

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN – A HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUE

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The *Human Rights Dialogue* is a journal that is published quarterly providing a forum to discuss various issues of human rights internationally. It is published by the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs roughly on a quarterly basis. This specific issue examined forms of violence against women, and some local programs that are addressing violence against women from a human rights framework.

The first article was an interview with Christopher Harper, an advocate working with men at a local “women’s support center” in South Africa. Mr. Harper describes the men’s program as “...one that encourages nonviolent men to become active in the struggle for gender equality and the eradication of violence against women and girls. The project emphasizes the need for men to work alongside women in order to change the value systems that oppress women and children and dehumanize men themselves.” Mr. Harper states that using a human rights framework provides a means by which to talk about violence against women in the context of women’s total experiences of violence and discrimination socially, politically, and economically. He also argues that the Human Right approach challenges the views that culture is static and that men’s rights/authority will be challenged by expanding women’s rights. He argues of the need for men to be involved to address the social context of men’s violence while also addressing individual men’s actions. He believes that it is important to talk and work with men using the values and concepts from the culture(s) that the man is coming from.

The second article examines domestic violence and HIV infection in Uganda. In this article, the author describes the ways that domestic violence increases women’s vulnerability to HIV. Because of the fear that women face, they may be unable to protect themselves from infection, and lack access to HIV/AIDS services. From a Human Rights perspective, domestic violence violates a woman’s right to bodily integrity by eliminating her ability to consent to sex, to negotiate safe sex, and to determine the number and spacing of her children. “Men’s entitlement to dictate the terms of sex” keeps women’s options limited. The author suggests that for service programs to be effective, they need to address women’s unequal decision-making power and status within the relationship as well as addressing abstinence and condoms.

The next article looked at the Human Rights issues faced by Battered Mothers in U.S. Family Courts. This article is based on a larger research project conducted by the authors in Massachusetts, where they examined the experiences of battered mothers through the lens of a human rights framework. A human rights framework was used “...because of its emphasis on government accountability; recognition of the equal importance and inextricability of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights; overarching framework for addressing multiple oppressions...; connections with the global women’s movement; and grounding in international law” (p. #12). Based on their research, the state of Massachusetts failed to protect the human rights of battered mothers in a number of ways:

- Failure to protect battered women and their children from abuse;

- Discrimination and bias against battered women;
- Degrading treatment of battered women;
- Denial of due process of battered women;
- Allowing the batterer to continue his abuse through family courts; and
- Failure to respect the economic human rights of battered women and children.

These different expressions of human rights violations were linked for the battered mothers in the research and created a web of difficulties for the women to overcome as they tried to protect themselves and their families. The use of this framework was also a powerful tool for defining and validating these women's experiences, for grassroots organizing around the issues of human rights and the needs of battered women and their children, and offering a foundation for possible state legislation.

The next issue explores expanding the definition of torture. The author argues that the popular understanding of torture helps maintain a gender bias because "torture" is understood as something that occurs on the "political sphere" and thus something that happens to men. Torture is also understood as something that the state perpetrates against a person. This framing of torture, however, denies women's experiences of torture in that women are often tortured by a partner not the state (although the state fails to protect women from this form of torture) and often occurs on more private settings. Just because the torture of women occurs behind closed doors does not mitigate the state's responsibility to protect women from torture and respond to the harm they experienced. The author argues for a "gender mainstreaming approach" which infuses a gender analysis into all forms of governmental actions and responses.

Another article in the series examined "Impunity and Women's Rights in Ciudad Juarez." The author suggests that the killings of women in Juarez results from a complex interconnection of dynamics: the impact of free-trade which weakened the city's social fabrics; growth of low-wage labor opportunities that target women employees; its position as a border town making trafficking of humans and drugs common; corrupt judicial and governmental institutions; and low status of women. The human rights framework provides a means to understand this interconnection of factors and a way to address these causes.

The final article examines strategies for the international women's rights movement. The author argues that there still exists a gross lack of analysis looking at women's rights from a human rights perspective. The first and most important challenge, according to the author, is to more vigorously respond to sex-based discrimination as "chronic and debilitating." Only by understanding sexism as chronic and debilitating with the responses be put in place to address the harms and move towards prevention. The author argues that advocates need to respond to the underlying human rights abused that put women at risk for violence: women's legal, social and cultural subordination to men; regulation of women's sexual activity; unequal access to educational opportunities; unequal and obstructed access to reproductive health care information and services; and discriminatory access to work.

Taken together, these series of articles expand the analysis of a human rights framework on protecting women.