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## **Impact of Violence on Women's Health**

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### **Abstract**

Violence against women is now well recognised as a public health problem and human rights violation of worldwide significance. It is an important risk factor for women's ill health, with far reaching consequences for both their physical and mental health. Gender based violence takes many forms and results in physical, sexual and psychological harm to the women throughout their lives. Gender based violence often the manifestation of unequal power relation between men and women in society and the secondary status of the women because of which women have to suffer a range of health problems in silence. This paper will aim at describing a few problems related to women's health which are directly linked to their experience as victims of gender based violence.

**Keywords:** Violence, Health, women

### **Introduction**

Violence against women is now well recognised as a public health problem and human rights violation of worldwide significance. It is an important risk factor for women's ill health, with far reaching consequences for both their physical and mental health. <sup>1</sup> Violence against women of which domestic violence is a part, is almost a universal phenomenon that cuts across the regional, social, cultural, economic boundaries and threatens the health, well-being, rights and dignity of women in streets, in workplace, and at home. The risk factors vary from culture to culture, but the consequences are almost similar all over the globe.

### **Defining Gender Based Violence**

Violence against women is “any act of gender-based violence 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 in private life.”<sup>2</sup> The term gender based violence has been defined as “acts or threats of acts intended to hurt or make women suffer physically, sexually or psychologically, and which affect women because they are women or affect women disproportionately.”<sup>3</sup> Gender based violence extends across women's life span which begins pre-birth with sex-selective abortion and battering during pregnancy; and continuing through infancy and childhood with differential access to food and medical care, and sexual abuse; during adolescence with dating violence, economically coerced sex, and forced prostitution; and in adulthood with violence from an intimate partner, marital rape, dowry abuse, homicide, and sexual harassment.<sup>3</sup> The most common forms of violence against women are physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by a woman's husband or intimate partner. <sup>4</sup>

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### **Gender Based Violence and Effects on Women's Health**

Violence against women is one of the most widespread human rights violations as well as a public health problem in need of urgent attention. It clearly impacts people's ability to achieve the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.<sup>5</sup> The consequences of gender-based violence include severe short-and long-term damage to women's health and significant risks for the health of their children.<sup>3</sup> The most immediate physical health consequences are the consequences of injuries such as acute and chronic pain, cuts, burns, bruises, broken teeth, broken bones, damages to eyes and ears. For women the risk of injury from physical assault seems to increase when the assailant is an intimate.<sup>3</sup> Chronic stress-related problems include functional gastrointestinal disorder, appetite loss and viral infections such as cold and flu.<sup>1</sup> Violence during pregnancy poses a threat to health and at its extreme can result in death of the mother and her unborn child.<sup>6</sup> The main health effect specific to abuse during pregnancy is the threat to health and risk of mother, fetus, or both from trauma. This can overlap of intimate partner violence and child abuse.<sup>1</sup> Gynecologic problems are the most consistent physical health difference between battered and non-battered women.<sup>7</sup> Female genital mutilation (FMG), a culturally supported form of gender-based violence is associated with a range of serious health problems, including infection, chronic pain, sexual dysfunction, and obstetric complications.<sup>4</sup>

Sexual violence has profound impact on the mental, physical and reproductive health of the victim. The acts of sexual violence have severe consequences for women's reproductive system causing nonspecific pelvic, genital and breast pain, severe menstrual problems, urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.<sup>3</sup> Evidence from health facilities suggests that abused women's reproductive health is compromised through much higher rates of gynecological problems, HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), miscarriages, abortions, low birth weight, and unwanted pregnancy.<sup>8</sup> Sexual violence also results in unplanned pregnancy.

The physical side of abuse is easily seen, but the psychological wounds are hardly seen and these affect every single aspects of the life of the victim. The psychological impact of domestic violence affects women more than the physical injuries. Physical and sexual violence negatively impacts women's mental health. Women who live with violent men tend, then, to develop serious health problems as a consequence of the repeated violence and fear they experience. Stark & Flitcraft (1996) have identified this as "Battered Woman Syndrome", characterized by recurrent assaultive injuries, stress-related injuries, isolation, substance abuse and mental illness.<sup>9</sup> Mental health consequences include depression, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, sleeping disorder, eating problems, suicidal tendencies, and increased use of alcohol and other drugs.<sup>3</sup> PTSD is commonly conceptualized as an anxiety disorder occurring subsequent to a traumatic event which is perceived as highly threatening. There is some evidence that PTSD is directly associated with more suicidal attempts and this mediates the link between partner violence and suicidal attempts.<sup>10</sup> Numerous researchers have documented that the "association between violence from one's spouse, low self-esteem, and suicidal tendencies is very strong, especially when compared to the women's pre-battering life phase".<sup>11</sup> Sometimes victims may take long time to recover from and may develop extreme symptoms years later in response to stressful incidents. Regular alcohol consumption by the husband, harassment by the in-laws, exposure to harsh physical discipline during childhood and witnessing father beating the mother during childhood were other factors that were strongly associated with increased risk of poor mental health.<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Millions of girls and women suffer from gender-based violence and its consequences because of their sex and unequal status in society. Violence against women is a serious violation of human rights. The women who have experienced physical, sexual and psychological violence suffer a range of health problems, often in silence.<sup>1</sup> Hence, attention has been paid to the

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serious health consequences of the abused and the health needs of the abused women and girls . Necessary measures are warranted to combat such situations.

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