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## On the Killing of Women and Girls

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# The Current Column

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## On the Killing of Women and Girls

Bonn, 19 November 2012. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of November every year, the world observes the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Consider this: A woman is killed in El Salvador every 13 hours. In that same time period, five women have been murdered by their partners in the US, ten female fetuses have been intentionally aborted in Jaipur and over 5000 young women have been at risk of female genital mutilation in the whole of Africa.

Violence against women is a phenomenon that happens across cultures, in both the developed and the developing world. It takes many forms and happens at staggering rates in the face of a rapidly modernizing world. Domestic violence, sexual assault, crimes committed in the name of "honour", the torture and killing of women by men connected to criminal activities, the systematic killing of women in armed conflict, female infanticide – the list of crimes is as long as it is horrendous.

But why target women? The reason is multivariate. Women may be killed by family members in the name of honour when they are thought to bring disgrace to the family (by, for example, refusing to enter into arranged marriages, divorcing or committing adultery). Men are rarely prosecuted and convicted for these murders due to the cultural acceptance of honour as a legitimate basis for killing. During armed conflict for example, polarizations of gender roles occur where men are viewed as the masculine defenders while women and girls are idealized as bearers of cultural identity. Combative troops may employ mass rape and other forms of gender-related violence to intensify their opponent's subjugation and humiliation. A more recent and aggressive form of violence against women spreading in Mexico and Latin America is where women are simply abducted, tortured and killed by men involved in criminal groups. The brutality of such attacks on women has caught the attention of the international community with the consequence that laws criminalizing gender-based violence have been passed in several Latin American countries to

tackle the situation. Clearly, there is no single reason for the violence. But whatever the allegation, violent behaviour against women boils down to a means of trying to exercise power or control over them.

As the reasons behind gender-related violence are multifaceted, so is its impact. Female infanticide and the intentional killing of female children in India have resulted in a total of 50 million missing Indian girls, roughly the same as the entire population of Spain. China is a little bit better. The population gender imbalance improved in the People's Republic after policies allowing parents in rural communities to have another child - if the firstborn was female - were implemented. Nevertheless the male to female ratio is so lopsided in both countries that the kidnapping and trafficking of women within India and China has dramatically increased from the 1990s onwards. Slave trade groups have even reached beyond the borders of these countries to abduct women to be sold into forced marriages. Closer to home, violence against women often results in serious physical and psychological consequences for the victim including chronic health problems of various kinds. In cases of massive gender-based violence during armed conflict, social bonds within communities tend to be broken and a legacy of bitterness towards perpetrators tends to make reconciliation more difficult. The negative impact of violence against women is also intergenerational. Children who witness gender-related violence are at an increased risk of behavioural problems, emotional trauma and mental difficulties in adult life. They also have a higher probability to become violent to women in adulthood.

One problem hindering efforts to end violence against women is the lack of reliable data that could be used to create tailored policies. The reason being, whatever official data that is at hand is merely the tip of the iceberg. Most incidences of gender-related violence remain unreported due to fear, shame, guilt, religious beliefs or the need to protect other people. Moreover, there remains a lot of room for improvement on what kind of data to gather, how to go about gathering it and how

to further increase social awareness on violence against women and girls.

For instance in Europe, half of the women killed between 2008 and 2010 were killed by a family member. There is a clear relation between the killing of women and partner and family violence. In South Asia the high level of tolerance of violence against women and young girls as well as female infanticide means that information is not forthcoming from affected parties or from official sources. Both of these examples point to a need to adapt data gathering techniques specifically for crimes against women and improve the way information is gathered on gender-based criminal justice. Global data may point to a low rate of killings of women and girls relative to men and boys but that only highlights the fact that national mortality rates may not always reflect the incidence of gender-related violence across regions or cities. This indicates a need to look at the issue on a more local scale. In carrying out surveys on violence against women, it is important to thoroughly train researchers to handle sensitive questions and situations that may arise during interviews in order to obtain truthful answers. Furthermore, instead of only looking at the inci-

dence, nature and consequences of violence, it is important to ask respondents the type of services that they contacted or are most likely to contact after an attack and whether these services responded in a satisfactory way. In this way, the function of these services could be customized to respond more effectively to cases of gender-based violence.

Finally, agencies could tap on social media in order to increase social awareness about gender-related violence. Facebook, Twitter and other social media applications could be used as powerful tools to enjoin the population to be more vigilant against the killing of women. Social media could also be used to capture the attention of governments and agencies to take violence against women as matter of social concern and state policy.

Whatever the reason behind the killing of women and girls, these are above all else, criminal acts that should be punished under the rule of law. And, although gender-related violence may have long historical or traditional roots, we are fortunate to live in a society and in an era, where we are equipped with the knowledge, technology and resources to fight back.



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