of domestic violence each year in England and Wales. While similar research has not been undertaken in all Commonwealth jurisdictions, smaller scale studies suggest the problems identified elsewhere are occurring in all societies.

## How many women report to the police?

The number of women reporting to the police is only a fraction of those attacked. Studies suggest this varies between 2 per cent and 20 per cent. Physical attacks are more likely to be reported than sexual assaults in all jurisdictions where surveys have been carried out. In the Canadian study mentioned above, 27 per cent of physical attacks and 6 per cent of sexual assaults were reported. Research suggests women and children are assaulted many times before they report to the police, or else they never report and knowledge of their victimisation is brought to the attention of the police by other people, such as family, friends, neighbours and health workers. Occasionally, the attacks on women or children are so extreme that it is impossible to hide it from the police and other agencies.

Ethnic minority women, particularly when they do not speak the dominant language, require the police to consider ways of reaching this population group through specialist units or trained officers and the use of translators. Translators should not be men from the migrant or refugee group or members of the woman's family as this may limit women's ability to speak freely and/or the translations may not be fully accurate.

The homicide of women and children, including infanticide, is more likely to be carried out by men known to women and children than by strangers. In those jurisdictions that have begun to respond positively to violence against women and children, it is likely that previous reports have been made prior to death. If the killing of women who have been prostituted is combined with marital or family killings, then almost all the homicides of women and girls are accounted for in any given year. Refusals to undertake pro-active policing and to see all women and children as worthy of protection increases the danger to women and children from known men.

## Why do men attack women and children?

Women identify five different behaviours in their self-definition of violence: mental cruelty; threats; physical violence with and without actual bodily harm; and non-consensual sexual relations, including rape. While not all these behaviours are criminal behaviour in all jurisdictions, in terms of the psychological harm to women it is incorrect to view these types of violence as lying on a continuum from less to more serious. For example, prolonged mental cruelty can have a greater impact than sporadic, isolated incidents of actual bodily harm. Mental cruelty can include behaviours such as verbal abuse, being deprived of money, clothes and sleep, and being prevented from going out or from meeting friends or family members. The longer women are in relationships dominated by mental cruelty, the greater the damage to their health and well-being is likely to be.

Women's lives provide information on how hierarchy and privilege is structured within families, how cultural boundaries apply to men and women, how individual women negotiate within and move beyond culturally and socially proscribed limits on their behaviour, and how individual men maintain their socially superior position without altering their behaviour. Women live in a web of relationship bound by family and culture in which expectations of correct behaviour for women and men differ substantially. When confronted with repeated violence, women describe how family members and others intervene in women's lives and how they attempt to use networks of family and friends to mitigate, if not resolve, problems with their men. Women's accounts demonstrate that men from varied cultural and ethnic groups have in common cultural and family advantages that come from being male, from being sons, husbands and fathers.

Research shows that it does not matter how marriages are entered into, whether arranged by others or not, between strangers or relatives. These differences are important to the lives of men and women, but domination, control and violence towards women and children occur whatever the preferred form of marriage. The advantages that men gain from violence to women have been

known for some time by both service providers to women and through research. These elements are usually described as forms of women's oppression, rather than personal or social benefits to men.

Described as benefits, violence gains for men:

- an outlet for their feelings, for example, 'After he had hit me, he would say, "sit here in front of me, if I see any tears in your eyes then see what happens". Then he would say, "laugh and talk to me". Children too can be involved; 'he said to the wife and mother, "you hit her; if you hit her you'll save yourself.'"
- the servitude of another, for example, women's domestic labour is essential for maintaining family life and is an important aspect of women's existence as wives. The movement from 'normal' demands to excessive is a matter of degree. One woman in an extended family said, 'They didn't think anything of me. They didn't think I was a part of the household but like a servant, all day cleaning, washing clothes, doing everyone's ironing, all day doing the work.'
- financial gains through exploitation, for example, women from all cultural groups have their money taken from them, beginning with dowry or wages and moving on to child benefit or other state welfare entitlements where these exist, coupled with non-sharing of his wage with his family
- multiple sexual relationships, where wives are forced to agree to his relationships with other women, even when multiple sexual relationships are not culturally supported
- feelings of superiority over women and children, which may be reinforced through subordinating a woman or child.

Men use coercion and threats, intimidation, isolation of the woman, minimising, denying and blaming the woman for their abuse, and threats and harassment involving children, in order to maintain a position of privilege. Families may make little or no effort to intervene to protect their daughter and sister or alternatively, they may simply be unable to control the husband of their relative. Police intervention is particularly necessary when women and children do not have the support of their families and communities or when this is ineffectual. It is important to emphasise that unchecked violence to women and children is to be explained by complex social and personal beliefs, cultural values and permitted behaviours attached to men. These serve to sanction the violent behaviour of men. Explanations that focus on what those who are victimised do, or do not do, whether women or children are inadequate to explain why violence occurs.

## **Future social transformations**

To demand social responsibility from men is to challenge the uniquely privileged position of men in families and in society. Creating similar expectations for men and women in relation to appropriate behaviour in family life inevitably involves a loss of social and personal privileges for men, including their ability to use violence against women and children without fear of effective intervention. Put another way, to establish women's rights as human rights is to seek social transformation. This cannot happen without considerable effort or without transformation of consciousness.

Policing violence against women and children, much of which is based in family life, requires police training to confront gender issues of power and control. The behaviour of officers at the scene or when responding to a female or child complainant demonstrates the extent to which these issues have been taken on board. This is the first, and most difficult step. Once achieved, however partially and unevenly in terms of the total number of officers, it becomes possible to move forward. For jurisdictions yet to begin offering training in these areas or those that do so in a very limited way, the first consideration is to train the trainers, who in turn will be able to take their knowledge to fellow officers. Jurisdictions with some or considerable training schemes already in place, need to constantly review the extent of the problem and the impact of policing endeavours in meeting the needs of victimised women and children.