

The international movement challenging discrimination and violence against women is driven by hundreds of formal and informal groups around the world that have mobilised for change.

Image: Zana Briski

# turning the tide

**“There must be no impunity for gender-based violence. Let me be clear. What we are talking about is not a side issue. It is not a special interest group, of concern to only a few. What we are talking about are not only women’s rights but also the human rights of over one half of this globe’s population. ...**

**Violence against women concerns not only women but above all the rest of us.”<sup>1</sup>**

**— the late Sergio Vieira de Mello, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

The fight to end violence against women is both historic and universal. Historic, because gender inequality, which lies at the root of this violence, has been embedded in human history for centuries and the movement to end it challenges history, custom and, most critically, the *status quo*. Universal, because no society is an exception to the fact that violence against women is perpetuated through social and cultural norms that reinforce male-dominated power structures. The struggle is nothing less than a demand for full human rights to be unconditionally extended to all people everywhere.

Those engaged in this struggle recognise that despite important advances that have laid the foundation for universal human rights, the work has only just begun. In October 2004, on the 25th anniversary of the landmark Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the committee monitoring international

implementation stated, “In no country in the world has women’s full *de jure* and *de facto* equality been achieved.”<sup>2</sup>

In most countries, in fact, the reality remains bleak. Discriminatory social norms and practices continue to impede women’s full enjoyment of their human rights. Insufficient political will, the extensive underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions and a lack of resources to address the issue are further impediments to progress.<sup>3</sup>

## Asserting human rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted without dissent by the United Nations in 1948, recognises the “equal and inalienable rights” of all people, “without distinction of any kind.”<sup>4</sup> Violence against women contravenes a number of the fundamental human rights laid out in this

Declaration, such as the right to security of person; the right not to be held in slavery or subjected to inhuman treatment; the right to equal protection before the law; and the right to equality in marriage.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, states sometimes deploy the argument of cultural relativism to defend practices that abuse women. According to the first United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, “The universal standards of human rights are often denied full operation when it comes to the rights of women.”<sup>6</sup>

This book highlights through written description and visual representation many of the persistent expressions of gender-based violence. The testimonies of women and girls emphasise that there is no room for complacency or a false sense of rapid progress in the fight against inequality. To the countless women still suffering today, any positive changes that have been achieved must bear little relevance to their immediate reality. Nevertheless, remarkable developments have taken place in recent years, due in large part to the commitment of a few to change the behaviour of many. In the face of formidable forces maintaining the patriarchal systems that give rise to both discrimination and violence against women, there is evidence that the tide may be turning.

## The emergence of an international movement

The protection of women from systemic violence and discrimination has its roots in the movement of female emancipation at the turn of the 18th century. However, it was only in the latter half of the 20th century, after the founding of the United Nations, that women’s activists began applying international standards of human rights to expose the links between sex-based discrimination and violence against women, and to argue for state accountability. By the 1970s, their efforts were taking root. The first World Conference on Women was held in Mexico in December 1975 and heralded the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, spanning the years 1976 to 1985.

Once the preserve of women’s rights activists, the struggle to end violence against women is now becoming mainstreamed in government policies and development programming and increasingly recognised as an international priority.<sup>7</sup> Academic scrutiny and public awareness of the issue also have accelerated in the last two decades. Key actors in the campaign are the United Nations — in particular the the Development

Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Fund for Population and Development (UNFPA) and the Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW), as well as

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a wide range of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations and local community-based groups.

An evolving body of international agreements and declarations is providing all these actors with a powerful normative framework for promoting and protecting women’s right to be free from violence. In 1979, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the comprehensive and detailed Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which is often referred to as the “bill of rights for women”. As of 2003, the Convention had been ratified by 174 states. It does not, however, specifically detail the issue of violence against women. Instead, this subject was taken up in 1993, with the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The Declaration calls upon states to condemn violence against women and to avoid invoking custom, tradition and religion to obstruct their obligation towards its total elimination.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and its follow-up conference in 2000, known as Beijing +5, have been important reference points for much of the activism and campaigning in recent years. Both conferences called for a re-engagement and intensification of focus by world governments and civil society on issues of violence and discrimination against women and girls. International commitments to the elimination of gender-based violence were strengthened with the appointment of a United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women in 1993, the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and the establishment of the United Nations Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women in 1996.

