Dr Enrique Silva, who is in charge of autopsies in Ciudad Juarez in northern Mexico, examines the clothing of recent rape and murder victims. Mexican police have been baffled by the number of young women found brutally raped and murdered in the outskirts of the industrial town that borders the United States. In some cases, the victims have been mutilated and horribly disfigured: Objects have been inserted into their vaginas or anuses and/or their left breasts have been cut off.

Image: Susan Meiselas/Magnum

Chapter 11

sexual assault and harassment

A young South African man participating in a recent ethnographic study of perceptions regarding sexual violence offered researchers his definition of rape: "What rape is, it is dragging a person forcefully and force [sic] her to have sex with you without her consent, totally, and she is not your girlfriend." According to another young man from the same study, "If you think about rape, you should notice the place. … You hardly ever hear that a person was raped in her own room … it happens there in the *veldt.* … Even the cherry [girl] doesn't think you raped her." One young female research subject, who told a story of being forced by her boyfriend to have sex and then being beaten by him for responding (in his words) "like a corpse", claimed that her experience was "different from rape in that I didn't want sex but I loved him and in the case of rape I don't love the person at all."[1]

Debunking the rape myth

Common myths and assumptions related to sexual violence are shared the world over. They often reflect and reinforce social attitudes and customs that aggrandise male aggression while at the same time purporting female passivity. In many settings, sexual activity is popularly represented as a "battle of the sexes", in which sexually driven men are expected to compel sexually hesitant women.[2] The implicit message is that it is socially acceptable for sexual transactions between men and women to involve some degree of force.[3] The explicit outcome is that the majority of victims of sexual violence around the world are female, and the majority of perpetrators are male.

Ideas about what constitutes "unacceptable" sexual behaviour between men and women more often serve to protect the *status quo* of male dominance, such that "the volition, perceptions, and feelings of the woman or girl" are "amazingly absent from most cultural definitions of violence."[4] Determinations of the moral, legal or social permissibility of a given sex act are more likely to focus on the context in which it occurs — "who did it to whom and under what circumstance" — rather than on "the act itself or its impact on the woman."[5] This failure to consider the rights and wellbeing of women and girls is vividly demonstrated in nearly universal attitudes towards rape.

According to conventional assumptions prevalent across cultures, rape primarily happens in dark alleys or other remote locations, is committed by strangers and involves physical brutality. The act of rape is a social aberration and, therefore, a rare event. Following this logic is the notion that the majority of rapists are sociopaths — mentally ill men who have uncontrollable sexual urges. If they are not part of the "lunatic fringe", then they are men who have been unnaturally provoked by sexually

promiscuous women.[6] In the latter model, responsibility to prevent rape falls to the potential victim, a sentiment illustrated in the recommendations of a Malaysian parliamentarian who argued, "Women should wear *purdah* [head-to-toe covering] to ensure that innocent men do not get unnecessarily excited by women's bodies and are not unconsciously forced into becoming rapists. If women do not want to fall prey to such men, they should take the necessary precautions instead of forever blaming the men."[7]

Such delimiting characterisations of sexual violence support impunity for the average rapist, not only because they blame the victim, but also because they disguise the global reality: that sexual assault, including rape, is more often perpetrated by someone known to the victim and occurs in her own home or in another familiar environment. Rape does not necessarily involve physical force, and the perpetrator need not be pathological.[8] Evidence from countries around the world confirms that while the classic "stranger" rape does exist, it represents only the "tip of the iceberg" of sexual assault.[9] Understanding the true extent of sexual violence is fraught with a number of challenges, not least of which is defining exactly what it entails.

"Women should wear *purdah* [head-to-toe covering] to ensure that innocent men do not get unnecessarily excited by women's bodies and are not unconsciously forced into becoming rapists."

Coercion, consent and choice

In the last 20 to 30 years, women's right activists have emphasised the basic human rights of women and girls — and the accountability of men and boys in respecting those rights — when differentiating between acceptable sexual contact and sexual violence. They suggest that force is not inevitable in sexual relations, but rather a reflection of male ideologies of control over women. Their work has informed contemporary definitions of sexual violence, which increasingly challenge conventional stereotypes that interpret "real" sexual violence only in the context of stranger rape.

