

# Destined to fail?

How violence against women  
is undoing development

act:onaid



oui au  
ment et  
Nous voulons  
l'unité et la  
réconciliation

Nous ne voulons  
plus être violées  
stop à la violence

Oui au  
développement et  
non à la guerre !

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## Acronyms

**AFLE:** Adolescent family life education

**CEDAW:** Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

**DFID:** Department for International Development

**FCO:** Foreign and Commonwealth Office

**FGM:** Female genital mutilation

**GBV:** Gender-based violence

**MDG:** Millennium Development Goal

**MoD:** Ministry of Defence

**MSF:** Medicins Sans Frontieres

**NAPWE:** National Association of Positive Women Ethiopians

**PHR:** Physicians for Human Rights

**SIDA:** Swedish International Development Agency

**TAC:** Treatment Action Campaign

**UNAIDS:** Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

**UNFPA:** UN Population Fund

**UNICEF:** United Nations Children’s Fund

**UNIFEM:** UN Development Fund for Women

**VAWIP:** Violence Against Women in Politics

**WHO:** World Health Organization

# Executive summary

## A global scandal

Violence against women and girls is one of the starkest collective failures of the international community in the 21st century. Violence affects one in three women globally and is one of the most widespread abuses of human rights worldwide in times of both conflict and peace. It is a leading cause of death and disability among women of all ages. As this report shows, women face violence and the threat of violence at every stage of their lives.

As well as representing a gross violation of human rights in its own right, violence against women also presents a fundamental barrier to eradicating poverty and building peace. Violence against women impoverishes individual women, as well as their families, communities and countries. It drains public resources, undermines human capital, and lowers economic productivity.<sup>1</sup> Even the most conservative estimates measure national costs of violence against women and girls in the billions of dollars.<sup>2</sup>

Crucially, violence against women undermines women’s potential and ability to effect change in the world. Half the world’s population is unable to bring their skills fully to bear on the challenges of the day because they are fighting for their safety. A constant threat to their lives and well-being, violence against women robs women of choices and control over their own bodies, sexuality and lives. It gravely affects their chances of survival and their ability to lift themselves out of poverty. It stops them from securing a decent education, entering the employed workforce, leaving an abusive partner and participating in public life.

Allowing violence against women to continue unabated sends the message that we do not value women or their lives. It also means that progress towards development goals is destined to fail.

## Key challenges

Violence against women remains a persistent problem because of women’s unequal status in society. Indeed, violence against women and girls is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. Violence against women is a means of social control that maintains unequal power relations between women and men and reinforces women’s subordinate status. Violence against women is also an abuse of the power imbalance between women and men. Women are at risk of violence because they do not have enough power in society to protect themselves from more powerful men or to access justice.

As this report demonstrates, violence against women and girls also blocks progress across the major development agendas:

## Education

Despite substantial progress in closing the gender gap in primary school enrolment during the last decade, the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005 was missed. According to this year’s MDG Report, more than 100 countries have still not met the target.<sup>3</sup> A key reason for this gap is that governments are concentrating on enrolment without adequately addressing the root causes of girls’ absences and departures from schools. ActionAid’s research has shown that girls are subject to routine violence in, around and on the journeys to and from school.<sup>4</sup> In some countries, sexual harassment and rape by male classmates and teachers are widespread;<sup>5</sup> in other countries, as many as 50% of girls are reporting ‘forced intercourse’.<sup>6</sup> Violence against girls in schools is leading directly to lowered enrolment rates, poor performance while in school, absenteeism and high dropout rates.

### Maternal and child health

The MDG on maternal health continues to show the least progress of all the goals set by the international community in 2000. And while under-five mortality rates have dropped globally, almost no progress has been made in countries with the worst child mortality rates since the MDG targets were set.<sup>7</sup> The new target to achieve universal access to reproductive health by 2015 has been a promising development.<sup>8</sup> But it will only be met if we start to tackle one of the main barriers to access: the violence against women and girls that is used to control their sexuality and reproduction. Girls and women are being forced into pregnancy, and targeted for violence once they become pregnant.<sup>9</sup> In some places, there is a direct link between widespread female infanticide and the abuse women face for not producing boys.<sup>10</sup> In addition, women who experience violence are significantly less likely to access natal care, which affects their own health as well as that of their children.<sup>11</sup>

### HIV and AIDS

International efforts to combat HIV and AIDS have increasingly recognised that gender inequality is a key driver of the epidemic. But they have not caught up to the new reality: the face of HIV is now female. Half of all new HIV infections globally occur among young people (aged 15-24), and two-thirds of these are women and girls.<sup>12</sup> Within some parts of sub-Saharan Africa where the epidemic is at its worst, teenage girls are six times more likely to be infected than their male counterparts.<sup>13</sup> The reason action is trailing the facts is that very little work is targeted at violence against women, which is a key cause of women and girls' vulnerability to HIV. Violence undermines the ability of women and girls to control if, with whom, when, and under what circumstances they have sex, including how able they are to negotiate safer sex. In some places, up to one third of women report that their first sexual experience was forced.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, violence against women and girls is a consequence of HIV, as women become easy targets for violence because of their real or perceived HIV status. HIV also fuels violence against women and girls and in turn increases the risk of infection: older women and young girls are raped on the assumption that they do not have<sup>15</sup> or can 'cure'<sup>16</sup> AIDS, respectively. In conflicts, women are deliberately

infected as a tactic of war.<sup>17</sup> In South Africa, HIV rates are increasing amongst lesbians as they are being targeted for 'corrective rape' because of homophobia and because they are seen to be transgressing prescribed gender norms and the sexual roles of women.<sup>18</sup>

### Conflict

Resolution 1325 and subsequent UN Security Council Resolutions on 'women, peace and security' have been landmark achievements. The recent creation of the new UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict is also a welcome development. Nevertheless, widespread violence against women and girls, especially sexual violence, continues to fuel conflict and insecurity because it is generally framed as: (a) unrelated to gender-based violence during peace time, and (b) a parallel rather than intrinsic security issue. In reality, the primary difference between violence against women and girls during times of conflict and post conflict situations compared to violence during 'peace time' is the degree to which perpetrators can act with impunity during war because of social breakdown and the absence of the rule of law.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the nature of war itself has changed. No longer are wars primarily an engagement between armed forces. Today, wars are also

characterised by violence that is overwhelmingly directed at civilians. In particular, violence against women and girls is now a defining and deliberate tactic of modern warfare, rather than being a by-product of war.<sup>20</sup>

### Governance

Good governance is a cornerstone of our efforts to eliminate poverty. And the active participation of all citizens is perhaps the most important factor influencing the quality of a state's governance. Unfortunately, women's political participation and representation in governments is very low globally. On average, women make up less than 20% of members of parliament in national parliaments. One reason for this political exclusion is itself a governance challenge: the epidemic levels of violence against women and girls. This violence betrays a lack of basic personal safety in society. Women's lack of access to justice in the aftermath of violence further fuels the cycle. In addition, women are often at increased risk of violence as they move further into politics and public life. In some places, violence has been deliberately used to target, control, penalise and silence women who are active in public arenas and politics.<sup>21</sup> Women human rights defenders are targeted both because they are advocating on women's rights and because they are women.<sup>22</sup>

## The UK's role in creating change

Violence against women and girls remains a pressing human rights challenge as well as having a huge impact on mainstream development issues and achievement of the MDGs.<sup>23</sup> But the international community has not adequately dealt with this issue. As a result of many years of campaigning work by women's organisations, important progress has been made on raising the profile of the problem. What is needed now is urgent action. If it remains untackled, violence against women will continue to silently undermine development goals.

The UK government can reverse this trend by committing political will and resources to tackling violence against women, and leading on this agenda internationally. Tackling violence against women as a strategic priority is a means for the UK government to meet its own and its international commitments, as well as to achieve its development aims. Other countries including the United States have already begun this work.

As global groundbreakers in international development, UK decision-makers are in a unique position to influence others and lead a new approach to change. The best way to do this is for the UK to address violence against women and girls coherently as a strategic priority in all of its international work, including its foreign policy. The first step is to recognise how violence against women is both a key development issue and a human rights issue. The government's new integrated strategy on violence against women, as well as the Equality Bill currently progressing through Parliament, offer two immediate opportunities to take action.

### Recommendations for the UK government:

1. Make ending violence against women internationally a foreign policy priority.
2. Appoint a Minister on violence against women and girls whose brief covers the Department for International Development (DFID), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD).
3. Establish infrastructure within government to monitor and enforce UK commitments on violence against women internationally.
4. Champion attention to violence against women and girls within the international development agenda, including the need for more and better disaggregated data, through advocacy with multilateral agencies and international frameworks including the MDGs and the post-MDG framework, and by supporting the UN Secretary General's campaign on violence against women and the full funding of the new UN gender entity.<sup>1</sup>

5. Strengthen the work of DFID on violence against women by recognising it as a core development issue, linking it to poverty, economic growth, education, health and conflict; developing a coherent and adequately funded strategy to address the issue above and beyond the current focus on violence against women and girls in conflict; and supporting the women's organisations and networks that provide life saving and advocacy services for women survivors of violence.

Thirty years after the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)<sup>24</sup> and on the eve of the fifteenth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action,<sup>25</sup> the ten-year review of the MDGs,<sup>26</sup> and the tenth anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1325,<sup>27</sup> the time is ripe for the UK to use its strong position on the global stage to tackle violence against women and girls internationally as a matter of immediate priority and urgency.

<sup>1</sup> On 14 September 2009, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to create a new UN gender agency.

## Introduction

“Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace. Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

### Beijing Platform for Action 1995<sup>28</sup>

Violence against women and girls is one of the starkest collective failures of the international community in the 21st century. Its prevalence, even in times of relative peace, demonstrates the systematic inability and unwillingness of states to protect half of their population from predictable – and preventable – danger. An urgent, coherent and strategic approach is crucial if this problem is finally to be meaningfully and successfully tackled.

With the UN estimating that one in three women faces some form of gender-based violence<sup>ii</sup> in their lifetime,<sup>29</sup> it is clear that violence against women and girls is not a marginal issue affecting just a few women. It affects women of all ages, all social locations, in all countries.<sup>30</sup> And it remains a persistent problem because of women’s unequal status in society, which denies them equal protection and access to justice. Allowing violence against women to continue unabated sends the message that we do not value women’s lives. It also means that progress towards development goals is destined to fail.

<sup>ii</sup> This report uses the terms violence against women and girls and gender-based violence interchangeably to refer to violence perpetrated by men against women and girls because of their gender.

Violence against women and girls is a gross violation of women’s human rights that is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality:

**Cause:** Violence against women is a means of social control. Violence against women and girls maintains unequal power relations between women and men and reinforces women’s subordinate status. It does this by entrenching the idea that women’s lives are worth less than men’s, taking power away from women and giving it to men and restricting how, when and which decisions women can take for themselves.

**Consequence:** Violence against women and girls is an abuse of the power imbalance between women and men. Women are at risk of violence because they do not have enough power in society to protect themselves from more powerful men or to access justice. Violence against women and girls is a consequence of structural inequalities that permit – and sometimes encourage – men to abuse women without fear of punishment.

