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**Health and Social Consequences  
of Violence against Women**

Dear Chairperson, distinguished speakers of the panel, dear guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very grateful and honoured to be here.

I congratulate the Supreme Council for Family Affairs and the Doha Institute for Family Studies and Development for organizing this colloquium.

The choice “impact of VAW on the family” for this colloquium is indeed timely and crucial.

In the past 20 or so years many studies have been done on the magnitude and patterns of violence against women. More recent studies showed the far-reaching impact on women’s health and on their children’s well-being, in short on families. It is now clear that besides the human rights problem which it is, VAW it is also a public health and social problem. This greatly helped putting VAW on the political agenda.

In this presentation I will give you a global perspective. I will use some of the results of WHO study on women’s health and domestic violence, (a study that I have been intensely involved with for the last 10 years) to show some of the health and social consequences of violence against women. These health and social consequences are very similar, wherever we look.

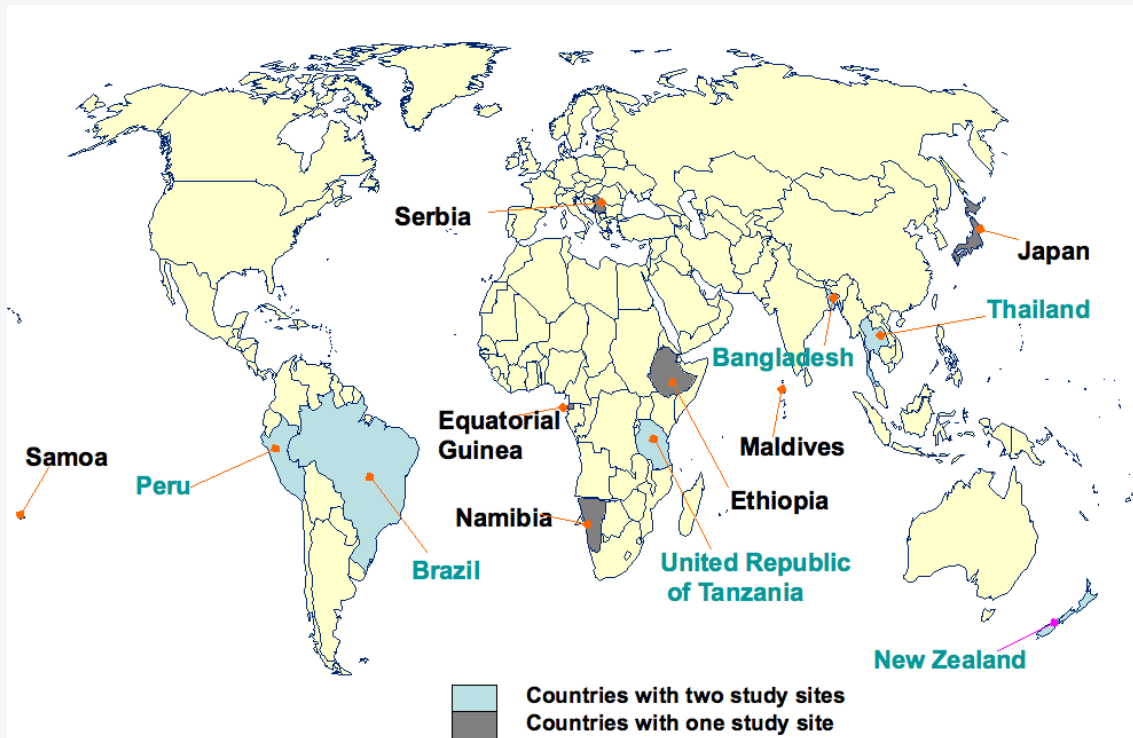


*So I take a blanket and I spend the night with my children out in the cold because he is hitting me too much. I have to take the kids to stop him hitting them too. I would go out in the fields and sleep there all night. I have done that more than ten times...*

*Woman interviewed in Peru*



**WHO multi-country study on DVAW**



Peru is one of the countries in the WHO study on women’s health and domestic violence. The first 10 countries in this study (between 2000 and 2003) were in South America: Brazil, in Europe: Serbia, in Africa: Ethiopia, Namibia and Tanzania, in Asia: Bangladesh, Thailand and Japan, then we have in the pacific and Samoa. In these countries 2400 women were interviewed. Results for these countries will be used in this presentation. They represent regional and cultural diversity.