In a 2002 global report on violence and health the World Health Organization (WHO) defined sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work."* Sexual assault is a form of sexual violence involving bodily contact. Rape is a further delineated form of sexual assault that entails "physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration — even if slight — of the vulva or anus, using a penis, other body parts or an object."[10]

A key determinant of sexual violence within this definition is the issue of coercion — which may involve physical force but also can involve "psychological intimidation, blackmail or threats — for instance the threat of physical harm, of being dismissed from a job or of not obtaining a job that is sought. It may also occur when the person aggressed is unable to give consent — for instance, while drunk, drugged, asleep, or mentally incapable of understanding the situation."[11]

By emphasising the concept of coercion rather than physical force, the WHO definition of sexual violence calls attention to the potentially wide range of behaviours that violate the rights of the victim. A definition based solely or even primarily on coercion presents challenges, however, because what amounts to coercion may be contested by those involved: A victim may experience behaviours as highly coercive when the perpetrator does not. To overcome ambiguities inherent in interpretations of coercion, many women's rights activists have stressed the primacy of consent.[12]

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women has described consent as the "legal dividing line between rape and sexual intercourse."[13] Another expert explained that a definition of sexual violence based on consent "recognizes and ratifies a simple principle … [which is] our personal sovereignty. We have the right not to be acted upon unless we wish to be acted upon and communicate that wish to the actor. Our silence is not our permission."[14]

Other feminist theorists prefer the concept of choice to that of consent

*According to the World Health Organization definition's broad ambit, sexual violence can be perpetrated by a wide range of actors and can include an equally wide range of acts and practices, such as sexual harassment, forced prostitution and trafficking, child sexual abuse, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, forced sex in intimate partnerships and rape by strangers. Although many of these forms of sexual violence have overlapping features, several have been covered more explicitly in other chapters of this book. The primary focus in this chapter is rape and sexual coercion committed outside the context of war and, to a lesser extent, sexual harassment in the workplace.

“Carolina” grew up on a farm in the northern province of Sucre, Colombia. When armed militias terrorised her village in 2001, Carolina and her family were forced to flee. They relocated to Nelson Mandela, a ramshackle *barrio* for internally displaced persons on the outskirts of the port city of Cartagena. Carolina, then 14, was often left alone to watch her younger siblings while her mother worked. She was seduced by a neighbour in his sixties, who wooed her with pocket money and treats. He raped her three times over a period of several months. Carolina told her parents about the rapes only after she realised that she was pregnant, having previously feared the neighbour’s threat to kill her family if she told them anything. With her family’s support, she reported the rapes to the authorities — who declined to investigate. With the help of a lawyer, Carolina is currently seeking justice through the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, D.C.

Image: Jennifer Szymaszek

because "it does not implicitly assume that men initiate all sexual overtures."[15] The language of choice, even more so than consent, underscores and promotes female autonomy in sexual relations.

Choice is the exception, rather than the rule, however, for many women and girls around the world. A teenage girl in South Africa observed, "Forced sex is the norm. It is the way people interact sexually."[16] In qualitative research in Zimbabwe, young women acknowledged their powerlessness in sexual relationships: "A woman can refuse, but then this woman will run the risk that she will be forced into sex. I would like to change it, but it cannot be done because a woman needs to follow the man."[17]

"A woman can refuse, but then this woman will run the risk that she will be forced into sex. I would like to change it, but it cannot be done because a woman needs to follow the man."

