

# UNITED NATIONS



## OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



OHCHR

---

# FACT SHEET 1

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

*International Women's Day, 8 March 2007*  
*"Ending Impunity for Violence against Women and Girls"*

Violence against women and girls around the world, including domestic violence and sexual violence, is increasing. In recent world conflicts, rape has been used by perpetrators as a tool of war to target not only women, but also the larger community.

Domestic gender-based violence is still, in some parts of the world, an issue that is confined to the private domain, and a symptom of how women are generally considered as objects. Men often use domestic violence to diminish women's autonomy and self-worth.

In a survey conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2005 in 10 countries, over 50 percent of women in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Tanzania had been subject to domestic violence. Low state prosecution of cases of domestic violence is the result of fear of stigmatisation by women, or fear of losing the economic and social rights they benefit from through their partners. It also illustrates the denial of women's equality before the law, and reinforces their inferior social status.

Crimes of sexual violence, such as rape, enforced prostitution and other forms of coercive sexual acts, go against international human rights law, international humanitarian law, as well as national legislation. According to the United Nations Fund for Population and Agriculture (UNFPA), 1 out of 5 women has been raped or been the victim of attempted rape in her lifetime (State of the World's Population 2005). Still, crimes of sexual violence are the least likely to be prosecuted today. In many countries, the state of the legal system and the community's erroneous perception of victims of crimes of sexual violence do not encourage victims to come forward and testify.

World leaders at the Millennium Summit held in New York in 2000 manifested their commitment to "combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women" in the Millennium Declaration. States have a positive obligation to guarantee rights and ensure protection under international law, as spelled out in the core seven human rights treaties and addressed by the Special Procedures mechanisms dealing with country and thematic human rights issues.

In order to combat the rising phenomenon of violence against women and girls, investigating and prosecuting such crimes is an issue that has to be brought forward. States must ensure, under international law, that crimes of violence against women and girls are prosecuted and that the economic and social rights of the victims are protected. Putting such a system in place will bring perpetrators to justice, encourage victims and witnesses to testify, and put an end to impunity for crimes of sexual violence against women and girls, including rape.

### **International law and violence against women and girls**

*Countries that have ratified international treaties to enforce the protection of people from violations to their human rights are held accountable if these rights are violated. The following are some of the international legal instruments used to address violence against women:*

- *The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (1948) states that all men and women should enjoy all human rights equally.*
- *The **United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women** (1979) affirms that no “person, organization or enterprise” should discriminate against women. **The General Recommendation number 19** of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reiterates women’s right to be free from violence.*
- *The **Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women** (1993) recognizes that violence against women is a human rights violation.*
- *The **Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences** is appointed by the Human Rights Council to report on violence against women, and appeal to governments on victims’ behalf.*
- ***International Humanitarian Law** defines the limit of the use of violence in times of armed conflict. It also aims at protecting persons who are not, or are no longer, directly engaged in hostilities (the wounded, prisoners of war, and civilians). Three main currents make International Humanitarian Law: the “Law of Geneva”, represented by the international Conventions and Protocols established under the aegis of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) with the protection of the victims of conflict as their central concern; the “Law of The Hague”, based on the results of the Peace Conferences in the capital of the Netherlands in 1899 and 1907, which dealt principally with the permissible means and methods of war; and the efforts of the United Nations to ensure that human rights are respected in armed conflicts and to limit the use of certain weapons.*
- *The **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court** (established in 1998) considers several crimes of violence against women as war crimes and crimes against humanity. “Rape, sexual slavery, enforced sterilization, or any other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity” are considered as war crimes. If these acts were committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack on a civilian population, they constitute crimes against humanity. The majority of the 70 percent non-combatant casualties in recent conflicts have been women and children (General Assembly, In-depth study on all Forms of Violence against Women: Report of the Secretary General, 2006).*