Violence against women and girls occurs within a broader context of unequal power relations. Women and men living in poverty in developing countries face an unfair globalised economy that leads to exploitation, social, economic and political exclusion and inequalities of all kinds. In this context, those who have more power than others – of any kind – tend to exercise it in ways that include violence. This in turn unleashes chains of violence where the rich exercise power over the poor and those with weapons or political power use it to brutalise those below them, using violence to exert control or authority. Men and boys that are exploited, brutalised, facing life-threatening economic insecurities and are themselves feeling powerless can turn to violence to express their frustration and exert what power they have over women and girls.<sup>32</sup> Evidence shows that gender-based violence increases during times of political and social instability, with women facing particularly acute risks during times of conflict.<sup>33</sup> Knowing what supports violence against women can help in generating solutions but does not excuse the violence.

Violence against women is a leading cause of death and disability among women of all ages and all social locations – rich/poor, urban/rural and so on – and women face violence and the threat of violence at each stage of their lives (see Table 1). Some women are at increased

risk of violence because of other identities and life circumstances, such as their disability, caste, race, sexual orientation, class, religion or gender identity.

Violence against women impoverishes individual women, as well as their families, communities and countries. It drains public resources, undermines human capital and lowers economic productivity.<sup>35</sup> Even the most conservative estimates measure the national costs of violence against women and girls in the billions of dollars.<sup>36</sup> Costs at household level are also significant. A recent study in Uganda found that the average cost to a household per incidence of violence is US\$5. This is significant since Uganda’s per capita gross national income is only US\$340.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to being a gross abuse of human rights, as noted in various international and regional human rights instruments including CEDAW,<sup>38</sup> violence against women and girls undermines the effectiveness of all international peace and development efforts. Violence against women and girls acts as a systematic barrier to women’s potential and ability to effect change in the world. Half the world is unable to bring their skills fully to bear on the challenges of the day because they are fighting for their safety. A constant threat to women’s lives and well-being, violence against women robs them of choices and control.

### What is ‘violence against women’?

“...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, UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women 1993

“Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following:

- (a) 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;
- (b) 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;
- (c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.”

#### Article 2, UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women 1993<sup>31</sup>

It gravely affects their chances of survival and their ability to lift themselves out of poverty. It stops them from securing a decent education, entering the employed workforce, leaving an abusive partner and participating in public life. It is simply not possible to end poverty without tackling violence against women. And no international agenda that systematically fails to deliver safety, equality and rights to women can be seen as a success.

After much hard work from women at the grassroots, violence against women has come on to the global agenda in visible ways. As Charlotte Bunch, then Executive Director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership, wrote about violence against women and the UN Secretary General's UNiTE to End Violence Against Women campaign:

**“There is no issue that better illustrates how the women’s movement can and has moved a concern from local women’s spaces to the tables of power.”<sup>39</sup>**

Years of lobbying by women’s organisations and the women’s movement have resulted in measureable progress, including the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,<sup>viii</sup> the high profile Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (especially 1325 and 1820), and the dedicated sections on violence against women within the Beijing Platform for Action. The Security Council Resolutions are especially important because they for the first time recognise that women’s security is a legitimate security issue in its own right.<sup>40</sup> Within the UK, the End Violence Against Women Coalition has successfully campaigned for the new cross-government violence against women and girls strategy.<sup>41</sup> Each of these successes has helped to raise the profile of violence against women and girls as a distinct international problem. What is needed now is urgent action.

<sup>viii</sup> Adopted on 20 December 1993, the Declaration was the first international human rights instrument to specifically focus on violence against women.

Thirty years after CEDAW and on the eve of the fifteenth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action,<sup>ix</sup> the ten-year review of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the tenth anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1325, the time is ripe for the UK to show leadership on the global stage by addressing violence against women as a foreign policy priority. Violence against women and girls remains a pressing human rights challenge and the MDGs are off target because they do not adequately promote gender equality and the empowerment of women.<sup>42</sup> Tackling violence against women and girls is therefore a means for the UK government to meet its international obligations and achieve its development aims. This report tracks five key global agendas to illustrate how this can be achieved.

<sup>ix</sup> The main human rights treaty dedicated to gender equality, CEDAW (1979), is often described as the international bill of rights for women. It is legally binding. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) meanwhile is recognised as the most comprehensive global policy document on women’s empowerment. Together, these two instruments establish the key guidance frameworks for states on eliminating discrimination against women and achieving equality for women.

**Table 1: Violence against women and girls by life stage**<sup>iii, 34</sup>

<b>Pre-birth</b>	Prenatal sex selection, <sup>v</sup> violence during pregnancy
<b>Infancy</b>	Female infanticide, emotional and physical abuse, restricted access to food and medical care
<b>Girlhood</b>	Child marriage, genital mutilation, incest and sexual abuse, restricted access to food and medical care, child sex work, coerced pregnancy
<b>Adolescence</b>	Dating and courtship-related violence, <sup>v</sup> economically coerced sex, <sup>vi</sup> sexual abuse, rape, sexual harassment, forced sex work, trafficking, coerced pregnancy
<b>Young and middle aged womanhood</b>	Intimate partner violence, marital rape, partner homicide, psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, rape, coerced pregnancy
<b>Older age</b>	Abuse of widows, <sup>vii</sup> elder abuse

<sup>iii</sup> These ‘stages’ are meant as descriptive guidelines and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, women can face widow abuse at very young ages.

<sup>iv</sup> ActionAid believes in a woman’s right to choose whether and how to have children, including the right to access safe and affordable abortions. Sex selective abortion is highlighted as a threat to women and girls in this box because it is rooted in gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls. ActionAid challenges the underlying causes of prenatal sex selection and does not support restrictions on women’s ability to access abortions.

<sup>v</sup> For example, acid throwing at women that occurs in Bangladesh (UNIFEM 2007) and Latin America (World Bank 1994).

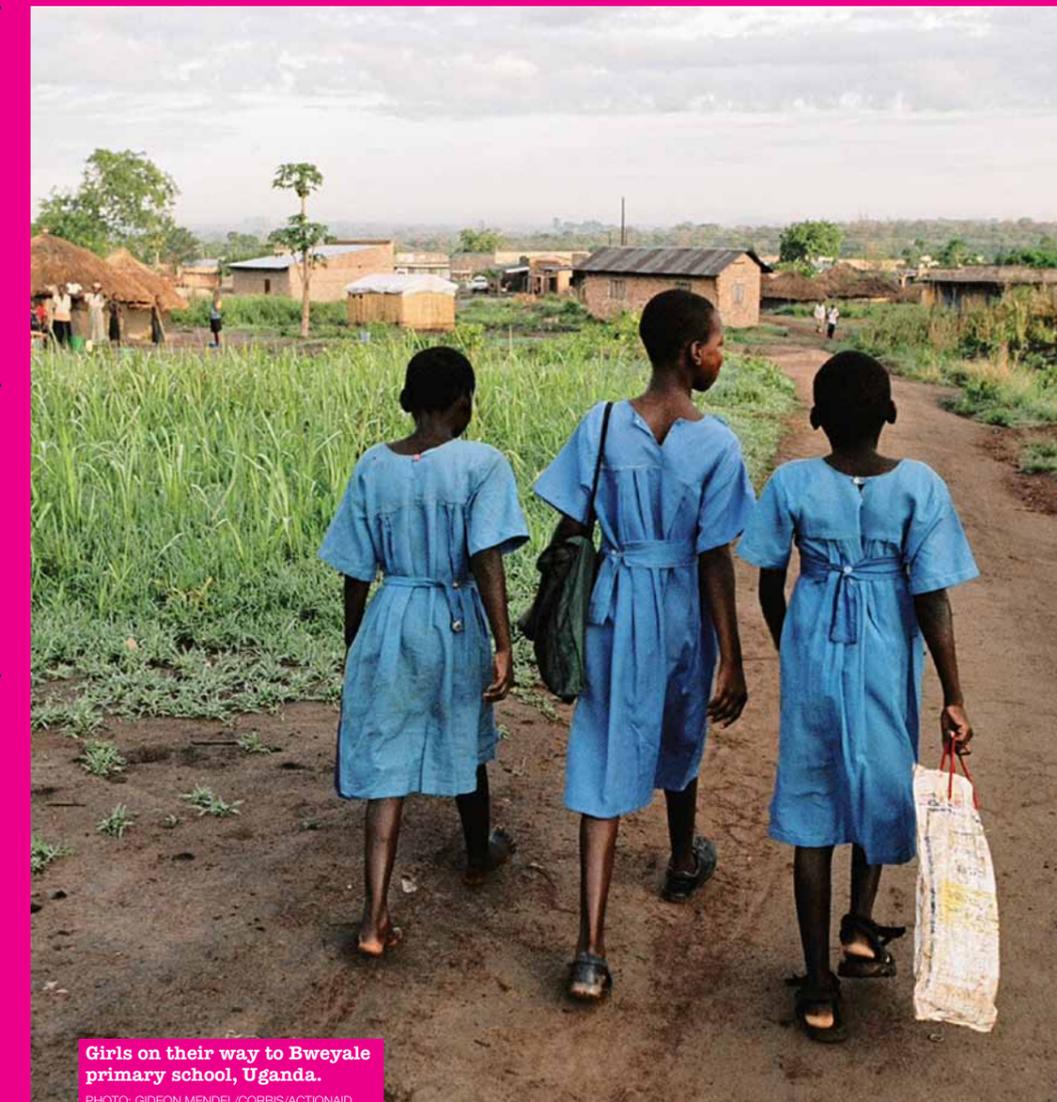
<sup>vi</sup> For example, girls in parts of Africa have transactional sex with older men in order to afford school fees (see Chapter 3).

<sup>vii</sup> Abuse of widows is not necessarily restricted to older age.

# Education

**41 million girls are still denied a primary education and two thirds of the world’s illiterate young people are female.**<sup>43</sup>

**Every year, 60 million girls are sexually assaulted at or en route to school.**<sup>44</sup>



**Girls on their way to Bweyale primary school, Uganda.**

PHOTO: GIDEON MENDEL/CORBIS/ACTIONAID

# Education

Access to education remains one of the best means of tackling many global problems, including eliminating poverty and inequality. For this reason, education is recognised as an international priority for all governments through initiatives such as the Education for All<sup>45</sup> targets and the MDGs. The right to education is also enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>46</sup> Girls' access to education has been a particular focus in these international agendas because of the ongoing disparity between their access and boys' access, which means that girls are more likely to be out of school. This is a problem for reasons of fairness as well as more practically: the education of women has been shown to be a driver of economic and social development.<sup>47</sup>

There has been substantial progress in closing the gender gap in primary school enrolment during the last decade. Nevertheless, the MDG target of achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005 was missed. According to the most recent MDG Report, more than 100 countries have still not met the target.<sup>48</sup> One of the reasons that the goal is not being met is that governments are concentrating on enrolment without adequately addressing the causes of girls' absences and departures from schools. These include gender stereotypes, household responsibilities, lack of money and the length of distances to schools. In addition, there continue to be almost no substantive attention or resources directed towards one of the most significant barriers to millions of girls' access to education: the violence they face in and around schools.

