

*Conveying Concerns:*  
**Women**  
Report on Gender-based  
**Violence**

# Conveying Concerns:

## Women

Report on Gender-based

## Violence

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## Preface

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing highlighted a scourge that preys on women and girls across cultures. The issue is gender-based violence—a manifestation of the social, psychological, and economic subordination of women that remains largely hidden from view. Whether trafficking in girls, sexual intimidation at work, rape, or battery in the home, gender-based violence cuts across social and economic divisions. The problem breeds in silence and finds legitimacy through cultural norms. Over the last two decades, however, recognition of the problem has increased. The Platform for Action adopted in Beijing sets out an agenda for eliminating and preventing the problem. The solutions are not simple. Attitudes must change.

This booklet, which conveys a range of themes on gender-based violence from the perspective of women journalists, reflects the issue's complexity. The booklet is the third in a series, compiled through the Women's Edition project, a unique effort to bring together women

from the media in developing countries. In October 1998, the Population Reference Bureau brought senior journalists from nine countries to New York City to discuss gender-based violence. The journalists subsequently produced special supplements in their newspapers and magazines as well as programs on radio and television that highlighted local and international aspects of the issue. (See a description of Women's Edition on page 35.)

The articles and scripts have been adapted for this booklet and appear in five sections, each with a brief introduction. The first section looks at domestic violence and is followed by sections on sexual abuse, female genital cutting, laws and policies related to gender-based violence, and the role of the media.

Though the articles and scripts were produced in countries of varying cultural and economic situations, they share a common thread: The media, as major purveyors of society's images, can play a key role in breaking down stereotypes and negative attitudes toward women. ■

## Global Overview: Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence occurs in all societies and is largely unpoliced. Such violence occurs within the home or in the wider community and affects women and girls disproportionately.

Women are vulnerable to this violence at all stages of life. They are threatened by female infanticide, incest, child prostitution, rape, partner violence, psychological abuse, sexual harassment, wartime violence, and harmful traditional practices such as forced early marriage, female genital cutting, and widow burning. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at least one in every five of the world's female population has been physically or sexually abused at some time.

In adopting the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the UN General Assembly defined the problem as “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 private life.”

Domestic violence, which typically occurs when a man beats his female partner, is the most prevalent form of gender-based violence. In the United States, more than a million and a half women are beaten by partners each year, according to a study by Murray A. Straus and Richard J. Gelles, published in 1986. In the 1995 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey, 35 percent of women reported being beaten by their husbands during marriage.

Though gender-based violence is widespread, information is fragmented and anecdotal. A culture of silence sur-

rounds cases of violence against women in most countries, making it difficult to get a true picture of its extent. Part of the difficulty is that gender-based violence mostly occurs in what is thought of as the private sphere—within families, inside homes, and out of sight. This type of violence is underreported and even deliberately disguised by both the survivors and the societies in which they live. The reliability of crime and health statistics varies among countries, and refusal to recognize the problem is a barrier to its solution.

Rape, a pervasive form of gender-based violence, has long symbolized a man's ability to have his way with a woman. Around the world, most rapists are known by those they attack and are often the victim's father, partner, or some other household figure. Statistics on rape suggest that 40 percent to 60 percent of those raped are 15 years old or younger. A recent U.S. National Academy of Sciences study on reproductive health noted that penal codes define rape in different ways. In many Latin American countries, rape, even by strangers, is considered a crime against morality rather than a crime against a person. Consequently, if the judicial system does not consider rape victims to have impeccable morals, the crime may not be prosecuted. In some societies, the rape of the girl or woman is thought to bring shame on her family. The family may consider marrying the girl to her rapist as the only way to recover its honor. In some cases, the girl is condemned to prostitution.

Wartime rape and other forms of gender-based violence remain a constant threat in politically unsettled lands. In countries like Rwanda and what was Yugoslavia, rape has been used as an

*Domestic violence, which typically occurs when a man beats his female partner, is the most prevalent form of gender-based violence.*

instrument of war to suppress and humiliate the enemy. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are now 13 million cross-border refugees around the world and an additional 30 million displaced persons, or people living like refugees in their own countries. Women and children uprooted by war and located in makeshift refugee camps are easy targets for marauders.

Female genital cutting, another form of gender-based violence, is practiced in 28 African countries and in about a dozen Middle Eastern and Asian nations. Some 130 million women and girls have been subjected to the practice, which is fundamentally about controlling women's sexuality.

The effects of gender-based violence can be devastating and long lasting. Such violence is a particular danger to a woman's reproductive health and can scar a survivor psychologically, cognitively, and interpersonally. Since girls are more often subjected to sexual violence, they are at risk of becoming infected with HIV at a much younger age than are boys. A man's refusal to have protected intercourse increases his partner's risk of a sexually transmitted infection and subsequent pelvic pain, pelvic inflammatory disease, and infertility. Forced and unprotected sex also leads to unintended pregnancies, abortions, and unwanted children. Boys who witness battering in their homes are more likely to become batterers themselves, while girls are more likely to become victims of battering.

Economic costs also flow from violence against women. The Inter-American Development Bank, for instance, says that

such violence is a pervasive drain on Latin American economies. The costs add up: health care, absenteeism and reduced family income, and outlays for law enforcement and the courts. The World Bank has calculated that gender-based violence is as heavy a health burden for women ages 15 to 44 as that posed by HIV, tuberculosis, infection during childbirth, cancer, and heart disease.

Multilateral institutions have begun to address gender-based violence, however, and the problem was placed high on the agendas of recent UN world conferences. In 1996, the World Health Assembly passed a resolution calling for public health interventions to combat violence. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing adopted a Platform for Action, which declares that "Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objective of equality, development, and peace." At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, nearly 180 countries recognized the role of violence in the definition of women's reproductive health, which "includes the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence ..."

International conventions and legislation are just beginning to be translated into action at a level that can effectively protect women—the level of families, communities, and even national governments. The initiatives are a beacon for women at the grassroots, where there are efforts to pull the issue out of the closet and to clearly define gender-based violence as a problem for society. ■

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, or psychological aggression or coercion and is a pattern of behavior employed by one person in a relationship to control the other. The abuse is typically directed at women and girls and can create health, social, and economic costs for the individual, the family, and society. The violence may include battering, burning, emotional blackmail, mockery or ridicule, threats of abandonment, confinement to the home, and the withholding of money or other family support. A woman living in an abusive relationship may be forced to become pregnant or have an abortion against her will, or her partner may knowingly expose her to a sexually transmitted infection.

Traditional attitudes toward women around the world help perpetuate the violence. Stereotypical roles in which women are seen as subordinate to men constrain a woman's ability to exercise choices that would enable her to end the abuse. The Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women encourages governments, research institutions, and nongovernmental and other organizations to promote research on the prevalence of domestic violence and its causes and consequences, and to assess the effectiveness of preventive measures.

The following articles from Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda emphasize that domestic violence is not simply a private issue but a societal scourge, and that efforts to end the violence must include changing attitudes and redressing the social, economic, and other imbalances that plague many male-female relationships.

## If Your Husband is Abusive, Leave Him!

The number of reported cases of gender-based violence has gone up in this country since the beginning of this year. It makes us wonder whether something has gone wrong in our society, or if people are now getting the courage to speak out against the vice.

