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BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AS A HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE
JODHPUR, INDIA, MARCH 14-19, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

All over the world, women experience violence right from the time they are born to the time they die. In some countries, foetuses are aborted simply because they are female, and female infanticide is common. In developing countries, girls are typically more malnourished than boys. And in practically every corner of the world, young and adult women experience a high incidence of sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence and other forms of abuse, while widows are abandoned or thrown out of their homes.

Violence has traditionally been considered a women's issue to be addressed through mechanisms such as law, counselling, provision of shelters, and community organizing. More recently, however, violence against women is being recognized as an issue that concerns the health and human rights of women – and one that demands a response both from health-care professionals as well as the human rights system.

What are the health consequences of violence against women? According to a report of the Global Commission on Women's Health, in addition to morbidity and mortality, violence against women leads to psychological trauma, depression, substance abuse, injuries, sexually-transmitted diseases and HIV infection, suicide and murder. Violence during pregnancy is identified as a major reason for miscarriage and low birth-weight children.

The World Bank, in its 1993 World Development Report, assessed the health consequences of gender-based violence for the first time. Based on the limited data available, it estimated that in industrialized countries, rape and domestic violence take away almost one in every five healthy years of life of women aged 15 to 44. On a per capita basis, the health burden of domestic violence is about the same for reproductive-age women in both developed and developing countries.

Violence against women is also a violation of women's human rights. Human rights, which arise from a fundamental notion of people's humanity, are considered inherent and inalienable to the very essence of being human. Not only does violence take away from the right to be human, violence also impedes other fundamental rights. These include the rights to life, to health, to security and bodily integrity, to political participation, and to food, work and shelter.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, however, violence was not explicitly declared a breach of women's human rights until the 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna. Subsequent world conferences reiterated governmental commitment to understanding women's rights as human rights.

THE MEETING

A meeting, which brought together activists from six Asian countries, was held in Jodhpur, India, from March 14-19, 1998 to deepen the analysis and understanding of violence as an issue of both women's health and rights. The meeting, which focused mainly on sexual and domestic violence, in the overall context of violence against women, had three objectives:

- To deepen the conceptual understanding of violence against women as a critical health and rights issue
- To share experiences of addressing violence against women across the region through a range of interventions
- To sharpen strategies to respond to violence more effectively at local, national, and regional levels

The meeting consisted of four key actors working in health or violence from each of the following countries: China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. These countries were selected on the basis of where the Ford Foundation programmes in Asia on issues of violence against women. Stree Aadhar Kendra, a non-government organization based in Maharashtra, India, collaborated with the Ford Foundation to host the meeting.¹

Participants, with their rich accumulation of expertise, were the meeting's primary resource. In line with this thinking, only two external resource persons with specialized experience were invited to the meeting. The meeting agenda, which was evolved in consultation with participants, included presentations, small group discussions and country exercises. The agenda was deliberately kept flexible to address the varying needs of participants, including the need to exchange information with one another.

This report summarizes the regional meeting that took place in Jodhpur. It is our hope that the report will contribute in a modest way towards raising awareness of the need to address violence as a critical issue of women's health and rights.

¹ Stree Aadhar Kendra started its work in the area of violence in 1984 by providing legal aid to women in distress. The organization organizes women around their concerns at the community level, and advocates these concerns to policymakers. Over the years, Stree Aadhar Kendra has taken up several issues including equal property rights for women, rehabilitation of widows and deserted women, and women's political participation. Violence against women continues to be a core work area for the organization.