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A group of sex workers in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Many of these girls, who were displaced from their villages by civil conflict, fled to the capital and, without a means to support themselves, were forced to work as prostitutes.

Image: Brent Stirton

Women who have suffered violence need economic opportunities in addition to medical and psychological support. Thousands of women in conflict-affected settings are rebuilding their lives support through training and microcredit initiatives.

Image: Brent Stirton

## Bringing the fight home

Today, agencies working to end violence against women — as well as leading researchers, writers and activists — agree that there are specific activities that need to take place at the national and local levels if the fight against gender-based violence is to have a long-term impact. These involve creating increased protection for women through partnerships with institutions and governments to ensure legislative reform and implementation. They also involve measures to guarantee that survivors have access to support services, which can mitigate the impact of violence and reduce the likelihood of its recurrence. They further involve raising awareness and developing public and institutional support through research and advocacy efforts. Lastly, they involve the empowerment of women through education, greater employment opportunities and equal participation in decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

## Changes in national legislation

Significant advances have been made in criminalising forms of gender-based violence at the national level. For example, by 2003, legislation explicitly banning intimate-partner violence was in place in 45 countries; a further 21 were drafting such legislation. In an additional 45 countries, this type of violence was covered implicitly by other laws. Legislative reforms in some countries have facilitated prosecution for sexual assault, notably by broadening the definition of rape, revising the conditions regarding evidence and removing demands that victims' accounts be corroborated.<sup>9</sup> Twenty-five countries have enacted legislation explicitly or implicitly criminalising female genital mutilation (FGM).<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding these gains, overall progress has been limited — the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women declared in recent years that “states are failing in their international obligations to effectively prevent, investigate and prosecute violence against women.”<sup>11</sup> In only three countries is violence against women in itself legally considered to be a criminal activity.<sup>12</sup> While there are 130 countries with legislation in place that can be applied to sexual assault, only 16 countries have specific laws against it, and although marital rape is considered a crime in 50 countries, only five countries have specific legislation against it. Seventy-nine countries have no legislation whatsoever covering intimate-partner violence, despite its prevalence, and very few nations have any mechanism to address the issue of gender-based violence in times of war.<sup>13</sup>

In some countries, laws may even exacerbate women's risk of violence. Legislation may favour family preservation in the event of domestic violence, suspend rape sentences if the perpetrator marries the victim or permit “honour” to be used as a mitigating factor in criminal penalties.<sup>14</sup>

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Women may be unable to own or inherit property and secure their financial independence.<sup>15</sup> Marital laws may enshrine unequal divorce rights, making it impossible for women to instigate separation.

Even where legislation prohibiting violence against women exists, there is no guarantee that it will be applied effectively. Enforcement requires the existence of a rule of law and an interested and impartial criminal justice system, which many countries lack.<sup>16</sup> Regional assessments on violence against women commissioned by UNIFEM in recent years documented that “nearly every area reported failure to implement anti-violence legislation as an egregious problem.”<sup>17</sup> Gender bias is strongly evident in the male-dominated law enforcement and judiciary sectors in many countries, where domestic violence, for example, may be dismissed as a “family” issue, and information regarding a rape victim's sexual history can be used in court to discredit her testimony. Despite the enactment of national legislation against female genital mutilation, the persistence of the practice in some countries continues unabated, while evidence of prosecution of those practising FGM has occurred in only six countries.<sup>18</sup>

## Assisting victims of violence

Over the last 20 years, particularly in industrialised settings, services for survivors have significantly improved in scope and quality. Due in large part to the efforts of women's organizations, coordinated responses to intimate-partner violence and sexual assault have become standardised and are increasingly addressing a variety of needs, from the provision of medical treatment, counselling, legal aid, protection and shelter, to assistance with reintegration of victims into society.

Innovative initiatives include women's police stations and “one-stop” crisis centres that provide survivors support through the criminal-justice process. Some countries have networks of “safe houses” to which women can go for temporary shelter from abusive partners. “Rape suites”, staffed by social workers as well as doctors, ensure that survivors receive

supportive care during forensic examinations.<sup>19</sup> Specialised treatment programmes also have been established for child victims of abuse, as well as for the elderly.<sup>20</sup> Many countries have initiatives to sensitise those working in the health, security and legal sectors to the issues surrounding violence against women. Such measures seek to challenge the gender biases that discourage women from reporting incidents of violence and in turn increase impunity levels.