We talked to Dr. Frank Njenga, the Chairman of the Psychiatric Association of Kenya, who enlightened us on reasons for the sudden rise in gender-based violence and most specifically, domestic violence. He also spoke about the possible causes of domestic violence and what can be done to reduce it, if not eliminate it totally.

The causes are quite diverse. One of the major contributors is the space people live in. The more crowded people are, the more violence there is likely to be. This does not mean that only poor people who live in crowded areas experience this form of violence. It means that poverty, which also determines where and how a person lives, is one of the contributing factors.

Financial insecurity is another factor. If a man cannot establish his authority intellectually or economically, he will tend to do so physically. A woman married to this kind of man experiences this form of violence because her husband has a very fragile ego. A woman in this kind of relationship should note that she is not the one who has a problem.

Dr. Njenga explains that part of the terrorism that is perpetrated by men

internationally against women is to try to persuade females that they are weak and stupid. His advice to women is that this terrorism has to stop.

"It will only stop when women realise that it does not matter what their batterer says, he is the one with a problem," he says. Society, however, has to bear some of the blame. "Society has created an image whereby a man is viewed as strong, educated, creative, and clever, while a woman is the opposite of all these traits," Dr. Njenga adds.

"If you consider how parents bring up their children, you will see the disparity that exists between boys and girls. When a boy grows up knowing that he is not supposed to wash his own clothes, cook or help out in the house, then when he is a grown up man, you cannot expect him to do that," explains Dr. Njenga. "He might get married to a woman who comes from a home where duties were equally shared between girls and boys. To this man, helping out in the home has never been the norm. This creates tension that might well lead to violence."

Society has got to change and treat all children as equal. It is from this change of attitude that we can begin to instill morals that a woman or girl is not the weaker sex, but equal to a man. Dr. Njenga envisions that if society takes this kind of outlook in the next 10 to 20 years, then we have the hope of eliminating domestic violence altogether. ■

*Society has got to change and treat all children as equal.*

## Myths About Battery

In a radio broadcast, Sarah Akrofi-Quarcoop and Kingsley Obeng-Kyere discuss the facts and myths associated with wife battering.

**MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO:** Domestic violence has been defined as a pattern of coercive behavior. It could be physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual, perpetuated usually by men against women to maintain power and control. Although the scope and pattern of battering may vary from country to country and region to region, research has established that battering, if kept silent, continues to escalate.

**MR. OBENG-KYERE:** Battering produces emotional as well as physical scars. While the bangs, bruises, or knife wounds fade, the emotional injuries slowly kill the spirit. Children who witness abuse in their homes experience what is called potent, long-playing memory tapes: This is what daddies do to mommies; it's okay for men to hit women; violence equals love. Also, research has established that the more a woman tries to explain or discuss with her partner what she thinks is going on, the more he becomes hard of hearing. One can't use logic with an abuser.

Research has also established the following myths and facts about battering:

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Battering only affects a small percentage of the population.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: The fact is, two million to four million women of all races and classes are beaten every year.

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Battering is only a momentary loss of control.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: The fact is, battering can go on for hours. Many batterers plan their assault or foresee it.

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Battered women are masochistic; they like the violence.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: The fact is, no one likes to be abused. Women often stay in abusive relationships because they hope their partners will change or because they want their kids to have a father. This does not mean they like the violence.

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Battering does not produce serious injuries; it is just a part of love.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: Battered women are often severely injured. My child's nanny's auntie, Auntie Gladys, is now permanently deaf in one ear as a result of constant battering.

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Drinking causes men to batter.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: The fact is, men batter when sober and when they are drunk. They use the fact that they were drunk only as an excuse: "I didn't know what I was doing." But in reality, they get drunk in order to say that they are not responsible for their behavior.

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Religious faith will prevent him from beating you.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: The fact is, even pastors beat their part-

ners. Religious faith does not stop men from believing that they have a right to beat their wives.

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Even if he's violent, it is better for the children to have a father.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: The fact is, children are very upset and scared by violence. It is better for them to be without a father than to be frightened by their fathers.

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Long-standing battering relationships can change for the better.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: The fact is, without outside intervention, battering tends to repeat itself.

**MYTH:** MR. OBENG-KYERE: Battered women deserve to be beaten.

**FACT:** MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO: The fact is, there is no justification for male violence. It is a criminal act. ■

## Family Problems Cannot Be Solved Through Blows

by Barbara Bitangaro

Violence against women is a complex phenomenon deeply rooted in the way society is set up—cultural beliefs, power relations, economic power imbalances, and the masculine ideal of male dominance.

The topic has just begun receiving recognition, partly because of the health implications and the strong movement by women against such violence. In Uganda, however, little has been documented, and silence is seen as the only remedy by women in abusive relationships.

A study in Uganda looked at a representative sample of women, ages 20 to 44, and their partners in two districts, Masaka and Lira. Forty-one of 100 women reported having been beaten or physically harmed by a partner; 41 percent of men reported having beaten their partners.

According to Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, Dr. Robert Busingye, it is difficult to determine the extent of abuse against women in the family setting because of the deeply entrenched culture of silence.

"The women who visit gynaecologists for that matter are those who are pregnant and think the baby could have been hurt or who have been severely hurt

themselves," Busingye said, adding that even those who report, try to find excuses for their injuries.

"Some will say they have been burnt by an iron, and yet it is clear they have been abused by their husbands," Busingye said.

Child Psychologist at Makerere University Becky Sherman explained that violence absolutely impacts on children even if they do not say anything. A child who has undergone or witnessed violence may become withdrawn, anxious or depressed on one hand. On the other hand, the child may become aggressive and exert control over younger siblings. Sherman said that boys usually carry out the aggressive form of behaviour and as adults, may beat their spouses.

The doctor called for counselling of both male batterers and their female partners. He said that the problem should not be looked at in a one-sided manner. Passing laws to criminalise violence within family relationships would be the ultimate goal. Violence, especially in the family setting, must be made a public issue. But women must be reminded that a confrontational approach against a society that has been long dominated by males will not change anything. We must involve these men. ■

*Violence, especially in the family setting, must be made a public issue.*

## SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse includes rape, sexual assault, sexual molestation, sexual harassment, and incest. The abuse is perpetrated by a person who is perceived to hold power over another and occurs in the home, at school, at work, or in a public place. The perpetrators can be family members, supervisors, teachers, community leaders, or strangers. Since sexual abuse is the exploitation of power, young people are especially at risk, and the violations can have lasting consequences for their sexual and reproductive health. The costs include unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, physical injury, and trauma. Studies also show that young people who have been sexually abused are more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behavior than are those who have not been abused. At the same time, the stigma attached to women and girls who have been raped or otherwise sexually assaulted continues to hinder research into the issue.

As the following articles from India, Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda demonstrate, however, local communities are taking steps to redress the problem. Their efforts include raising awareness of the issue, exposing violations, advocating legal sanctions, and creating training and other support services for people who have been abused.

