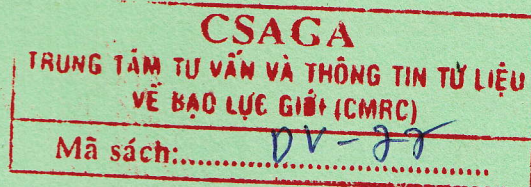


CSAGA
CMRC

DV-77

WHO/EIP/GPE/99.2
Distr. Limited
English only



**PUTTING WOMEN'S SAFETY FIRST:
ETHICAL AND SAFETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
RESEARCH ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN**



Global Programme on Evidence for Health Policy
World Health Organization
Geneva, Switzerland

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women, in its various forms, is endemic in communities and countries around the world, cutting across class, race, age, religious and national boundaries. According to the United Nations Declaration, violence against women includes "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 deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (United Nations 1993)". The most common type of abuse of women worldwide is "domestic violence" or the physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse of women by their intimate partners (Heise 1994). There are other forms of abuse, such as dowry harassment and wife inheritance, which are linked to traditional or customary practices and are limited to specific regions and communities.

It is only now, through the sustained activism by women's organisations that violence against women, including domestic violence, is starting to receive substantial attention internationally. As domestic violence against women becomes increasingly recognised and discussed, important questions are being raised concerning its magnitude in different settings, and its causes and consequences. Likewise, there is increasing recognition of the need for better data on the effectiveness of different interventions.

Due to the limitations of service-based data, accurate figures on the prevalence of domestic violence must be obtained through population-based surveys in which a representative sample of randomly selected women are asked directly about their experiences of abuse. Population-based surveys can also be used to obtain important insights into some of the causes and consequences of violence, and in the long term, to monitor trends and to explore the community impact of different interventions. More in-depth qualitative research provides a means to obtain greater insights into the settings and contexts in which violence occurs, the dynamics of abuse, and to better understand how women, children and communities are affected by this violence. Likewise, research on men can provide important insights into the causes of violence, and to explore the impact of different forms of intervention.

Research on violence against women, however, raises important ethical and methodological challenges. Researching abuse is not like other areas of investigation – the nature of the topic means that issues of safety, confidentiality and interviewer skills and training are even more important than in other forms of research. It is not an exaggeration to say that the physical safety and mental well being of both the respondents and the research team can be put in jeopardy if adequate precautions are not taken.

In order to guide future research in this area, the World Health Organization has developed the following recommendations regarding the ethical conduct of domestic

violence research. These build on the collective experience of the International Researchers Network on Violence Against Women (IRNVAW)¹. They have been reviewed and approved by the WHO Steering Committee for the Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women, and also reviewed by key members of the Scientific and Ethical Review Group (SERG) of the Special Programme on Research and Research Training on Human Reproduction (HRP.) The recommendations are in addition to those outlined in the CIOMS International Guidelines for Ethical Review of Epidemiological Studies (1991).

RESEARCHING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

It is often felt that domestic violence against women is too sensitive a topic to be explored in a population-based survey, and that shame, self-blame or fear of further violence will prevent women from discussing their experiences. However, community-based research on this issue has been successfully conducted in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Europe and North America (Heise 1994, WHO 1997), and a number of instruments have been developed to quantify the extent, nature, severity and frequency of different forms of interpersonal violence. These studies show that research on domestic violence against women can be conducted with full respect of ethical and safety considerations. They also show that when interviewed in a non-judgmental manner in an appropriate setting, many women will discuss their experiences of violence. Indeed, rather than being a barrier, evidence suggests that many women find participating in violence research beneficial (Health and Development Policy Project, 1996).

Despite these positive findings to date, there is the real danger that research conducted without due sensitivity and attention to safety and confidentiality could be distressing and put respondents, and at times researchers, at risk. All research on domestic violence against women needs to prioritize women's safety, and build into the study design plans on how to protect the safety of all participants and to ensure that the research is conducted in an ethical and appropriately sensitive manner. Box 1 summarizes key ethical and safety principles that should guide all research on violence against women. Recommended actions that should be taken to ensure that the research adheres to these principles are then described.

² This network, co-ordinated by the Centre for Health and Gender Equity (formerly the Health and Development Policy Project), is made up of individuals who have pursued gender-violence research, particularly in developing country settings. It meets annually to exchange information on how best to research physical and sexual abuse in a methodologically rigorous and ethically sound manner.

BOX 1: ETHICAL AND SAFETY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESEARCH

- The safety of respondents and the research team is paramount, and should infuse all project decisions
- Prevalence studies need to be methodologically sound and to build upon current research experience about how to minimize the under-reporting of abuse
- Protecting confidentiality is essential to ensure both women's safety and data quality
- All research team members should be carefully selected and receive specialized training and on-going support
- The study design must include a number of actions aimed at reducing any possible distress caused to the participants by the research
- Fieldworkers should be trained to refer women requesting assistance to available sources of support. Where few resources exist, it may be necessary for the study to create short-term support mechanisms.
- Researchers and donors have an ethical obligation to help ensure that their findings are properly interpreted and used to advance policy and intervention development
- Violence questions should be incorporated into surveys designed for other purposes only when ethical and methodological requirements can be met

a) Safety of the respondents and the research team is paramount and should infuse all project decisions.

The physical safety of respondents and interviewers from potential retaliatory violence by the abuser is of prime importance. If the focus of the survey becomes known -- either within the household, or among the wider community -- the topic of the interview may become known to a perpetrator of family violence. For women experiencing abuse, the mere act of participating in a study may provoke further violence. This may place the respondent or the interview team at risk, either before, during or after the interview. At the same time the woman, as the subject and beneficiary of the research, needs to give full informed consent. Thus, for both ethical and safety reasons, the survey is introduced to the household and wider community as a survey on women's health and life experiences. However, the woman herself has to be fully informed about the nature of the questions. The sensitivity of the research topic can be raised during the initial consent procedure.