“It is not gender which is destroying our culture.... it is our interpretations of culture which has destroyed gender equality”

Cambodian civil society group

Violence against women is a violation of women’s human rights and prevents women from enjoying their human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as the rights to life and security of the person, to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, to education, work and housing and to participation in public life.

Such violence perpetuates the subordination of women and the unequal distribution of power between women and men. It has consequences for women’s health and well-being, carries a heavy human and economic cost, hinders development and can also lead to displacement.

Violence against women prevents women from fully participating in their communities socially or economically. Women who are targeted for violence are less likely to be employed, tend to be employed in low status jobs and are unlikely to be promoted. Sexual violence undermines physical security in public areas and the risk of such violence may
increase when women enter public life, constraining their political voice. For example, in Sri Lanka, the continuing conflict has created a culture of violence against women that has limited their political participation. One study in Mexico found that women often stopped participating in community development projects because of threats from men.

The societal consequences of trafficking in women include the separation of children from their families; loss of education; stigmatization of the women, who therefore require long-term social support; and the growth of criminal activities.

Research indicates that violence against women in the family and social violence are closely linked. Witnessing chronic domestic violence can be the start of a lifelong pattern of delinquency and the use of violence in personal relationships.

Children are often present during episodes of domestic violence and those who witness it may suffer a range of behavioural and emotional problems. Research suggests that violence in the family affects children in at least three main ways: their health; their educational performance; and their use of violence in their own lives. Children who witness violence may exhibit more fearful and antisocial behaviour. They also have been found to show more anxiety, depression, trauma symptoms and temperament problems than other children. These children also tend to
exhibit more aggressive behaviour towards their peers. Exposure to chronic violence is associated with lower cognitive functioning and poor school performance. A study in Nicaragua found that children of female victims of violence left school an average of four years earlier than other children. At the same time, most children who witness violence at home will not become violent and these different reactions need to be better understood. However, children who do exhibit violent behaviour are more likely to continue that behaviour and transmit it to future generations.

Domestic or intimate partner violence against women can also be fatal for children. A Nicaraguan study found that children of women who were physically abused by a partner were six times more likely than other children to die before the age of five.³

1. DENIAL OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Perhaps the most crucial consequence of violence against women and girls is the denial of fundamental human rights to women and girls. International human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, and the convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted in 1989, affirm the principles of fundamental rights and freedoms
of every human being. Both CEDAW and the CRC are guided by a broad concept of human rights that stretches beyond civil and political rights to the core issues of economic survival, health, and education that affect the quality of daily life for most women and children. The two conventions call for the right to protection from gender-based abuse and neglect.

The strength of these treaties rests on an international consensus, and the assumption that all practices that harm women and girls, no matter how deeply they are embedded in culture, must be eradicated. Legally binding under international law for governments that have ratified them, these treaties oblige governments not only to protect women from crimes of violence, but also to investigate violations when they occur and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

2. **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT GOALS UNDERMINED**

There is a growing recognition that countries cannot reach their full potential as long as women’s potential to participate fully in their societies is denied. Data on the social, economic and health costs of violence leave no doubt that violence against women undermines progress towards human and economic development. Women’s participation has become key in all social development programmes, be they environmental, for poverty elevation, or for good governance. By hampering the full involvement and participation of
women, countries are eroding the human capital of half their populations. True indicators of a country’s commitment to gender equality lie in its actions to eliminate violence against women in all its forms and in all areas of life.

3. HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Domestic violence against women leads to far-reaching physical and psychological consequences, some with fatal outcomes. While physical injury represents only a part of the negative health impacts on women, it is among the more visible forms of violence. The United States Department of Justice has reported that 37 percent of all women who sought medical care in hospital emergency rooms for violence-related injuries were injured by current or former spouse or partner. Assaults result in injuries ranging from bruises and fractures to chronic disabilities such as partial or total loss of hearing and vision, and burns may lead to disfigurement. The medical complications resulting from FGM can range from haemorrhage and sterility to severe psychological trauma. Studies in many countries have shown high level of violence during pregnancy resulting in risk to the health of both the mother and the unborn foetus. In worst cases, all these examples of domestic violence can result in the death of the woman-murdered by her current or ex-partner.