Even when choice is clearly absent, many women and girls who suffer sexual assault still may not view their victimisation as rape because their experience is not represented in hegemonic definitions of sexual violence. Based on encounters reported by a national sample of college women in the United States, researchers concluded that from one-fifth to one-quarter of all college women are at risk of an attempted or completed rape during their college years. However, for those respondents whose experiences were categorised as completed rape according to the standard definition used by the researchers, only 46.5 percent believed the incident to be rape. Forty-nine percent said it wasn't rape, and 4.7 percent said they didn't know.[18]

Any attempts to study sexual violence must understand this important distinction. As one women's rights advocate noted, "Just because a woman doesn't call it rape, doesn't mean she doesn't feel violated."[19]

Generating reliable data on sexual violence

According to a sexual violence expert from the United States, "rape appears in many guises" and, as such, requires careful investigative methods that capture the range of women's and girl's experiences.[20] When researchers use narrow definitions of sexual violence, the reported rates of sexual crimes are likely to be relatively low. Crime-victim surveys reflect this: While they are useful because of their broad scope and comparable methodology, questions on sexual violence may not discriminate between different types of sexual assaults and/or perpetrators. In data presented by the WHO on a select number of crime-victim surveys, rates of reported sexual victimisation (recorded in the five years prior to each survey) range from less than 2 percent in Bolivia, Botswana, China and the Philippines to 5 percent or more in Albania, Argentina, Brazil and Colombia.[21]

Although still scarce and somewhat difficult to compare because of differences in data-collection techniques and definitions used, more targeted sexual violence surveys typically generate higher rates of reporting among participants. A variety of such surveys from the United States, for example, suggest that between 14 percent and 20 percent of the general population of women in that country will be raped at least once in their lifetime.[22] In the Czech Republic, 11.6 percent of women responding to a national survey reported that they had experienced forced sexual contact, most commonly in the form of vaginal intercourse.[23] Forty percent of a random sample of 420 women in Toronto, Canada, reported at least one episode of forced sexual intercourse since the age of 16.[24] Specific subgroups are at even greater risk. Research from the United States on women with disabilities, for example, indicates they are at one-and-a-half times greater risk of sexual victimisation than women without disabilities.[25]

The use of explicit questions in these surveys helps to overcome underreporting related to biases or preconceptions associated with the semantics of rape. Even employing the language of forced or coerced sex, rather than rape, can produce more accurate estimates of women's and girl's exposure to sexual violence. In a South African study, 11 percent of the adolescents surveyed said they had been raped, but a further 72 percent reported being subject to forced sex.[26] A survey of unmarried adolescents seeking abortions in 17 hospitals in China found that 48 percent had experienced sexual coercion at least once.[27]

An increasing number of studies have focused on the issue of coerced or forced sexual initiation among adolescent girls. Average estimates of coerced first sex among adolescents around the world range from 10 percent to 30 percent, but in some settings, such as Cameroon and Peru, the number is closer to 40 percent.[28] In a survey of high school students in Korea, 39 percent of sexually active females reported that their first experience of sex was the result of force or pressure from their partner.[29] Studies of nine countries in the Caribbean estimated that incidents of forced first intercourse were as high as 48 percent.[30]

An example of a police docket from Durban, South Africa. In this case a 14-year-old girl was raped by multiple perpetrators but the findings of the magistrate were *"nolle prosequi"*, a legal term indicating that the prosecutor will proceed no further.

Image: Mariella Furrer

Crosses mark the graves of women who were killed in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Local women's rights groups believe that at least 187 women have met violent deaths in the border town since 1993. Many of the dead were murdered by pimps, drug dealers, husbands and boyfriends. At least one-third of the deaths are unexplained, however, and police have no suspects. Authorities believe that about 30 of the cases have the common elements of torture and rape and may be the work of one or several serial killers. Most of these victims were slender, dark-haired girls between 14 and 18 years of age who worked in one of the numerous United States-owned *maquiladora* factories. Many were killed on their way to or from work.

Image: Antonio Olmos/Network Photographers

Identifying the perpetrators

Many studies have confirmed that most perpetrators of sexual violence are known to the victim. In fact, according to the WHO, "One of the most common forms of sexual violence around the world is that which is perpetrated by an intimate partner."[31] In a recent study of a representative sample of married and unmarried young men and women in Kenya, more than one in five sexually experienced young women had been subjected to nonconsensual sex. Those who had been married were at greater risk of coercion than respondents who had never been married, and husbands were often identified as perpetrators.[32] Other studies from around the world that have specifically investigated intimate-partner violence suggest that on average one in five women has been forced to have sex by her partner — in some settings those numbers are much higher.[33] In general, sexual assaults by intimate partners are reported two to eight times more often than assaults by strangers.[34]

"One of the most common forms of sexual violence around the world is that which is perpetrated by an intimate partner."

