



Violence against women

Health consequences

Violence against women and girls increases their risk of poor health. A growing number of studies exploring violence and health consistently report negative effects. The true extent of the consequences is difficult to ascertain, however, because medical records usually lack vital details concerning any violent causes of injury or poor health.

Physical consequences

Homicide

Numerous studies report that most women who die of homicide are killed by their partner or ex-partner.

A study of 249 court records in Zimbabwe revealed that 59% of homicides of women were committed by the intimate partner of the victim.¹

In cultures where the giving of a dowry is practised, the custom can be fatal for the woman whose parents are unable to meet demands for gifts or money. Violence that begins with threats may end in forced "suicide", death from injuries, or homicide.

Serious injuries

The injuries sustained by women because of physical and sexual abuse may be extremely serious. Many assault incidents result in injuries, ranging from bruises and fractures to chronic disabilities. A high percentage of these require medical treatment. For example, in Papua New Guinea, 18% of all urban married women had to seek hospital treatment following domestic violence.²

Research in Cambodia found that 50% of all women reporting abuse had sustained injuries.³

Canada's national survey on violence against women revealed that 45% of wife-assault incidents resulted in injuries, and of the injured women, 40% subsequently visited a doctor or a nurse.⁴

Injuries during pregnancy

Recent research has identified violence during pregnancy as a risk to the health of both mothers and their unborn foetus. Research in this area has shown increased levels of a variety of conditions.

In a three-year study of 1203 pregnant women in hospitals in Houston and Boston, United States, abuse during pregnancy was a significant risk factor for low birth weight, low maternal weight gain, infections and anaemia.⁵

Injuries to children

Children in violent families may also be victims of abuse. Frequently, children are injured while trying to defend their mothers.

In one study of abused women in Bogotá, Colombia, 49% reported that their children had also been beaten.⁶

Unwanted and early pregnancy

Violence against women may result in unwanted pregnancy, either through rape or by affecting a woman's ability to negotiate contraceptive use. For example, some women may be afraid to raise the issue of contraceptive use with their sexual partners for fear of being beaten or abandoned.

Adolescents who are abused, or who have been abused as children, are much less likely to develop a sense of self-esteem and belonging than those who have not experienced abuse. They are more likely to neglect themselves and engage in risky behaviours such as early or unprotected sexual intercourse. A growing number of studies suggests that girls who are sexually abused during childhood are at much greater risk of unwanted pregnancy during adolescence.

A United States study found that women who experienced childhood sexual abuse are nearly three times more likely than non-victimized youth to become pregnant before the age of 18.⁷

This greater risk of unwanted pregnancy brings with it many additional problems. For instance, it is well documented that childbearing during early or middle adolescence, before girls are biologically and psychologically mature, is associated with adverse health outcomes for both the mother and child. Infants may be premature, of low birth weight, or be small for gestational age.

When an unwanted pregnancy occurs, many women try to resolve their dilemma through abortion. In countries where abortion is illegal, expensive or difficult to obtain, women may resort to illegal abortions, at times with fatal consequences.

In a study in Bombay, India, 20% of all pregnancies of adolescent abortion seekers occurred because of forced sex, 10% from rape by a male domestic servant, 6% from incest, and 4% from other rapes.⁸

STDs including HIV/AIDS

As with unwanted pregnancy, women are vulnerable to contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) because they are unable to negotiate protection.

In Thailand, researchers found that one in ten victims of rape had contracted a STD because of the attack.⁹

Women with STDs have a higher risk of complications during pregnancy, including sepsis, spontaneous abortion and premature birth. Some STDs increase a woman's vulnerability to the HIV virus, as well. Violent sexual assault may also increase their risks because resulting tears to delicate vaginal tissue allow the virus easier entry into the bloodstream. With HIV/AIDS, the consequences are usually fatal for the woman, and possibly for her children as well.

Vulnerability to disease

Compared with non-abused women, women who have suffered any kind of violence are more likely to experience a number of serious health problems.

