

How Do We Know that Domestic Violence is an Epidemic?  
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The World Health Organization (WHO) has just released a report on an epidemic of domestic violence around the world. They say that at least one-third of women are assaulted by a partner at some point in their lives. When I see numbers like this, I wonder how they know this.

According to this report, 40 percent of women killed worldwide were slain by an intimate partner and being assaulted by a partner was the most common kind of violence experienced by women.

These reports were based on studies from 1983 to 2010. By their own (UN) statistics, 600 million women live in countries where domestic violence is not considered a crime. Where, then, could they gather statistics? If it is not a crime, then it is not among government crime statistics. Such violence is against the law in the developed world, but even here, if women do not press charges, those numbers must be guessed.

In Muslim-majority countries, domestic violence is not a crime and, furthermore, nobody goes door-to-door asking questions about women (surveys). Some numbers might be guessed if statistics are available in health clinics, but it is difficult to assess how many broken bones are the result of a fall or abuse, particularly if the victim is afraid to tell. There is too much guesswork here for me to take these numbers at face value.

WHO does have some statistics on childbearing fatalities, but those would only be available from a clinic or hospital, not from home deliveries. How many of those fatalities were the consequence of inadequate health care (such as in Afghanistan) and how much from pregnant wife battery, which we hear anecdotally is the most dangerous time for women in the hands of a brute.

How do we know that today's batteries are epidemic? Could it be that this is the first time that numbers are being collected? Were women less battered in the past? I don't have numbers, but my educated guess is that we are just becoming aware of what has always been so.

There is a possibility that certain times in history are worse than others when it comes to abuse of women. Warfare is such a time. We also can see that even today, where great social change and disruptions are taking place, such anxiety may provoke more men into violence toward their women than in periods of stability.

For the first time in history, women in the Western world are no longer keeping traditional silence about rape or domestic violence. Remember that it has not been very long that such responses have been possible. In the rest of the world, something new is afoot too: the availability of western media even in benighted countries. When a Turkish soap opera about a modern Muslim married couple was shown in the Arab states, women watching recognized that their husbands were not as gentle as the young husband in the soap opera. They are starting to see the injustice in what they thought was inevitable.

WHO has done one important service with their report, one that has been introduced in the United States and Europe, and that may take root elsewhere. Doctors in Women's and Orthopedic clinics now ask patients if there has been any violence in their homes. It is a public health matter. Eventually, it will become a criminal justice matter, which is impossible today in the face of stiff male cultural resistance.

The three worst places for brutality toward women are Central Africa, where constant warfare and rape violence are endemic; Muslim-majority countries, where clerics resist even safe houses for runaway battered women; and India, where in-laws unhappy with dowries set fire to brides (calling these murders kitchen mishaps).

WHO got our attention, despite incomplete numbers, and that is good. But what is most important is that publicity about this matter is beginning to make a dent. One must understand a problem in order to fix it. Someday we will not have to say that it is

better for a woman to be lucky than good.

677 words

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