One sexual violence expert concluded, "The most important lesson learned about interpersonal violence in the past 20 years is how frequently it is perpetrated by apparently normal individuals."[35] Rather than verifying assumptions that rape is committed by a small number of disturbed men, research suggests that many men around the world share the attitudes and beliefs necessary to commit an act of sexual violence.[36] In other words, the "high prevalence of rape largely reflects a high level of social tolerance of the crime."[37]

Social acceptability of sexual violence

The United States has been called one of the "most rape-prone of all modern societies."[38] Regardless of whether this is true in absolute terms or more a reflection of the relative preponderance of research conducted among men there, studies from across the United States have shed light on the intersection of male entitlement, sexual aggression and the perpetration of sexual violence. In one study, 85 percent of a sample of men from the midwestern United States who were defined by researchers as highly sexually aggressive had victimised women with whom they had had relationships.[39]

In other studies, one-third to one-half of college males indicated that they would rape if they knew they would not be punished.[40] Similar percentages of high school males interviewed in yet another study from the United States agreed that it was acceptable for a man to force sex on a woman if she " 'led him on', changed her mind, or sexually aroused him."[41] One young man who raped his date after she had voluntarily touched his penis but then declined intercourse reported, "I felt as if I had gotten something that I was entitled to. And I felt I was repaying her for sexually arousing me." For him, committing rape was "very powerful and titillating. … It made me feel as if I was in control."[42]

These attitudes are not restricted to the United States. A recent study conducted by Australia's National Crime Prevention Authority highlighted the connection between young men's presumptions of sexual entitlement and the high prevalence of forced sex reported by young Australian women.[43] The same link has been illustrated in research from other parts of the world, where men insist on their right to sexual access of women, regardless of the feelings and desires of the women themselves. In Kenya, for example, adolescent boys admitted to drugging and even gagging girls to obtain sex, claiming, "We seduce them at first, but if they remain adamant we force them."[44] The reflections of one incarcerated rapist from the United States illustrate male entitlement in the extreme: "Rape is a man's right. If a woman doesn't want to give it, the man should take it. Women have no right to say no. Women are made to have sex. It's all they're good for. Some women would rather take a beating, but they always give in."[45]

Perceptions like this have led feminist theorists to conclude that in the vast majority of cases of sexual violence, sex is the mechanism through which men express their control over and objectification of women. In her 1975 book *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller argued that throughout history rape has been employed to generate and reinforce female subordination to males. According to the theories of Brownmiller and many others, sexual violence is less the expression of an individual man's unrestrained sex drive than it is a reiteration of patriarchal social structures and norms. Rape is primarily motivated by power, not sex.[46]

Sexual violence as both a reflection of and an exercise in control of women is most unambiguous when it is used as an overt method of punishment. Such practices are evident in the history of cultures around the world. Among the Cheyenne Indians of the United States, for example, a wife suspected of adultery was "put on the prairie" as

punishment by her husband, and men were invited "to feast" on her through gang rape.[47] In a modern example of rape as retribution, teenage girls in Kenya reported that appearing "haughty" and "in need of a lesson" by failing to respond to the attentions of boys might result in punishment through rape.[48]

In some instances, the target for punishment is not only — or even primarily — the woman herself. In cultures where women are considered the property of men, rape may be used to avenge male family members. Mukhtaran Bibi, for example, was recently sentenced to gang rape by a Pakistani tribal council as punishment for a crime allegedly committed by her brother. After being raped by four men, she was forced to walk home nearly naked while being jeered at by approximately 300 onlookers. Bibi took the extraordinary step in her conservative community of fighting back against her attackers, six of whom were convicted. But after becoming a "ferocious spokesperson" against violence against women in Pakistan, Bibi was punished again. The Pakistani government put her under house arrest and held her passport to prevent her from travelling to the United States at the invitation of Pakistani-Americans. As yet, her documents have not been returned to her and she remains unable to travel outside her country unless she complies with her government's requirement that she be accompanied by an escort.[49]

