



MASTER'S COURSE IN:
INTERNATIONAL MEDICINE-HEALTH CRISIS MANAGEMENT

**“Domestic violence: A major Health and
Human Rights issue in the world”**

MSc in International Medicine- Health Crisis Management

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Abstract

Domestic violence has become a very widespread phenomenon, all around the world, affecting hundreds of thousands of women and children. When violence is one of the main causes of death and disabilities worldwide, domestic violence is considered one of the most common seen forms of violence, victimizing the most vulnerable population such as women and children. When one's house should be considered as the safest place to be, victims of domestic violence are not covered by any protection. Especially in countries of the Arab world, the phenomenon takes unexpected forms, violating the dignity and human nature of the victim. This paper examines domestic violence under a human rights' approach as well as under a public health approach, especially with regards to woman as a victim.

Keywords

Domestic violence, violence against women, child abuse, human rights, public health, intimate partner violence

Περίληψη

Η ενδοοικογενειακή βία είναι ένα εκτεταμένο φαινόμενο που εμφανίζεται σε όλο τον κόσμο, επηρεάζονται εκατοντάδες χιλιάδες γυναίκες και παιδιά. Αν η βία γενικότερα είναι μια από τις βασικές αιτίες θανάτου και αναπηρίες στον κόσμο, τότε η ενδοοικογενειακή βία θεωρείται είναι μια από τις πιο κοινές μορφές βίας, που θυματοποιεί τον πιο ευάλωτο πληθυσμό, τις γυναίκες και τα παιδιά. Τα θύματα της ενδοοικογενειακής βίας δεν καλύπτονται από κάποιου είδους προστασία, εφόσον στο ίδιο τους το σπίτι, που θα έπρεπε να είναι το πιο ασφαλές μέρος, είναι ο τόπος καταπάτησης των δικαιωμάτων τους. Ειδικά σε χώρες του Αραβικού κόσμου, το φαινόμενο παίρνει μη αναμενόμενες μορφές, καταπατώντας την ίδια την αξιοπρέπεια και την ανθρώπινη φύση του θύματος. Το παρόν κείμενο μελετάει την ενδοοικογενειακή βία, τόσο υπό το πρίσμα των ανθρωπίνων δικαιωμάτων όσο και της δημόσιας υγείας, κυρίως όσον αφορά τη γυναίκα- θύμα.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά

Ενδοοικογενειακή βία, βία ενάντια στις γυναίκες, παιδική κακοποίηση, ανθρώπινα δικαιώματα, δημόσια υγεία, κακοποίηση από σύντροφο

Introduction

The phenomenon of domestic violence has attracted the attention of the international community at many levels. Not only in terms of social concern and policy intervention but also as a human rights violation and a global health issue. However, the perception of domestic violence being a human rights violation is more wide-spread in the western world. This paper will examine various perceptions of domestic violence in as a human rights' violation and global health issue according to international human rights' law.

First of all, a definition should be given to domestic violence as it has been recognized as one of the main forms of expressed violence in the world. There is no universal definition for domestic violence. By the term "domestic", violence is defined when practiced by an intimate partner or by other family members, in whatever form it might take, such as physical, sexual or psychological (1). In more details, domestic violence could be defined as any kind of violent act that takes place in a domestic setting and might take the form of spouse abuse, child abuse, abuse of elders or even abuse in same sex relationships. The majority of the studies made on domestic violence focus mainly on male violence against women, as it has been widely reported that is the most common form of abuse.

To be more specific with regards to women, according to the Universal Declaration on the Elimination of Violation against Women (2), violence against women is defined as *"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"*.

Around the world at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Every year, violence in the home and the community devastates the lives of millions of women. Gender-based violence kills and disables as many women between the ages of 15 and 44 as cancer, and its toll on women's health surpasses that of traffic accidents and malaria combined.¹ Violence against women is rooted in a global culture of discrimination which denies women equal rights with men and which legitimizes the appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification or political ends. This paper will focus on women as victims of domestic violence.

International Protection of Human Rights

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the United Nations General Assembly some 20 years ago, the decade-old Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth International Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, all reflect this consensus.

Background on Violence against Women

- Violence against women feeds off discrimination and serves to reinforce it. When women are abused in custody, when they are raped by armed forces as "spoils of war", or when they are terrorized by violence in the home, unequal power relations between men and women are both manifested and enforced.

