



**ending violence against women: a brief on programming,  
protection and care, based on research led by maysoon melek,  
culture advisor (until 2005) for unfpas culture, gender, and  
human rights branch**

**commentary by alyssa loukota, oef (a/k/a 'b.a.r. nun')**

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Many of us know that there's considerable violence against women and children in the world, but many of us *don't* know how to respond; so, we wait for governments to do something. If there was anything I learned while at the UN, earlier this year, it was that change is brought about by average people, by grassroots movements. And that, in turn, gets the attention of the press and governments.

Maysoon Melek researched ten projects in five regions of the world, and the following findings are based on the successes of those projects. What's also important is that these approaches are based on a "deep understanding of the culture in which they are operating, and rely on the active participation of the communities they serve". The ten projects were in Bangladesh, Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritania, Mexico, Morocco, Romania, Sierra Leone, and Turkey. What I briefly review, here, comes from the Programming to Address Violence Against Women: Ten Case Studies, published by UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund).

In Bangladesh, child marriage and the giving and receiving of dowries constitute the majority of domestic violence. The most heavily militarized area of Colombia, Magdalena Medio, is known as the region of death. The ongoing "trokosi" (ritual sacrifice of young girls to enforced servitude as atonement for a family's sins) system in Ghana is one demonstration of the power of Ghanaian tradition to deny women their rights. In Kenya's Masai culture, female genital mutilation (FGM) or cutting is an initiation into adulthood and considered a prerequisite for becoming a bride. In Mauritania, survivors of rape were thrown into jail while their molesters went free. In Mexico, women face constant familial and sexual violence that goes undetected and unreported.

In Morocco, the legal age of marriage for women was, previously, 15 years old. A wife's sole obedience was to her husband and she had no rights to divorce. Domestic violence in Romania was brought to national attention when a survey showed that incidences of physical abuse reported by women were much higher than other Eastern European countries. Both during and after the civil war in Sierra Leone, women have been forced into sex slavery and trafficking. Until recently, honor killings in Turkey went virtually unnoticed.

Many of these issues facing women—not just in the ten aforementioned countries, but around the

world—are often illegal. It's not so much a matter of passing laws as it is that governments and societies possess the political will to enforce them. Until mindsets are changed and people are educated about specific practices, and until governments see how protecting and empowering women produces huge economic and social improvements, things don't change much.

**Yes, it's bad...but something CAN be done.**

Based on UNPF's case studies, here are the areas in which one should educate oneself, and measures that others can take when deciding to tackle such injustices from the outside.

**A. Lay the groundwork.**

1. Recognize that culture is dynamic and people are willing to change. Even though some practices may be traditions having lasted hundreds of years, people are often willing to change if they can see that to do so would improve their lives.
2. One must understand the local context. Frequently, these practices are buried under social norms and customs. It helps to learn why and how these practices developed in the first place.
3. It's important to take the time to gather hard data and solicit expert opinions. Hard facts can—and *do*—convince people to think through the issues. The results of a 1999 survey about domestic violence in Romania encouraged the government to take action.
4. One should identify and build upon positive cultural values. The Masai have a rich cultural heritage, marred with the practice of female genital mutilation. But to say the overall Masai culture over is brutal and harmful is simply untrue. Consulting with village elders brought change for the women in the community.

**B. Start off correctly.**

1. It helps to adopt a rights-based approach. Don't just provide a service for victims of violence; instill the idea that *women have a right to live free of violence*.
2. Be flexible enough to allow community involvement and listen to the community's wishes.
3. Target the men, who are key to the violence against women. Often, men are ignored.
4. Use the health sector as one entry point and position the problem as a public health priority.
5. As I mentioned before, laws are often in place but unenforced. Advocacy needs to follow the legislative action, as well as awareness-raising and follow-up to cases.
6. Tap the strength of community-based organizations. Especially when dealing with sensitive issues, NGO (non-governmental organizations) workers often know the culture

and are trusted in the community.

