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Indicators and data collection on violence against women
Challenges and lessons learned
Background Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is prevalent in practically all societies in which it has been studied. Women and girls are at greatest risk of being abused by family members, intimate partners and ex partners. Violence is now firmly on the international agenda, and countries, governments, NGOs, national statistics offices, women activists, policy makers and service providers worldwide have recognized the need for reliable data on violence in order to create awareness of the problem, convince policy makers of the magnitude of the problem and related issues, as a basis for the development of interventions and to monitor the impact of programs.

OUTLINE

In this paper on indicators and data collection on domestic violence against women the following topics will be covered. I will address what indicators are and why we need them, the possible sources of data and, most importantly, challenges around analyzing and interpreting data. I will give special attention to understanding what the data tell us: issues and biases. I will finish with lessons learned and recommendations.

WHAT ARE INDICATORS?

The English Language Dictionary describes an indicator as "an instrument which gives you information". In line with this description, indicators come into the picture at the moment that specific information is required.

Particular characteristics of indicators are:

- Indicators provide a simple summary of a complex picture (in the format of a number, proportion, percentage, trend, etc.);
- They need to present features to support informed decision making, policy and programs;
- They need to be sensitive enough to measure change (periodicity);
- They also need to enable comparisons between groups

According to conventional wisdom, it is being said that indicators should meet a number of criteria referred to as SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely.

WHO ARE INTERESTED IN INDICATORS?

Indicators are important for a whole range of users such as: programme/service managers; people who use services; advocates for service users – community; policy-makers; the international community, donors, etc., each of them having different and specific needs and uses for indicators.

WHY USE INDICATORS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

Indicators on violence against women can be used for the following purposes.

- To know the magnitude of the problem (e.g. what proportion of the population suffers from family violence, how often does it happen) and to compare between different populations
- To monitor State response and changes over time: laws developed and implemented, cases reported, persons arrested, persons referred for services, etc.
- To measure impact of services and interventions (are programs successful, are women being helped, has the situation changed?)

For these different purposes data will need to be collected from different sources.

SOURCES OF DATA ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

If you want to know how common violence against women is, possible sources that come to mind are:

1. Population based surveys (e.g. National crime victimization surveys, demographic and reproductive health surveys, focussed specialized surveys, a short module added to other surveys)
2. Records from police, courts, hospital, etc

While surveys are not the main focus of this paper and conference, it is important to realize what is their value and limitations, therefore I will refer to surveys a couple of times in this paper.

Many of the conference participants will be collecting data through service based records. Even if data is collected in a proper and systematic way, what happens with the data after collection is at least as important: how is it analysed, used, and interpreted.

HOW IS DATA COLLECTED ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN SURVEYS?

Surveys can be carried out by national statistical offices and or by other research institutions. They are often and ad hoc activity.

To operationalize violence in quantitative studies, particularly when the aim is to estimate the prevalence of violence in different settings, researchers need to develop clear definitions that can be compared across settings. It should be said up front that due to the complex and sensitive nature of the of partner violence researchers should realize that quantitative research will not give a complete picture. The way in which violence is defined has an enormous impact on the final results.

Almost all surveys will collect data prevalence of violence, many also on frequency and almost all on perpetrators. Attitudes on violence are sometimes collected, though there are issues around interpretation and usefulness.

A special feature of surveys on violence against women/family violence is that women are being asked questions on a sensitive topic they may have never talked about before. This brings with it extra risks and responsibility for the researchers, and this should be addressed in the survey design and implementation.

“Many women told me that they never talked about this with anyone, not even with the neighbors, friends or relatives, ‘because if I tell her, she might tell her husband or her mothers, and word will get around and might reach my husband, which would be terrible. If he found out he would kill me.” (female interviewer, Nicaragua)

There are specific challenges around population-based surveys to collect data on domestic violence:

- Prevalence rates on violence are highly sensitive to methodological issues and therefore difficult to compare between settings
- Research on violence raises major issues of safety and ethics, for example because of the risks for respondents and research team when the topic of interest of the survey becomes know, when there are no appropriate support mechanisms in place for respondents who need so.
- It is unrealistic to expect reduction in prevalence in short or medium term