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Silencing the victim

Unlike Bibi, the majority of rape victims never speak out about their experiences. In the United States, rape is more likely than any other form of victimisation to be kept secret.[50] Data from Canada suggest that rape is four times less likely to be reported than domestic violence.[51] A 1999 demographic and health survey from South Africa found that only 15 percent of women who had experienced an incident of forced sex had reported it to the police.[52] Criminologists in Taiwan estimate that 10 percent of rapes committed there are reported, a rate that some emergency room doctors who treat rape victims believe to be optimistic.[53] Seven percent of the young women and girls surveyed in 2001 in Nigeria acknowledged being raped, but only 1 percent had reported the incident to the police. The case of a 15-year-old from Lagos illustrates some of the reasons why:

"Adeola" blamed herself when she was raped by the lodger, a friend of her father, and became pregnant. After he found out about the rape, her father accused Adeola of being a prostitute. Instead of protecting her from further violence, her parents ostracised her. She fled the house, eventually finding her way to the only shelter for women in Lagos, which is run by a women's human rights organization. She hoped to continue her studies after the delivery of her baby. She did not want to press charges against the lodger.[54]

Shame, blame, social ostracism — these are powerful inhibitors to seeking assistance, let alone justice. A 17-year-old girl from Zambia who was raped by the priest of her local church told researchers, "I'm scared to tell the police. They won't believe me because he's a priest. … I feel ashamed. … Others think you want it to happen."[55] A survivor courageous enough to report her rape runs the risk of being revictimised by the very same beliefs that facilitated the rape. One sexual assault victim in India who filed a complaint was asked by a police officer if she knew "the meaning of the word rape." Another was told, "A woman like you will never get raped. Don't try to tell us that you did not enjoy it."[56]

In conservative Islamic cultures, a woman who cannot produce four Muslim witnesses to prove that she was raped may be imprisoned or publicly stoned to death for having committed adultery.[57] Afia Bibi, a blind Pakistani girl who was sentenced to three years imprisonment after being unable to produce the requisite number of witnesses to support her claims of rape, was lucky enough to have her case overturned by the federal court due to the national mobilisation of women's organizations.[58] Many other rape victims in Pakistan and elsewhere do not receive such support. If they are not killed by order of Islamic law, they may be murdered by a relative for tainting the family honour.

Creating a blanket of impunity

However draconian, such traditions reflect attitudes prevalent in many cultures that essentially hold women accountable for sexual violations on the grounds that they are responsible for protecting their own chastity — and, by relation, their family's reputation. Particularly in situations where a woman knows her rapist, the assumption is that she asked for and even wanted sex, and it is often her responsibility to prove otherwise. Evidentiary rules in a number of countries place the victim at

This woman, who is the representative of a labour union in Nicaragua, was sexually harassed by an accountant in the factory where she works. “One day as I left work, the man in charge of accounting told me that he wanted to talk to me. He asked for my address and kept on visiting me uninvited. I had told him that I wasn’t interested in a relationship. Still, the next time I went to his office, he touched me on my arm and face. He tried to grab me in the dining hall and the corridors. I talked to the CEO several times, but he didn’t do anything. The harassment only stopped after I threatened to go to the labour ministry and report it to the judiciary.”

Images: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN

A factory worker in one of Nicaragua's export-production zones told this photographer, "It is very delicate. We know there are cases [of bosses trying to sleep with workers], but we don't know the women's names. They are afraid that they will lose their jobs or that people won't believe them. We don't know for sure, but rumours go around." Workplace sexual harassment is widespread and particularly pervasive in the export-production zones, where Nicaragua's national laws do not apply. Women who do report such incidents to senior management risk losing their jobs — in a place where there are few options for employment.

Image: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN

a disadvantage. They not only require independent corroboration of a rape allegation, they also allow for testimony about the victim's sexual history — i.e., whether or not she was a virgin before the attack.[59] In some settings, a rape survivor may be required to undergo a virginity test, established by whether a doctor can easily insert two or more fingers in her vagina.[60] Such requirements imply a woman who is not a virgin is a less credible victim, and less deserving of protection.