Other countries that followed with WHO involvement were New Zealand, Equatorial Guinea and Maldives. The methods developed for this study are used in many other countries such as Pakistan, China, Indonesia and Turkey (where I am now).

Data is mainly collected using household survey techniques, conducting face to face interviews, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, with a representative sample of women, representing all ages, educational and socioeconomic levels, urban and rural areas.

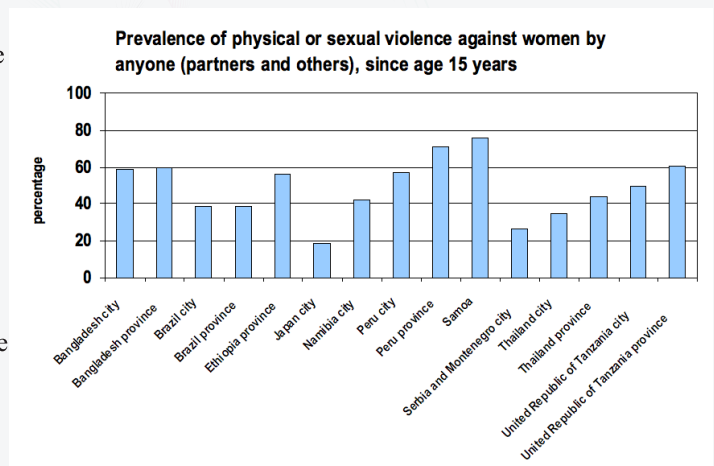
Notes (1) Muslim countries: Bangladesh, Maldives, Indonesia, Turkey; (2) the questionnaire and manuals also exist in Arab

**Physical and sexual violence is extremely common in women’s lives**

A key finding of the study is that physical and sexual violence is extremely common in women’s lives, much more than I myself had expected when I started this work.

Among adult women we found that between 19% (Japan) and 76% (Samoa) have been physically or sexually abused by someone (partner or non-partner) at least once in their lifetime.

The levels of violence in most of the sites were between 26% and 60%. That’s almost two-thirds of women in some settings.



### How common is domestic violence?

(WHO study)

In most sites, 4 out of 5 women who have been abused (by anybody: partners and others) reported being abused by a partner.

15- 71% (between one in six and two out of three) of ever-partnered women experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner

But what is really shocking: when you look the all experiences of violence, by partners and by non-partners: we found that among women who were abused (by anyone), 4 out of 5 women reported abuse by a partner. While the popular belief is that the street is dangerous, for many women it is actually her own family home, that is not safe, the place where she should be protected and loved.

The statistic of 1 in 3 that you often hear hides a much more complex reality. There is a lot of variation, between countries but also within countries. Globally between 15- 71% (between one in six and two out of three) of ever-partnered women experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner.

### Pregnancy is not necessarily a protected time

(WHO study)

In most sites 4 %- 12% of women who had been pregnant were beaten during a pregnancy

In 90%- 100% of cases the abuser was the father of the unborn child

Between on-quarter to half of these women reported being punched or kicked in the stomach

Another key finding is that pregnancy is not always a protected time for women.

We have found that in most sites between 4 and 12% of women had ever been pregnant, had been beaten during at least one ipregnancy.

Significantly, in almost all cases the abuser was the biological father of the child the woman was carrying.

Across all the sites, between one-quarter to a half of these women who were beaten during pregnancy report being punched or kicked in the abdomen, which brings risk to the unborn child.