## Incest — When Silence Does Not Pay

*Dear Editor,*

*I am writing this letter in deep sorrow because I feel my hands are tied. My cousin died a year ago leaving behind two sons, ages 11 and 9. Before she died, she was not on good terms with her husband, and they were not living together, although the children would visit their father. Naturally, when my cousin died, the children had to stay with their father.*

*What is worrying me is that I have reason to believe that the children are being sexually molested by their father. My cousin's sisters-in law took the children to a hospital recently and they were treated for a sexually transmitted disease. But they are not willing to give me this information, neither do they want to talk to me. I only found this out through my own investigations.*

*What depresses me most is that even after the children were treated, they returned to their father. What can I do? I know that I need medical proof to show that they are being molested. But I cannot do that without taking the children from their father whose permission I need first.*

*I visited the children's school and the teacher has not noticed any peculiar behaviour. Their grades have not changed and they sing praises of their father. How is this, when he is abusing them?*

*What am I supposed to do? I really want to help these children.*

*Concerned relative.*

### *Editor's Response:*

**W**e have received many letters from our readers expressing their views on the rising rate of children molested and abused by their relatives. Most of the victims are little girls, while a smaller number are boys, as on page 12.

Dr. Florence Manguyu, a member of the African Network Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANACAN), talks to us about how we can help these children and what we need to do in case we find out that a child is being molested.

Many parents today are abusing the very children they love. The same children who are being abused are protecting their abusers because some of them are their parents, and they love them. Some children are also too young to understand. If you look at the above case, the children are naturally protective of their father, because he is the only parent they have. He is the only security figure they know.

Dr. Manguyu asks children who are able to understand that there is something wrong going on to tell someone. "If your aunt, uncle, house maid, father or relative is doing something that you

think is wrong, confide in someone you trust." A child should not feel guilty or responsible for what is happening but should know that there is definitely something wrong with the adult. At the same time, when, as an adult, you notice something happening as in the above case, then you need to take action and help the child. The only help is removing the child from that home.

When we take this case, we see that several people are failing in their responsibilities. First and foremost, the father. He is doing what he should not be doing. Secondly it's the 'good' aunt who takes the child to the hospital and even after realising what is happening, returns the child to the source of the problem. Thirdly, it is the doctor who treated the child. He should have sorted out the problem and demanded to see the abuser before he released the children to his custody again.

When it comes to a situation like incest and child abuse, it becomes everybody's responsibility. We are all supposed to work together to help the child. That is what makes incest a societal issue. ■

***When it comes to a situation like incest and child abuse, it becomes everybody's responsibility.***

## Special Assignment: Rape

Rape is one of the most underreported crimes in South Africa. It is estimated that one million cases occur every year. This is the televised story of a woman who was raped. (Charlene Smith is a white woman journalist).

### The HIV Test (In Doctor's Room)

**DOCTOR:** How many weeks now?

**CHARLENE SMITH:** Six.

**DOCTOR:** The antibody tests, standard HIV tests that we all undergo for insurance and the like, is a test that is very, very accurate. It's over 99.7 percent accurate ... hellishly high accuracy, but it still says to you there's a very slight chance that ... A false positive ...

**MS. SMITH:** Whether I'm positive or negative, I have to know how to live the rest of my life in a more productive and better way.

**DOCTOR:** Let's take some blood. We're running out of time ... I'm going to have some results for you tomorrow and we're gonna meet again tomorrow and decide what they mean, where do we go from here. Obviously we're gonna have to check again in six weeks' time to be absolutely sure. Where do I leave you mentally for tonight and tomorrow? Are you gonna be OK?

**MS. SMITH:** I'll be fine. My daughter's coming and so I've got to be fine for her.

### The Beginning

**MS. SMITH:** I came home at about half-past eight, and what I always do is I check the road outside, because obviously we all think of hijackings. Everything was fine. I put on my brights, came into the gate. The dogs acted as normal.

I came in and I noticed that there were more lights on than what I'd left and there was a jacket in the middle of the lounge floor. I was still preoccupied with work. I really just wasn't thinking about anything else. I went through to my bedroom. I kicked off my shoes, put my bag and my keys and my cell phone on the chair next to the phone and went to the toilet.

The door was open, and as I turned to flush the toilet, he was just standing there.

I started screaming. I'm not usually a person who screams, but I thought to myself, "I'd better scream to attract attention." And he came.

He first of all initially stood there as if he wanted me to admire him in a jacket. He came in and he grabbed me by the arm and he said, "I've got a knife," and pulled me out of the bathroom.

I had my bank card in my bag and he said, "Give me the pin," and I gave him the pin and he said, "Don't lie," he said, "Write it down."

I said, "I'm not lying, I'm not lying."

I said, "If you want, I'll even take you to the bank so you can draw out the money."

At that stage, I thought, "I've just gotta get out of this house," and he said, "No, no, no, no!"

*"And I said I  
had been  
raped. It's an  
extraordinary  
thing to say it  
for the first  
time and to  
hear it."  
—Charlene Smith*

He then said, "I'm going to the bank now, and I'm going to get the money out, but I'll be 15 minutes and if you do anything wrong, I'll come back and I'll kill you," he said. "But first, we're going to have sex."

## **The Rape**

**MS. SMITH:** He removed my lower garments and pushed me onto the bed and undid his belt and zip and ...

I can remember thinking, "My God I'm going to be raped." And, I said to him, "I've got AIDS."

So, he said, "I'll use a condom." Which he didn't ...

... He then got up, and he did up his clothes, and he—he went and got the masking tape and he started putting it around my eyes, around my head. Then around my ankles and around my knees ...

## **The Escape**

**MS. SMITH:** Then I started trying to get free. I tried with my hands, because obviously it was really important that my hands get free and then my feet were the first to break free, and that meant my knees were able to break free, which meant I was able to stand. I managed to get this one [hand] out, which meant I was able to pull the thing down off my eyes and off my mouth, and I shouted. At one stage, my mouth became so dry that I couldn't get any sound out. Not even dogs were barking when I was shouting. At one stage, I thought, "This is just what it's like before you die, how people must feel before they're murdered."

And then all of a sudden at the gate, I saw some light, and I heard men's voices. At first I got a fright, because I thought that he was back and he was back with other people. But it was my neighbours, and they said, "What's wrong?"

And I said I had been raped. It's an extraordinary thing to say it for the first time and to hear it.

So the police arrived very quickly. They took me outside and this young reservist took me in the car with him.

He'd radioed ahead to Millpark that I was coming in. It was the closest clinic.

**POLICEMAN:** It's my duty that as a policeman, as a professional policeman, and also as a humane person to make sure that that person is given my utmost attention ...

## **Rape in South Africa**

**ANNOUNCER:** The police estimate that only one out of every 35 rapes is reported. In 1996, less than half of all reported rapes were referred to the courts. Of these, less than 10 percent led to convictions.

Eight out of every 10 women raped are poor and black. More than 60 percent are between the ages of 14 and 19.

In the 60 minutes that you've been watching this programme, an estimated 60 rapes have been perpetrated in South Africa. ■

## **Rape, the Silent Cancer Among Female Refugees**

*by Barbara Bitangaro*

Uwimaana, 52, had been collecting firewood deep in the forest with her 13-year-old daughter and two other friends. They had knowingly ventured through the legal camp boundary that was controlled by a UN military unit in search of firewood. During the walk home, the women were attacked and gang raped for hours.