However, if well designed, a survey can provide results useful for understanding the magnitude and characteristics of violence. This can included for example risk and protective factors, associations with health outcomes, economic implications, etc.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEASURING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN SURVEYS

1. Define the study population broadly
2. Use behaviorally specific questions: specific acts
3. Specify discrete time frames (last year, ever)
4. Give multiple opportunities to disclose
5. Cue respondent to different contexts and perpetrators
6. Use WHO ethical guidelines for violence research

[SEE ANNEX 1 of this paper for more details on these points]

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF SURVEYS

Because of their capacity to contribute to the understanding the magnitude and characteristics of violence, the health burden of violence and risk and protective factors for violence, population based studies are very useful for advocacy, policy development and program design. However they are less useful for monitoring and evaluation programs and services.

INDICATORS BASED ON DATA FROM SERVICE STATISTICS

For program evaluations service statistics are useful, but they also have their limitations in particular when the wrong indicators are chosen for a certain purpose, or when indicators are not properly interpreted.

This is illustrated with the below example of the misguided use of criminal justice statistics for program evaluation^a

ECLAC (Economic commission on Latin America and the Caribbean) proposed in a publication in the 90s to use the following indicators on violence:

- Number of women and girls reporting sexual violence/ 100,000
- Number of women and girls reporting non-fatal injuries due to domestic violence / 100,000

The publication suggested that the source of data be those bodies that produce police, judicial and forensic medical statistics. Moreover, it was stated that “A falling value for the indicator notes improvement”.

The problems with this indicator are

- It is not representative (not valid for whole population)
- It is not “interpretable” (not sure what it means)
- It sets the bar too high (not appropriate indicator to measure improvement of the situation)

I will elaborate on this using another example from Nicaragua.

According to police records in Nicaragua, 3,000 women reported domestic violence in 1995. In the same year, according to population based surveys 150,000 women suffered domestic violence.

The service statistics are not wrong. But this example shows that the service statistics only say something about the use of the services and *they do not represent the actual situation in the whole population.*

^a Credit for the examples from ECLAC and Nicaragua: Mary Ellsberg

And not only do service records not represent the population, *they are also not easy to interpret*, as shown next: Whereas in 1995 3,000 women reported violence to the police, in 1997 more than 8,000 cases were reported to the police. Do the data show that rates of violence increase between 1995 and 1997?

You should realize that during this period special police stations for women were opened throughout the country, and media campaigns were carried out which brought awareness of these services. Because of the increase of services and better quality of care, more women reported violence!!

Conclusion: The data do not tell us anything about the increase of violence but they do tell us about the increase of use of services. The message is: Know what your data tell you!!

The bottom line is, no matter how carefully collected and tabulated, data can tell many stories, and often unknowingly and sometimes manipulatively, they can tell a misleading story.

ISSUES IN INTERPRETATION OF THE INDICATORS ON VIOLENCE

The following issues are important to take into consideration when interpreting data and statistics on violence against women/ family violence:

- Representativeness
- Gender bias
- Underreporting

We already looked at examples of issues around representativeness. Examples of gender bias and underreporting will follow next.

GENDER BIAS

It is good practice to collect and present data for men and women separately (sex disaggregation) to compare the results for man and women. What you may be less aware of is that also sex disaggregated data can give a misleading picture of the difference between man and women.

For example, community based prevalence rates from surveys tend to bias towards a symmetry in the rates women and men are perpetrators or victims of certain forms of domestic violence; whereas service based statistics (e.g. police and hospital records) tend to show something else, namely that men commit almost all violence and they tend to overestimate women as victims of domestic violence.

I will explain this with examples.^b

^b Credit for the examples from the British Crime Survey: Sylvia Walby

Domestic Violence: incidents and gender (British Crime Survey)

	Women	Men	% against women	Ratio: Women: men
Victims	657,000	356,000	65%	1.8
Average number incidents per victim	20	7		3.9
Total incidents	12.9 million	2.5 million	84%	5.2

The table shows that if you look at numbers of victims by sex, women and men look more similar in their experience of violence (this is called “gender symmetry”), compared to when you also look at number of incidents. Thus using prevalence alone (violence as ‘course of conduct’) might mean that a series of 20 incidents may count only as one crime, thereby underestimating the proportion of violent crime that is gender-based violence against women.