Sexual assaults and rape can lead to unwanted pregnancies, and the
dangerous complications that follow from resorting to illegal abortions. Girls who have been sexually abused in their childhood are more likely to engage in risky behaviour such as early sexual intercourse, and are at greater risk of unwanted and early pregnancies. Women in violent situations are less able to use contraception or negotiate safer sex, and therefore run a high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

The impact of violence on women’s mental health leads to severe and fatal consequences. Battered women have a high incidence of stress and stress-related illness such as post traumatic stress syndrome, panic attacks, depression, sleeping and eating disturbance, elevated blood pressure, alcoholism, drug abuse, and low self-esteem. For some women, fatally depressed and demeaned by their abuser, there seems to be no escape from a violent relationship except suicide.  

4. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC COSTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.

Calculating the costs of violence is a strategic intervention to make policy-makers more aware about the importance and effectiveness of prevention. Studies carried out in Canada, the United States, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Australia calculate costs using different parameters. The Canadian study, which estimated the costs of violence
against women in the larger context of violence both within and outside the home, concluded that the state spends over CDN$1 billion annually on services, including police, criminal justice system, counselling and training. For the United States, according to one study, cost estimates range between US$5 and US$10 billion annually. These studies, it should be noted, refer only to direct service-related costs and do not address the human costs of violence.

In 1993, the World Bank estimated that in industrialised countries health costs for domestic violence and rape accounted for nearly one in five disability-adjusted life years (The Bank estimates count every year lost due to premature death as one disability – adjusted life year (DALY), and every year spent sick or incapacitated as a fraction of a DALY, with the value depending on the severity of disability.) lost to women age 15-44. The health costs of domestic violence and rape are the same in industrialised and developing countries, but because the overall burden of disease is much higher in developing countries, a smaller percentage is attributed to gender-based victimization. In developing countries, depending on the region, estimates range from, 5 to 16 per cent of healthy years lost to women of reproductive age as a result of domestic violence.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has recently carried out studies in six countries in Latin America - Brazil, Colombia, El
Salvador, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela – taking a more holistic look at the socio–economic cost of domestic violence. For analytical purposes, the IDB has divided the costs of domestic violence and social violence into four categories using following framework:

(i) **Direct Costs** take into account expenditures on psychological counselling and medical treatment (emergency room care, hospitalization, care in clinics and doctors’s offices, treatment for sexually transmitted diseases); police services including time spent on arrests and responding to calls, costs imposed on the criminal justice system (prison and detention, prosecution and court cases); housing and shelters for women and their children; and social services (prevention and advocacy programmes, job training and training for police, doctors, the judiciary and the media).

(ii) **Non- Monetary Costs** that do not draw upon medical services, but themselves take a heavy toll on the victim-survivors by way of increased morbidity and mortality through homicide and suicide, increased dependence on drugs and alcohol and other depressive disorders. These are the intangible costs that are comparable, according to
World Bank estimates, to other risk factors and diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and sepsis during child birth.

(iii) **Economic multiplier effects** include, for example, decreased female labour participation and reduced productivity at work and low earnings. In the United States, it has been reported that 30 percent of abused women lost their jobs as a direct result of the abuse. A study in Santiago, Chile estimates that women who do not suffer physical violence earn an average of US$385 per month while women who face severe physical violence at home earn only US$150 – in other words, less than half the earnings of other women. The study also focuses on the macro-economic impact as a result of loss of women’s earnings.

Another effect under this category is the potential impact of domestic violence on the future capacity of children to obtain adequate employment. Apart from the loss of human capital, there are direct costs on the school system as children from violent homes may perform badly and have to repeat grades.
According to an IDB study in Nicaragua, 63 per cent of children from families in which women are subjected to domestic violence repeat a grade at school, and on average drop out at age 9, compared with age 12 for children of women who are not victims of severe abuse.

(iv) **Social Multiplier effects** include the inter-generational impact of violence on children, erosion of social capital, reduced quality of life and reduced participation in democratic processes. These effects are difficult to measure quantitatively, but their impact is substantial in terms of country’s social and economic development.

It is clear that all sectors of society are deeply affected by, and bear the consequences of, violence against women. More studies need to be carried out in both developing and industrialised countries to estimate the costs of domestic violence in order to advocate for national policies to eradicate this largely preventable crime.

A major knowledge gap also exists on the cost-effectiveness of interventions for domestic violence. This is an important area of research that would provide guidance on effective, workable and replicable programmes, and thereby help channel resources and energy in the right direction.\(^5\)
1 http://www.ifor.org/WPP/quotes.htm
2 In-depth study on all forms of violence against women: Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, United Nations, Sixty-first session, Item 60 (a) of the preliminary list, Advancement of women: advancement of women, 6 July 2006, Pg. 47-48.
3 Ibid, Pg. 49-50.
4 Domestic Violence Against Women and Girls, Innocenti Digest No. 6-June 2000, UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy, Pg. 8-9.