Luckily for them, the American Refugee Committee (ARC) had a confidential protocol already in place. The women were counselled and given antibiotics and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases. They were also given emergency contraceptive pills to prevent pregnancy. This is a true story as told by women working in refugee situations.

In Luweero District, Uganda, women were raped by fleeing government troops in 1986. The world witnessed with horror the systematic use of rape in war-torn Rwanda, Bosnia, and more recently Kosovo.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that worldwide, there are at least 30 million refugees and displaced people, 80% of them women and children. In Uganda alone there are 185,000 refugees and asylum seekers

from Sudan, Zaire, and Rwanda, many of them women and children, states the World Refugee Survey 1998.

The term refugee refers to people who have been uprooted by persecution, war, or widespread violence, and women refugees form one of the world's most vulnerable populations.

Like Uwimaana, thousands of refugee women are raped or coerced into sex and often seek unsafe abortions to terminate unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. They face death or chronic complications when medical care is not available.

In Uganda, as in many parts of the world, a lot of stigma is attached to a woman who has been raped. This has hindered adequate research on the issue. A study by the International Rescue Committee, however, shows that of 3,083 Burundian women refugees in a Tanzanian camp, 27% of women had been raped since becoming refugees.

Rape and coercive sex are used as weapons of war against women in situations of armed conflict throughout the world. Women who flee war often face more sexual violence during flight as they seek safety and provisions for themselves and their families. ■

# Rape—Are You at Risk?

by Sathya Saran

When it comes to rape, every woman is at risk ...

## It Happens

I know, as I write this, that I am looking at rape quite academically. Every woman—I repeat this to get it across as much to myself as to you—is at risk. I am, as I walk through darkened lanes and the only woman in the ladies' compartment at night; at times, there is not another soul on the floor I work on ... But in normal, everyday life, I do not see any of the risks inherent in these situations.

My colleagues with young daughters carry burdens of guilt: They are at work, their children return to homes not quite empty, and, by most counts, safe. Yet, a report about 10-year-old boys 'raping' eight-year-old girls in Mumbai sets alarm bells ringing. Schoolmates, teachers, servants, tuition masters, relatives, neighbours whom the girls call Uncle—can anybody be trusted, they tell themselves. I know the story of 12-year-old Neena, whose servant used to undress her and play 'Doctor doctor' with her every time the girl was left in his care while her parents went out for dinners or socials dos. And I worry, for my colleagues' daughters' safety.

## You Can't Be Too Careful

Look into your daily routine. When you see the number of vulnerable situations you place yourself in, you will have an answer to the question. Are you at risk? You are. Being educated, urbane and alert is no safeguard. Whether you are 16 or 60, you are at risk.

## How Aware Are You?

Some myths dispelled:

**MYTH:** Rapes happen outside, at night.

**FACT:** Most rapes happen in the home of the victim, the attacker or a friend. Home security is vital. Get good locks fitted, ensure that your house is well lit, and don't open the door to strangers. Rapes can happen anytime, anywhere.

**MYTH:** Only a certain kind of woman is raped, and it can't happen to me.

**FACT:** Rape happens to people of all ages, educational levels, religions, sexual orientations and physical descriptions. Victims range in age from a few months to into their 90s. Religious beliefs and education have no influence on a woman's vulnerability. The elderly, mentally and physically disabled are often victimised because they are seen as helpless.

**MYTH:** Rapists are usually strangers.

**FACT:** We've always feared strangers, but most victims know their attackers. The term 'acquaintance rape' means assaults in which the woman knows the assailant who can be someone in your classroom, a neighbour, a superior, a date, your friend's boyfriend, etc. More acquaintance rapes go unreported than those by strangers, because the woman feels more responsible. When the assailant is a friend or relative, the act is likely to end up as a completed rather than attempted assault, especially if the relationship is intimate. Research shows that women caught offguard by a familiar person are so sur-

*Women can take steps to reduce their vulnerability: Have strong body language. Be assertive, not passive.*

prised that they are unable to get out of the situation.

**MYTH:** Women shouldn't report rape.

**FACT:** Rape is a crime, and all crimes should be reported. Few sexual assaults are actually reported, though. Some reasons why victims choose not to report: Belief that the police won't be sensitive, embarrassment, and the fear of publicity.

A woman may also feel guilty and responsible for the attack. And that she was unable to escape. Attackers often threaten revenge if a woman tells anyone (although they rarely follow through). She may be afraid of losing her job or friends if the attacker is in a position of power and respect.

**MYTH:** Sudden uncontrollable sexual urges motivate rape.

**FACT:** Men can control their sexual urges. Rape is an act of power, anger and dominance over another. Sex is a weapon used to gain control. Rape not only violates a woman's integrity, but her sense of safety and control over her life, too. Most rapes are reported to be planned. The rapist decides to rape, chooses a plan of attack and a victim. If it fails, he may try another plan with a different victim.

**MYTH:** Rapists look like rapists—crazy, sex-starved perverts who can be easily spotted in a crowd.

**FACT:** The average rapist could be a 23-year-old male who is married or has a girlfriend. He may appear normal. The difference between a rapist and other men is that rapists vent their frustrations and lack of power violently. They need to control and have power over another person because they feel a lack of personal power and self-esteem.

**MYTH:** People who succumb secretly want to be raped.

**FACT:** There are two myths operating here. One: No healthy woman can be raped. But rapists often threaten to hurt or kill their victims or their family. Some use weapons to coerce women. Most women fear rape, which alone can immobilise a person. Should a woman be attacked, she may choose not to fight back. This is an option. She should not be blamed if she chooses this option.

The other myth is that women want to be raped. Many women and men have fantasies about aggressive sex. But people are in control of their fantasies. No one wants to go through rape, a violent, terrifying, and humiliating assault.

**MYTH:** Victims may initially fight rape, but end up enjoying it.

**FACT:** No one enjoys being raped. The image of a woman whose terror turns into ecstasy is one portrayed in the media and pornography, and one that many rapists believe. Rapists may continue raping hop-

ing that their fantasy will come true. It never does.

**MYTH:** Spouses or dates can't be charged with rape—by consenting to be with them, you have consented to intercourse.

**FACT:** Forcing anyone into intercourse against his/her will is rape. A woman may choose to date or marry someone; she may or may not want sex with that person at any given time.

Some people think a man has a right to sex as payment for a date or as part of his marriage vows. Social attitudes are the main reason for this. Thus, acquaintance rapes are more difficult to prosecute than stranger rapes, because it is felt that if a woman reports it, she won't be believed.

**MYTH:** A woman's dress and behaviour can invite rape.

**FACT:** This myth places the blame for rape on women and views men as unable to control themselves. If a woman is known as a party animal

or a tease, and wears 'provocative' clothing, she is asking for attention, flattery, or just trying to fit in. She is not asking to be raped. Women may take risks which render them vulnerable to sexual assault, like walking alone at night, but the blame for the rape always lies with the rapist.

**MYTH:** You can talk a rapist out of the attack by telling them you have VD, or that you are pregnant.

**FACT:** Rapists don't care about the victim's well-being or her feelings. They are not thinking rationally during the attack and see the victim as an object to dominate, not as a human being.