These words from a woman in Peru illustrate a consequence of such violence:

“He hit me in the belly and made me miscarry two babies - identical or fraternal twins, I don’t know. I went to the hospital with heavy bleeding and they cleaned me up.”

### Many women internalize social norms justifying abuse

Yet another key finding of the study that many women living with violence believe it is normal, or that she deserves it.

This comes through strongly in the words of this woman interviewed in Bangladesh.



*My husband slaps me, has sex with me against my will and I have to conform. Before being interviewed I didn't really think about this. I thought this is only natural. This is the way a husband behaves.*

*Woman interviewed in Bangladesh*



It is not only the women themselves who think it is normal and who see violence as a way to discipline a woman. Very worrying is that this notion is also held by service providers, people who are supposed to help.

A health worker in Samoa said it as follows:

“There are certain behaviours that are expected of a married woman, and if you don't and your husband beats you up, then it's ok. It's like a parent disciplines a child.”

### Violence impacts on women's health

In terms of impacts on women's health, violence can result in injuries, and it often does. But besides these direct consequences we found all kinds of indirect impacts on women's health. Women who have experienced partner violence score much worse (compared to women who were never abused) for all health variables that we measured:

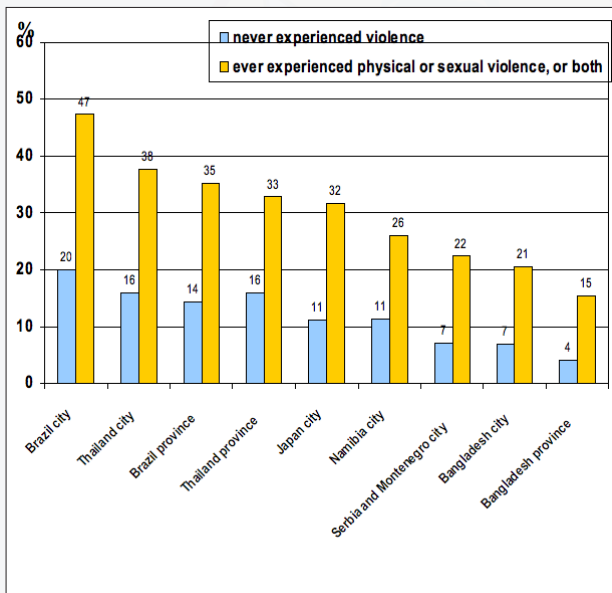
- They have a worse general health situation,
- More symptoms of ill health such as pain, memory loss, dizziness in the past 4 weeks
- More signs of mental distress
- More suicidal thoughts and attempts
- More induced abortions and miscarriage

Everywhere we looked we saw consistent and similar impacts on health. This was equally true for a rural, poor woman in Ethiopia or a cosmopolitan woman in a big city in Brazil.

As a woman interviewed in Serbia observed:

“I suffered a long time and swallowed my pain. That is why I am constantly visiting doctors and using medicines. No one should have to do this...”

### Partner violence increases risk of suicidal thoughts (WHO study)



As an example, on this slide we see the strong relationship that exists between lifetime experience of physical or sexual partner violence and suicidal thoughts. Abused women were up to 3 times more likely to report suicidal thoughts compared to non abused women (shown in blue). A similar pattern holds true for suicide attempts.

As a woman interviewed in Peru observed:

“...I don't feel well and I just cry. There are times that I want to be dead. I even thought of killing myself or poisoning myself and my kids, because I think if I have suffered that much, how much would my kids suffer if I am no longer there...”



### Violent acts as a risk factor for ill health



An association between recent ill health and lifetime experiences of violence suggest that the negative consequences of violence can persist long after the violence has ended.

