A man holding prayer beads walks past a beggar woman in Afghanistan. Often associated with the now-ousted Taliban regime, the strict separation of men and women and the widespread enforcement of the burkha predates the Taliban and continues to be enforced in one of the world's most traditional Islamic countries. In Afghanistan the predicament of widows and female-headed households is precarious as women struggle to survive in a context where their opportunities and freedoms are severely limited and controlled by men.

Image: Iva Zimova/Panos

introduction

"Each time a person stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, (s)he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

— Robert F. Kennedy

This book is a ripple. Its portraits and testimonies join the global groundswell that has formed in response to the injustice of violence against women. This violence is a worldwide pandemic, one that transcends the bounds of geography, race, culture, class and religion to touch virtually every community, in virtually every corner of the globe. Too often sanctified by custom and reinforced by institutions, it thrives on impunity. Today, as in history, violence against women may constitute one the "most universal and unpunished crimes of all."[1]

It has been estimated that at least one in every three women around the globe "has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime."[2] In many settings, the percentage is even higher. From birth to death, millions of women are directly exposed to violence, and an even greater number are forced to live with the fear its pervasiveness instils. As numerous investigators and activists have highlighted and as this book graphically reiterates, violence against women may begin even before birth: In certain parts of the world, sex-selective abortions of female foetuses, female infanticide, and fatal neglect of girl children have caused dramatic imbalances in sex ratios between males and females. Some researchers place the global number of "missing" females — those who should currently be living but are not because of discriminatory practices — at between 50 million and 100 million.[3]

During childhood, girls may be up to three times more likely to experience sexual abuse than boys, and some data indicate that they are the majority of all incest victims.[4] Of the almost two million children being exploited in prostitution and pornography worldwide, 80 percent to 90 percent are girls in most countries.[5] In the rapidly increasing global trafficking market, well over a half-million human beings are forcibly or coercively transported across international borders each year — an

estimated 80 percent of these victims are women and girls, and most of them are believed to be trafficked into the commercial sex industry.[6]

In adulthood and even into old age, women continue to be at risk of specific forms of violence simply by virtue of being female. Most of their abusers are known to them — they are boyfriends, husbands and other family members, people from their community and, in the case of older adults, those specifically designated as caregivers.

The inconceivable repercussions

The human injustice of such violence is almost inconceivable in its scale. An estimated 100 million to 140 million girls alive today have undergone some form of medically unwarranted genital cutting.[7] In 2000, a United Nations report estimated that on average five Indian women a day were killed in "accidental" kitchen fires by husbands or in-laws whose demands for dowry had not been met.[8] In other parts of the world, thousands of women are murdered each year in the name of family "honour", and in most instances, their murderers receive little to no punishment. In times of war, women are increasingly targeted for rape and other assaults so extreme in their brutality that in the Democratic Republic of Congo violence against women has been coined "murderous madness".[9] Only a negligible fraction of these perpetrators will ever be prosecuted for their heinous crimes.

Just as difficult to conceive are the public-health implications of violence against women. Complications from pregnancy and child-bearing are the leading cause of death for 15- to 19-year-old girls worldwide, a fact made all the more alarming by widespread child marriages.[10] A projected 82 million girls around the world who are now between the ages of 10 and 17 will be married before their 18th birthdays.[11] The health risks of marriage are not limited to pregnancy. In 1997, the United States Surgeon General concluded that violence committed against women by their intimate partners poses the single largest threat to all American women, and similar conclusions have been drawn from studies in Europe and Australia.[12] According to a 1993 World Development Report, violence "is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer, and a greater cause of ill-health than traffic accidents and malaria combined."[13]

In adulthood and even into old age, women continue to be at risk of specific forms of violence simply by virtue of being female.