Research in Norway revealed that chronic pelvic pain is significantly associated with a history of domestic violence.¹⁰

A major study in the United States found that having been the victim of childhood abuse or violent crime doubled a woman's likelihood of suffering from severe menstrual problems, a sexually transmitted disease, or a urinary tract infection; domestic violence tripled her likelihood.¹¹

Other research from the United States has shown that patients with irritable bowel syndrome, compared with those with the less serious inflammatory bowel disease, were more likely to have suffered severe sexual trauma, severe childhood sexual abuse or some form of sexual victimization.¹²

It has been suggested that abused women's increased vulnerability to illness may be due partly to lowered immunity because of stress resulting from the abuse. In addition, self-neglect and increased risk taking have also been implicated. It has been found, for instance, that abused women are more likely to smoke than women without a history of violence.¹³

Psychological consequences

Suicide

For women who are beaten or sexually assaulted, the emotional and physical strain can lead to suicide. These deaths are dramatic testimony to the paucity of options for women to escape from violent relationships.

Research in the United States has shown that battered women, as compared to women not living with violent men, are five times more likely to commit suicide.¹⁴

Mental health problems

Research suggests that abused women endure enormous psychological suffering because of violence. Many are severely depressed or anxious, while others display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. They may be chronically fatigued, but unable to sleep; they may have nightmares or eating disorders; turn to alcohol and drugs to numb their pain; or become isolated and withdrawn.

In one study in León, Nicaragua, after controlling for other factors, researchers found that abused women were six times more likely to report experiencing mental distress than non-abused women.¹⁵

Likewise in the United States, women battered by their partners have been found to be between four and five times more likely to require psychiatric treatment than non-abused women.¹⁶

Rape and childhood sexual abuse can cause similar psychological damage. One occurrence of sexual aggression may be sufficient to create long-lasting negative effects, especially if the child-victim does not subsequently receive appropriate support. Like violence against women in the family, child abuse often continues for many years and its disabling effects can carry over into adult life. For example, the reduced self-esteem of women who have been abused in childhood may result in their making little effort to avoid situations where their health or safety are in jeopardy.

A study carried out in Boston, Los Angeles and San Diego in the United States, Juarez, Mexico, and San Juan, Puerto Rico, showed a strong link between sexual abuse victimization in early life, and involvement later in life in sexual behaviours that place women at risk of contracting HIV.¹⁷

Effects of witnessing violence on children

Research has shown that children who witness domestic violence often suffer many of the same symptoms as children who have been physically or sexually abused themselves. Girls who witness their father's or step-father's violent treatment of their mother are also more likely to accept violence as a normal part of marriage than girls from non-violent homes. Boys who have witnessed the same violence, on the other hand, are more likely to be violent to their partners as adults.

The León, Nicaragua, study reported that children who had regularly witnessed their mothers being hit or humiliated, compared to other children, were at least five times more likely to experience serious emotional and behavioural difficulties.¹⁸

Impact on society

Added health care costs

The costs to society of violence against women are tremendous, in terms of health

care alone. A proportion of these costs are for treating serious physical injury. A substantial amount is also spent on psychological problems including managing anxieties and symptoms which happier, more confident, women may be able to tolerate, ignore or shrug off.

One study in the United States showed that outpatient care for women with a history of sexual or physical assault cost two and a half times as much as care for other women, after controlling for other variables.¹⁹

Direct costs include those incurred by the police, courts and legal services to prosecute perpetrators of abuse; the costs of treatment programmes for men who batter, and other offenders; the medical care costs of treating the direct medical consequences of sexual and physical abuse; and social service costs, including child protection services.

Effects on productivity and employment

Women experiencing violence may have a reduced contribution to society as well as to their own potential self-realization.

In Canada's national survey on violence against women, 30% of reported wife assault incidents led to time off from regular activities, and 50% of women who were injured took sick leave from work.²⁰

Women may be equally intimidated by their husband's violence, which prevents them from advancing at work.

One development strategy in Madras, India, nearly collapsed when women began dropping out because of the increased incidents of beatings from their husbands, after the women had joined the project.²¹

The economic impact of abuse may extend to losses in women's earning potential. This may be partly because girls who are victims of violence are likely to be anxious or depressed, and unable to perform to the best of their ability at school. Because of their experience of having no control over their own bodies, the world may become a threatening place where they avoid challenges of any kind.

In areas where sexual abuse of female students by male teachers is prevalent, girls may stay away from school to escape unwanted attention. Elsewhere, parents, who fear that their daughters will be sexually assaulted, may keep them at home until they are "safely married". In many countries, a girl who becomes pregnant is expelled from school, regardless of whether or not the pregnancy was the result of a rape. The consequence, in every case, is a curtailed education, a decreased chance of securing gainful employment, and a reduced contribution to the quality of life for her community.



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