

# Prevention of and response to...

*...Sexual and gender-based violence against women...*

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## **The International Centre for Reproductive Health (ICRH)**

ICRH was established in 1994 in response to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD, Cairo, 1994). ICRH is a multidisciplinary research centre operating within the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Ghent University, Belgium. As a WHO Collaborating Centre in Reproductive Health Research, ICRH implements research and intervention projects in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. ICRH fully adheres to the recognition of sexual and reproductive health as a basic human right of all men and women at different stages in their lives. ICRH is one of the pilot research centres in Belgium and in the world that contributes to breaking taboos on sexual and gender-based violence. Through its activities in the medico-social field, ICRH aims at developing an evidence-based approach to the issue. The main goal of ICRH is to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights in its broadest sense. Through its activities, ICRH wants to contribute to the promotion and protection of the sexual and reproductive health and rights, and more particularly to the protection of women and children from all forms of threats that may affect their physical, mental and social wellbeing where their sexuality and reproduction is concerned.

## **Background**

Sexual and gender-based violence is a violation of human rights and a public health problem affecting millions of women and men each year worldwide. Since the World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in 1993, and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the same year, civil society and governments have acknowledged that violence against women is a public policy and human rights concern. Violence against women has profound implications for health but is often ignored. WHO's World Report on Violence and Health notes that 'one of the most common forms of violence against women is that performed by a husband or male partner'. This type of violence is frequently invisible since it happens behind closed doors, and effectively, legal systems and cultural norms do not treat it as a crime, but rather as a 'private' family matter, or a normal part of life. It is driven by many factors operating in a range of social, cultural and economic contexts.

Violence against women is both a consequence and a cause of gender inequality. The Millennium Development Goal regarding girls' education, gender equality and the empowerment of women reflects the international community's recognition that health, development, and gender equality issues are a global concern and all closely interconnected.

## **Perspectives**

In Europe, concerted actions are urgently needed to address this public health problem and should emphasise on the following:

### **Focus on prevention**

High prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in Europe and developing countries as documented by various

research studies are of great concern, especially in light of the HIV epidemic. Greater public awareness of this problem is needed and a strong public health response that focuses on preventing such violence from occurring in the first place. The health sector can play a vital role in preventing violence against women, helping to identify abuse early, providing victims with the necessary treatment, and referring women to appropriate care.

### **Comprehensive health sector response**

The high rates also call for more in-depth research and the development of comprehensive responses at all levels, which do not only include the provision of medical care, but also psychosocial support and legal aid to the victims. Health services must be places where women feel safe, are treated with respect, are not stigmatised, and where they can receive quality, informed support. A comprehensive health sector response to the problem is needed, in particular addressing the reluctance of abused women to seek help.

### **Strategic partnerships**

Increased attention needs to be paid to building strategic partnerships between governments, research centres, universities, international agencies and other stakeholders that play a key role in service delivery and protection of vulnerable populations against all forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

### **From research to policy**

Building and strengthening the research capacity of partnerships should strive to guarantee the needs-responsiveness of its research and to develop strategies for increasing the chances of the research results to be included into the development of policies and programmes.



### Approach

One of the main characteristics of ICRH research is the use of a multidisciplinary approach whereby health research is combined with socio-cultural, legal and policy research. This approach allows for a better understanding of a variety of determinants necessary for the development of more comprehensive strategies for prevention and response, and to increase the impact of policies and the programmes. Particular attention is paid to the impact of prevailing gender inequalities and their impact on women's and girls' vulnerability. Specifically, ICRH contributes to the empowerment of certain vulnerable groups such as poor women, adolescents, sex workers, migrant and refugee populations by providing these groups with the means of making informed and responsible decisions concerning their sexual and reproductive health. Through its research, training, interventions and advocacy, ICRH contributes to policy development and community action that promote and protect sexual and reproductive health and rights.

### Partnerships

In order to increase the needs-responsiveness of its activities, setting of priorities, linking research to actions in the field, and to improve the applicability of the research findings by policy-makers and services providers, ICRH actively seeks collaboration with a variety of stakeholders including universities, research centres,

health institutions, policy-makers, UN and other international agencies, governmental, and non-governmental organisations, and civil society. This international networking has also facilitated the exchange of information, the identification of best practices and lessons learned, the detection of unmet needs and improved complimentary activities undertaken in the field.

The European Network for the Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation in Europe of which Dr Els Leye of ICRH is one of the founding members, unites community based organisations, non-governmental organisations, research centres and policy makers with the aim to harmonise efforts for the development of tools and the organisation of training activities and to improve the impact of research on policy development. The creation of a European network for the promotion of the sexual and reproductive health rights of refugees and asylum seekers and concertation with existing networks on migrant health, is a major resource for raising awareness about the need for improved access of refugees and asylum seekers to appropriate sexual and reproductive health services and to put the issue on the European political agenda.

Equally, partnerships with universities in the South are not only aimed at strengthening local research capacity, but also at enhancing the role of the universities as active stakeholders in the development

of their respective countries and regions. ICRH aims to support initiatives for the strengthening of North-South-South initiatives, which will enable the partners to put the issue of sexual and gender-based violence within a broader, regional and international perspective.

The quality of the partnerships in the field combined with the quality of the project results also contributes to more consolidated partnerships with agencies of the United Nations, such as WHO and UNFPA.

Challenging the social norms that condone and therefore perpetuate violence against women is a responsibility for us all. Supported by WHO, the health sector must now take a proactive role in responding to the needs of the many women living in violent relationships. Much greater investment is urgently needed in programmes to reduce violence against women. We must bring the issue of domestic violence out into the open, examine it as we would the causes of any other preventable health problem, and apply the best remedies available. WHO regards the prevention of violence in general – and violence against women in particular – a high priority.




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