Chapter 1
Violence Against Women Worldwide:
Setting the Context

Gender-based violence is perhaps the most wide-spread and socially tolerated of human rights violations. . . It both reflects and reinforces inequities between men and women and compromises the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims.

(United Nations Population Fund 2005:65)

Agencies of the United Nations have declared in many documents and forums that violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace. As such, women’s vulnerability to violence violates and impairs enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms (www.un.org/womenwatch). It has been described by the Secretary-General of the UN as the most shameful human rights violation and perhaps the most pervasive (UNIFEM 2003:8).

Decades of research and action have lead to a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted nature of male violence directed at women. Such acts of violence encompass human rights, health, criminal justice, economic and social justice dimensions. However, the prevalence and breadth of women’s experiences of male violence are only gradually becoming known. The World Bank estimates that, globally, violence causes more ill-health for women than malaria and traffic accidents combined and that it is equally serious in causing death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer (World Bank 1993). The direct and indirect economic consequences of violence against women, both at an individual and a societal level, are beginning to be documented (see e.g. Day 1995; Piispa & Heiskanen 2001; Walby 2004; WHO 2004a).

Violence against women takes many forms. The 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women was the first to arrive at an internationally agreed upon definition of violence as it pertains to women’s experiences. Violence was defined as:

any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

The Declaration specifies that this definition should encompass, but not be limited to, acts of physical, sexual, and psychological violence in the family, community or perpetrated or condoned by the State where it occurs. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action expanded on this definition, specifying that violence against women
includes violations of the rights of women in situations of armed conflict, including systematic rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, coerced or forced use of contraceptives, prenatal sex selection and female infanticide.

Around the world, women suffer intimate partner violence, marital rape, rape by other men known to them and by strangers, incest, foeticide, sexual harassment, trafficking for the purposes of forced labour or prostitution, dowry-related violence, honour killings, other forms of femicide, acid attacks, and female genital mutilation. These acts are considered to be “gender-based” violence because they are committed almost exclusively by men against women, and are supported by gender inequalities at the societal level (Heise et al. 1999; Johnsson-Latham 2005). Individual acts of violence are supported overtly or tacitly by cultural, social or religious norms and economic inequalities, which can serve to undermine legal prohibitions against such acts. The term “gender-based violence” underscores the links between women’s social and economic status and their vulnerability to male violence.

Studies have confirmed that violence affects vast numbers of women around the globe. In a summary of 80 population-based surveys conducted in more than 50 countries, Ellsberg & Heise (2005) find that:

- between 10% and 60% of women who have ever been married or had a partner have experienced at least one incident of physical violence by an intimate partner
- rates of intimate partner violence in a single year range from 3% or less in the United States, Australia and Canada, to 27% in Leon, Nicaragua, 38% in Korea, and 52% of Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip
- women are more likely to be murdered by an intimate partner than by anyone else
- one-half of ever-partnered women in some countries have experience sexual violence by an intimate partner

In addition, up to one-half of adolescent girls report their first sexual encounter as coerced (Krug et al. 2002).

While progress has been made in tackling violence against women and providing supports to victims in many countries, new forms are emerging. Human trafficking is overtaking drug smuggling as one of the world’s fastest growing illegal activities, although estimates of the dimensions of the problem vary. A report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that between 700,000 and 2 million people are trafficked each year (UNODC 2006). The United States 2005 Trafficking in Persons report estimates that between 600,000 and 800,000 persons are trafficked each year, the majority for commercial sexual exploitation (US State Department 2005). Approximately 80% are women and girls.

The impacts of violence on women, girls and societies can be profound. According to OXFAM, there are 50 million fewer women in South Asia today than there should be due to sex-selective abortions, violence and neglect. Girls and women have less to eat than boys and men, are often denied an education, are forced into dowry marriages, and have little or no access to proper health care (OXFAM International 2004). The premature death of women and girls due to gender discrimination, unequal access to resources, violence and neglect is known as the “missing women” phenomenon (Klasen & Wink 2003). Worldwide, missing women number approximately 100 million (Sen 2003).