## Examples of violence

Examples of violence against school girls were uncovered by ActionAid's research in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Vietnam:

- rape, sexual harassment and abuse by education staff, teachers and school boys
- girls being employed as child labour at home and at school
- corporal punishment and public shaming by school authorities, which perpetuates violence at home and school
- trafficking and transactional sex with older men, as a result of vulnerability through poverty, to pay for items including school fees
- abduction en route to or from school.<sup>58</sup>

## The problem

Research by ActionAid in 12 countries in Africa and Asia in 2004 showed that violence against girls at school is relatively common, though under-researched and under-reported.<sup>49</sup> Other studies have also begun uncovering the extent of the problem. For example, studies by DFID in Zimbabwe, Ghana and Malawi found that school girls were 'routinely' subject to 'aggressive sexual advances' including rape and sexual abuse from older male students, male teachers and 'sugar daddies' who targeted school girls.<sup>50</sup> Another study of eight schools in South Africa found that rape, sexual abuse and sexual harassment of girls by male teachers and male students was 'widespread'. Girls were being raped in toilets, classrooms, hallways, hostels and dormitories.<sup>51</sup> In research conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Botswana with over 400 girl students, 50% reported experiencing forced intercourse, 38% reported sexual touch without their consent and 34% reported intercourse for favours/gifts/money.<sup>52</sup> While most detailed studies to date have focused on sub-Saharan Africa, evidence shows that the problem is global.<sup>53</sup>

Violence against girls takes place in schools, around schools, and on the journeys to and from schools. It is perpetrated mostly by male classmates,<sup>54</sup> and often by male teachers, but also by other educators, and community and family members. It affects all girls, regardless of age, caste, class, race or location. The risk of violence tends to increase for adolescent girls, while girls with disabilities, refugee and internally displaced girls, girls who are orphans, pregnant girls and teenage mothers are more vulnerable.<sup>55</sup> School-based violence against lesbian, bisexual and transgendered girls is also on the increase.<sup>x,56</sup> Sexual abuse of girls in schools goes largely unchallenged; even when perpetrators are known, they are rarely punished.<sup>57</sup>

x This homophobic and transphobic violence also affects boys.

## The impact

The direct impact of violence against girls includes physical and psychological trauma, depression, suicide, loss of self-esteem, unwanted pregnancy and STIs including HIV. The indirect impact includes millions of girls being denied their right to education and the potential for the future that education brings. Violence against girls leads directly to lowered enrolment rates, poor performance while in school, absenteeism and high dropout rates.<sup>59</sup> It does this by restricting girls' freedom of movement and undermining their ability to participate equally and effectively in school. In this way, violence against girls in school, which is the result of gender inequality and also a means by which this inequality is maintained, is both a human rights violation in and of itself and a structural barrier to girls' access to education.

Violence and the threat of violence keep girls out of school. Parents may be persuaded that their daughters are safer if they stay at home,<sup>60</sup> or if they are married at an early age.<sup>61</sup> Girls are often forced to leave school when they become pregnant through rape or early marriage.<sup>62</sup> In Mozambique, for example, the Ministry of Education's official policy is that girls who become pregnant will be barred from school and asked to attend night classes.<sup>63</sup> According to Tanzania's

Minister for Education and Vocational Training, more than 14,000 girls were expelled from school because they were pregnant between 2003 and 2006.<sup>64</sup> Detailed research in Ethiopia has found that abduction 'for the purposes of marriage' forces many girls to drop out of school.<sup>65</sup> A study in Peru found that a girl's risk of being molested increased as the distance she needed to travel to school increased. As a result, many girls stayed home from school, repeated grades, or left school altogether to avoid the risks of rape, sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancy.<sup>66</sup>

Violence affects girls' performance in school as well. All of the survivors of rape interviewed in South Africa by Human Rights Watch for a 2001 report revealed that their school performance suffered after they were attacked. Some lost interest in school or had trouble concentrating. Many had to transfer schools. Others left school entirely.<sup>67</sup> In a study in Botswana, 11% of girls surveyed reported they were considering dropping out of school because their teachers were sexually harassing them.<sup>68</sup> Two studies in South Africa found that girls were being forced to avoid educational opportunities to try and stay safe. Girls avoided certain subjects if the teachers were known to be abusive, and came to classes late to avoid being sexually harassed by male classmates before teachers arrived.<sup>69</sup>

## violence against school girls

Sexual violence is the leading cause of girls dropping out of school in Uganda, according to ActionAid's field research conducted in 2004. Through discussion groups, girls were able to share their stories with us.

"When a teacher calls you to his house, you cannot refuse because he is a teacher. When he asks for sex, you find it difficult to tell your parents."

**Female student, Kawempe, Kampala**

"The head teacher would sometimes send all the other pupils away for school fees and leave only girls. He would ask a girl go for work from his house...or to take him water to bathe or make him tea. Sometime, you would find him naked. One day I found him naked. He would beat me every time he saw me talking with another student thinking I am telling them. Sometimes he would ask you what a word like 'virginity' means in vernacular. If you refuse he would beat you. A teacher can force you into sex and you feel you have nobody to talk to."

**17-year-old female student, Kawempe, Kampala**

Girls in the study were active about changing their circumstances and were forming clubs to support each other. At a school in Bundibugyo district, 16 child mothers formed a Young Mothers Association to empower themselves with life skills to manage their lives as mothers and students. At a school in Kampala, three girls who had survived abuse formed a group to help and talk to other girls in the school about safety and life skills.<sup>71</sup>

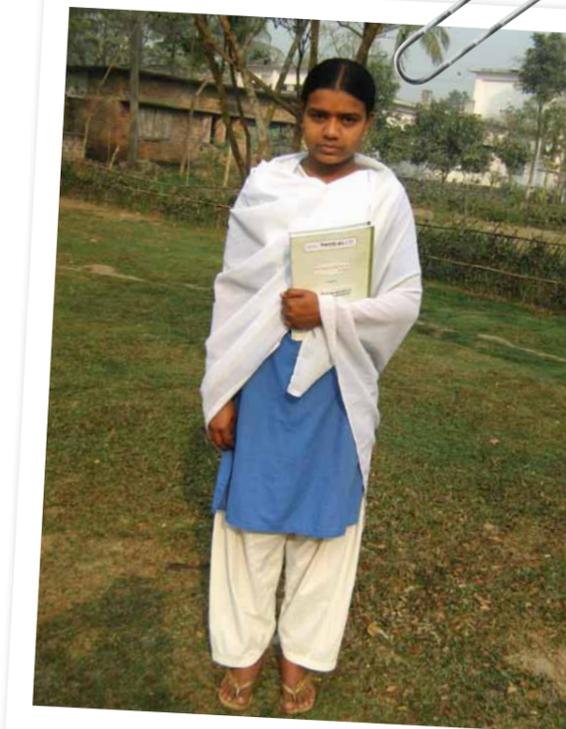
**"I was made pregnant by a teacher and I dropped out of school. But my mother has put me back in school."**  
**Female student, Bundibugyo district, Uganda**

## violence against adolescent girls

ActionAid Bangladesh's adolescent family life education (AFLE) programme has been working with young people and teachers for two years. Through a mixture of training for teachers, raising awareness among adolescents and creating opportunities for young people, we have come a long way towards addressing the issue of violence against girls in school, with visible results including reduced dropout rates among girls and stamping out negatively gendered views among both girls and boys. We have shown that AFLE can be effective in reducing violence against girls and can help young people take part in society as an effective force for social change.

Arifa Khatun is the only girl in her family who goes to school. Her father, Md. Azizul Hoque, is a day labourer. They live in the Miapur village of Chorghat Upazilla in Rajshahi. She has two sisters and one brother. Neither of her sisters goes to school any more. Arifa is in class nine in Karbala High School. When her friends at the adolescents' forum, which was formed as part of the adolescent-friendly institution-building programme, found out that Arifa was going to get married, they discussed the problem with the forum's focal teacher and a staff member of TDC (ActionAid Bangladesh's partner organisation), so that they could jointly intervene to stop the marriage.

When the teacher and forum members spoke to Arifa's parents, they refused to stop the marriage and tried instead to arrange the ceremony as fast as they could. At the same time forum members talked to Arifa about what she wanted to do, and she told them that she was very keen to continue studying, so the forum members took the matter to the ward commissioner. The commissioner told them to inform the Upazilla Nirbahi Office (the sub-divisional authority), which referred the matter back to the Chorghat Thana (local-level police authority). With the assistance of the Thana, they collected Arifa's birth certificate and told her parents that, as Arifa was under age, they would take legal action if they forced her to marry. At last her parents stopped the marriage and Arifa was free to continue with her education.<sup>72</sup>



**Arifa Khatun**, who escaped a forced marriage and can now stay on at school.  
 PHOTO: ACTIONAID

### The solution

Violence against girls is a violation of their human rights. It is a global scandal that girls are actually facing an increased risk of violence because they are attending school. Girls are being taught that violence against them is the price of education.

Concerted action is needed to address violence against girls as a human rights violation, though the solutions may be challenging to the mainstream. Prompted by the dramatic increase in sexual violence against girls in schools in recent years, Senegal has proposed a series of legal reforms to bring perpetrators to justice that includes penalising parents who fail to report that their girl child has been raped.<sup>70</sup> Violence against girls also needs to be addressed as a basic structural barrier to education. Millions of girls are unable to access education because it is not safe for them to be in school. The UK government can lead in this area by making violence against girls a foreign policy priority. Key messages should emphasise how violence against girls is an inherent violation of the rights of girls as well as a significant underlying structural barrier to achieving Education for All targets and MDGs.

The government can take practical steps by lobbying internationally to include specific targets on reducing violence against girls within the MDGs that address education and gender equality. A major barrier to tackling violence against girls in schools is the lack of systematic data on the extent and forms of violence. DFID can help to address this gap by developing the tools to define the problem appropriately, standardise monitoring indicators and collect data, disaggregated by age and other factors, on its prevalence.

## Maternal and child health

Over 5% of women interviewed for a World Health Organization (WHO) study were physically abused when they were pregnant.<sup>73</sup>

In Pakistan and India, girls have a 30-50% higher chance of dying before their fifth birthday than boys.<sup>74</sup>



**Pho**, an ActionAid trained women's health worker, tests the blood pressure and health of Tol, 39, in Kam Pong Lor, Krakor district, Cambodia.

PHOTO: NICOLAS AXELROD/ACTIONAID

# Maternal and child health

Maternal health and mortality are key development indicators, and slow progress on both is a major source of concern internationally. One woman dies in pregnancy or childbirth every minute of every day.<sup>75</sup> Almost all of these deaths are preventable, and 99% occur in developing countries.<sup>76</sup> For every woman who dies, 30 more are infected, injured or made disabled from pregnancy-related complications.<sup>77</sup>

Maternal health and mortality is also intimately connected with child health and mortality. Three out of four infant deaths occurring within the neonatal period could be prevented if women had enough food and care during pregnancy, childbirth and postnatally.<sup>78</sup> Where mothers' lives are at risk, so too are their children's, and vice versa. Mothers who suffer poor health and cannot access health care when they are pregnant can give birth to unhealthy children and both remain at risk. Children who lose their mothers are up to ten times more likely to die prematurely than those whose mothers survive.<sup>79</sup>

The international community has attempted to tackle these twin problems by giving each one its own MDG.<sup>xi</sup> Yet almost no progress has been made in some of the countries with the worst child and maternal mortality rates, notwithstanding the additional target to achieve universal access to reproductive health by 2015 agreed in 2007.<sup>80</sup> This year's MDG report has confirmed that, once again, the MDG on maternal health has seen the least progress of all the goals, in spite of the fact that both child and maternal health and mortality remain priorities for most development agencies and donors.<sup>81</sup> There has been increasing attention on some of the factors that would make a difference, including access to health clinics and the availability of birth attendants. Unfortunately, this attention is not addressing the root causes of the problems, including gender inequality. As a result, the international community is failing to account for one of the gravest threats to the lives of mothers and children: violence against women and girls.

xi MDG 4 seeks to reduce child mortality while MDG 5 aims to improve maternal health.