7. Engage local power structures, including faith-based organizations. This can open the door for outsiders.

8. Involve people at a local level, encouraging them to delve into the phenomenon and challenge themselves. Training people at all levels of society is essential.

9. Separate the values underlying a harmful practice from the practice, itself. It's possible to devise alternative practices which serve the same functions and cultural values without causing harm.

### **C. Build in sustainability.**

1. In many countries, women who choose to leave an abusive relationship face intense social stigma and are also trapped because they have few options. Expanding women's options can help them to remove themselves from dangerous situations.

2. Build institutional and community capacity to insure that efforts to combat violence against women will be sustained at national and local levels.

3. Forge alliances across medical, psychological, educational, social, cultural, economic, legal and human rights dimensions.

4. Seek to unify and not divide. Never think a group is in opposition to certain ideas before engaging them in discussion.

5. Develop a system of data-gathering for defining and quantifying the problem as well as tracking and monitoring cases.

6. Encourage change from within, rather than imposing a new value system or way of operating on a community.

7. Reach young people through education. This will help shift from a curative to a preventative approach.

### **D. Care for the whole person.**

1. Consider the whole person. A survivor of violence has multiple needs, which begin with—but extend beyond—medical care.

2. Prevent survivors from "falling through the cracks". To do this, a network of partner organizations that understands the problem of violence and can reach out to women in need is critical in addressing the issue.

3. Shame and social stigma keep domestic and sexual violence hidden. A sense of trust and, most importantly, strict confidentiality must be established before the survivors will be willing to access services.

4. Protect the emotional and physical well-being of the service providers.

## **E. Gain support through advocacy.**

1. A wide variety of innovative approaches can capture public attention. Be creative in raising awareness.
2. Rely on popular culture and local artists. Local music, drama, dance, and storytelling can be lively forms of entertainment *and* education.
3. Involve the media, which are often willing to cover personal accounts of violence because they give a human face to the problem and are particularly effective in conveying the message that such violence is unacceptable.
4. Harness the energy of local activists to overcome resistance and help a project succeed.

## **Case Studies | The Projects from Ending Violence Against Women**

### **Bangladesh**

Child marriage and the giving and receiving of dowries are major factors in the continuation of domestic violence in Bangladesh. Laws have been passed that criminalize both practices, but they are difficult to enforce, especially in rural areas where custom and tradition tend to govern social life. An advocacy project supported by UNFPA has worked from the grass roots to change the cultural beliefs and practices through which violence against women persists. A host of community groups, made up of civic and political leaders, imams, village elders, schoolteachers, mothers-in-law, young people, and others are challenging age-old practices, and proving that culture is anything but static.

### **Colombia**

Magdalena Medio, the most heavily militarized area of Colombia, is known as a region of death. But, for many, it has become a region of hope, due to a Development and Peace Programme run by Jesuit priests. An offshoot of the programme, supported by UNFPA, is improving reproductive health and addressing violence against women using a rights-based approach. Through an intensive process of community dialogue that explores the connection between the rights related to one's own body and other civil and political rights, the project is fostering personal and cultural transformation in a region where fear, conflict and machismo prevail.

### **Ghana**

The persistence of the trokosi system in Ghana—the ritual sacrifice of young girls to enforced servitude as atonement for a family's sins—is one demonstration of the power of tradition in Ghana to deny women their rights. The lack of domestic violence legislation is also hindering a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the problem. UNFPA's strategy in addressing gender-based violence in Ghana is to support existing programmes, many of which are working effectively at the grass-roots level. Still needed are effective awareness campaigns that target the media, legislators and other decision makers and spread the message of zero tolerance for violence against women.