The development implications are no better. In the words of the United Nations Secretary-General, any society which fails to take measures to protect the safety and wellbeing of half of its members "cannot claim to be making real progress."[14] Violence against women drains a country's existing resources and handicaps women's ability to contribute to social and economic progress. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, women are nine times more likely than men to leave their jobs as a result of sexual harassment.[15] In some industrialised settings, the annual costs of intimate-partner violence alone have been estimated in the billions of dollars. State expenses for one act of rape in the United States, when accounting for both tangible and intangible costs, may amount to US $100,000.[16]

However immense in scope and impact, violence against women is not inevitable. At the same time that activists have been struggling to expose its magnitude, they have been working towards its elimination. An important part of these efforts has been defining exactly what violence against women entails and, in the process, identifying its root causes.

Defining violence against women

One of the great victories of women's rights activists over the last 10 years is that "the political climate surrounding the rights of women has shifted from refusing to admit that violence against women is a problem, to an almost universal understanding that it is the ultimate expression of the subordinate status of women globally."[17]

In 1993, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the watershed Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, in which violence against women was 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 private life."[18] In emphasising the centrality of gender, the definition speaks to the necessity of examining the societal and relational contexts in which violence against women and girls occurs.

One conundrum of the United Nations definition — especially when taken out of the context of the entire Declaration — is its circularity: Neither gender-based violence nor violence against women is actually defined. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the term gender-based violence has come to be used synonymously with violence against women. When removed from the

Young girl with baby, Democratic Republic of Congo. In most developing countries, girls take on household and caregiving tasks in addition to or instead of going to school. As the divisions of labour become more apparent, so do the differences between the opportunities and aspirations of boys and girls

Image: Georgina Cranston/IRIN

Women at work in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo. Many women in conflict situations are highly vulnerable when they venture in search of firewood, water and other necessities.

Images: Georgina Cranston/IRIN

Declaration's tautology, however, gender-based violence stands alone to describe harm perpetrated against any person — male or female — that is instigated or exacerbated by exploiting social roles ascribed to men and to women. As such, the term may not only refer to violence against women, but also to certain manifestations of violence against men.

To the extent that this book focuses on violence against women, the term gender-based violence, when it is applied herein, refers to women. While recognising that boys and men in some instances may be exposed to gendered violence, women's inferior status virtually everywhere in the world means that they are its primary targets. The term is therefore used in this book to emphasise the fact that violence against women is fundamentally related to discrimination, the foundations of which are deeply rooted in nearly universal attitudes and behaviours that reinforce women's subordination. The preamble to the Declaration makes this clear: "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."[19] The Declaration goes on to say that "violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men."[20]

Throughout history, acts of gender-based violence have been explicitly endorsed or implicitly condoned by the male-dominated societies in which they are committed.

Thus, gender is one of the most significant factors around the world in the perpetuation of violence against women and girls. It is not the only criterion for evaluating and addressing the nature and prevalence of violence against women, however. Additional measures include class, race, poverty, ethnicity and age. In fact, where gender bias intersects with these "other sites of oppression", levels of discrimination are likely to be compounded, "forcing the majority of the world's women into situations of double or triple marginalization."[21]

Grasping the context of gender-based violence

Any effort to understand violence against women must be located within the larger framework of gender inequality. Women are the majority of the world's poor. Seventy percent of people living in poverty — those surviving on less that $1 per day — are women.[22] In many countries, women are less likely than men to hold paid and regular jobs within the formal employment sector — where the benefits and security of employment are most reliable — and therefore more likely to suffer the financial instabilities inherent in the informal economy.[23]

In addition, women represent more than two-thirds of the world's illiterate.[24] While gender disparities in education are shrinking globally, in many parts of the world they still "yawn wide".[25] The predictable outcome of women's lack of education, especially when combined with other forms of discrimination, means that they are almost entirely excluded from the corridors of power: Women hold only 15.6 percent of elected parliamentary seats globally.[26] Without admission to decision-making structures, they are less able to determine and enforce the laws and policies that are meant to protect them.