- Violence against women is compounded by discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexual identity, social status, class, and age. Such multiple forms of discrimination further restrict women's choices, increase their vulnerability to violence and make it even harder for women to obtain justice.
- There is an unbroken spectrum of violence that women face at the hands of people who exert control over them. States have the obligation to prevent, protect against, and punish violence against women whether perpetrated by private or public actors. States have a responsibility to uphold standards of due diligence and take steps to fulfill their responsibility to protect individuals from human rights abuses.(3)

International Women's Human Rights Law

- ***The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*** states that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status." (Article 2)
- ***The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*** states that "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." (Article 1) It further asserts that states have an obligation to "exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and, in accordance with national legislation, punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons." (Article 4-c)
- ***The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)***, defines discrimination against women as any "distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality between men and women, of human rights or fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." (Article 1)

Forms of domestic violence

The phenomenon includes both physical violence and number of forms of apparently non-violent behaviors too. Thus in addition to physical violence such as wife battering, sexual abuse, torture, spouse abuse also includes psychological and emotional abuse such as denial of recognition, use of derogatory language, emotional damage, and neglect - denial of food for wife, denial of financial access to wife or partner. In the arena of spouse abuse domestic violence has received greater attention, because it is most visible, and also provable form of abusive violent acts committed by men on women.

However, though violent acts are obviously visible forms of domestic abuse, the intermittent absence of violence can also be most traumatic. For, the woman living in an abusive relationship is under constant fear of threat of violence. Thus some women are 'constantly tormented and threatened when not being physically attacked'. Similarly women can also be sexually abused without use of force. These conditions make Domestic violence more difficult to identify and prove; yet they can be worst forms of psychological and emotional abuse.

That the battered women are prone to psychological disturbances, resulting from domestic abuse is a common fact. It is noteworthy that mental cruelty as an aspect of domestic violence is considered to be

more common than the physical violence. Vast majority of women in everyday life experience it. One woman explains this experience thus: 'in my opinion mental cruelty is equally bad as physical violence except the scars do not show and never heal.(1)

Physical abuse such as slapping, beating, arm twisting, stabbing, strangling, burning, choking, kicking, threats with an object or weapon, and murder. It also includes traditional practices harmful to women such as female genital mutilation and wife inheritance (the practice of passing a widow, and her property, to her dead husband's brother).

Sexual abuse such as coerced sex through threats, intimidation or physical force, forcing unwanted sexual acts or forcing sex with others.

Psychological abuse which includes behaviour that is intended to intimidate and persecute, and takes the form of threats of abandonment or abuse, confinement to the home, surveillance, threats to take away custody of the children, destruction of objects, isolation, verbal aggression and constant humiliation.

Economic abuse includes acts such as the denial of funds, refusal to contribute financially, denial of food and basic needs, and controlling access to health care, employment, etc.

Acts of omission are also included in this Digest as a form of violence against women and girls. Gender bias that discriminates in terms of nutrition, education and access to health care amounts to a violation of women's rights. It should be noted that although the categories above are listed separately, they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they often go hand in hand. (4)

Domestic violence as a human rights violation

International human rights' law has been developed mainly in the so-called western world, in an attempt to protect individuals against the state. According to international human rights' law, the state could be held responsible and accountable for any violation of those rights. The main concept of human rights are about autonomy and freedom.

As human rights, we may describe all commonly understood "inalienable fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being"(5). They are meant to be universal (applicable everywhere) and egalitarian (the same for everyone). However, some human rights are conceived in different ways by different cultural backgrounds and societies.

International human rights law has been developed through the years and has been the cornerstone of public policy around the world, while being based on concepts that evolved in the French and American Revolution.

After the atrocities taking place in World War II, in order for the citizens to be protected against any state violating their liberties, the General Assembly of the newly formed United Nations has adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in Paris in 1948. According to the UDHR, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood".

Human rights have been developed gradually in three generations. The first generation concerns the civil and political rights, the second generation concerns the social and cultural rights whereas the third one the peoples' rights. These generations reflect a chronological order and not a hierarchy of rights.(1) One may argue, however, that these rights have been developed in a way to reflect men's experiences and men's struggles while they do not cover women and the risks they face(1, 6).

According to some academics, the development of human rights movement, starting from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the three generations of rights shows that rights are defined as

'*belonging to all human beings*' irrespective of gender. However, even though international law is gender neutral in theory, in practice it constituted men and women into separate spheres of existence--public and private, respectively. Thus men exist as public, legal entities that enjoy civil and political rights and in a way define the nature of rights discourse.

