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"Violence against women: a statistical overview, challenges and gaps in data collection and methodology and approaches for overcoming them"

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**Defining and measuring violence against women:  
Background, issues, and recommendations**

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## **Historical Background of Violence Against Women Movement in the United States**

It has often been asserted that the current field of violence against women in the United States owes its existence to the re-emergence in the 1970s of the women's movement. At that time, there was an explosion of scholarship in the United States in the area of violence against women, as women trained in such diverse fields as philosophy, literature, law, sociology, anthropology, and psychology wrote about the experiences of women as victims of violence (Wilson, 1981). Many of these women approached their subjects within the context of a feminist ideology that viewed patriarchy as the root causes of violence against women (Brownmiller, 1975; But

*Journal of the American Medical Association* by stating that violence remains the leading cause of injuries to U.S. women ages 15 to 44 (Novello, 1992).

This paradigmatic shift resulted in more and more cooperation between U.S. criminal justice and public health agencies to conduct research on violence against women and to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies and policies. For example, in 1993, the U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention collaborated to jointly sponsor – through a grant to the Center for Policy Research – a national telephone survey on violence against women, which was conducted from November 1995 to May 1996. The National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), as it came to be called, queried 8,000 U.S. women about their lifetime experiences as victims of various forms of violence, including rape, intimate partner violence and stalking. To provide a context in which to place women's experiences, the NVAWS also sampled 8,000 U.S. men.

This paradigmatic shift in viewing violence against women as a public health rather than a strictly criminal justice problem was advanced further when the World Health Organization's published its groundbreaking *World Report on Violence and Health*. In that report violence is defined as:

*“The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (Krug et al 2002:5).”*

As Dean (2004) points out in a recent article in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, although many of the acts that are defined as violence against women under a public health perspective are also defined as violence against women under a criminal justice perspective, there are some important differences. First, the public health definition of violence against women includes acts that result in psychological harm. Second, the public health perspective includes acts involving deprivation and neglect, which under most U.S. criminal codes usually only apply to children or vulnerable adults who are severely deprived and/or neglected by their caretakers. And third, the public health perspective places more emphasis on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator: Whereas, the criminal justice perspective defines murder, physical assault, sexual assault, and stalking as crimes irrespective of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, the public health perspective distinguishes between acts that perpetrated against women by family members and intimate partners versus those perpetrated by acquaintances or strangers (Dean, 2004). According to a public health perspective, the emphasis should be on violence perpetrated against women by intimate partners. As will be explained later, these differences in definition may have profound influence on what is included in a definition of violence against women.

## **A Human Rights Perspective on Violence Against Women**

In recent years, another shift has occurred in the way researchers and activists view violence against women. Following such major events as the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the 1994 World Conference on Population in and Development, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, scholars and activists, especially those working in so-called developing nations, have come increasingly to view violence against women as a human rights issue rather than merely a criminal justice or a public health issue. In addition to recognizing the debilitating effects of physical and sexual violence perpetrated against women by private actors, such as by partners or family members in their homes, or by acquaintances and strangers in the community, this paradigm focuses attention on violence perpetrated against women by soldiers during times of war and internal conflicts; sexual assaults perpetrated against women in state custody by law enforcement personnel; rapes perpetrated against women in refugee camps by other refugees, local police, and/or military personnel; the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation or for menial labor; and harmful traditional practices, such as forced marriages, genital cutting, honor crimes, suttee (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

The human rights perspective also focuses attention on state-tolerated and state-sponsored discrimination against women. In many countries, statutory restrictions curtail women's freedom of movement, ability to inherit property, ability to divorce, and access to education, health care, and jobs (Human Rights Watch, 1999). In others, such restrictions, while not strictly legal, are nonetheless tolerated. The human rights perspective recognizes that these discriminatory practices make women more vulnerable to violent victimization and emotional abuse, that gender-based violence constitutes discrimination against women, and that violence intersects with and impacts on other aspects of women's well-being and their enjoyment of human rights.

### **How Should Violence Against Women Be Defined?**

A discussion of the different paradigms used historically to frame the subject of violence against women begs the question: How should violence against women be defined for purposes of establishing research protocols to measure violence against women on an international basis? This question is critical because, as numerous scholars (e.g., Dean, 2004; DeKeseredy, 2000) have pointed out, how we define violence against women determines what types of acts are measured. If violence against women is defined narrowly, such as including only violent acts proscribed by criminal sanctions, or only acts perpetrated by intimate partners, the rates of violence produced by our measurement strategies will be much lower than if we use a broader definition, such as one that includes violent and non-violent acts perpetrated by all types of offenders.

A *criminal justice perspective* would result in a relatively narrow definition of violence against women, one that defines the problem as a subset of crimes perpetrated against women and female children by any type of offender. This definition would eliminate acts that may be very injurious to women, but are

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how researchers frame their questions about violent victimization can





assailant; whether the perpetrator ever directly threatened them; and whether they thought they had been stalked.

This methodology allowed the investigators to compare prevalence and characteristics of stalking victimization using different definitions of stalking (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2001). For example, one operational definition required stalkers to overtly threaten their victim, while another required victims to only feel a high level of fear. It also allowed investigators to compare victim definitions of stalking with legal definitions of stalking (Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison, 2000). Obviously, stalking prevalence rates varied by definition used. In general, less restrictive definitions yielded higher prevalence rates, while more restrictive definitions yielded lower rates.

Using a “multiple definitional/measurement” approach can be a bit messy. For example, it is harder to present data when there are multiple estimates of stalking victimization. Moreover, there is not a single estimate to feed to the media or policy makers. However, this approach is more intellectually honest because it demons

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