## The threat of early marriage

Early marriage is often conducted between young women and much older men and is widespread in parts of Asia and Africa. It cuts across the range of development issues discussed in this report. The latest estimates have found that:

- more than half of all women are married by the age of 18 in Bangladesh, the Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique and Niger
- more than a third of all women in these countries are mothers by the age of 18
- 49% of 20–24 year old women in southern Asia were married before they were 18
- 44% of 20–24 year old women in western and central Africa were married before they were 18.<sup>80</sup>

## The problem

Violence against women who are pregnant is an under-researched topic, but the existing evidence suggests that this is a widespread problem.<sup>82</sup> Sometimes women only become targets of violence once they become pregnant.<sup>83</sup> Overall, it is estimated that one in four pregnant women worldwide is subjected to violence, usually at the hands of her partner.<sup>84</sup> In a ten-country comparative study on women's health and domestic violence, the WHO found that "the proportion of ever-pregnant women physically abused during at least one pregnancy exceeded 5% in 11 of the 15 settings".<sup>85</sup> In another study, the prevalence ranged from approximately 4–32% for women in developing countries.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, according to the World Bank, violence against women may "be responsible for a sizeable but unrecognised share of maternal mortality".<sup>xii, 87</sup>

Young mothers are particularly at risk of violence. According to the UN's independent study on violence against children, 82 million girls are estimated to be married before they are 18. This is partly because laws on minimum ages of consent do not exist in some countries and are often

xii The social stigma and pressures of unwanted pregnancies and being unwed are reasons why this affects younger unmarried women in particular.

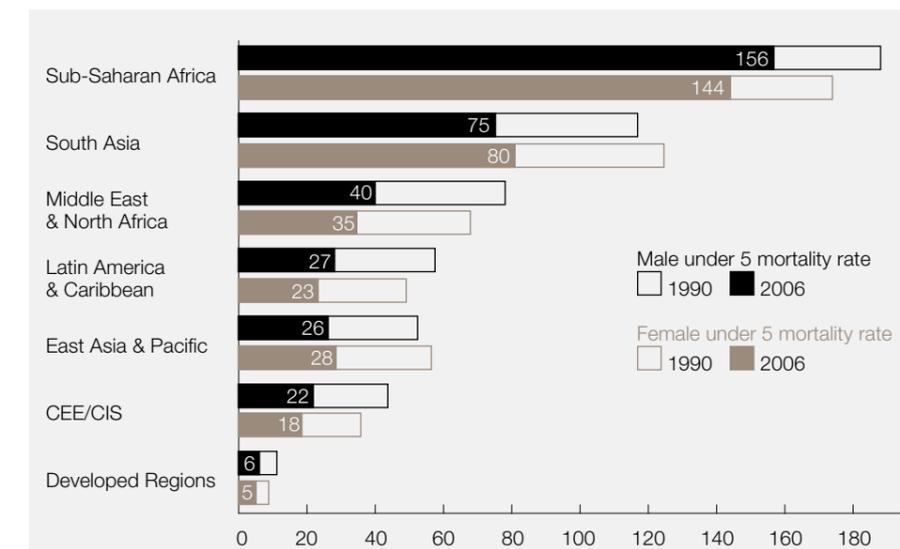
unenforced where they do exist. The study found that a significant number of these girls are coerced when they are much younger than 18, and face high risks of violence, including rape, from their partners.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the younger a girl is when she first has sex, the more likely it is that she faced violence.<sup>89</sup> In effect, widespread statutory rape is common.

Targets on child mortality will also not be met unless gender equality and the prevention of violence are made explicit parts of strategies to reduce it. Girl children are at particular risk of violence, leading to higher mortality among girls than among boys in some regions (see Figure 1). In many parts of the world, girl children are considered to be of so little value compared to boy children that female infanticide and abuse of childbearing women who produce girls is widespread. According to ActionAid's report *Disappearing daughters*, son preference and the undervaluing of girl children is so strong in India that female infanticide is not uncommon. Girl infants and children are killed through direct attacks or intentional neglect and starvation.<sup>91</sup> This discrimination against daughters is found across all classes, castes and states in the country, with the ratio of girls to boys declining fastest in urban areas among those in

upper castes. In fact, as a result of this preference for sons over daughters, the number of girls under six in India is the lowest it has ever been.<sup>92</sup>

**Figure 1: Disappearing daughters, decline in ratios girls to boys<sup>93</sup>**

Source: WHO 2008 and UN Statistics Division database



The decrease in under-five mortality rates since 1990 has been striking for both boys and girls. Child mortality rates have been roughly halved in East Asia and the Pacific, CEE/CIS and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Under-five mortality rate is the probability of a child born in a specific year or period dying before reaching the age of five. The under five mortality rate is not a rate per se. Values shown correspond to weighted averages for 2006.

## The impact

In addition to the immediate physical dangers, violence against women who are pregnant has longer-term impacts on maternal health, including mental health. Most obviously, attacks can leave women scarred, depressed, injured, suffering from post-traumatic stress and disabled. This means that they have difficulty in maintaining a healthy pregnancy, safely delivering their baby and subsequently caring for their newborn child. Violence against pregnant women can also affect child health, leading to premature labour, foetal distress, miscarriage or threats of miscarriage, injury to the foetus and low birth weights.<sup>95</sup>

Where research has been carried out, the link between violence and maternal health is clear.<sup>96</sup> One 1996 study in Maharashtra, India found that 13-16% of maternal deaths could be attributed primarily to domestic violence. Another study found that violence was the fourth most likely cause of maternal deaths in Maputo Central Hospital in Mozambique.<sup>97</sup>

ActionAid's work on discrimination against daughters in India has found that the undervaluing of girls is so deeply rooted that many childbearing women face immense social pressure to produce boys. Their status within households becomes dependent on whether they give birth to sons, and they are subject to abuse and social stigma if they bear daughters. Their reproductive health may even be controlled by the husband and his family.<sup>98</sup> Yet the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that a third of pregnancy and childbirth-related deaths could be avoided if women who wanted effective contraception had access to it.<sup>99</sup> Women who are not able to choose when and if they have children may be forced to produce many children in the hopes of bearing a son, or coerced into having abortions to avoid producing daughters. Unsafe abortions in developing countries account for one in seven of all maternal deaths.<sup>100</sup> It is currently unknown whether violence against pregnant women who know they are bearing daughters increases in areas where girl children are especially undervalued.

For girls who are forced or coerced into early marriages, a common practice in many developing countries, the violence they face is compounded by the health risks associated with early pregnancies.

Girls who have children when they are adolescents face significantly increased risks of morbidity and mortality compared to their adult counterparts. Younger mothers are more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than adult women: girls under 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties. Infants born to girls under 18 have a 60% higher chance of dying in their first year than those born to older mothers.<sup>101</sup>

Violence also affects women's access to the health services that are crucial in strategies to reduce maternal mortality worldwide. According to WHO research in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Tanzania, women who reported that their partners were violent towards them were significantly more likely to report not having attended any antenatal services compared to other women. In Bangladesh, Brazil, Peru, Thailand and Tanzania, women were significantly less likely to report having attended a postnatal service if they also reported that they had a violent partner (see Table 2). The study also found that, in almost all the places studied, women who were abused were significantly more likely to have more children than women who were not.<sup>102</sup>

### Known methods of female infanticide

- feeding girl children the sap from poisonous plants
- choking girl children by lodging rice hulls that have been soaked in milk in their throats
- shoving tobacco into girl children's mouths
- deliberately providing poor postnatal care such as permitting umbilical cords to become infected
- deliberately starving or providing poor nutrition to daughters
- not seeking medical care for ill infants or daughters.<sup>94</sup>

**Table 2: use of antenatal and postnatal care services for most recent live birth, according to experience of physical or sexual violence, or both, by an intimate partner, by site**

Site	Experience of violence	No antenatal care (%)	No postnatal care (%)	Total no. of women with live birth in past 5 years
<b>Bangladesh city</b>	Never experienced violence	10.4	50.7	270
	Ever experienced violence	17.9 **	67.4 ****	364
<b>Brazil city</b>	Never experienced violence	0.9	24.9	217
	Ever experienced violence	3.3	40.0 **	90
<b>Ethiopia province</b>	Never experienced violence	65.5	98.1	420
	Ever experienced violence	71.2 *	98.5	1205
<b>Peru city</b>	Never experienced violence	2.1	9.5	190
	Ever experienced violence	5.7	23.7 ****	229
<b>Thailand city</b>	Never experienced violence	2.0	16.9	196
	Ever experienced violence	1.4	27.3 *	139
<b>Tanzania province</b>	Never experienced violence	3.8	57.5	368
	Ever experienced violence	7.6 *	69.6 **	460

Asterisks denote significance levels: \*, P < 0.05, \*\*, P < 0.01, \*\*\*, P < 0.001, \*\*\*\*, P < 0.0001 (Pearson chi-square test).

### how sex selection can crash economies

The skewed sex ratios caused by preference for boys and violence against girls can have consequences that go beyond the horrific abuses of the rights of individual women and girls. A recent study carried out by Professor Shang-Jin Wei of the University of Columbia, and published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the USA, shows that half of the very high household saving rate in China is explained by the skewed sex ratio among young people in that country. Parents with boys were found to have very high savings rates in order to pay for the housing, cars and other status symbols that would allow their sons to attract a wife. This effect then increased prices for everyone, forcing up the savings rate across the country. It was the high savings rates in China that were one of the key factors behind the 'global imbalances' in financial markets that destabilised the system and contributed to the financial crisis in 2008.<sup>103</sup>

## violence against girl infants

ActionAid's work in India has found that the deliberate neglect of girl babies is deeply engrained in some parts of the country. In Morena, one of the poorest rural districts in the state of Madhya Pradesh, girl infants are routinely denied access to medical treatment. Locals admit that female infanticide is widespread. Here is an account from a 2008 ActionAid report:

When his wife died, Kirpal\* had four daughters aged 5, 9, 10 and 12, but with so many girls his chances of finding a second wife were slim. Now only his youngest daughter is alive. Kirpal says the others fell ill and died through lack of access to medical treatment.

After his second marriage, Kirpal's new wife Usha\* gave birth to two daughters.

Both died soon after birth. When her first child was sick, Usha's mother-in-law banned her from sending for medical assistance. After the baby died, "I cried a lot, because she was my first child," says Usha. "So God dropped three daughters to punish us."

Neighbours claim that Usha and Kirpal's second daughter died after the mother-in-law stuffed tobacco in the baby's mouth. Usha suffered taunts and abuse from her family until she gave birth to a son.

**Kirpal Ojha, Morena<sup>104</sup>**

"So God dropped three daughters to punish us."  
**Usha Ojha, Morena**

## women's rights activists challenge violence against women and girls in India

Asha Singh is working to stop India's daughters from disappearing. She is a women's rights campaigner with Prayatn, an ActionAid partner organisation active in Morena.

