

I. UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In recent years, policy makers and service providers in many countries have become more aware of the problem of violence against women. Since the 1970s, the level of understanding has increased and violence against women has been more widely identified. Evidence on the nature, extent and effects of violence against women has improved, leading to the adoption of measures to address the phenomenon. Although differences of opinion remain as to the definitions of some aspects of violence against women, there is now a growing body of accepted knowledge, and some aspects of current understanding are outlined below.

The nature of violence against women

Before solutions to the problem can be found it is essential to understand the nature of violence against women. There have been many attempts to define such violence and its particular forms, and it is agreed that any definition must be precise enough to guide actions, yet wide enough to include all relevant forms of behaviour.

Many issues must be taken into account in formulating a definition; for example, violence may involve more than one form of behaviour, and different forms of violence may be committed by the same perpetrator. A definition must also take account of all the relationships, settings and contexts in which violence against women can occur. It must reflect the fact that women from all social classes and races experience violence (although different groups of women may experience specific issues). The 3rd European Ministerial Conference on Equality between Women and Men (1993), for example, noted:

with grave concern that violence towards women is a universal phenomenon which is present in all social strata and societies, independent of their level of development, political stability, culture or religion.

The definition must reflect the fact that violence against women is perpetrated in most cases by men (particularly relatives and partners, but also acquaintances and strangers) and is used to assert control over women. The causes are complex, and rooted in gender inequality.

Responses to violence against women cross different legislative areas; for example, the Council of Europe’s “Plan of action against traffic in women and forced prostitution” (1996) identifies the relevance of administration, emigration, employment, criminal law, criminal procedure, civil law and other areas, for that issue alone. Other forms of violence against women also have implications for many areas of policy making, and these need to be recognised when the issues are defined.

All these factors make an absolute definition difficult, but there is now agreement on the need to include physical, sexual and psychological violence in a definition and to recognise that violence against women is perpetrated both in the family (for example, domestic abuse, genital mutilation) and in wider society (rape, harassment, etc.). It has also been recognised that violence against women can be perpetrated or condoned by states (such as rape during wartime). The United Nations World Conference on Human Rights (1993) defined violence against women as follows:

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 deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

This definition was also adopted in April 2002 by the Council of Europe in the appendix to the Committee of Ministers Rec(2002)5 on the protection of women against violence. Similarly, the UN Beijing World Conference on Women (1995) defined violence against women as broadly to include physical, sexual and psychological violence. The Council of Europe’s Group of Specialists for Combating Violence against Women added to the list economic violence (controlling access to money), structural violence (“power relations ... which generate and legitimise inequality”) and spiritual violence (eroding a women’s cultural or religious beliefs).