As a result, in many countries women are not accorded the same basic legal rights and social privileges as men. In some settings, women have no right to own or inherit housing, land or property. In fact, they own only 1 percent of the world's land.[27] Not surprisingly, the majority of the one billion inadequately housed persons in the world are women.[28] In a number of countries, marriage laws discriminate against them, in terms of the legal age of marriage, for example, as well as the right to divorce.

Against a backdrop defined by widespread inequities, women's ability to assert their rights is crippled. The conclusion of the World Economic Forum's 2005 study on the global gender gap elucidates the problem: "The reality is that no country in the world, no matter how advanced, has achieved true gender equality, as measured by comparable decision making power, equal opportunity for education and advancement, and equal participation and status in all walks of human endeavour."[29] Such is the context in which gender-based violence breeds with impunity.

Women's rights: from invisible to indivisible

Throughout history, acts of gender-based violence have been explicitly endorsed or implicitly condoned by the male-dominated societies in which they are committed. This is in part because these violations most often occur in private spheres — traditionally considered beyond the purview of international and national law. It is also due to the self-interest and self-preservation of patriarchy. According to the World Health Organization, "Something that greatly encourages violence — and is a formidable obstacle in responding to it — is complacency.

Often, this complacency is strongly reinforced by self-interest."[30] Violence against women is a method by which men assert their social control; when it goes unchecked it is a method of propagating that control. In the absence of justice and in the presence of fear, women may not challenge the presumption of male dominion because to do so would put them at further risk. And so, the vicious circle of gender-based violence continues.

Women's rights activists are working to break this cycle. By insisting that violence against women constitutes a fundamental violation of basic human rights — human rights codified by men in international law — they have succeeded in making the invisible both visible and indivisible. They have brought violence against women "outside its protective shell of culture and tradition and focused attention on state responsibility to work to eliminate it."[31] Article 4 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women unequivocally asserts, "States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition, or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination."[32]

The Declaration goes further in making explicit what gender-based violence entails. It includes, but is not limited to "physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere; trafficking in women and forced prostitution, and physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs."[33]

Breaking the silence: promoting empowerment

In the words of one female victim of violence, "The less we speak about it, the more it hurts." This is as true at the societal level as it is for the individual. Even so, calling attention to violence against women presents risks, especially when individuals — and the cultures they represent — aggressively insist that their attitudes and actions related to the subordination of women are integral to their customs and traditions and that challenges to those traditions are an intrusion of foreign values.

The concept of human rights is not foreign to any culture, however, and not all traditional practices are harmful to women. The line cannot be strictly drawn between foreign and traditional ideals. The essential ideological divide is instead one that is internal to every culture around the world — where one set of beliefs seeks to justify discrimination against women and an opposing set of beliefs seeks to uphold the fundamental equality and human rights of all people, both women and men.[34]

"States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition, or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination."

This book is based on the premise that human rights are both universal and indivisible. It draws on the decades of work by researchers and activists committed to exposing and eradicating violence against women. It insists — once again — that the issue of violence against women be acknowledged and confronted. The results of such confrontation have never been, and never will be, a "zero-sum game" for men, or for societies.[35] Putting an end to gender-based violence will bring us that much closer to a stage of human social development in which "the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of individuals will not be determined by the fact of being born male or female."[36] The goal is to create a world where all people, regardless of their gender, are free to achieve their full potential. ■

Children sorting rubbish in Pakistan. Girls are more likely than boys to be found, outside school, starting work from a young age.

Images: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN

Women make up two-thirds of those who are illiterate in the world. Gender disparities in education are reducing globally, but in certain countries the differences remain high. The absence of educational opportunities is one of many inequalities that define childhood for millions of girls — and is symptomatic of cultures that are patriarchal in both ideology and structure.

Image: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN

Power by the gun leads to abuses in communities without recourse to civil authority.

Image: Brent Stirton