### Other outcomes related to violence

For women:

- injuries
- own health
- financial status
- ability to work
- ability to function
- participate in society

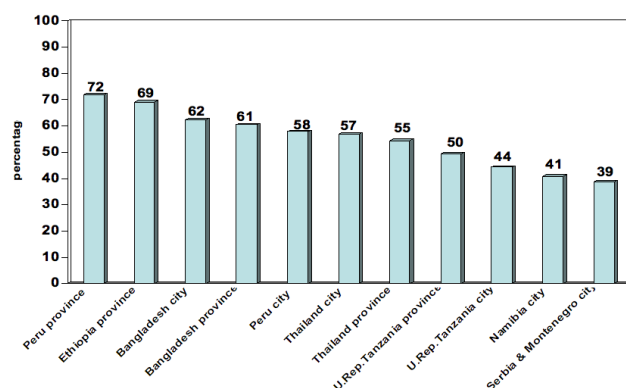
For children:

- low birth-weight
- emotional well-being
- behavioural difficulties
- problems at school
- leave home

Besides direct injuries and associations with health we found that partner violence was associated with a woman's financial status, her ability to work and to participate in society. We also saw in families where women who experienced violence (in comparison with families where the mother was not beaten) newborn children were more likely to be born with low birth weight, the children had a worse emotional wellbeing (more nightmares and bedwetting), they had more behavioural problems (extremely aggressive or extremely shy), they had more problems at school and run away from home more often.

### Percentage of women who report her children witnessed violent incidents, among women who reported physical violence

Many women with children report that children witness the violence, and children learn in this way that it is normal that a man beats his wife. There is lots of evidence now that boys who witness that their mother is beaten, are much more likely to become perpetrators themselves later in life. Violence is learned behaviour.



### **Violence is largely hidden**

Another troubling finding was the degree to which violence remains hidden.

At least one fifth (to two-thirds) of abused women had never told anyone about the violence prior to being interviewed. The social consequences of disclosing abuse can be severe. As a middle class, urban Bangladeshi woman reports:

“If I protest I’ll be marked in the society and then my daughter wouldn’t be able to get married...  
If I voice my protest the community will blame me for not bearing it in silence. This helplessness is a torture in itself.”

### **The majority of women never contact formal support services**

Moreover, the majority 55- 95% of abused women never contact formal support services, such as the police, doctors, or religious leader.

When women in violent relationships do reach out, they tend to do so to family and friends.

Unfortunately, many women report that the response they get from their closest support system, family. This makes them feel more isolated and guilty.

As this 25 year old woman in urban Thailand observes:

*“ At work I have one close friend. I told her sometimes. She would nod and encourage me to stay in the relationship. For the kids, she said. He is not that bad. No one is perfect.”*

### **Why do women not seek help from doctors or others?**

#### **Women are not talking:**

- Shame, embarrassment
- Lack of confidence in the health worker / system
- Fear of more violence at home

Unfortunately, women who are experiencing violence rarely reveal their situation spontaneously, as they may be ashamed to admit what is happening, or they may fear that the health worker will not believe them, or worse, blame them for the violence. In health settings where mandatory notification laws are enforced, women fear that telling a health worker about violence will lead to police involvement or involvement of the child protection agency, and possible reprisals on the part of the abuser, in other words more violence at home.

This is convincingly illustrated by this quote of a woman living with violence:

*«I said in the hospital that I had fallen, because if I told the truth he would kill me, and I was also ashamed that they would find out that it was my husband who had beaten me.»*

### **Conclusions**

Domestic violence against women affects a significant proportion of women around the world, with grave consequences for these women and their families, in particular their children

While often hidden, violence against women represents a substantial added burden on already struggling health systems.

But to end on a positive note: The enormous variation in levels of violence across and within settings shows us that violence is not inevitable that it can be avoided.

Remember the first slide. Hopefully one day, we can live in a world where all women feel safe in their homes and don't have to sleep out in the cold outside to hide from an abusive husband.

"Violence against Women never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable"

United Nations Secretary General  
Ban Ki-moon