The standards established in certain countries are by no means global. In many parts of the world, specialised services for survivors continue to be minimal or nonexistent. Barriers include a lack of resources and technical competence; as well as institutional constraints such as limited coordination between service providers and perceptions that violence against women is unimportant.<sup>21</sup> The failure by the healthcare and legal sectors to offer free, confidential and safe advice and care, the absence of standards for the sensitive and accurate collection of forensic evidence, and prevailing victim-blaming attitudes discourage victims from seeking assistance.<sup>22</sup> Poor infrastructure and lack of affordable transport also mitigate against women receiving support. Overall the issue of adequate and appropriate service provision continues to be a huge challenge — particularly in areas where it is most needed.

### The power of data

Data on the scope, causes and implications of gender-based violence are vital to designing and monitoring both prevention and response strategies, informing advocacy and awareness campaigns, and advancing legislative reform. Especially in the last 10 years, research efforts have improved considerably, and in some countries population-based studies and standardised collection of service-delivery data are now routine. The WHO, in particular, has made significant strides in researching the issue of violence against women by their intimate partners and in establishing ethical and methodological standards for investigating violence against women.<sup>23</sup> Demographic and health surveys now include optional questions on female genital mutilation, as well as other forms of violence against women.

International and national agencies, academic institutions, and nongovernmental organizations also have developed and implemented data-collection strategies, and the scope of their work is positively illustrated by the statistics contained in this book. Most recently, a

United Nations General Assembly resolution in December 2003 commissioned an “in-depth study on all forms of violence against women.”<sup>24</sup> UNDAW is responsible for the implementation of this study, which will not only detail existing data, but also provide recommendations for improving comprehensive and comparable data collection around the world.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women estimated in 2003, however, that “it will be another decade before adequate information can be collated.”<sup>25</sup> Comparison of data that has been collected is hampered by the use of different frameworks, methods and time-spans, and prevalence research on various types of gender-

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based violence is often limited to selected areas as opposed to entire countries. In many nations surveyed by UNIFEM, “there is no comprehensive and systematic mechanism for collecting reliable data on violence against women.”<sup>26</sup> In the absence of representative statistics, analysts are forced to rely on victims’ reports to health and social services agencies and to the legal sector.<sup>27</sup> Because most victims never report their crimes, service-delivery statistics are not an accurate indication of the scope of the problem.

### Raising awareness

Efforts to raise awareness and educate the public about violence against women and its roots in broader gender inequalities have been significant in recent decades, at both the national and local levels. Activists have employed different media — from posters to television dramas, and from video cassettes to the Internet — to convey messages aimed at combating violence.<sup>28</sup> Informing women of their rights has been central to their efforts. Key messages within the campaigns have included women’s rights to be free from violence, to demand that partners use condoms, and to decide when and with whom they wish to have sex.<sup>29</sup> Awareness-raising has also focused on encouraging women to report incidents of violence and urging families and neighbours to take action if they know women who are being abused.<sup>30</sup> Some successful strategies from around the world have been documented by UNIFEM and others and widely distributed in media toolkits.

Police training in Islamabad, 2005. Despite efforts to sensitise law enforcement officers, Pakistan, along with other countries, struggles to implement national law on violence against women.

Image: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN



**Welcome to Liberia: Young men and boys with guns in a climate of impunity and civil dislocation often contribute to high incidents of rape and sexual abuse of women and girls.**

**Image: Brent Stirton**

Reviewers of campaigns to raise awareness still cite the lack of media expertise and adequate resources as a serious constraint. Even where governments have undertaken national education on violence against women, the level of funding they have devoted to the effort is low compared to allocations they have made to other public-health campaigns.<sup>31</sup> The Special Rapporteur assessed in 2003 that "... very little has changed in the lives of most women. A few women have benefited [...] but for the vast majority violence against women remains a taboo issue, invisible in society and a shameful fact of life."<sup>32</sup>