Women's existence, on the other hand, is "privatized", thus, seen as existing outside the purview of the state's obligation. Often women's exclusion from the human rights practice and discourse, their relegation to the private, has been justified on grounds of social and cultural specificity of region or a group. Thus, social and cultural norms, which become grounds for respective states' consistent relegation of women to private sphere, results in international law being either reinforcing of women's human rights abuses from the public sphere. The effects of this public/private divide in the international law are more evident in domestic violence, which literally happens in the private. Many laws are gender neutral, however, their application is gender biased. Moreover the economic and social context of its application has not been considered seriously by both the governmental and at the same time non-governmental organizations, all over the world.(1)

Violence against women practiced by private individuals or within the family environment is not included in the framework of international human rights. However, feminist movements insist that this is a failure of international human rights law.

Domestic violence is a violation of a woman's right to physical integrity, to liberty, and all too often, to her right to life itself. When states fail to take the basic steps needed to protect women from domestic violence or allow these crimes to be committed with impunity, states are failing in their obligation to protect women from torture.(3)

However, it is worth noting that not only the abuse directly committed by the state or by its agents, but also the systematic failure to prosecute the actions committed by its agents or the private individuals, have been added as a state's responsibility. It was not until recently that the state can be held responsible for acts of violence when failing to prosecute the abuse.(7).

According to Amnesty International, violence against women is considered as a human rights violation.

Violence against women is present in all corners of the world. Such violence is a human rights violation that manifests itself in a number of ways, including(3):

Acid Burning and Dowry Deaths

In many countries, it is quite a frequent phenomenon for a woman who turns down a suitor or does not get along with her in-laws far too frequently becomes a victim of a violent form of revenge: acid burning. Acid is thrown in her face or on her body and can blind her in addition to often fatal third-degree burns. Governments do little to prevent the sale of acid to the public or to punish those who use it to kill and maim. Similarly, the ongoing reality of dowry-related violence is an example of what can happen when women are treated as property. Brides unable to pay the high "price" to marry are punished by violence and often death at the hands of their in-laws or their own husbands.

"Honor" Killings

In some societies, women are considered as representatives of the honor of the family. Possible extra-marital sexual relations, even if in the case of rape, can be considered by society as a violation of family's honor. In order to protect the honor of the family, other family members might implement cruel forms of violence, even by fathers or brothers. Women suffering from such forms of violence do not even have the possibility to prove that they have been raped or not. In some countries, if they are accused of the crime of unlawful sexual relations (zina), they

are punished by public stoning to death. This makes it almost impossible for them to pursue a case against the one that had raped and leads to a vicious circle of impunity.(3)

Domestic violence

Violence against women is a global phenomenon described by Amnesty International as a pandemic. It is commonly accepted the greatest risk for a women to be abused, comes from her close environment. As we have already mentioned, domestic violence is a violation of a woman's right to physical integrity, to liberty, and all too often, to her right to life itself.

When states fail to take the basic steps needed to protect women from domestic violence or allow these crimes to be committed with impunity, states are failing in their obligation to protect women from torture.

Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation is the removal of part or all of the external female genitalia. In its most severe form, a woman or girl has all of her genitalia removed and then stitched together, leaving a small opening for intercourse and menstruation. It is practiced in 28 African countries on the pretext of cultural tradition or hygiene. An estimated 135 million girls have undergone FGM with dire consequences ranging from infection (including HIV) to sterility, in addition to the devastating psychological effects. Though all the governments of the countries in which FGM is practiced have legislation making it illegal, the complete lack of enforcement and prosecution of the perpetrators means FGM continues to thrive.

Human Rights Violations Based on Actual or Perceived Sexual Identity

Sexuality is regulated in a gender specific way and maintained through strict constraints imposed by cultural norms and sometimes through particular legal measures supporting those norms. The community, which can include religious institutions, the media, family and cultural networks, regulates women's sexuality and punishes women who do not comply. Such women include lesbians, women who appear "too masculine," women who try to freely exercise their rights, and women who challenge male dominance. Lesbian women, or women who are perceived to be lesbian, experience abuses by state authorities in prisons, by the police, as well as private actors such as their family and community. Numerous cases document young lesbians being beaten, raped, forcibly impregnated or married, and otherwise attacked by family members to punish them or "correct" their sexual identity. Lesbians in the United States face well-founded fears of persecution by police because of their sexual identity and violence against lesbians occurs with impunity on a regular basis.