It is also important to consider severity, for example by looking at injuries. Injuries show better the gender differences than actions. Data from the UK showed the following:

- Minor force (e.g. slap): 49% women 36% men sustain physical injury
- Severe force (e.g. choke, weapon): 77% women 56% men sustain physical injury

Research based on the survey-based Conflict Tactics Scale, a measure of intra-family conflict and violence focusing on the adults in the family developed by Murray Straus (1979), tends to show in the United States that men and women are equally violent. This is because one slap by a woman to a man is counted as equal to many kicks and blows with fist by a man to a woman, and thus seriously underestimates the experiences of women.

Gender bias can also work in the other way and this happens in particular in police records. For example, according to police records, 95% of child abuse victims in Nicaragua are girls. On the other hand, according to anonymous population based surveys, 70% of child abuse victims are girls and 30% are boys. How can this be explained?

In general research based on reported domestic violence or on police records show men to be the perpetrators and women the victims of most domestic violence. The mere intervention of police may introduce a degree of gender bias into reporting. When faced with a domestic violence situation, police officers often find it far easier to take action against a male protagonist than a female one. Removing one party will normally defuse an altercation. Often police will choose the man, because his arrest is not normally going to involve any children; while removing the woman may entail involving other social services to care for the children for a time, something that may not be in the

children's best interests, or may cause a significant delay. The fact that the majority of police officers are also male and that non-domestic offending is often committed by males may also influence an officer's decision.

Also, police responding to a complaint may act more favorably to the complainant than other parties. Some researchers have suggested that women are more likely to report domestic violence to police than men are, and this is a cause of gender bias. For example, in Ireland, 29% of female victims and 5% of male victims of domestic abuse reported the abuse to the police. In the United States, male victims are less likely than female victims to report rape, physical assault, or stalking.

UNDER-REPORTING

The problem of under-reporting to police is believed to be substantial. However, estimates about how much domestic violence is not reported vary widely. It must also be remembered that a significant amount of non-domestic violence crime is also not reported to police.

Many crime victimization surveys, from many countries, do show that there is a correlation between the under-reporting of crime and the degree of intimacy between the victim and the offender. The degree of seriousness of offending also affects reporting, with less serious offending less likely to be reported to police. Also the nature of the offending affects reporting, with sexual offenses far less likely to be reported, even when they are serious.

LESSONS TO TAKE HOME

- No indicator is perfect
- It is important to be aware of interpretation and potential weaknesses
- The range of indicators to be used changes according to the purpose and context
- If you use of a group of indicators that reflect different aspects of VAW, you will get a better idea of the bigger picture

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Base indicators on existing information where possible
- Indicators should be action-oriented (relevant and useful for programme or case management)
- Always disaggregate by sex, age, rural/urban, etc.
- Include severity and incidents in violence indicators
- For interpretation be aware issues around representativeness, gender bias, underreporting)
- Importance of ownership by stakeholders in countries (including the producers of data), only then will they be used for action!

ANNEX 1

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEASURING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN SURVEYS

1. Define the study population broadly

While we recommend using the broadest criteria possible to define the study population of ever-partnered women (the at risk population), it should be recognized that this will be different in different contexts (e.g. in Bangladesh it was not feasible to ask unmarried women about their partners, but then, an unmarried woman in Bangladesh cohabiting with a partner would in most instances would have identified herself as being married and in this way still be included in the study population).

2. Use behaviorally specific questions: specific acts

Although intimate partner violence researchers initially focused primarily on physical violence, today emotional and sexual abuse are usually also considered. Many studies also include other kinds of abusive or controlling behaviors, such as limiting decision-making power or mobility, or forms of economic violence.

While it may be useful to identify women who have experienced abuse overall, it is important to present separately the prevalence of each type of violence. Aggregating emotional, sexual, and physical abuse in a single domestic violence indicator is likely to lead to confusion, because definitions of emotionally abusive acts vary across cultures, which makes it difficult to define cross-culturally.