Women can take steps to reduce their vulnerability: Have strong body language. Be assertive, not passive. Stand up for yourself on small issues and you will assert yourself on larger ones. Be aware of your surroundings; walk purposefully. ■

## FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING

The international community is paying increased attention to female genital cutting (FGC), citing the practice as a threat to women's health and a human rights violation. The practice (also known as female circumcision and female genital mutilation) is steeped in tradition in many countries in Africa, as well as in some Asian, Middle Eastern, European, and North American communities. The procedure, seen as an impediment to a girl's sexual enjoyment, varies from the partial or total removal of external genitalia to the narrowing of the vaginal opening. The girls are known to experience intense pain, bleeding, painful or abnormal menstruation, infections, or trauma when they undergo this procedure.

Efforts to end the practice focus on legal initiatives and on improving the status of women socially and economically to enhance their ability to make choices. As the following experiences in Uganda illustrate, some community initiatives place the education of girls at the center of their efforts. FGC has been banned in roughly one-third of the 28 African countries in which it is practiced.

*"The pain was terrible. I got to a point where I thought my mother did not love me."*  
—Doreen Chesang

## A Fight Against the Knife

It is circumcision season again. Female circumcision in Kapchorwa is at the center of several debates. Some girls have done it willingly. Doreen Chesang, 25, was forced into the act, and she narrated her experience to "Women's Vision."

**I**t was in January 1995 when I went home for school fees. The moment the people set their eyes on me, I was finished. They secretly organised people in the area and clan heads to force me into circumcision.

On January 15, in the evening, a whole group of drunk and energetic men came for me together with three other girls.

When they got us, they immediately tied us with strong sisal ropes and undressed us, leaving us with only our petticoats on. The people danced and rejoiced because they had finally captured us. They beat us and forced us to dance throughout the night.

At daybreak, we were at the surgeon's place. We were told to declare that we wanted to get circumcised, but we refused. We boldly said "no." At that moment, other people came around with knives and swords saying we were to be pierced to death if we refused to be circumcised. As they continued torturing us, one of us escaped. Her parents saved her. At the time she was picked from home, her parents were not around. So they came for her, and she was released.

In our desperate situation we were pushed onto the ground and forced to sit down with our legs wide apart. They still battered us. Finally, we were defeated and we surrendered.

The pain was terrible. I got to a point where I thought my mother did not love me. How could she let me go through such pain? The surgeon herself looked

miserable. I did not think she knew what she was about to do!

Later, the police arrested some of the men, took them to court and imprisoned them at Kapchorwa Prison. Unfortunately for us, we had already been circumcised.

That was not the end of my story. While going through the agony of nursing my septic wound, I faced several threats from people. They said if the men stayed in prison, I would have to leave the village or else I would die.

I ran to my relatives. Months later, I went back home to ask for school fees, thinking things had cooled. The moment they learned I was around, men came to our home in Kabyoyon, Kongasis County.

They kicked the door of my hut and I made an alarm. They wanted to kill me! My mother heard and came to my rescue. When the gang realised they could not do much, they set my hut on fire. I ran for my dear life and sought refuge at Peter Kamuron's (the Member of Parliament at the time) place.

Kamuron sympathised with me and took me back to school. This was in 1996. From that time, different people paid my school fees.

Finally, a nongovernmental organization called Reproductive, Educative and Community Health (REACH) came in. It registered me as a peer educator. They started giving me some money—forty thousand shillings per term—to enable me to continue with my studies. ■

## Killing Women's Sexuality

by Joan Mugenzi in Kapchorwa

One by one, students of Gamatui Girls' School in Kapchorwa district left their examination rooms and assembled in front of one of their buildings.

It was a great day. Members of a newly born association called the U.S.-Uganda Godparents Association, with President Yoweri Museveni as its patron, had visited them. There were three members from the U.S. and Uganda. They were rare visitors to the school.

The girls kept on gaping at the white people not knowing what was coming. It was a talk on female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM is the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia. External genitalia include the clitoris, labia, mons pubis (the fatty tissue over the pubic bone), and the urethral and vaginal openings. In Kapchorwa, it is the clitoris that is cut—a very painful process that normally leads to excessive bleeding and at times, death. The practice is intended to give men control over women's sexuality.

Godparents zeroed in on the Gamatui girls as the best group with whom to discuss issues concerning FGM. Godparents is an association of mothers and fathers who want to support young children, especially girls.

"We want to support them in all aspects of life," the project manager, Godparents Uganda, Erinah Rutangye says. "Our first activity is the girls undergoing female circumcision here in Kapchorwa. We want them to escape this cruel practise."

Godparents are to pay the school fees of 54 girls from S1 through S4, starting first term, 1999. They are also to build a boarding school for girls, which will offer subsidised fees. The idea is that it is only through education that the girls will be in a position to oppose FGM.

But fighting FGM is not a simple task. Several people look at those who are against the practise as people who have betrayed their culture. George William Cheborion, 70, is one man who has been looked at by Sabiny elders as a 'rebel.' He does not support female genital mutilation.

Cheborion reveals: "I gave up female circumcision in the early 1950s. As a teacher, I worked in many places, so they used to sensitise me about the dangers of the culture. I realised we were hurting our women. I swore never to have my daughters circumcised."

Health workers say many women report to their health units with post-effects of FGM. The Medical Superintendent, Kapchorwa hospital, Dr. Samuel Malinga says that the hospital receives people with different complaints following circumcision.

All this is a result of the 'surgeons'. They do their work crudely. The old women who do the 'surgery' claim that they have ancestral powers. Kuka suggests that 'surgeons' be given some income generating activities so they may refrain from their circumcision duties. ■

*"I gave up female  
circumcision in  
the early 1950s  
... I swore never  
to have my  
daughters  
circumcised."  
— George William  
Cheborion*

## LAWS AND POLICIES

In adopting the Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, governments around the world agreed to improve the status of women socially and economically and to end all forms of violence against women and girls. They agreed to institute effective policies, programs, and legislation to punish and rehabilitate perpetrators of violence and protect and compensate those who have been abused. The Beijing Platform also requires that governments increase awareness of the causes and consequences of violence against women among those persons responsible for carrying out the policies, including police, medical, judicial, and social workers, and persons who deal with minority, migration, and refugee issues.

The following articles from Ghana, Kenya, India, and Romania stress governments' responsibility in implementing legislation, but they also highlight the importance of monitoring the laws to make sure they are enforced and the need to periodically assess their effectiveness in addressing gender-based violence.

## Governments and Violence Against Women

**ANNOUNCER:** The high incidence of gender-based violence worldwide has called into question government's role in promoting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women.

Correspondent Sarah Akrofi-Quarcoo examines the Ghanaian government's efforts in curbing violence against women against the background of recommendations in the Beijing Platform for Action.

**MS. AKROFI-QUARCOO:** Violence in any form is a serious problem that transcends racial, economic, social, and religious lines. The problem is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa.

Surveys conducted in the region show that 46% of Ugandan women, 60% of Tanzanian women, 42% of Kenyan women, and 40% of Zambian women report regular physical abuse. Close to home, in Nigeria, 81% of married women report being verbally or physically abused by their husbands, and 46% report being abused in the presence of their children.

The story is no different in Ghana, where records of the Federation of Women Lawyers show that 100% of women attending Usher Clinic in Accra reported having been assaulted by their husbands. The high incidence of serial murders of women at Mataheko in Accra and the high media reportage on rape, defilement, and incest are all common knowledge.

