Risk Factors for Violence against Women in Developing Countries

Mary Ellsberg, PhD
Senior Advisor
Gender, Violence and Human Rights

PATH
A catalyst for global health
Sources of evidence

- WHO study and comparative DHS study (9 countries)
Limitations in the evidence:

- Lack of longitudinal data
- Differences in the way violence is defined and measured
- Most evidence addresses only wife abuse
- Lack of multivariate analysis
- Difficulties in measuring and comparing cultural contexts (multi-level analysis)
An ecological framework for understanding the causes of violence
Violence is supported and reinforced at many different levels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victims:</th>
<th>Abusers:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Witnessing or experiencing violence**</td>
<td>• Witnessing or experiencing violence**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Age (younger)</td>
<td>• Fights outside of marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Age at first marriage &lt;15</td>
<td>• Alcohol/substance abuse**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High parity</td>
<td>• Low education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Low education (&lt; high school)</td>
<td>• Relationships with other women/multiple marriages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Marital status (living together, separated)</td>
<td>• Preference for sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Access to independent income (micro credit) +/-</td>
<td>• High risk sexual behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, it is difficult to unravel causes from consequences

- Does having many children or unwanted pregnancies precipitate violence or result from it?

- Does alcohol cause violence or “trigger” it?
• Male economic & decision making authority in the family
• Husband’s controlling behavior
• Marital conflict (woman leaving relationship)
• Women’s access to birth family support
Lack of social support networks for women

High unemployment/crime

Delinquent peer associations

Views on privacy of family problems

Gender roles in transition
Society

Laws / Policies
Institutions
Cultural norms
Sanctions and Sanctuary are both necessary…
In many countries laws favor abusers...

- Difficulties in obtaining and enforcing protection orders
- Requirements for “visible scars” or injuries
- Pardon for rape if he marries the victim
When you hit a woman, you have to know what you’re doing. If you hit her with the machete and it turns on the edge you can get in trouble.

A woman should be hit with a belt on the bottom. This is not serious because it can’t be seen, but if you give it to her in the eye it is trouble.

Rural man, Nicaragua
Services for victims are inadequate

- Women who report violence are often mistreated or blamed for violence (may increase risk for further abuse)
- Health services do not screen for violence or offer services for victims
- Most existing services are run by NGOs, located in larger cities and underfunded
- Problems with coordination
In large parts of the world, wife beating is conceptualized as a form of “correction” or chastisement.

Beating is acceptable as long as it is for “just cause”.

Acceptability depends on who, does what to whom, for what reason.
Cultural norms, cont.

- Male entitlement/ownership of women
- Rigid gender roles
- Violence is a private matter, others should not get involved.
- Masculinity linked to dominance, aggression, honor
- Violence as an acceptable way to resolve conflict
- Traditions that make it difficult for women to return to family in times of trouble (dowry, brideprice)
“I think that if the wife is guilty, the husband has the right to hit her...If I have done something wrong...nobody should defend me. But if I haven’t done something wrong, I have a right to be defended.”

-- Indigenous woman, Mexico

“If it is a great mistake, then the husband is justified in beating his wife. Why not? A cow will not be obedient without beatings”

-- Rural man
Tamil Nadu India
These factors not only shape the likelihood of a woman being beaten, but also her options for escape

- Unlike other violent crimes, stigma attaches to victim not abuser

- Particularly sexual abuse, may render women’s chances of marriage impossible

- May lead to more violence (honor killings)
My mother would tell me, “Do you think you’re the only one this happens to?” and she would tell me not to leave him.

My mother-in-law would say to me, “you have to put up with him and keep the marriage together. Remember that he is your husband and the father of your children.”
Difference factors may affect women’s risk of violence differently

- Bangladesh research (Koenig, 2003) shows the importance of cultural context

- Participating in micro-enterprise can precipitate or prevent violence, according to prevailing attitudes
What does this mean for interventions?

Violence occurs at many levels, and therefore must be addressed at many levels:
Breaking the silence is the first step:
Women’s social, economic and political empowerment is key to ending violence against women:
Legislative reforms are necessary but not sufficient to raise the cost of violence to abusers and offer protection to victims.
Improving the health sector response to violence
Transforming community norms around gender equity and violence
Focus on girls’ education, rights and well-being
Reaching out to men
The White Ribbon Campaign-Brazil: Men Working to End Violence Against Women
And to youth...
Violence can be prevented!
Mary Ellsberg, PhD
Senior Advisor, Gender, Violence and Human Rights
mellsberg@path-dc.org
www.path.org