"Here in India women are blamed for all that is wrong in society. Men feel they can inflict pain, shame and dishonour on women because we are powerless to fight back. I am determined to try and change this. I'm a trained lawyer but have been working as an activist fighting against sex discrimination for five years.

Every month I travel by motorbike to over 25 towns and villages talking to women about their rights and asking them to recognise the valuable place they hold in our society. I want to help reduce discrimination against women and stop the violence against girls happening at every level of our society.

India's disappearing daughters are a national shame. It's also hard to witness how much neglect there is of girls in some of the villages I work in. Change doesn't come easily but I am convinced we can change things for the better in India. I'm proud I've become a role model for many girls in rural areas."

**Asha Singh, Molena<sup>105</sup>**



**Asha Singh**, 37, teaches women in Madhya Pradesh, India, to value themselves and their daughters.  
PHOTO: SANJIT DAS/ACTIONAID



**Asha Singh** at home with her daughter Disha, aged eight.  
PHOTO: SANJIT DAS/ACTIONAID

## The solution

Violence against women and girls is a factor driving the high rates of maternal and child mortality worldwide. Unless violence against women and girls is tackled directly, the immediate development targets will not be met. And unless the underlying inequality in power and status between men and women within societies is addressed, neither violence nor maternal and child deaths can be addressed.

The MDG on maternal health has progressed the least of all the goals. This is because the systematic inequalities between men and women, and the subsequent violence that contributes to maternal mortality, have not yet been properly addressed by either the donor community or by developing country governments.

The UK government is well positioned to make a strong intervention in this area, as some aspects of this problem are already part of government policy. The FCO has been pioneering work on forced marriage. The government can continue to show leadership by ensuring its priorities and development funding are directly targeted at promoting gender equality and improving the status of women in society. This includes preventing and responding to violence against women and girls, including attempts to control their sexual and reproductive rights and health.



**Midwife Rustica Banda** assesses a pregnant woman in the maternity ward of Mitundu community hospital, Malawi.  
PHOTO: GIDEON MENDEL/CORBIS/ACTIONAID

# HIV and AIDS

More than **17.5 million** women are living with HIV globally and every day **7,000 more** become infected.<sup>106</sup>

**Three-quarters** of the total number of young people aged 15-24 that are living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are women and girls.<sup>107</sup>



**K. Rajeshwari**, 23, attends a support group for women living with HIV in Andhra Pradesh, India.  
PHOTO: SANJIT DAS/ACTIONAID

# HIV and AIDS

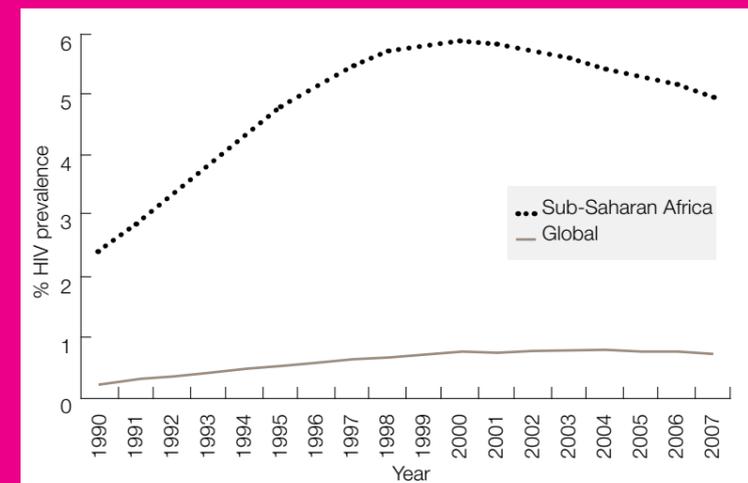
HIV and AIDS continue to present a significant and fundamental challenge to development. More than 33 million people in the world are currently HIV-positive. About two-thirds of them live in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>108</sup> In the countries that are worst affected in this region, household poverty has deepened, economic growth has slowed and life expectancy has been reduced by more than 20 years.<sup>109</sup> In Asia, HIV is expected to push six million households into poverty by 2015 if national responses do not adjust.<sup>110</sup>

Globally there has been marked energy and focus directed at curtailing the spread and impact of the disease, including the creation of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), political focus by the G8 countries and dedicated targets within the MDGs. These efforts have increasingly recognised – at the policy level – that women and girls are more vulnerable to the impacts of HIV. Gender inequality has also been recognised as a key driver of the epidemic.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, according to the WHO, HIV and AIDS is the leading cause of death amongst women of reproductive age in developing countries.<sup>112</sup>

Yet most practical interventions have not fully caught up with the new reality: that the face of HIV is now female. Women are disproportionately likely to be contracting HIV.<sup>113</sup> Young women are particularly vulnerable: half of all new HIV infections globally occur among young people (aged 15-24). Two-thirds of these are female. Within some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, teenage girls are six times more likely to be infected than their male counterparts.<sup>114</sup>

The reason action is trailing the facts is that very little work is targeted at one of the main causes of the problem: violence against women. A focus on other factors such as access to contraception and antiretroviral drugs are of course important. However, international initiatives such as the MDGs, which continue to treat the twin epidemics of violence against women and girls and HIV and AIDS as distinct issues that are unrelated, will continue to miss their targets.<sup>115</sup>

**Figure 2: HIV prevalence amongst women**



## The problem

Gender inequality and the systematic abuse of women's rights – and violence against women in particular – is directly responsible for fuelling AIDS in Africa.<sup>116</sup> Violence against women reduces women's control over their own bodies and sexuality, and curtails their ability to determine if, with whom, when and under what circumstances they have sex. They are frequently less able to insist on condom use, for example, and are often unable to refuse unwanted sex in the first place, as the UK government's *Achieving universal access* strategy acknowledges.<sup>117</sup> This problem can often be exacerbated within marriage because many men still believe they are entitled to their wives' bodies; marital rape is not recognised within the laws of many countries. Rape during conflict has also been shown to be a driver of the epidemic. For example, during the Rwandan genocide women were deliberately raped and infected with HIV as a tool of war.<sup>118</sup>

Research in Uganda with women experiencing domestic violence found that many women were unable to ask their husbands to use a condom out of fear of being subjected to further violence. When some tried, this fear was proven to be justified as they typically received a violent response.

Women described being raped without a condom even when their husbands' HIV-positive status was known.<sup>119</sup> Work in Zimbabwe has similarly found that coercive sex within 'intimate partnerships' is common, with 26% of married women reporting they had been forced to have sex.<sup>120</sup>

This lack of control over their own bodies and sexuality due to violence helps explain why, in some countries, married women face the highest risks of infection.<sup>121</sup> According to UNAIDS, the reason the proportion of women living with HIV is growing in Asia, eastern Europe and Latin America is that male partners who were likely infected through previously unprotected sex, including paid sex, and unsafe drug use, are now going on to infect their female partners.<sup>122</sup> Young women married to older men are often especially at risk because their partners are more likely to have been exposed to HIV through previous sexual relationships and they are less likely to be able to negotiate safer sex. Emerging evidence from South Africa is finding that young women (16–23 years old) who have partners who are three or more years older than them are 1.5 times more likely to experience violence and 1.6 times more likely to be HIV-positive than women of the same age whose partners are in their peer group.<sup>123</sup>

## The impact

Violence against women – physical, psychological, emotional and economic – reduces women's power to refuse sex or negotiate the terms of sex within their relationships and increases their vulnerability to HIV. Women who have experienced violence are more likely to be living with HIV.<sup>124</sup> Studies in Rwanda, South Africa and Tanzania, for instance, found that women were up to three times more likely to be living with HIV if they had experienced violence compared to those who had not.<sup>125</sup> Women who are HIV-positive are also more likely to have experienced violence than HIV-negative women. One report on Tanzania, for example, found that younger women living with HIV were ten times more likely to have survived violence than their HIV-negative peers.<sup>126</sup> A study in South Africa found that the infection rate of women who had abusive partners was 50% higher than that of other women.<sup>127</sup>

Women, and young women in particular, are biologically more susceptible to HIV contraction through unprotected heterosexual vaginal intercourse than men and boys. Girls and women who are raped face increased risk due to tearing in the vaginal, anal and oral tissues.<sup>128</sup> As ActionAid's report *Hit or miss* notes, one of the reasons that HIV

infection rates are so high among young women globally is that they are raped: in some areas up to a third of women are reporting that their first sexual experience was forced.<sup>129</sup> In countries like South Africa, where HIV prevalence is at its highest,<sup>130</sup> it is estimated that almost half of all women are raped at some point in their lives.<sup>131</sup>

Sexual violence targeted at particular groups of women and girls can also be directly linked to the feminisation of the pandemic. For example, there is some evidence that the myth that sex with a virgin can 'cure' AIDS, coupled with girls' low social status, lack of power and physical vulnerabilities, has led to the raping of young girls in South Africa, and, concurrently, an increase in their risk of HIV contraction.<sup>132</sup> According to Stephen Lewis, former UN special envoy for HIV and AIDS in Africa, older women have also been targeted for rape in the belief that they are less likely to have AIDS.<sup>133</sup> During conflicts, women are raped with the deliberate intent of infecting them with HIV in order to ensure their deaths are painful, protracted and destabilising for communities beyond the immediate conflict.<sup>134</sup> On page 24 we discuss ActionAid's recent report on 'corrective rape', which shows how black lesbians in South Africa are being targeted for rape because of their sexuality and are facing increased risks of HIV infection as a result.

## ‘corrective’ rape in South Africa

ActionAid’s work in South Africa has uncovered evidence that lesbians, and black lesbians from townships in particular, are being targeted for rape by men as part of a wider culture of homophobia and heterosexism. Women are being attacked in order to ‘correct’ their sexuality, including by ‘punishing’ them for their perceived transgressions of gender and sexual roles and lack of conformity with heterosexual norms.<sup>135</sup>

The Swedish International Development Organisation (SIDA) has also had reports of black and coloured lesbians in townships being raped by men in order to ‘cure’ them of their lesbianism, with consent from the victims’ families. According to SIDA, ‘curative rape’ is the reason that HIV and AIDS prevalence among black South African lesbians is equal to that found in the general population.<sup>136</sup> Work by ActionAid partner Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) on the ground confirms this: TAC says there is increasing evidence linking the growing rates of HIV infection among black lesbians with rape.<sup>137</sup>

“This guy he wanted to go out with my girlfriend so one day he picked me up with a crew of his gangster friends, they took me off the street and to an abandoned place where they beat me with a spanner and did whatever they wanted... All the time they were telling me this is what happens when a woman pretends to be a man.”

**Tshidi, 31, Cape Town**



**Tshidi (left) and her partner Pumeza** have both suffered violence and abuse because of their relationship.  
PHOTO: JODIE BIEBER/ACTIONAID



**Pumeza and Tshidi** at home in Cape Town, South Africa.  
PHOTO: JODIE BIEBER/ACTIONAID

## violence against young women

“When I was sixteen, I was abducted by a man who wanted me as his wife. Normally, a girl’s family will negotiate to get her back. But my parents were dead and I had no family. When I became pregnant I had to stay with him.

In 1992 my husband died of AIDS. After his death I was tested and learned that I also had HIV. I was just 22 and had three young children. My friends avoided me, I had no one to talk to and I was told that I would die within two years.