The government of Ghana deserves commendation for passing legislation and instituting certain measures to stop violence against women. In June last year, the government passed the Criminal Code Amendment Act, which seeks,

among others, to ensure that individual rights are protected under the constitution. The Act has a whole chapter on sexual offenses, which originally attracted low sentences. Rape, for instance, is now a first-degree felony, liable to imprisonment of 5 to 25 years.

The Act further addresses forced marriage as well as indecent assault, which covers sexual harassment, incest, child trafficking, and prostitution. And most importantly, the Act has a provision on customary servitude, banning any traditional ritual or activity that subjects a person to any form of customary servitude or forced labor.

In addition to the Criminal Code Amendment Act, the government has enacted a law banning female circumcision and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Parliament is also in the process of debating an Affirmative-Action Bill.

Furthermore, the Women and Juvenile Unit of the Ghana police service has been set up to handle all cases of violence against women. The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice has also been empowered by the 1992 constitution to handle cases of gender discrimination.

Commendable though these efforts are, one cannot give government full marks. Research findings show that violence is frequently directed at youth and females who lack economic and social status and, therefore, cannot seek justice. Where is the justice then, and why the law, if it cannot protect those who need it most? ■

*The most critical issue on which to assess the government's efforts in eliminating violence against women is the extent to which the laws are enforced.*

## Existing Laws Lenient on Domestic Violence

The Kenyan law does not specifically criminalise wife beating. The existing laws are lenient and tolerant of domestic violence.

The earliest public concern was expressed in 1966 when the Commission on the Law of Marriage and Divorce was set up. The Commission was charged with, among other things, looking into the status of women in society. This mandate was interpreted by the

Commission to include the problem of wife beating. The commission recommended that a proposed bill explicitly outlaw wife beating. All male members of Parliament opposed it. Not only was this crime considered a private affair, it was rationalized in the name of “tradition.” As a result, Kenyan women have had to rely on the general criminal law of assault in seeking legal redress for wife beating. ■

## Rape as Defined by Law

Section 375 and Section 376 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) have defined and prescribed punishment for rape as follows:

“A man is said to commit ‘rape’ who, except in the case hereinafter excepted, has sexual intercourse with a woman under circumstances falling under any of the six following descriptions:

**FIRST:** Against her will.

**SECOND:** Without her consent.

**THIRD:** With her consent, when her consent has been obtained by putting her or any person in whom she is interested in fear of death or hurt.

**FOURTH:** With her consent, when the man knows that he is not her husband,

and that her consent is given because she believes that he is another man to whom she is or believes herself to be lawfully married.

**FIFTH:** With her consent, when, at the time of giving such consent, by reason of unsoundness of mind or intoxication or the administration by him personally or through another of any stupefying or unwholesome substance, she is unable to understand the nature and consequences of that to which she gives consent.

**SIXTH:** With or without her consent, when she is under 16 years of age.

**EXPLANATION:** Penetration is sufficient to constitute the sexual intercourse necessary to the offence of rape.” ■

*Femina, India*  
April 15, 1999

## Forum of the Council of Europe in Romania: Elimination of Family Violence

by Raluca Marculescu

*It is also important to structure legislative initiatives and to develop programs that offer assistance to the victims.*

The Forum of Information on National Policies on Equality of Women and Men of the Council of Europe took place November 26-28, 1998, in Bucharest, at Romania's invitation. The event was organized by Secretary of State in the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, Norica Nicolai, under the theme, "Violence in the Family: Actions and Steps."

The first objective was to draw up recommendations for approval by the Council of Europe and—it goes without saying—to have a precise and timely exchange of information.

The need to produce a legislative initiative on the issue—approved, in principle, by all participants—brought to light the major discrepancies between those countries with extremely advanced programs (Norway, Sweden, Britain) and those recently admitted to the Council of Europe (Russia, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania). The differences refer not only to the financial aspects (lack of funds for initiating and sustain-

ing assistance programs, consulting offices, and therapy and psychiatric treatment for victims and aggressors), but also to the cultural aspects. The latter received special attention from Pierre-Henri Imbert (Director of the Commission of Human Rights of the Council of Europe) at a press conference.

"Democracy within a relationship reflects the degree of democratic development at the level of the entire society," P. Henri Imbert stressed.

For Romania, as for other countries of the former Communist bloc, it is important to achieve changes in attitudes (including those of women who, for various reasons, often suffer abuses quietly). It is also important to structure more stringent legislative initiatives and to develop sound, viable programs that offer psychological and material assistance to the victims of abuse—women and children. The coordination of these main aims is essential and could be the most important conclusion of the three days of debate. ■

## THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Media efforts are critical to the success of any program to eliminate gender-based violence. Media already provide a valuable function as watchdog, highlighting abuses, encouraging better policies and legislation, and ensuring that governments follow through with their commitments. The Beijing Platform for Action also challenges media establishments to police themselves in an effort to eliminate gender-based stereotypes and erase negative and debasing portrayals of women on television, and in magazines, newspapers, and other mass media.

The articles in this collection demonstrate that media have already entered the fight to end gender-based violence. Their efforts include highlighting its prevalence, challenging attitudes, questioning traditional gender roles, publicizing efforts to end the violence, and placing the problem squarely in the view of society.

## **Injurious Questioning**

*Interviewing rape victims and other survivors of violent crimes by Pennie Azarcon Dela Cruz*

*To be able to write accurately and dispassionately about rape and similar violence, it is important to understand the nature of the crime.*

**I**s it possible to be a hard-nosed journalist in sensational cases, especially those that involve sex crimes, and still remain human? How does one interview rape survivors and other victims of violent crimes without exploiting their vulnerability at such times?

Can one distance oneself from an interview subject without sounding callous and unfeeling? More to the point, is it necessary to hold the victim's hand when one has a deadline to catch? Is there a quicker, less messy way to get the story?

There may be, according to Louise Kindley and Susan Xenarios, social workers from the St. Luke's/Roosevelt Hospital Crime Victims' Treatment Center in New York. The two women spoke on the subject to nine journalists from developing countries during a recent seminar on "Violence Against Women."

To be able to write accurately and dispassionately about rape and similar violence, it is important to understand the nature of the crime, says Kindley.

"Media has perpetuated the myth of rape as sexual attraction, as a crime motivated by a stranger's uncontrollable lust," she notes. Yet, studies have shown that most rapists are known to the victims. Far from being lonely, dysfunctional individuals, most rapists are married or have sexual partners.

"Rape, then, is really more about power and control, rather than lust. Most

rape victims feel that control has been taken away from them. It's like being told that your life and body are not in your hands."

"It is thus important to give control back to the [rape victim]," says Kindley. "Give her the choice. Ask if she would be comfortable talking to you and if it's alright to identify her at all, and how—by name, by face, or by circumstance."

### **Identifying Victims**

The issue of identifying victims of violent sex crimes is particularly touchy, she notes. "Consider what rape means to a particular culture and what subsequent identification and prosecution would mean to her." This, she cites, could range from loss of privacy if the case happened in the United States, to stigma and ostracism in most Asian countries, and stoning to death for adultery in some fundamentalist Muslim nations.

