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**Session 4– Invited paper**

**INTERNATIONAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SURVEY**

Submitted by European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated  
with the United Nations (HEUNI)\*

**I. IVAWS**

1. The International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) is an international, comparative survey on women's experiences of male violence. The IVAWS project was initiated in 1997 when HEUNI together with a number of international experts in the field started developing a comparative and standardised survey tool for measuring violence against women world-wide. The project is co-ordinated by HEUNI with inputs from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and Statistics Canada.

2. IVAWS is specifically designed to target violence against women and to make international comparisons. It utilises the methodology and contacts developed for the International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS), the specific expertise of Statistics Canada in developing sensitive survey tools for measuring violence against women, as well as the experience of the World Health Organization in developing sensitive research methods on violence against women. The International Violence Against Women Survey thus combines the comparative methodology of the International Crime Victim Survey with the national violence against women surveys.

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## II. Building on previous research

3. There are a number of (national) studies on domestic violence and violence against women. The studies offer a variety of viewpoints to the issues around violence against women. Most of the studies have been designed to explore country-specific issues, e.g. focusing on violence against women from a women's health perspective or exploring domestic violence from an interpersonal conflict theory perspective. Some countries have carried out extensive national surveys on women's victimisation by male offenders.

4. In almost all countries, the police records crimes that have come to its attention. It is generally agreed that police recorded crime do not correspond to the actual level of crime (e.g. Newman 1999). This is especially true for crimes of violence against women (e.g. Johnson 1996). General crime victim surveys have been accepted as a measure of the extent of victimisation in society for certain forms of crime. Most of the general crime victim surveys specifically ask female respondents on their experiences of sexual violence. General crime victim surveys usually broadly adhere to the legal definitions of crime. Since the general victimisation surveys have been designed to measure several forms of criminal victimisation, they have tended to overlook many features specific to violence against women. Especially victims of intimate relationship violence do not necessarily perceive their victimisation as a crime and therefore might not report it in a *crime* victim survey. Particularly sexual victimisation may remain underreported, as observed e.g. by Percy and Mayhew 1997 about the British Crime Survey (BCS). BCS, administered by the Home Office, has since developed a separate self-completion component for questions on violence against women, where women are asked to key in their replies themselves to the questions shown on the computer screen.

5. The problems associated with the reliability of the responses to general criminal victimisation also apply to women's victimisation, both sexual and physical. Respondents might not want to talk about difficult or embarrassing incidents, or they might forget about certain incidents or add other incidents outside of the time frame of the survey, thus leading to under- or over-reporting. Some respondents are more eager to participate than others and some might regard it unnecessary to participate in the survey altogether, for a variety of reasons. (Skogan 1986; Percy and Mayhew 1997.)

6. The national violence against women surveys are a valuable source of information on one of the most hidden forms of violence. The surveys have shed light on the extent of women's victimisation and they have raised the issue to the political and governmental agenda. The surveys have generally also received due media attention and the empirical results have been used both in general awareness-raising campaigns, as also more specifically in training and sensitising those groups in health sector, criminal justice sector and social services who frequently in their work come across victims of violence.

7. It is tempting to carry out comparisons between the results of national violence against women surveys. Although these surveys all address the same issues and the structures of the questionnaires are closely related, it is difficult to compare the findings even when examining items which seem less problematic to measure than for example sexual victimisation in intimate relationships. Behind the figures hide small differences in survey design which make the comparisons unreliable. If one wishes to compare lifetime victimisation by strangers, there can be a problem with an overlap of different perpetrator groups as well as definitions of incidents. Without access to the raw data files and relying on the written reports only, it is difficult to determine how to compare the different surveys.

8. Comparison between surveys may also be dubious due to differences in cultural and social factors, method of data collection (telephone or face-to-face interviews or a postal survey), as well as sampling. It is evident that the national violence against women surveys have been developed for national purposes and national needs. Possibilities for international comparison have not been a priority when designing the surveys.

### **III. International efforts**

9. A fundamental requirement of a prevention-oriented approach to crime is the availability of extensive and reliable data, which unfortunately are often not found in either industrialised or, to an even greater extent, developing countries. Not too long ago all the information available was based on official records produced by the criminal justice administration. Information on the “dark figure” and citizens’ direct contact with crime and criminal justice administration was not readily available. This situation prompted the initiation of the surveys of victims of crime. A victimisation survey is an excellent tool for collecting information on citizens’ first hand experiences with crime and criminal justice.

10. From their initiation, victim surveys were mainly confined to the developed countries, where their diffusion was relatively rapid, becoming more focused and regular, while their presence in the developing world was very limited. The International Crime Victim Survey was designed to expand the availability of good data.

11. However, the ICVS was not specifically designed to target violence against women. More generally, it seems that there are shortcomings to victim surveys when it comes to measuring the extent of the specific and intimate forms of violence that affect women. Additionally, the ICVS is focused on criminal victimisation. Many women might not regard the acts they have experienced as crimes. Thus they might be reluctant to inform the interviewer about their experiences of male violence.

12. The aim with the IVAWS is to promote research on violence against women around the world, and in particular in developing countries and countries in transition where resources for survey research have been limited. Further, it aims to create an international data set for cross-cultural analysis of violence against women around the world, and to promote policy development for preventing and counteracting violence against women both nationally and world-wide.

13. In 2002, pilot studies were carried out in 15 countries, including Argentina, Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Poland, Australia, Indonesia, Philippines, Spain (Basque region), Serbia, and Ukraine.

14. At the moment, full-fledged studies have taken place in five countries (Australia, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Switzerland), and national reports from these studies are forthcoming. Another five countries (Greece, Italy, Mozambique, the Philippines, Poland) will finish their fieldwork by the end of 2004–early 2005. In the beginning of 2005, after the first set of national datasets have been integrated to the IVAWS database, the work on the comparative analysis will be started. The first comparative results will be presented at the Eleventh United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (Bangkok, Thailand, 18–25 April 2005).

**References**

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