After my diagnosis I faced a lot of stigma. For years, I told no one I had HIV; I just stayed at home and worried about the future. In 1998, I saw a couple on television discussing the fact that they had HIV. They came from an organisation called Dawn of Hope based in a nearby city, Awassa. I contacted Dawn of Hope, and soon set up a local branch. I became the first person in my city to come out and talk about life with HIV.

Gradually, at Dawn of Hope I realised that as a woman, I had concerns which were overlooked. So five of us, all women, founded Tilla, the first association in Ethiopia specifically for women living with HIV and AIDS and supported by ActionAid. Our members – all positive women – went to public gatherings and gave speeches about HIV to fight stigma and encourage people to get tested.

Tilla was very successful, and women around Ethiopia contacted us for advice in setting up their own groups. With so many positive women’s associations established, I realised we could have a stronger voice. In 2005 with ActionAid’s support I set up the National Association of Positive Women Ethiopians (NAPWE) to link women’s groups across the country.

In 2005, I ran for election. I wanted to help people living with HIV build confidence and show the world that they can work and contribute to the well being of their society. While I didn’t win, I did succeed in placing the issues of women and AIDS on the national agenda, and showed that having HIV is not an obstacle to aspiring to political office.”  
**Birhane Kelkay, Addis Ababa**<sup>146</sup>

Today NAPWE has 22 member organisations and a strong relationship with the Ethiopian government. It is continuing Birhane’s campaign for the rights of women living with HIV.



**Birhane Kelkay**, who fought back against the stigma of being HIV-positive in Ethiopia.  
PHOTO: CHRYSYA PANOUSIADOU/ACTIONAID

Meanwhile, HIV-positive status in itself increases the likelihood of women experiencing violence.<sup>138</sup> A new study by Women Fighting Aids in Kenya (Wofak) and ActionAid Kenya has found that half of Kenyan women living with HIV and AIDS have been subject to physical abuse in the last year. This is in addition to other types of abuse they face, including social isolation, denial of basic rights such as access to food and medical care, and property rights abuse such as being evicted out of their homes or – in the case of widows who disclose their HIV status – being disinherited by their husband's relatives.<sup>139</sup> This in turn affects women's ability to access treatment, support and care for managing the disease. Gender discrimination and gender violence both mean that women are less likely to have access to knowledge and information about HIV prevention and treatment. They are also more likely to experience barriers to accessing treatment, care and support once infected. Indeed, Human Rights Watch's studies on Uganda and Zambia found that domestic violence prevents many women from accessing treatment and information about HIV.<sup>140</sup>

## The solution

Violence against women is a violation of women's human rights and is an epidemic itself. In turn, one of its effects is that it prevents women from protecting themselves against HIV and AIDS by undermining women's ability to control if, with whom, when and under what circumstances they have sex. In addition, the threat of HIV and AIDS means the violence women are experiencing is becoming even more deadly and debilitating. Sometimes women are specifically targeted for violence because of their actual or perceived HIV status.

International efforts to combat HIV and AIDS that do not acknowledge this separate and significant driver of the disease will fail. The UN recognised this in 2001,<sup>141</sup> but action since has been slow or non-existent. The UK can lead in this area by developing a coherent foreign policy framework that prioritises violence against women in its own right, and also explicitly addresses its links to HIV and AIDS. By arguing for other governments and international bodies to take a similar approach, the UK could then contribute significantly to tackling this global issue.

Since March 2007, a new international coalition of organisations and networks called Women Won't Wait has been "working to promote women's health and human rights in the struggle to address HIV and AIDS and end all forms of violence against women and girls."<sup>142</sup> The Women Won't Wait campaign highlights the links between violence against women and girls and the spread of HIV in order to speed up effective responses. As the campaign's *Show us the money* report highlights in its review of the four largest public donors to HIV and AIDS, DFID in particular has a strong role to play in this agenda.<sup>143</sup> DFID can build on its strong start in *Achieving universal access* – the UK's strategy for halting and reversing the spread of HIV in the developing world<sup>144</sup> – by being more explicit about the strategic connection between violence against women and HIV and AIDS, adequately funding mainstream HIV and AIDS programmes targeted at eliminating violence against women and girls, explicitly tracking the programming resources directed at the intersection of violence against women and girls and HIV and AIDS, and collecting data on violence against women and girls as part of the evidence base on the epidemic.

UNIFEM and ActionAid's newly published report on successful approaches to addressing violence against women and HIV and AIDS offers useful lessons in this area.<sup>145</sup>

Without focusing on violence against women as a strategic international priority in its own right, its role in fuelling and exacerbating the HIV and AIDS epidemic will remain unresolved.

# Conflict

Civilians now account for more than **70% of casualties in conflicts** – most of them women and children.<sup>147</sup>

**250,000-500,000 women and girls were raped in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The number of convictions on sexual violence produced by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda is eight.**<sup>148</sup>



Women protest at a camp for displaced people in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The placard says 'We don't want to be raped any more. Stop the violence'.

PHOTO: JENNY MATTHEWS/ACTIONAID

# Conflict

Political attention is increasingly focused on the significance of conflict as both a cause and an effect of poverty, driven by high-profile academic research such as that of Paul Collier in ‘The Bottom Billion’.<sup>150</sup> There is a strong empirical justification for this – poverty rates are 22% for low-income countries as a whole, but stand at 54% on average for countries in conflict.<sup>151</sup> The UN has also made clear how poverty, conflict and the absence of human rights reinforce each other.<sup>152</sup>

Violence against women and girls has been particularly identified as a significant issue in conflict situations. After years of struggle by women’s rights organisations and movements, it has become the subject of several Security Council resolutions at the UN, most notably 1325 and 1820. More than ten years ago, violence against women and girls was recognised as both a war crime and a crime against humanity.<sup>153</sup> A Special Representative on sexual violence in armed conflict was also recently created by the Security Council.

Despite this, violence against women and girls, especially sexual violence, remains widespread during and after conflicts. The failure of the international community’s commitment to lead to change is linked to two gaps in understanding. Firstly, governments are still failing to see violence against women and girls during conflict in the context of huge inequalities in power between men and women at times of both peace and war. Violence against women during wars derives from their unequal position in societies predating the conflicts in question and cannot be tackled without looking at the underlying causes. Secondly, violence against women and girls during conflict is not being treated for its fundamental role in fuelling conflict. That is, violence against women and girls during conflict continues to be seen as a parallel rather than intrinsic security issue.<sup>xiii</sup> As long as approaches to peace and security fail to treat the elimination of violence against women as a core objective, they will be unable to achieve their aims for development.

xiii This is in spite of Resolution 1820, which specifically treats sexual violence as a distinct security issue that requires a security response.

## Countries where mass rapes have been part of recent conflicts

Afghanistan, Algeria, Argentina, Bangladesh, Bosnia, Brazil, Burma, Cambodia, Chechnya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Croatia, Cyprus, East Timor, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Kuwait, Kosovo, Liberia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Peru, Pakistan, Rwanda, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, Uganda, Vietnam, Zimbabwe.<sup>157</sup>

## The problem

In the last half century, conflicts have shifted from being primarily engagements between military and armed forces to violence directed at civilian populations.<sup>154</sup> The direct outcome of this transition is that women are increasingly likely to face the greatest harm during conflicts.<sup>xiv</sup> Civilians now account for more than 70% of casualties, the majority of them women and children.<sup>155</sup> More importantly, while violence against women and girls in conflicts is not a new phenomenon (see Table 3, for example), it is now the case that women are being deliberately targeted for violence, in particular sexual violence, as an integrated tactic of war. Indeed, violence against women is a defining characteristic of modern warfare.<sup>156</sup>

xiv Some argue that information on the significant increase in sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls during conflicts in the last couple of decades is a result of greater attention being paid to the issue thanks to decades of awareness-raising by women’s rights activists rather than an absolute increase in numbers. The UN maintains that a change in the nature of warfare is more likely. See Jeanne Ward and Mendy Marsh, *Sexual violence against women and girls in war and its aftermath: realities, responses, and required resources. A Briefing paper. Prepared for Symposium on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Beyond. Brussels (Belgium), UNFPA, 21-23 June 2006.*

Reports on recent conflicts confirm this. The European Commission found that the use of rape against Muslim women in the former Yugoslavia could not “be seen as incidental to the main purposes of the aggression but as serving a strategic purpose in itself.”<sup>158</sup> Similarly, the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights officially reported that rape was systematically used as a weapon during the genocide in Rwanda against between 250,000 and 500,000 women.<sup>159</sup> Work by Human Rights Watch has documented how sexual slavery and sexual mutilation were also deliberately employed as tactics in the genocide.<sup>160</sup> Five years ago, the UN estimated that 100,000 women had already been raped in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>161</sup> A 2002 report emphasised that sexual violence against women and girls would continue while the culture of impunity reigned.<sup>162</sup> By last year it was estimated that 70% of women in the Shabunda region of South Kivu had been raped.<sup>163</sup> Table 4 documents the prevalence of rape in several recent conflicts but is not a comprehensive list as data is either unavailable or grossly estimated for many conflicts. Widespread rape has been reported in Côte d’Ivoire,<sup>164</sup> East Timor and Indonesia/West Timor.<sup>165</sup>

Women are deliberately targeted for violence during conflicts because of gender inequality. For example, women are targeted as a way for male combatants to humiliate, attack and undermine enemy male combatants because of perceptions of women as the property of men and communities. Women are used as ‘envelopes’ during conflicts to ‘deliver messages’ to enemies. They are raped and deliberately impregnated or infected with HIV to destabilise and hurt communities.<sup>167</sup>

**“It is now more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier in modern conflict.”**  
Maj. Gen. Patrick Cammaert, 2008, former UN Peacekeeping Operation Commander in the Democratic Republic of Congo<sup>149</sup>

During genocides and ethnic cleansing, women are targeted for sexual violence in order to demoralise communities and destroy social bonds; the raping of women belonging to a particular group is treated as the raping of the group as a whole. Social stigma exacerbates this, sometimes preventing women from returning to their families and communities after they have been raped. During genocides and ethnic cleansing, women are also forcibly impregnated, infected with HIV, sterilised or forced to terminate pregnancies in order to ‘pollute’ bloodlines<sup>168</sup> and ethnically cleanse.<sup>169</sup> Women are targeted for abduction and sexual violence because of their gender roles. For example, they are attacked when they go out to collect firewood and water, and are also abducted, trafficked and forced into sexual and domestic slave labour for combatants.<sup>170</sup>

**Table 4: Prevalence of rape in selected recent conflicts<sup>166</sup>****Bosnia**

By 1993, the Zenica Centre for the Registration of War and Genocide Crime in Bosnia-Herzegovina had documented 40,000 cases of war-related rape.

While the figures are in dispute, it is estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 women were raped, most of them Muslims.

NGOs have alleged that more than 35,000 women and children were held in Serb-run rape/death camps, where women 10-30 years of age were raped daily by 40-50 men.

**Burundi**

19% of 1,575 Burundian women surveyed by the United Nations Population Fund in 2004 had been raped; 40% had heard about or had witnessed the rape of a minor.

**Colombia**

Of a sample of 410 internally displaced Colombian women in Cartagena who were surveyed in 2003, 8% reported some form of sexual violence prior to being displaced, and 11% reported being abused since their displacement.

