

In War and Peace

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

While the use of violence against women and girls (VAWG) as a ‘weapon of war’ has received widespread international attention, researchers have only recently begun to assess its prevalence in peacetime and transitioning societies. This chapter examines sexual and domestic violence—two pervasive forms of VAWG—both internationally and through the experiences of two countries emerging from conflict: Liberia and Nepal. The chapter pays particular attention to the influence of social norms as risk factors and touches on the role of guns in the context of violence against women. It also examines the challenges in responding to VAWG by reshaping underlying social norms in post-conflict environments.

Violence against women is a global phenomenon. A recent World Health Organization report on intimate partner violence in selected states finds that 36 per cent of women aged 15–69 worldwide have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence. Although official national data suggests significant variations across countries and regions, differing definitions and survey methodologies from

country to country undermine cross-national comparisons. Around the world, social stigma, the fear of retaliation, and justifications of domestic violence often dissuade women from reporting violent incidents to the police, making the phenomenon difficult to quantify.

Domestic violence rates are higher wherever it is socially accepted as a justified response to household disputes.

By shaping the ways in which violent behaviour is incentivized through social approval or deterred through stigmatization, social norms can affect the prevalence of VAWG. According to a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the average rate of domestic violence in countries where it is highly accepted as a justified response to household disputes is more than double the average of countries where its acceptance is low.

In Liberia, sexual violence was a key feature of the country’s civil conflicts. Victimization surveys and data collected by the Government of Liberia indicate that sexual and domestic violence are still prevalent in Liberia ten years after the end of the civil war, despite tough laws prohibiting rape. Social norms acquired during the conflict, along with gender inequality dating from before the war, continue to influence post-conflict norms about rape in Liberia. Almost six out of ten surveyed Liberian women said a husband was justified in beating his wife under certain circumstances, while 44 per cent of all Liberians expressed the view that there was no such thing as ‘rape’ in marriage or other intimate relationships.

As in Liberia, hostile parties in Nepal’s ten-year civil conflict also used sexual violence as a weapon of war. Although persistent underreporting precludes a reliable quantification of present-day VAWG in Nepal, studies suggest that it remains widespread in the post-conflict era and that social norms are an important risk factor. At the family level, imbalanced power relations within a couple and the perception of violence as an acceptable corrective serve to fuel VAWG (see Table 1.1). Norms that establish the man as the titular head of household can inscribe a relationship of domination, with marriage granting a husband sexual rights over his wife.

Social norms that influence VAWG are also tied to notions of masculinity that project violence as the prerogative of men, and to guns as signifiers of masculinities.



A poster reading ‘rape is a crime’ forms part of a campaign to combat human rights abuses, Monrovia, July 2006. © Betty Press/Panos Pictures

Table 1.1 Men's attitudes towards VAWG in 2011, in selected districts, by type of VAWG (n=1,000)

Type of VAWG	Attitudes that directly or indirectly support VAWG in Nepal	% of respondents who agree*
Domestic violence	There are times when a woman deserves to be beaten.	43.6
	If a woman does something wrong, her husband or partner has the right to punish her.	77.3
	A woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together.	50.8
Sexual violence	A woman cannot refuse to have sex with her husband.	52.1
	When a woman is raped, she is usually to blame for putting herself in that situation.	20.6
	If a woman does not physically fight back, it is not rape.	58.0
Son preference	Not having a son reflects bad karma and a lack of moral virtue.	9.5
	A woman's most important role is to produce a son for her husband's family.	21.6
	Fathering a male child shows you are a real man.	31.4

Note: * Out of 100 per cent; the remaining percentage disagreed with the statements. The survey interviewed men aged 18-49. The sample included 400 households from urban areas and 600 from rural ones in three districts in Nepal: Saptari, Gorkha, and Dang.

Although much of the VAWG in Nepal and Liberia tends to involve unsophisticated instruments, such as crude or bladed weapons, or no instrument, gun violence targeting women and girls is also present. This form of VAWG sometimes results in injury or death, although it generally takes the form of threats or intimidation within the family, which is seldom reported.

**Attitudes that condone VAWG often pre-date conflicts, but they are reinforced during wars
and often persist long past the formal cessation of hostilities.**

The experiences of Liberia and Nepal highlight why efforts to change discriminatory norms have become a recurring theme in discussions of femicide and other types of violence against women. At the global level, interventions are challenging the social norms that support VAWG; these can be integrated into other approaches, such as improved data collection, legal reform, economic empowerment, and increased provision of VAWG response services. But societies emerging from conflict face particular challenges with respect to VAWG, and efforts to alter attitudes that support VAWG in those contexts take time and require more complex programming.

Projects to counter discriminatory social norms are also being integrated into efforts to control small arms. Thanks primarily to the advocacy of women's groups, the international normative frameworks on small arms control and women, peace, and security have become linked. At the advocacy level, the VAWG component is becoming more prominent in arms control campaigns that try to achieve greater security for both men and women.

To be most effective, initiatives aimed at changing social norms around the use of violence must be informed by research. Thus, research efforts need to be strengthened to collect accurate data on VAWG in post-conflict environments and to obtain better information about the roles that guns may play in VAWG. The further evolution and dissemination of good practices for collecting data and conducting surveys on VAWG in challenging environments could improve not only the quality of data, but also its comparability across regions. ▀