Chapter 5
Correlates of Violence

As shown in Chapter 3, there is variation in the types and frequency of violence experienced by women in the countries participating in the IVAWS. There is ethnographic evidence from other research studies that, although gender-based violence exists to some extent in the majority of societies, it is low or non-existent in some. In his ethnographic study of 90 small-scale and peasant societies, Levinson (1989) identified 16 that were relatively free of family violence. Sanday (1981), in a cross-cultural study of rape in 95 tribal societies, described 45 as free of rape. The fact that cross-cultural research has found variations in the frequency and severity of violence against women has led some researchers to the conclusion that violence therefore is not inevitable (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2005) and that by identifying factors that raise the risk of violence, actions can be taken to prevent it.

This chapter examines the factors that are associated with physical and sexual violence and that those help protect women from violence. Previous research has identified certain characteristics of women, their male perpetrators and the surrounding culture that are associated with a heightened risk of intimate partner violence. These include: the youth of the victim and perpetrator; male unemployment and low economic status; alcohol and drug abuse on the part of male partners; exposure to violence in childhood; emotional abuse by male partners; forced sex; male dominance and control in the family; traditional gender-role ideology; attitudes condoning marital violence; a wider culture that equates masculinity with dominance, toughness and honour; and, a culture that condones violence as a way to solve problems (Heise 1998; Stith et al. 2004).

Many of the risk factors for killing or attempted killing of female partners are the same: perpetrators with a history of violence inside and outside the home; access to weapons; substance abuse; jealousy and obsessiveness; stalking; sexual violence; violence during pregnancy; children from a previous relationship living in the home; threats of homicide or suicide; and, separation or threats by female partners to end the relationship (Campbell et al. 2001, 2003; Gartner et al. 1998; McFarlane et al. 2002; Wilson & Daly 1998). Men are almost universally most often the perpetrators in intimate partner homicides cross-culturally, and when women kill intimate partners they are far more likely to be killing a violent partner in self-defence (Campbell et al. 2001).
As a field of study, research examining correlates and risk factors for sexual assault is less well-developed than in the area of intimate partner violence. Victimisation surveys, which are designed to assess the prevalence of sexual violence and the factors or situations that increase women’s risk of attack, typically contain little information about offenders, with the exception of offenders who are intimate partners. This is due to the very nature of victimisation surveys which focus primarily on the characteristics of respondents who are the victims of crimes, and also concerns that women may not have reliable information about many characteristics of sexual offenders who are casual acquaintance, friends or strangers. Correlates of sexual victimisation that have been identified by surveys include being young and unmarried, being a student or active in leisure or work patterns that take place outside the home in the evening, and having previously been raped or sexually abused (Gannon & Mihorean 2005; Krug et al. 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes 2006). These indicate something about the risk of sexual violence for young women but they are not very helpful for identifying factors related to perpetrators that could help with the design of intervention or prevention programs for potential offenders. Prevention and intervention strategies that typically flow from assessments of risk based on the characteristics of sexual assault victims focus on helping women protect themselves by restricting their activities or improving their self-defence capabilities. These strategies place the burden of prevention on female victims and not on the perpetrators of sexual violence.

Studies of offenders have identified characteristics that raise the likelihood of committing sexual violence, but these studies are generally based on men who have been apprehended by police. Offenders who are charged by police, convicted and sentenced to prison represent a very small, nonrepresentative sample of all men who rape (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of the barriers to reporting sexual violence to the police). The World Health Organization, in a review of the research literature in the World Report on Violence and Health cite the following personal and societal level risk factors for perpetrating sexual violence: alcohol consumption, especially within a cultural context of male group bonding; a history of sexual violence in childhood; strongly patriarchal relationships or family structures; societal tolerance of sexual assault and objectification of women; high levels of violence in the community; and weak laws and policies related to sexual violence and gender equality (Krug et al. 2002).

Small studies, typically conducted with men attending college, have explored men’s attitudes and beliefs about rape and rape victims. The results of these studies provide an important source of information for understanding male sexual aggression. Belief in rape myths—beliefs that only certain types of women are raped, women “ask for it” by the way they dress, any woman who doesn’t want sex can resist if she wants to, and women cry rape when they engage in sex that they later regret—are widespread and those who adhere to rape myths are more likely to use sexual coercion or commit rape and support male peers in the same behaviour (Burt 1991; Check & Malamuth 1985; Murnen et al. 2002; Schwartz & Dekeseredy 1997; Taylor & Mouzos 2006). Men who hold rape-supportive beliefs also tend to hold traditional beliefs about gender roles, negative attitudes toward male-female relationships, hostile attitudes toward women, conservative political beliefs, and express a need for power and dominance in intimate relationships (Anderson et al.