**D. R. Congo**

Human Rights Watch estimates that as many as 33% of the women in the country were raped, including up to 80% in any given community.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimates that for every rape reported, 30 are not.

During and following a rebel offensive launched in 1998 on the capital city of Brazzaville in the Republic of Congo, approximately 2,000 women sought out medical treatment for sexual violence, 10% of whom reported rape-related pregnancies. United Nations officials estimate that the real number of women who were raped in Brazzaville during this single wave of violence was closer to 5,000.

**Kosovo**

In some villages in Kosovo, 30-50% of women of child-bearing age were raped by Serbian forces.

An estimated 23,200 to 45,600 Kosovar Albanian women are believed to have been raped between August 1998 and August 1999, the height of the conflict with Serbia.

**Liberia**

15% of women interviewed reported being the victim of rape, attempted rape or sexual coercion.

A World Health Organisation study found 33% of women reported rapes. More than one attacker was present in over half of the incidents, and weapons were used in the great majority (90%).

In 2003, 74% of a random sample of 388 Liberian refugee women living in camps in Sierra Leone reported being sexually abused prior to being displaced from their homes in Liberia. Fifty-five percent of them experienced sexual violence during displacement.

**Rwanda**

Overall estimates on the number of rapes range from 15,700 (Rwandan Government) to 500,000 (UN Special Representative). These rapes were committed in less than 100 days.

Of a sample of Rwandan women surveyed in 1999, 39% reported being raped during the 1994 genocide, and 72% said they knew someone who had been raped.

In April 2004, a local organisation, Widows of the Genocide, polled and tested 1,200 of its 25,000 members and found that 80% had been raped and 66% were HIV-positive.

**Sierra Leone**

In a Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) survey, 13% of households reported some form of war-related sexual violence. The prevalence rate during the ten-year civil war was equal to the lifetime prevalence of non war-related sexual violence among the study participants.

53% of respondents in the PHR study who had 'face to face' contact with the rebel forces experienced some form of sexual violence. 33% of the rape victims were gang raped.

Based on the outcomes of a study undertaken in 2000, researchers concluded that approximately 50,000 to 64,000 internally displaced women may have been sexually victimised during Sierra Leone's protracted armed conflict.

**Sudan**

Between October 2004 and February 2005, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) treated almost 500 rape victims in Darfur, Sudan. Since that time, incidents of rape have continued, and MSF 'strongly believes' the number of women who have been raped is much greater than the number of those who have received medical care.

**Uganda**

70% of women in the Luwero District reported being raped by soldiers.

A large proportion of the survivors were assaulted by as many as 10 soldiers in a single episode of gang rape.

## violence against older women

Sifa\* is a mother of four who used to live in the Busambare hills in DRC. She was forced to flee her home when soldiers attacked her village. She returned with a neighbour to try and salvage her belongings only to face even more violence as she tried to get home.

“On the way back we met one soldier who urged us to let him escort us. The same soldier went and turned against me in the house and asked to sleep with me. I told him I am HIV-positive to dissuade him from raping me but he would not take that. I then asked him to let me pray first, but he wrestled me to the floor and raped me.”

Sifa was hurt very badly. Her body ached the next day. When she got up to walk, water began oozing from her private parts. She was traumatised and afraid of any soldiers she saw.

**Sifa, 57, Bogerere<sup>185</sup>**



**Sifa, 57,** was forced to flee her home when soldiers attacked her village in Bogerere, DRC.  
PHOTO: JENNY MATTHEWS/ACTIONAID

## The impact

Violence against women and girls is becoming an effective tactic of war because it is able to build on violence against women and girls during peace time and extend it through the particular context of conflict. The root cause of violence against women and girls during both peace and war is gender inequality. During times of social breakdown, such as during conflicts, this gender inequality is more easily exploited by those in power, and becomes a means of attacking whole populations as well as individual women, as described above.

Lack of action on violence against women and girls at both national and international levels encourages the use of violence against women and girls as a tactic of war, since perpetrators assume they can act with impunity.<sup>171</sup> For individual women, the lack of redress and accountability for survivors of violence against women and girls during peace time is magnified during times of conflict when rule of law can cease to exist. Perpetrators are rarely held to account during conflicts.<sup>172</sup> The post-conflict situation is not much better: new evidence on the experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that, not only do the vast majority of women survivors of sexual violence not have access to justice, but offenders who walk free sometimes return to live in the same communities as their victims.<sup>173</sup> The latest issue of the annual Gender Report Card on the International Criminal Court – some women's only chance for justice – shows that gender-based crimes are receiving a higher profile in investigation and initial charging stages, but are being dropped, diluted or confirmed without unanimity from judges at final charging stages. Less than two thirds of the charges for gender-based crimes brought to the court were confirmed in 2009.<sup>174</sup>



For women, the violence often does not end when the conflict is officially over.<sup>176</sup> Women are subject to routine violence by actors in post-conflict contexts such as:

Retreating armies and militia groups continue to treat women's bodies as a battleground to vent their frustration at losing battles or to inflict damage even as they leave.<sup>177</sup>

Government officials, peacekeepers, aid workers and other post-conflict authorities rape women who are economically, socially and physically dependent on them. New data, released by the UN for the first time in December 2009,<sup>178</sup> tracks the extent of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel from 2007-2009.<sup>179</sup>

Men returning to their communities after conflicts are often violent to the women in their lives as a result of having been militarised, traumatised and acculturated into violence – committing it and witnessing it – as part of the war effort.

Women are abducted, forced into sexual slavery and trafficked during and after conflicts as border controls, rules of law and police operations are disrupted.<sup>180</sup>

Yet because of the perceived divide between violence against women and girls during wartime and violence against women and girls during peace time, most donor and humanitarian interventions do not tackle the increase in violence against women and girls that follows conflicts.<sup>181</sup>

**Table 5: Women's access to justice at the international level**

Figures from UNIFEM<sup>175</sup>

Context	Number of women affected	Number of decisions resulting in convictions related to sexual violence in relevant International Criminal Tribunal
Genocide in Rwanda in 1994	250,000–500,000 women and girls raped	8
War in Bosnia-Herzegovina in early 1990s	20,000–50,000 women and girls raped	18
Civil war in Sierra Leone in 1990s	50,000–64,000 internally displaced women sexually attacked by combatants	6

## The solution

The increasingly high levels of systematic violence against women and girls during recent conflicts provide a tangible illustration of the extreme danger of failing to address violence against women and girls as a security challenge in its own right, both in times of conflict and in 'peaceful' societies. Women are targeted for violence because of their gender roles and lack of power relative to men. It is tempting to assume that violence against women and girls during conflicts is 'worse' or different to that which transpires during peace time because it can be more brutal, frequent or deprived.<sup>182</sup> For women survivors of violence, this categorisation can be meaningless where access to justice and appropriate support services are absent either way. The situation for women during times of conflict is simply a more extreme example of the general failure of international law and humanitarian aid to respond to women's distinct needs.

Serious action is needed to curb the staggering level of violence against women and girls that takes place during times of conflict. In addition, peace efforts that fail to account for the role of violence against women and girls as a driver of conflict and post-conflict instability will not succeed. The UK government can build on the international momentum behind existing UN Security Council resolutions by highlighting that violence against women is a security issue in its own right. The FCO has recently committed to reviewing the UK's National Action Plan for Resolution 1325 – one of only 16 national plans in the world.<sup>183</sup> It can use this opportunity to influence other governments by explicitly outlining how tackling violence against women and girls as a distinct security issue, even during peace time, can actually support global peace efforts by addressing one of conflict's key drivers. The FCO can also work with the MoD to ensure that peacekeeping forces include better representation of women and receive adequate training on sexual violence against women and girls.

DFID is well placed to make a difference at country-levels by ensuring that its programme work prioritises violence against women and girls as a whole and not just in conflict, that its work on access to justice specifically includes violence against women and accountability to women, and that its conflict and security-related funding includes long-term support for women survivors of violence and the organisations that support them. The forthcoming ActionAid Access to Justice for Women project which DFID is funding in Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Nigeria and Liberia is a promising start. The successful recently completed two-year project by Isis-WICCE (Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange) delivered in partnership with Urgent Action Fund-Africa and supported by the Ford Foundation offers replicable lessons on how channelling funds directly to survivors of violence is transformational for women and the communities they live in.<sup>184</sup>

# Governance

Women make up **less than 20%** of MPs in national parliaments.

**26%** of women candidates faced violence in Nepal's 2008 elections.



**Hafeza Khatun** facilitates a group called women united, where women are encouraged to speak up and discuss how they can change their lives in Chandpur, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: G.M.B. AKASH/PANOS/ACTIONAID

# Governance

Along with other agencies such as the World Bank, the UK government has long identified good governance as a cornerstone of efforts to alleviate and eliminate poverty. The UN Millennium Project explicitly marks governance out as a key requirement for successful poverty reduction.<sup>186</sup> In its 2006 ‘Eliminating world poverty: making governance work for the poor. A White paper’, the UK government claims that the effectiveness of states “is the single most important factor that determines whether or not successful development takes place.”<sup>187</sup> The paper in turn identifies the active participation of citizens as the most important factor influencing the quality of governance.

Yet this document, as with most other international efforts on governance, is silent on the role of women in decision-making and politics. Like most other international efforts, it also takes a limited view of accountability and security. Global initiatives on governance are largely failing to pay attention to the fact that women are almost completely absent from political office, and in some cases they are absent from public life altogether. Taking the world average, women make up less than 20% of MPs in national parliaments.<sup>189</sup>

International efforts are also focusing on the institutional structures of democracy, for example, ensuring that rule of law exists, without adequate attention to the biases within law that leave women unsafe in their homes and limit women’s access to justice. As a result, these initiatives are missing one of the most important governance challenges of the current age: half the planet’s population is unable to effectively influence their states’ decisions because of gender inequality and because they are the victims of epidemic levels of violence against women and girls.

## The World Bank’s definition of governance

“We define governance as the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised for the common good. This includes (i) the process by which those in authority are selected, monitored and replaced, (ii) the capacity of the government to effectively manage its resources and implement sound policies, and (iii) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them.”<sup>188</sup>

## The problem

One in three women globally will be subject to gender-based violence in her lifetime. One in five will face rape or attempted rape. Two million girls a year are at risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) every year. Five thousand women are estimated to be murdered every year in the name of ‘honour’.<sup>190</sup> And the list goes on, affecting all women and girls at each stage of their lives, with some groups, such as women with disabilities and lesbians, particularly vulnerable.

In some parts of the world, the risks of different types of gender-based violence are even higher. In Colombia for example, a woman is killed by a current or former partner every six days. In Guinea, 99% of women have undergone FGM. In Amhara, Ethiopia, 50% of girls are married by the time they are 15 years old. In one study in Malawi, 50% of schoolgirls had been touched in a sexual way without their consent by their teachers or classmates.<sup>191</sup> And of course, as discussed above, during times of conflict, women and girls face the heightened risk of violence and sexual violence in particular.

