Domestic violence is a pervasive problem worldwide that is of great concern to diplomats and NGO personnel at the UN. Leaders at the UN characterize domestic violence, also called intimate partner violence (IPV), as a violation of human rights for millions of women globally. These leaders, including former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, support research which has identified the causes of IPV as patriarchal inequality between men and women which results in power and economic differentials (Haj-yahia, 2002). This inequality includes cultural norms which discriminate against women and condone violence by male perpetrators.

Gender-based violence adversely affects the UN’s ability to successfully meet its MDGs, for example, MDG # 3, which relates to promoting equality and empowering women, and MDG # 5, which involves improving maternal health. Despite the efforts of the UN and the World Health Organization (WHO), programs to reduce or eliminate domestic violence have not been very effective.

Some Definitions

1. **Domestic violence** is defined as physical, psychological, or sexual violence occurring among family members.

2. **Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)** occurs between partners who are in marriages, cohabiting relationships, or while dating. The various forms of IPV include violent acts...
which cause physical, sexual, or psychological harm; economic control; and behavioral restrictions.

3. **Honor crimes or honor killings** occur within families or between intimate partners.

Honor killings are the most extreme form of IPV in which mostly women are killed for alleged transgressions which negatively affect the “honor” of the family. These transgressions include being a rape victim, alleged adultery, or even speaking to a man who is not a relative. For example, recently, a father in Yemen burned his daughter to death after discovering that she had spoken with her fiancé on a cell phone before they were married. In another horrific example, in India, in 2012, a 14 year old girl who had been in an arranged marriage, returned to her family complaining of being torturd by her in-laws. A few days later she disappeared. Her brother found her living with an ex-boyfriend. The brother dragged her into the street, cut off her head, and walked to the police station to surrender while carrying her head. The family was “very proud” of the brother’s actions because she had to be punished in order to restore the family’s honor.

**Some Statistics**

IPV is the most common form of violence against women but also is one of the most under-reported crimes (Domestic Violence Statistics, 2014). For example, in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa, and the U.S., IPV accounts for between 40% and 70% of murdered women (Domestic Violence Statistics). However, because of under-reporting, these data are likely to be inaccurate.

Though widely understood as an under-estimation, honor killings are estimated to be about 5,000 murders of women per year worldwide, with reports of approximately 950 honor killings yearly in Pakistan alone (UN News Service, 2010). Often, honor killings receive little
or no punishment. In some cultures, the perpetrators simply apologize and are not given prison sentences if the apology is accepted.

**Some Consequences**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have identified several different consequences of IPV for women (CDC, 2014; WHO, 2014):

- **Physical consequences include the following:**
  - Mild to severe physical injury (e.g., broken bones, burns)
  - Reproductive difficulties (e.g., miscarriages, excessive bleeding). Young girls are at high risk for this consequence. Girls who are forced into an arranged marriage to an older man and obligated to engage in sexual activity, may not have a fully developed reproductive system.

- **Psychological consequences include the following:**
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
  - Low self-esteem
  - Fear of intimacy

- **Health consequences include the following:**
  - Chronic stress-related disorders (e.g., high blood pressure)
  - HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases
  - Suicide attempts and ideation
  - Sleep disturbances
- Substance abuse/alcoholism
- Risky sexual behaviors
- Smoking

**Intervention Programs**

Mr. Ban Ki-moon, the current UN Secretary General, made the following statement regarding domestic violence, “Break the silence. When you witness violence against women and girls, do not sit back. Act” (UN Women, n.d.). Psychologists have offered explanations for IPV and have developed interventions designed to reduce this violent behavior. Within its cultural context, violent behavior is so complex and its specific cultural factors are so significant, that multi-factor and culturally sensitive interventions must be developed. Solutions to this gender-based violence problem must focus on the following:

1. *Legal and international agreements.* Laws must be passed and international agreements must be enforced to punish perpetrators. Leaders of countries that do not abide by international agreements and laws must be held accountable.

2. *Training for the police force, judiciary, and medical/mental health personnel.* These professions are typically male dominated in many countries. Consequently, men are in a power position to ignore or minimize charges of IPV, while concurrently being “responsible for” adjudicating perpetrators and protecting and treating victims. These professions need training to ensure sensitivity to survivors and to take seriously accounts of abuse. For example, a student from India said that IPV victims are reluctant to report abuse because of fear that the police will laugh at them and send them back to the abusers.
3. **Academic education.** Education is important for empowering women and girls and for reducing IPV and domestic violence in the long term. Girls and women who are educated may be less vulnerable to abuse in relationships because they have acquired some skills for economic independence and might perceive that they have options, other than remaining within the relationship.

4. **Life skills training.** Children can be trained in early grades to use conflict resolution and other non-violent life skills.

5. **Change cultural attitudes and norms.** Changing attitudes and norms that condone, and even mandate, violence against women must occur. Social psychologists have informed us that information campaigns alone (e.g., cognitive awareness) will not change cultural attitudes, which are endemic in the society. The emotional aspects of “attitude,” along with cognitive ones, must be used. Over time, attitude change results in new cultural norms.

6. **Involve boys and men in the change process.** In order for attitudes and norms to change, men and boys need to be involved in the efforts. Males typically listen to other males. Male-led conversations and interventions should stress IPV as a *human* problem, and not one just relevant to women.

7. **Increase safe havens.** There should be safe havens for women and girls to recuperate and receive medical and mental health treatment. The locations of these havens should be confidential in order to avoid destruction and intimidation by perpetrators or other males.
8. *Use evidence-based psychotherapy when culturally appropriate.* In some cultures, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), an evidence-based therapy, has been used successfully to treat IPV survivors.

9. *Develop appropriate and culture-specific treatment/intervention programs for perpetrators.* Globally, the traditional focus of treatment and intervention is on survivors, usually girls and women, but there should be parallel treatment/intervention programs for abusers. For example, Day, Chung, O’Leary, and Carson (2009) found that assessing for the *types* of batterers in mandated treatment programs is effective in determining the best therapy/intervention modality to motivate the perpetrator to change behavior. Intervention models that are chosen should be culturally relevant.

10. *Increase public awareness.* Involve the local and/or global media in increasing awareness about IPV and attitude change programs in order to eventually influence cultural norms. For instance, the Nigerian government was forced to attend to the horrific kidnapping of the nearly 300 girls from their school in Chibok earlier this year because of the international pressure to rescue them (i.e., #Bring Back Our Girls).
References