The list of abusive behaviors need not be exhaustive. Their purpose is not to describe every possible act that a woman may have experienced. Rather, the aim is to maximize disclosure and to allow for general characterizations regarding the most common types and severity of violence. There is broad agreement now on the types of acts that capture physical violence, less so for sexual violence and emotional abuse. Box 1 show how physical and sexual partner violence was operationalized in the WHO Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women (VAW).¹

Box 1. Operational definitions of physical and sexual partner violence used in WHO Multi-country study on Women's Health and Domestic violence

Physical violence

Has your current husband / partner, or any other partner ever....

- a) Slapped or threw something at you that could hurt you?*
- b) Pushed or shoved you or pulled your hair?*
- c) Hit you with his fist or with something else that could hurt you?*
- d) Kicked, dragged or beat you up?*
- e) Choked or burnt you on purpose?*
- f) Threatened to use or actually used a gun, knife or other weapon against you?*

Sexual violence

- a) *Were you ever physically forced to have sexual intercourse when you did not want to?*
- b) *Did you ever have sexual intercourse you did not want because you were afraid of what he might do?*
- c) *Ever force you to do something sexual that you found degrading or humiliating?*

3. Specify discrete time frames (last year, ever)

To fully understand patterns of abuse, researchers need a time frame by which the abuse can be measured. To determine how many women have experienced partner abuse, for each of the acts, it is generally sufficient to obtain information pertaining to the last year, and to lifetime experiences of abuse and whether it happened once, a few times or many times.

4. Give multiple opportunities to disclose

Numerous studies have shown the importance of giving women more than one opportunity to disclose violence during an interview. Women may not feel comfortable talking about something so intimate the first time it is mentioned, or they may not recall incidents that took place long ago. This is why studies that include only one or two questions on violence usually result in substantial under-reporting of abuse. Researchers have found that many women initially deny having experienced violence, but over the course of the interview, overcome their reluctance to talk. For this reason, it is also wise to avoid using “gateway” or “filter” questions, where women who reply negatively to the first violence question are not asked the more specific questions in the survey.

5. Cue respondent to different contexts and perpetrators

Just as it is crucial to be able to distinguish between different types of abuse, researchers also need specific information about the number of perpetrators and their relationship to the victim. Some researchers suggest that providing specific cues about context may be more effective than a single general question in helping a woman remember violent events.² Therefore, interviewers may be trained to probe about specific situations in which women might have experienced violence, such as the workplace, school, or violence by family members.

6. WHO ethical guidelines for violence research

Research on VAW raises important ethical challenges. WHO has developed “Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women,” which were used for the WHO Study. WHO considers that adhering to these guidelines is essential for doing research in this field and for ensuring the quality of the data.⁽³⁾ These guidelines lay out some of the key principles that should guide research on domestic violence, such as ensuring absolute privacy when doing the interview and maintaining absolute confidentiality of information provided by respondents. It also

identifies specific actions needed to promote each of the principles identified. The principles are summarized in Box 2. These guidelines are now being used widely for research on VAW and in other fields.

Box 2: Ethical and safety recommendations for domestic violence research

- a) *The safety of respondents and the research team is paramount, and should guide all project decisions*
- b) *Prevalence studies need to be methodologically sound and to build upon current research experience about how to minimize the under-reporting of violence*
- c) *Protecting confidentiality is essential to ensure both women's safety and data quality*
- d) *All research team members should be carefully selected and receive specialized training and on-going support*
- e) *The study design must include actions aimed at reducing any possible distress caused to the participants by the research*
- f) *Fieldworkers should be trained to refer women requesting assistance to available local services and sources of support. Where few resources exist, it may be necessary for the study to create short-term support mechanisms.*
- g) *Researchers and donors have an ethical obligation to help ensure that their findings are properly interpreted and used to advance policy and intervention development*
- h) *Violence questions should only be incorporated into surveys designed for other purposes when ethical and methodological requirements can be met*

References

- ¹ World Health Organization (2003). WHO Multi-Country Study On Women's Health And Life Experiences. Core Questionnaire, Version 10.
- ² Koss M. The underdetection of rape: Methodological choices influence incidence estimates. *Journal of Social Issues* 1992;48:61-75.
- ³ World Health Organization *Putting women first: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence against Women* WHO/FCH/GWH/01.1(Geneva: World Health Organization, 2001)

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