As we have seen in previous chapters, gender inequality and the associated prevalence of violence against women and girls makes violence the norm rather than the exception for many women in the world. But attempts to contribute to ending this violence through changes to law and politics is itself made more difficult by violence against women in the political sphere. A new report on the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe for example reveals evidence that President Mugabe sanctioned the use of systematic rape by his political party to terrorise, destabilise and control the population to keep him in power. According to the report, those now responsible for bringing the perpetrators of this violence to justice were themselves the orchestrators of the violence; this licence to act with impunity has created a severe accountability gap.<sup>192</sup>

Sometimes, women are specifically targeted for violence as they increase their participation in public life and politics including when they attend elections and run as candidates as happened in Malawi<sup>193</sup> and Afghanistan<sup>194</sup> last year. Although evidence is limited, a new organisation called Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWIP) is highlighting the challenges for women in politics in South Asia. Research on Nepal’s April

2008 elections found that 26% of women candidates faced some kind of violence. Fear of such violence was contributing to women’s low participation in politics in the country.<sup>195</sup> Women involved in politics in Bangladesh are being sexually harassed, assaulted and raped, sometimes by their own colleagues.<sup>196</sup> The problem is not confined to Asia. Research in Guatemala has found similar problems: women politicians face harassment and political violence during the course of their work, often from fellow Guatemalan authorities and officials.<sup>197</sup>

In addition, women who are themselves women’s rights advocates challenging violence against women and girls are often the most vulnerable to gender-based violence. There are too many examples worldwide of women human rights defenders being targeted for violence, including sexual violence and death threats.<sup>198</sup> Indeed, the UN notes that women human rights defenders are at risk of more hostility than their male colleagues precisely because they are women working to challenge gender inequalities.<sup>199</sup>

## The impact

The high prevalence of and poor responses to violence against women and girls in any given country should be a matter of urgent priority in international governance discourses. The lack of access to justice for the majority of survivors of gender-based violence alone should signal a major accountability gap for states.<sup>200</sup> Yet virtually all countries are ill-equipped even to track the accountability gap because they do not recognise violence against women, despite its prevalence, as a governance concern. For example, the World Bank completely ignores violence against women and girls in its major project on governance indicators.<sup>201</sup> Even the indicator that includes ‘absence of violence’ limits the issue to those acts that could destabilise the government,<sup>202</sup> reinforcing the notion that violence against women and girls is a private matter rather than a public security issue even though the most dangerous place for a woman is in her home.<sup>203</sup>

Violence against women and girls subjugates and disempowers women and is a way of exercising social control on even those women who are not directly affected at any one time. It is a result of unequal power relations, an abuse of power by men, and a method of reinforcing women’s lack of power. Violence against women restricts women from even attempting to access the power and authority to take decisions through a variety of insidious methods, including instilling fear and trauma into women’s lives,<sup>204</sup> restricting their movements and controlling their behaviour as happened during Afghanistan’s elections in August 2009,<sup>205</sup> undermining their confidence, and punishing them for challenging gender stereotypes. This sends a clear signal to women that their involvement in decision-making is unwelcome and comes at a cost to their safety.

During conflicts, as discussed in the previous chapter, violence against women and girls undermines women’s ability to participate in rebuilding peaceful democratic societies. In some places, violence against women and girls has been deliberately used to target, control, penalise, and silence women active in public arenas and politics.<sup>206</sup> In Bolivia, for example, political violence against women has become such a problem that most

women councillors are forced to leave politics after their first term. None of the perpetrators in over 200 cases logged by the Bolivian Association of Women Town Councillors (ACOBOL) has been brought to justice.<sup>207</sup> Where states cannot protect such women, the public’s trust and confidence in their government’s commitment to gender equality can be undermined. In these ways, violence against women and girls acts as a structural barrier to gender parity in politics.

The severe under-representation of women in political office in turn has a direct impact on the status of women in society. Having more women in government ensures that issues that are vital for women – and society – are prioritised. Social policy agendas such as violence against women and girls and sexual and reproductive rights have been shown to have more support and resources where women have been in parliament and have therefore had the power to influence decisions as decision-makers.<sup>208</sup> In Rwanda, where the number of women MPs is the largest in the world, the high levels of women’s representation has led to a concrete and notable policy outcome: the new Law on the Prevention, Protection and Punishment of Any Gender-Based Violence. This law provides a legal definition of rape for

adult women, defines marital rape as a gender-based crime, and sets out punishment for offenders.<sup>209</sup> Increasing women’s representation and access to decision-making can also help improve accountability, as UNIFEM’s Progress of the world’s women report explains (see Accountability systems that work for women, page 40).<sup>210</sup> Violence against women and girls, itself a governance failure, systematically marginalises women from power. The subsequent under-representation of women in politics and decision-making is in turn another governance failure. This failure then leads to states remaining unresponsive to women’s needs – yet a third governance failure.

## violence against middle aged women

Shahla Farid is a lawyer and women’s rights advocate whose work on gender equality has made her and her seven daughters a target for violence.

“In 2003, I published a book on gender and laws in Afghanistan. While my family was so happy about it, the highly patriarchal community insulted and made fun of me. I recently published another book on the same topic after about three years of hibernating due to threats,” says Shahla. The second book, funded by ActionAid Afghanistan, was recently published as ‘A brief comparative study on women’s rights in Islam: Afghanistan laws, Afghan customs and international documents’.

Shahla first became controversial when she chose to demonstrate against the ten year sentence of a police commander who had been accused of raping a very young girl in the Jawzjan Province in Northern Afghanistan. Feeling that the punishment was not severe enough for the crime, Shahla took up the cause despite the fact that it appeared futile. Shahla defends her decision saying, “No foundation or organisation to support women’s cases exists in Afghanistan.”

Shahla faced her most challenging times during the year she hosted an afternoon programme on women’s issues on Ariana television, the second most-viewed TV network in the country. She began receiving threatening phone calls where callers revealed they had been following her. “The most horrible phone threat I received was when they told me that they will do to my daughters what they have done to the girls whose cases of abuse I am handling. That totally unnerved me, horrifying for a mother who had borne and loves seven daughters. I had to stop hosting the program[me] and cancel media interviews altogether.”

Shahla is frank about the dangers. “Individual initiative[s] like I am doing is very dangerous, not only for me but for my family.” Today, Shahla is happy to conduct her advocacy in more low-profile ways, including teaching as a civil law professor at Kabul University, because she knows she will champion women’s rights wherever there is a need for her.

“I still make TV appearances, the latest of which was on Noor TV where I commented regarding the election but it has to be very brief.... My family’s life is more valuable than anything else in the world. But given a support group that will help women who are helplessly being played around in court, I will always be in the midst of their fight. I have already done this in the past and I will continuously do so in the future.”

**Shahla Farid, 48, Kabul<sup>212</sup>**



**Shahla Farid (standing)**, lawyer and women’s rights activist, Afghanistan.  
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

## The solution

Violence against women and girls is widespread and extensive. State responses to this endemic breach of women's human rights are universally inadequate on a number of levels: states are failing to protect women from violence in the first place; they are withholding vital support and rehabilitation services from survivors once they have been subject to violence; and they are also failing to bring most offenders to justice even in the longer-term. This is the case whether violence against women and girls is perpetrated by family members, those in the community or agents of the state. In failing women in this way, all states, including those in the global north, are failing to pass the most basic elements of the UK government's test for good governance.

Violence against women and girls needs to be recognised for the governance failure it represents. So too does the severe under-representation of women in governments around the world. In addition, governments would do well to recognise how the two issues are linked: violence against women acts as a structural barrier to women's participation in politics and public life. Indeed women are often placed at increased risk of violence the

further they move into public life and politics. The relationship between the two needs to be tackled for either to make any progress.

The UK government can lead in this area by championing the ideas that good governance requires both the eradication of violence against women and gender parity in representation as part of its basic framework. The FCO can support this agenda by prioritising both issues within foreign policy in their own rights, as well as demonstrating how a focus on violence against women improves governance outcomes. For example, work on access to justice should include accountability to women survivors of violence. DFID can support this important work by building on its targeted interventions on women's participation in politics.<sup>211</sup> It can deepen its commitment to gender equality by specifically setting gender parity in governance as a target for its programme work, including by addressing the ways that violence against women is a direct challenge to this aim.

## Accountability systems that work for women

Women ought to benefit as much as men from governance reforms that focus on reducing corruption and increasing opportunities to participate in public decision-making. But there is no such thing as gender-neutral governance reform. If governance reforms do not address the social relations that undermine women's capacity to participate in public decisions, they run the risk of reproducing gender biases and patterns of exclusion in the management of public affairs.

Accountability systems that work for women contain two essential elements:

**1. Women's inclusion in oversight processes** Gender-responsive accountability institutions must ensure that decision-makers answer to the women who are most affected by their decisions. This means that women must be entitled to ask for explanations and justifications. They must be legitimate participants in public debates, power-delegation processes and performance assessments.

**2. Advancing women's human rights is a key standard against which the performance of officials is assessed** Power holders must answer for their performance in advancing women's rights. The standards of due diligence and probity in holding the public trust must include gender equality as a goal of public action.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Violence against women and girls is a significant challenge to the UK's international efforts to promote human rights, development and peace. It is one of the most widespread abuses of human rights worldwide. It is rooted in gender inequality, and also maintains and reinforces this inequality. And it is a leading factor in global poverty.

This report has tracked the consequences of failing to address violence against women and girls as a strategic priority in five key global agendas: education, maternal and child health, HIV and AIDS, conflict and governance. In all cases, it is clear that violence against women and girls blocks progress and undermines the UK's efforts to deliver change. It is equally clear that progress in promoting human rights, development and peace is hollow when routine violence against half the population goes unacknowledged and unchallenged.

Important steps have been taken within the international arena to recognise the extent of the problem. What is needed now is urgent action.

Spain has contributed substantially to UNIFEM and is seeking to increase the EU's efforts on tackling violence against women during its presidency in 2010.<sup>215</sup> The Dutch government has created and invested heavily in an 'MDG 3 Fund'.<sup>214</sup> And the United States has taken unprecedented steps to prioritise global violence against women in its foreign policy through an International Violence Against Women Act<sup>215</sup> and the creation of the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues post within the Department of State.<sup>216</sup>

As global groundbreakers in international development, UK decision-makers are in a unique position to help lead this new approach to tackling violence against women and girls globally. The first step is recognising how violence against women and girls is both a development as well as a human rights issue.

## Recommendations for the UK government

1. Make ending violence against women internationally a foreign policy priority.

2. Appoint a Minister on violence against women and girls whose brief covers the Department for International Development (DFID), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

3. Establish infrastructure within government to monitor and enforce UK commitments on violence against women internationally.

4. Champion attention to violence against women and girls within the international development agenda, including the need for more and better disaggregated data, through advocacy with multilateral agencies and international frameworks including the MDGs and the post-MDG framework, and by supporting the UN Secretary General's campaign on violence against women and the full funding of the new UN gender entity.

5. Strengthen the work of DFID on violence against women by recognising it as a core development issue, linking it to poverty, economic growth, education, health and conflict; developing a coherent and adequately funded strategy to address the issue above and beyond the current focus on violence against women and girls in conflict; and supporting the women's organisations and networks that provide life saving and advocacy services for women survivors of violence.

## Endnotes

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**Cover photo: members of the  
'Voices of the women of Congo'  
group in Goma, Democratic  
Republic of Congo, call for peace  
and the protection of women  
in the wake of conflict.**

PHOTO: JENNY MATTHEWS/ACTIONAID