Gender Based Asylum

The UN High Commission on Refugees advocates that "women fearing persecution or severe discrimination on the basis of their gender should be considered a member of a social group for the purposes of determining refugee status." (*Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women*)

There are many forms of violence against women that may fall under the above description such as female genital mutilation, forcible abortion etc. Domestic violence falls also under this provision when the state refuses to protect the woman. Amnesty International however claims that a refugee status is not easily attributed to a women based on such reasons, especially in the US, due to a more limited interpretation of the above provision.(3)

The Problem of Impunity

Perpetrators of violence against women are rarely held accountable for their acts. Women who are victims of gender-related violence often have little recourse because many state agencies are themselves guilty of gender bias and discriminatory practices. Many women opt not to report cases of violence to authorities because they fear being ostracized and shamed by communities that are too often quick to blame victims of violence for the abuses they have suffered. When women do challenge their abusers, it can often only be accomplished by long and humiliating court battles with little sympathy from authorities or the media. Violence against women is so deeply embedded in society that it often fails to garner public censure and outrage.

Violence against women is a violation of human rights that cannot be justified by any political, religious, or cultural claim. A global culture of discrimination against women allows violence to occur daily and with impunity. Amnesty International calls on you to help us eradicate violence against women and help women to achieve lives of equality and human dignity. (3)

The World Organization against Torture has expressed its concern regarding the high levels of violence against women worldwide. Although provisions related to domestic violence are included in several national policies and laws, there are difficulties in implementing them".(8)

Domestic Violence as a global health issue

All around the world, violence is considered as one of the most common causes of death and disability in women of reproductive age. It is even more widespread than traffic accidents and malaria together.(8) Public health experts have put in the agenda of public health issues violence against women and they insist on having a public health approach.

In 2005, the World Health Organization has issued a landmark study on domestic violence that revealed that intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence that affects women. Violence coming from strangers or acquaintances is much less. This means obviously that women are not secure in their own family environment and that their health and well-being is at risk, while the phenomenon is still kept a secret due to society's stigmatization.(9) The key note of the study however was that domestic violence should be treated as a major public health issue, according to WHO.

The study is based on interviews with more than 24 000 women from rural and urban areas in 10 countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Namibia, Peru, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, and the United Republic of Tanzania. The Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women study makes recommendations and calls for action by policy makers and the public health sector to address the human and health costs, including by integrating **violence prevention** programming into a range of social programmes.

The study underlines that one quarter to one half of all women who had been physically assaulted by their partners said that they had suffered physical injuries as a direct result. The abused women were also twice as likely as non-abused women to have poor health and physical and mental problems, even if the violence occurred years before. This includes suicidal thoughts and attempts, mental distress, and physical symptoms like pain, dizziness and vaginal discharge. The study was carried out in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, PATH and national research institutions and women's organizations in the participating countries.

“The degree to which the health consequences of partner violence in the WHO study are consistent across sites, both within and between countries, is striking,” noted Dr Charlotte Watts, from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, a member of the core research team for the study. “Partner violence appears to have a similar impact on women’s health and well-being regardless of where she lives, the prevalence of violence in her setting, or her cultural or economic background.”

Domestic violence is known to affect women's sexual and reproductive health and may contribute to increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. In this study, women who were in physically or sexually abusive relationships were more likely to report that their partner had multiple sexual partners and had refused to use a condom than women in non violent relationships. Women who reported physical or sexual violence by a partner were also more likely to report having had at least one induced abortion or miscarriage than those who did not report violence.

Although pregnancy is often thought of as a time when women should be protected, in most study locations, between 4% and 12% of women who had been pregnant reported being beaten during pregnancy. More than 90% of these women had been abused by the father of the unborn child and between one quarter and one half of them had been kicked or punched in the abdomen.

For policy makers, the greatest challenge is that abuse remains hidden. At least 20% of women reporting physical violence in the study had never told anyone before being interviewed. Despite the health consequences, very few women reported seeking help from formal services like health and police, or from individuals in positions of authority, preferring instead to reach out to friends, neighbours and family members. Those who did seek formal support tended to be the most severely abused.

The report recommends a range of vital interventions to change attitudes and challenge the inequities and social norms that perpetuate abuse. It further recommends integrating violence prevention programming into ongoing initiatives aimed at children, youth, HIV/AIDS, and sexual and reproductive health. Health service providers should be trained to identify women experiencing violence and to respond appropriately. Prenatal care, family planning or post abortion care are potential entry points to provide care, support, and referral to other services. Schools need to be safe places, support systems for victims must be strengthened and prevention programmes put in place. Raising awareness of the problem among the general public is critical. . “Domestic violence can be prevented and governments and communities need to mobilize to fight this widespread public health problem (10)

Some quotes from women interviewed for the study:

"I suffered for a long time and swallowed all my pain. That's why I am constantly visiting doctors and using medicines. No one should do this." Woman interviewed in Serbia and Montenegro.