The problem is that media always want a face, says Kindley, adding that the prominence of the victim or suspect involved means almost sure identification. "Remember that rape is a tragedy; it is not entertainment," cautions this adjunct professor at Columbia University.

### **Assigning Blame**

Reporters' questions must also avoid sounding like they're blaming the victim, says Kindley. "Women already blame

themselves too much as it is, especially after rape happens. They should not have gone out with him, they should not have worn that dress, they should not have gotten drunk, and so on. Why torture them further?”

The fear of getting caught in the emotional force of the case may likewise deter reporters from adopting a more sympathetic regard for rape victims and drive them to take on a tougher stance, notes Kindley. An angry or cold reaction may be considered preferable to tears.

“Journalists have often asked, how will they manage their emotions? What if the victim starts to cry? I tell them about the healing powers of tears and how it is good for victims to let go. Yes, but what if, once she starts, she can’t stop crying? How can we get the story then? I guarantee you, she will stop crying.”

## Real Needs

Kindley, who has often been called on for expert court testimony in cases involving rape, sex crimes, and domestic violence, reminds journalists to think of their subjects as more than just headline figures, sound bytes, or symbols in a raging political issue, but as real people with real needs.

Part of those needs may be healing. Fortunately, asking questions of the victim may in fact be therapeutic.

Telling another person what happened can be part of healing, adds Kindley. Dr. Marisol Gawidan, a psychiatrist at PGH-Child Protection Unit (CPU) agreed, in

an interview on rape victims that appeared in the Manila Times (January 20, 1999): “We ask [the victim] to [recount the incident] at every session until she has released all her feelings—anger, confusion, guilt, etc.”

Susan Xenarios, Kindley’s colleague at St. Luke’s/Roosevelt, notes that sometimes, talking to a journalist or having one’s story published in the paper can be part of healing.

“The victim feels validated; people talked to her, people believed her.”

“Again, give her the choice,” suggests Xenarios. “Ask: Would you be willing to tell me what happened?” At the same time, she adds, it is important to give some acknowledgement that you are appalled at the incident. “Support is critical. The victim must see that you believe what she tells you and that you treat rape, sexual assault and domestic violence as serious issues. Your attitude and response can be the most critical and motivating factors for her continuing to seek help.”

Support comes in many forms, Xenarios adds.

“Express sympathy. Say something like, ‘I’m so sorry about what happened.’” But don’t go overboard, she cautions. Spare them the clichés as well, adds the co-founder and director of St. Luke’s Hospital victim’s treatment center. Sometimes, reporters go overboard in squeezing out sympathy from their readers or viewers. Show sympathy by guarding your subject’s privacy instead. ■

## Murder, They Wrote

Her sister was brutally murdered; the tabloids played up every gory detail. This is *Pennie Azarcon Dela Cruz's* experience with how tabloids treat violent crimes.

On the evening of January 10, 1998, when I saw the bloodied sheets wrapped around the lifeless body of my sister, Veronidia Azarcon-Lui, little did I know the cruelty she'd be subjected to by the tabloids.

The news broke on January 12. Veronidia had been knifed to death. Her killer was roaming free ...

As a mainstream journalist and an advocate of women's issues in the media for the last 10 years, I know how the media works and how it affects readers as news consumers. But my experience with the tabloids made me realise how news can affect readers. Among the few lessons I've learnt, which crime reporters might remember, are:

### **1 STRESSING THE VICTIM'S APPEARANCE ADDS LITTLE SUBSTANCE TO CRIME**

**REPORTAGE.** Why use this angle at all? Most news stories began with Nidia's good looks. If anything, it makes us wonder if it only adds to the titillation factor and speculation: If she was pretty, could it have been a love angle? A spurned or jealous lover? A crime of passion? Focusing on looks also trivialises the victim and the crime.

**2 DOUBLE-CHECK YOUR FACTS, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT CONCERNS THE VICTIM'S REPUTATION.** When victims aren't around to defend themselves, their closest kin feel obliged to do so. By questioning the victim's reputation, you are adding one

more burden for the family. They have enough on their plate as it is. They can only take so much physical and emotional pressure. Don't add to it.

**3 GRIEF IS A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE, NOT A PUBLIC SPECTACLE.** Ask permission before you barge into a wake and burial rites with your obtrusive cameras and tape recorders. Tread gently while asking questions and leave the bereaved alone. Though it may be cathartic, few people relish being shown at their most vulnerable on national television. Realise that friends and neighbours who drop in during the wake are not very savvy about the media. They are easy prey and can be manipulated to say what you want them to through loaded questions. Shame on you if you talk to the relatives just to get sensational quotes they may regret later.

**4 BE HONEST.** Introduce yourself properly when you conduct interviews. At Nidia's wake, two tabloid reporters tried to pass themselves off as mourners and probed relatives about what they knew of the case. Such speculation and unguarded revelations, when magnified in the media, might jeopardise investigation and scare off potential witnesses.

**5 DON'T STOOP FOR A SCOOP.** Underhand tricks may be fine for government officials trying to fudge public records, but not when dealing with individuals grappling with grief. One tabloid photographer wanted to take photos of the

\* Originally published in the *Philippine Journalism Review*, Philippines.

grieving relatives and my sister in her coffin.

**6 WHETHER SUSPECT OR VICTIMS, AVOID NAMING OR PHOTOGRAPHING MINORS.** It is unfair to condemn them to notoriety without a fair hearing. The 'Inside Story' staff appreciated this concern and ensured that the son was photographed with a back light to obscure his face. This was beyond the comprehension of the tabloid photographer who was seen mixing with the mourners, asking them surreptitiously to point out the son, presumably so that he could shoot a photo for his paper.

**7 EVEN THE DEAD DESERVE RESPECT AND PRIVACY.** Publishing the grisly photo of my sister taken from the morgue stripped her of all human dignity and privacy. She was treated like a slab of meat served up to be consumed by voyeurs.

Of course, for tabloid publishers who regularly serve up crime, sex and violence, it's just work, nothing personal.

**8 DON'T PUBLISH PICTURES OF VICTIMS OF VIOLENT OR SEX-RELATED CRIMES.** The result is that the crime is trivialised; it assumes the colour of gossip. There is no distinction between the gravity of the crimes and cheap fluff.

Studies show how constant exposure to violence—in this case, the gratuitous reportage of violent crimes—can increase

one's threshold of shock and outrage. One would need more and more stimuli or worsening violence to react. Humanity—one's capacity to feel compassion for the victims and outrage for crimes—is replaced by apathy. Is this worth the scoop?

**9 CHOOSE WORDS AND DESCRIPTIONS CAREFULLY AND AVOID IRRESPONSIBLE SPECULATION.** Are we perpetuating biases and prejudices with certain words? Tabloids kept harping on Nidia's son being adopted. Can they imagine how hurtful this is to the son who, on top of losing his mother so young, is now being told that well, after all, you're not her real son, you're only adopted. You have no right to grieve. Why, you might even be a suspect!

If tabloids are so bad in covering crime, why don't similarly aggrieved families complain? Don't we always see photographs of crime victims, in situ, even in broadsheets, and lots of coffin shots? What about press freedom?