## Involving men

Because male perceptions of masculinity and power relations with women act as collective reinforcement and perpetuate violence against women, targeting men is a crucial element of awareness-raising strategies.<sup>33</sup> Approaches have included community-education campaigns, men's activism against violence and perpetrator programmes.<sup>34</sup> While recognising that not all males are perpetrators, research suggests that "all men can influence the culture and environment that allows other men to be violent."<sup>35</sup>

Educational campaigns have attempted to redefine masculinity as nonviolent by providing an alternative construction of male identity.<sup>36</sup> The White Ribbon Campaign, launched in Canada in 1991 and now established in many countries, is a well-known example of a campaign run by men that encourages other men to condemn violence against women.<sup>37</sup> Studies of men's relationships with other men have suggested that such relations can promote notions of male responsibility for ending violence against women.<sup>38</sup> Men's groups committed to combating violence against women can be found all over the world: In the United States alone, there are over 100 such groups linked to the White Ribbon Campaign.<sup>39</sup>

## Empowering women

The issue of empowerment of women is a key element in "measuring the world's gender gap." When women advance in five critical areas — economic participation, quality of employment, political representation, educational attainment, and health and wellbeing — they are better equipped to challenge the unequal power relations that preserve male dominance.<sup>40</sup> Research suggests that women who are more empowered in these areas are at lower risk of violence.<sup>41</sup> Empowerment with regard to skills and resources also promotes financial independence, a sense of

social value and improved self-esteem. Another by-product of increased participation by women is a sense of solidarity with other women gained through greater access to social-support networks.

Undeniably, positive changes have occurred in the last 50 years in the status and role of women in many countries. Women have entered the labour market in great numbers, giving them unprecedented economic decision-making power. Increases in women's access to finance have enhanced their control over household resources.<sup>42</sup> In many settings girls have achieved parity with boys, and sometimes exceeded boys, in terms of access to education. Women also have been major actors in the rise of civil society throughout the world, with the current levels of female participation in economic, political and social processes the highest they have ever been.<sup>43</sup>

Despite these advances, the economic, political, social and educational development of women is highly uneven throughout the world. For example, on average 15.6 percent of political representatives in combined houses of parliament around the world are female — but this

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figure is as low as 6.8 percent in Arab states and as high as 39.7 percent in the Nordic states.<sup>44</sup> The 2005 report by the World Economic Forum, "Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap," which ranks 58 countries according to gender equality in the five areas mentioned above, highlights the significant differences between countries at the top of the ranking (Sweden, Norway and Iceland) and those ranked at the bottom (Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt).<sup>45</sup>

While it would be wrong to understate the significant and steady progress made in recent years, it would also be wrong to overstate the benefits. Too often, activities to advance women's rights and safety are constrained by limited resources and a lack of influence. Even the United Nations Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence Against Women, an inter-agency effort with a global mandate, that is administered by UNIFEM, labours under severely restricted funding. To end violence against women in this context can sometimes be a Herculean task. Positive change is hard-won and often fragile. ■

## *A call to act against discrimination and violence*

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This book should serve as disturbing testimony of the global disparity between the sexes in relation to equality and human rights abuses. Although the inclusion of images and case studies brings some individual lives into sharp focus, a burden of truth-telling remains. This burden is the weight of the millions of untold stories, of unnoticed suffering, of secret pain and unchallenged assaults on women's minds and bodies. It is also the burden of the endless assaults on women's and girls' dreams and potential.

"Perpetrated by men, silenced by custom, institutionalised in laws and state systems and passed from one generation to the next," the continued and unrelenting violence visited upon women and girls is the "most universal and most unpunished crime of all."<sup>46</sup> With increased evidence of violence against women comes the obligation to act. History will no doubt judge this and subsequent generations harshly if comprehensive action to reject all forms of violence against women is not taken.

Everyone has a role to play because the challenge implicates every community and nation of the world and involves all women and, more pointedly, all men. Ending violence against women and girls is a struggle of historic and universal dimensions. The battle is already underway. And once won, humanity's place on earth will more aptly — and honestly — be called "civilisation".



In one initiative to offer recreation and alternative experiences of solidarity for young commercial sex workers in Sierra Leone, an international nongovernmental organization launched a sports programme of monthly soccer matches.

Image: Brent Stirton