### **Kenya**

Though proud of her Maasai heritage, Agnes Pareyio knew that certain traditional practices in Kenya needed to change. For years she travelled on foot from village to village, with a wooden model of the female reproductive system in hand, explaining the dangers of female genital mutilation/cutting to anyone who would listen. In Maasai culture, genital cutting is an initiation into adulthood. It is also considered a prerequisite for becoming a bride, which occurs, on average, at the tender age of 14. With support from UNFPA and V-Day, Ms. Pareyio and her colleagues created a safe house for girls attempting to escape this fate, and enrolled them in school. A network of like-minded organizations, alternative rites of passage and awareness-raising in the community are helping to ensure that Maasai girls in the future will have a wider range of options.

### **Mauritania**

Prior to 2003, survivors of rape in Mauritania were thrown in jail while the perpetrators went free. Correcting that gross injustice—and getting society to recognize the problem of rape at all—began with the grass-roots efforts of four Mauritanian midwives, who could no longer ignore the stories they were hearing from their clients. With UNFPA support, the first statistics on sexual violence in Mauritania were collected, and a center was established to respond to the multiple needs of survivors. Breaking the taboos surrounding the discussion of rape was the first step in addressing the problem. Local imams lent their support to the effort, convincing government officials, judges, the police and members of the community that protecting women and easing the suffering of those who are most vulnerable was a religious obligation.

### **Mexico**

Starting in 1999, a series of initiatives were undertaken in the health sector to address family and sexual violence in Mexico. This included the development, in 2004, of a comprehensive model to prevent and respond to such violence, which links health services with legal assistance and community-based initiatives in 12 states and the Federal District. Today, thousands more women survivors of violence in Mexico are receiving help, due to the collaborative efforts of civil society organizations, government institutions and international agencies, including UNFPA. But much more work remains to be done to meet the demand and to break down the cultural barriers that keep sexual violence hidden and women in subservient roles.

### **Morocco**

A progressive political environment in Morocco has ushered in a number of victories for women, including landmark reforms to *Al Mudawwana*, a legal code that governs family life. Another victory is widespread acceptance of a national strategy to combat violence against women. The strategy came about after years of advocacy and consensus-building, supported by UNFPA and civil society organizations, following a national debate on the role of women and men that had once polarized Moroccan society. Ensuring that the strategy makes a difference will require continued awareness-raising about women's rights, and building the capacity of the health and justice institutions that are charged with implementing it around the country.

### **Romania**

Domestic violence in Romania was brought to national attention by the results of a 1999 survey, which found that the incidence of physical abuse reported by women there was higher than in other Eastern European countries. UNFPA is supporting efforts from the grass roots to the highest levels of Government to raise awareness of the problem, promote legislative and institutional

reforms to combat it, and set up demonstration projects of what works. One key to the success of these projects is establishing partnerships among district health authorities, local administrations, neighborhood police, NGOs and the media.

Another is helping people explore their own attitudes about domestic violence through training and innovative awareness campaigns.

### **Sierra Leone**

Rape, abduction and sexual slavery are part of the brutal legacy of Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war, which left over half the country's population displaced and destitute. As a matter of survival, both during and after the war, women (as well as men) have been forced into commercial sex, which leaves them vulnerable to HIV infection and other, potentially fatal, problems. In response, a faith-based organization supported by UNFPA is helping girls and young women affected by the war to regain their health and dignity, and is giving them the tools to generate alternative livelihoods. One key to success is responding to their needs in a holistic way. Another is involving partners—as well as the host community—in sensitization and training activities, and providing free education to their children.

### **Turkey**

As in many countries, laws protecting women's rights in Turkey have had little impact due to the lack of political will and public inertia. A study on the incidence of 'honor' killings was a wake-up call to government officials and others to do something about it. An advocacy campaign initiated by UNFPA and involving government decision-makers, NGOs, the private sector and Turkish celebrities proved remarkably successful in focusing public attention and shaping a national dialogue on violence against women. Its targeting of Turkish men was a key to its success. Among other superstars who embraced the campaign were the country's major league football players, who spread the message—'Stop violence against women!'—during half-time and in film spots on television and in cinemas across the country.

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