Violence against women is a problem of global proportion. In a just-released report, Amnesty International has determined that nearly a third of women worldwide, or close to one billion, have been beaten, sexually assaulted or abused in their lifetime. The organization is launching a campaign to end violence against women but many say the first step to ending this crisis is to get people to admit there is a problem.

Reverend William Schulz is executive director of Amnesty International/USA. He joins me now by telephone from Wilmington, Delaware.

Welcome, Reverend.

Reverend WILLIAM SCHULZ (Executive Director, Amnesty International/USA): Pleasure to be with you.

COX: How do you measure the scope of denial of the crisis of violence against women and once that has been determined, how do you put a dent into something that in many societies is culturally ingrained?

Rev. SCHULZ: Well, you have cited the astonishing statistic of up to one billion women, one billion, beaten, coerced into sex, otherwise abused, and yet despite the massiveness of this problem, we really hear very little about it. Oh, sure, we certainly hear occasionally about the domestic violence issue. We hear occasionally about rapes used as a form of warfare. But we don’t systematically hear about this problem. And Amnesty International intends to change that. We’re going to focus in this campaign on the effects of armed conflict on women, and we’re also going to focus on domestic violence itself as a human rights violation.
COX: Times of conflict usually breed a number of problems, including an increase in violence against women. Why is that?

Rev. SCHULZ: Well, in the first place, of course, sexual assault by military figures, particularly those who are involved in conflict, is very, very common in any war zone. In some war zones, it has been used as a systematic policy to advance the war ends themselves. We saw that in Bosnia, we’ve seen it in the Democratic Republic of Congo, we’ve seen it in Sierra Leone. But then there are a whole host of ways in which women are affected by war that we don’t normally think of. For example, armed conflict results often in increases in sexual trafficking. You have a lot of soldiers, many of them young males, away from home, sometimes away from home for long periods of time, and the result of that is an atmosphere that breeds sexual trafficking. You then, of course, have increased levels of HIV-AIDS, and women are more susceptible than men to HIV-AIDS. I mentioned that 80 percent of refugees who often result from war are women or children. And even in the cases where we have seen UN peacekeepers occupy countries, the results are often an increase in sexual assault and an increase in sexual trafficking.

COX: In the United States, Reverend Schulz, black women have a 35 percent greater chance than white women of becoming victims of violence within the family. How much is race a factor in who gets victimized?

Rev. SCHULZ: There is no question but what race is an important variable, plays an important part in this issue. And so often domestic violence has been understood as just a problem of family relations. But the reality is that domestic violence is a criminal matter. Domestic violence is a human rights violation. And the fact that a particular race is more victimized than another by it means that it also adds to the discrimination that we find in our society to begin with and the racism as well.

COX: On a global scale then, what is the role government should play in either hindering or helping the efforts to address these problems?

Rev. SCHULZ: Well, government’s role is absolutely critical. There need to be laws in every country on this planet that are consistent, that treat men and women the same and that establish severe punishments for this kind of violence against women. Even in our country there are some 33 states which provide in their laws for exceptions to marital rape in cases where the woman may have some mental disability or may even, in some cases, be asleep, the husband, or the partner, can utilize that as an excuse to defend himself against charges of marital rape. That’s an example of the kind of discriminatory laws that have to change, and in terms of the issue we discussed earlier, violence against women in the course of armed conflict, we have to establish at the international level an international criminal court which will end impunity for this kind of violence in armed conflict as well.
COX: You mentioned reporting. Certainly that is an issue with regard to this. How do you get women to overcome fear and insecurities and embarrassment in order to get them to come forward and talk about the abuse that they’ve suffered?

Rev. SCHULZ: Well, the first thing that you do is you just talk about the problem, as you and I are doing right now. And you surface it, and make it something that is not a question of embarrassment. The second thing you do is that you guarantee them confidentiality and privacy. You guarantee that if they are under threat from a man, they will be able to seek protection from a court or from an authority of some kind, and their complaints, if necessary, will be kept confidential, and the third thing that you do is that you consistently punish men who are appropriately convicted under due process standards of these kinds of crimes. You don’t just let them go. One of the shocking things in the US military, for example, is that many of the men who have committed these sexual assaults are honorably discharged, and a very, very small percentage of them ever face criminal charges. And that is true to some extent in the larger society as well, and that’s the kind of thing that has to stop.

COX: Reverend William Schulz is executive director of Amnesty International/USA. Sir, thank you for being on this show.

Rev. SCHULZ: My pleasure. Thank you.

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