The key word here, I think, is informed consent. Most families don't know that they can say "no" to intrusive reporters and object to intrusive coverage. The media is perceived to be too powerful to criticise and antagonise. People fail to see that there are alternatives. ■

## Reporting on Gender-based Violence

With their formidable capacity to spread the word, the mass media can be a powerful force to bring about change on gender-based violence. The media can sensitize the community to the problem, change attitudes within the family, report abuses to prevent recurrence, and publicize strategies for addressing the problem.

The media can help bring domestic violence out of the closet.

What we know for a fact is that violence against women thrives in cultures where the subjugation of women and domination by men are accepted as “natural” and inevitable. The media, in a way, must take responsibility for creating and reinforcing values and attitudes that

uphold this culture. Many writers are themselves shaped by this dominant culture and bring their attitudes towards women, including their biases, to their work.

Many media practitioners ignore the fact that violent crimes against women, such as rape, are seldom about sex but are almost always about dominance and violence, which explains why the majority of such crimes are committed by men known to women. The media must always try not to carry inaccurate reports about violence against women, try not to degrade the victims, or sensationalize the issues, or exploit the situation to capture a good headline. ■

## About Women's Edition

Women's Edition is a global activity of the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) that brings together senior women editors and producers from influential media organizations around the world to examine and report on issues affecting women's health and status. Women's Edition was launched in 1993 and is currently funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the MEASURE *Communication* project. Each year, new participants are competitively selected.

The 1998 Women's Edition members were selected from among 70 applicants. The group represented Brazil, Cameroon, Ghana, India, Kenya, the Philippines, Romania, South Africa, Uganda, and Ukraine. Their combined audiences numbered an estimated 16.5 million.

The mission of Women's Edition is to inform policy decisions through accurate and timely media coverage that reflects women's needs and perspectives. By providing information to millions of women in developing countries on issues that affect them, Women's Edition also attempts to shape public discussion of the problems and helps women make informed decisions on matters related to their livelihood.

The Women's Edition journalists meet twice each year for week-long seminars to examine reproductive health and associated issues, to meet with experts, and to identify strategies for providing solid media coverage of the topics. The Women's Edition seminar of October 1998 investigated gender-based violence, a subject that the members chose.

Women's Edition members produced the programs and supplements in this collection following their participation in the seminar. Coverage included pull-out sections in newspapers, feature stories, news reports, editorials, and talk shows on gender-based violence.

Women's Edition also seeks to build institutional capability among media organizations. The journalists share their experiences with colleagues through their local journalism associations. They also give presentations at conferences and organize and lead training in topics they have dealt with at the seminars.

## 1998 Members

Gabriela Adamesteanu, *22*, Romania

Sarah Akrofi-Quarcoo, Ghana Radio News, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, and *Daily Graphic*, Ghana

Barbara Kagoro Bitangaro, "Women's Vision," *The New Vision*, Uganda

Josefina (Pennie Azarcon) Dela Cruz, *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Philippines

Cica Lessa, *Capricho*, Brazil

Eunice N. Mathu, *Parents*, Kenya

Galina Rotayenko, *Marianna*, *Panorama*, Kharkiv region TV, Ukraine

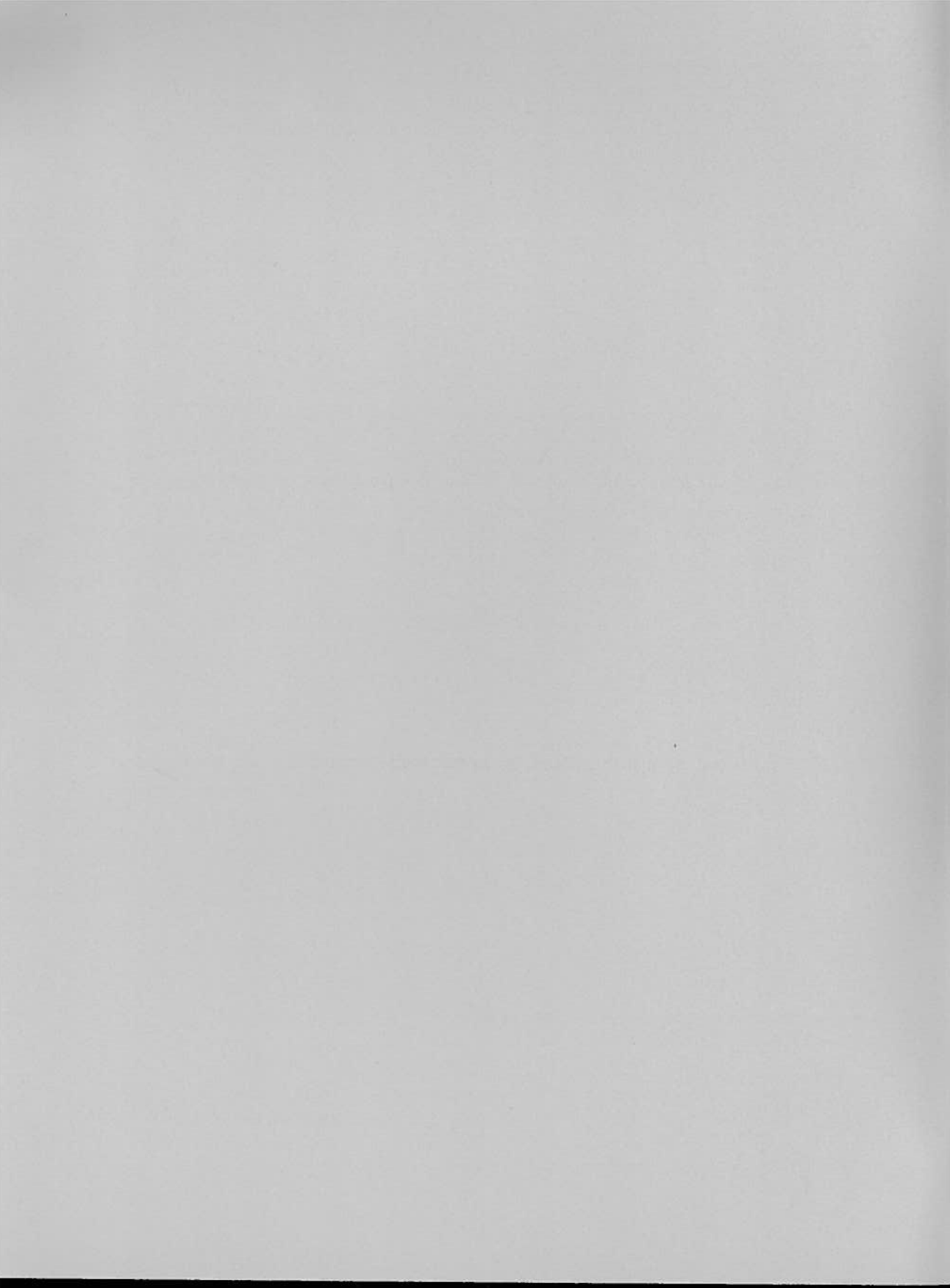
Sathya Saran, *Femina*, India

Seraphine Lainjo Tata, Cameroon Radio and Television Corporation, Cameroon

Sylvia Vollenhoven, South African Broadcasting Corporation-Television, South Africa

Julia Beamish, Coordinator, *Women's Edition*, PRB, USA

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