"He got this gun, I don't know from who... And he would tell the girls: "I'm going to kill your mother... The day will break and your mother will be dead right here..." I would sleep in a locked bedroom and with a dog inside the room with me. My dog. So he would not kill me". Woman interviewed in Brazil.

"He hit me in the belly and made me miscarry two babies - identical or fraternal twins, I don't know. I went to the Loayza hospital with heavy bleeding and they cleaned me up." Woman interviewed in urban Peru.

It is important to underline how physical and sexual violence was measured during this study in order to realize the public health approach of domestic violence. For physical violence, women were asked whether a current or former partner had ever: slapped her, or thrown something at her that could hurt her ; pushed or shoved her ; hit her with a fist or something else that could hurt ; kicked, dragged or beaten her up ; choked or burnt her on purpose ; threatened her with , or actually used a gun, knife or other weapon against her.

Sexual violence was defined by the following three behaviours: Being physically forced to have a sexual intercourse against her will ; having sexual intercourse because she was afraid of what her partner might do ; being forced to do something sexual she found degrading or humiliating.

Prevalence in Arab countries

In Arab countries, domestic violence is not only under-recognized and under- reported, but it is also considered as one of the most significant epidemics.(8) Domestic violence, and more specifically violence against women occur in all countries of the region and concerns any type of family, no matter of religion and social sphere. It is a social phenomenon.

It is a common perception in Arab countries that women should be subordinate to men, even if significant progress has been made in the past few years. Men consider themselves as the breadwinners of the family and by using violence they maintain the order of the household.(8)

There are many factors, as mentioned in the previous chapter, for women's unwillingness to denounce acts of violence taking place in the household. Such factors could be cultural, economic or social but most of all is the lack of an effective judicial response to any accusations that discourages them.

Domestic violence is possible also to cause a variety of other health problems such as depression and suicide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), *“nearly half of women who die due to homicide are killed by their current or former husbands or boyfriends while in some countries it can be as high as 70%. While exact numbers are hard to come by due to lack of reporting, available data suggest that nearly one in four women will experience sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Most victims of physical aggression are subjected to multiple acts of violence over extended periods of time. A third to over half of these cases are accompanied by sexual violence. In some countries, up to one-third of adolescent girls report forced sexual initiation.”*(11)

Studies carried out in the Arab world show that 70% of violence occurs in big cities, and that in almost 80% of cases those responsible are the heads of families, such as fathers or eldest brothers.

Progress has been though in various Arab countries, such as Tunisia, where the Code of Personal status has been improved in order to provide more rights to women. Article 207 of the Code has been abolished as it mentioned reduced penalties for the so- called honor crimes. In Lebanon, though, domestic violence is still considered a taboo, even if many activists are trying to through some light on it.(8) Lately though, Queen Rania of Jordan, has initiated a unified strategy of Arab countries for safeguarding familie from domestic violence, working with family experts and sociologists from the Arab world. Morocco is also a good example as many public awareness forums have been organized in order to protect women victims of domestic violence, while counseling centres have been established. Finally Egypt, where the phenomenon is quite extended, the first women's shelter of the whole Arab world has been established.

Even if some steps have been taken, there is still a long way to go in order to eliminate the stigma that is created by domestic violence in Arab countries. Not to mention, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen.(8) A very important step to be taken should be the criminalization of all forms of violence against women, including marital rape.

The 2009 report by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) stated that women's lack of social participation *“is primarily attributable to the existence of discriminatory laws, failure to implement the non-discriminatory legislation that does exist and a lack of awareness by women of their rights in such matters”*.(12)

Prevention of Domestic Violence

Among the recommendations for prevention made by WHO are primary prevention responses such as preschool and social development programmes for children and adolescents, parent training and support

programmes and measures to reduce firearm injuries and improve firearm safety. Other recommendations include strengthening responses for victims of violence, promoting adherence to international treaties and laws, and improving data collection on violence.(11)

Conclusion

It is obvious that domestic violence is a clear violation of international human rights law as it violates the right to dignity and even life. At the same time it is a health issue as it one of the most common reasons of death and disability and can be addressed through an effective public health policy, in terms of prevention, through specially designed programmes. In specific countries such as the ones of the Arab world, a legislation reforms are essential in order to fight impunity of such crimes against women. It is very clear to all that domestic violence can be eliminated only by changing our way of thinking towards the role of woman (and children) in all societies around the world, even the more developed ones.

(1, 3, 4, 6-11, 13-26)

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