Even when evidence proves a victim's innocence, rape can nevertheless decrease her value in the eyes of society. The stigma of rape attaches itself to the victim rather than to the rapist in a variety of ways. In Southeast Asian culture, a husband may abandon his wife if she has been raped because he perceives that she has "been used or left over."[61] Even in modern Taiwan, a survivor of acquaintance rape may be encouraged to marry her rapist to protect her reputation as a virtuous woman.[62] The same is true in other parts of the world: Among some tribes in sub-Saharan Africa, a girl's bride price will decrease if she has been raped. If the rapist refuses to marry the girl, he may be subject to fines to make up the difference of the reduced bride price.

Given few alternatives, the majority of sexual violence victims are forced into silence. A woman's subordinate status ensures many perpetrators a blanket of impunity. Around the world, as more and more women enter the public sphere through low-paying jobs that are supervised by men, the playing field for this vicious cycle of violence and impunity gets even larger.

Sexual harassment in the workplace

Like other forms of sexual violence, sexual harassment of women and girls is a manifestation of unequal power relations between the sexes. Because harassment refers primarily to nonphysical forms of abuse — such as threats and intimidation, verbal slander, unwanted sexual advances, intentional stalking and sexual humiliation — it is often considered a lesser form of sexual violence and has therefore received significantly less attention from researchers.[63]

The pervasiveness of sexual harassment, however, constitutes an ever-present threat. It can occur anywhere — on the street, at school and at home — "instilling fear and violating a woman's right to bodily integrity, education, and freedom of movement."[64] Moreover, the essential dynamics that drive sexual harassment are the same as those that lead to rape. According to one researcher, "Men who verbally harass women on the street say they do so to alleviate boredom, to gain a sense of youthful camaraderie and because it's fun — the same reasons men who rape give for their behaviour."[65]

One of the "more pernicious" forms of sexual harassment, in the opinion of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, is that which occurs in the workplace. Around the world, many women labour in climates of fear and degradation. One 22-year-old woman from Poland who worked as an assistant said that her boss "smacked her bottom … and told her that he wanted to have sex with her." On one occasion, he "came up behind her, and … he fondled her breasts and genitalia and put his fingers into her pants. She was in shock and started to cry." Another Polish woman, who was working as a nurse, remembered when her director "grabbed my breasts from behind and started to kiss my neck. I was shocked but managed to get away. Then, in very rude words, he said, 'What are you afraid of? Nothing will happen to your pussy.' "[66]

The offence of sexual harassment in the workplace is further compounded by the fact that it "strikes at the heart of a woman's self-sufficiency."

The offence of sexual harassment in the workplace is further compounded by the fact that it "strikes at the heart of women's economic self-sufficiency."[67] Those who complain about sexual harassment risk losing their jobs. An 18-year-old Thai woman who had been molested frequently by her supervisor, for example, was encouraged by other colleagues who had experienced the same thing to take the case to the police. When an investigation was mounted, however, these same colleagues were reluctant to act as witnesses for fear of losing their jobs. The young woman was forced to resign.[68]

Raising global awareness

Over the last 20 years, based on a movement that has its origins in the United States, a growing number of governments have recognised sexual harassment in the workplace as a form of sex discrimination and a violation of basic human rights.[69] Even so, there is no widely accepted international definition of workplace sexual harassment, nor is there any international convention that specifically prohibits it. Instead, various national laws have defined workplace sexual harassment generally to include sexual advances or propositions to which an employee may be

explicitly or implicitly expected to submit as a condition of employment (*quid pro quo* harassment), or offensive behaviour, questions or comments that create an intimidating or hostile working environment.

While data on the scope of the problem is limited, the rate of sexual harassment experienced by working women in the United States and Western Europe is estimated at 50 percent.[70] Research from countries as culturally dissimilar as Nepal, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic indicates similar numbers.[71] In Asia, where women are moving into the workforce in unprecedented numbers but often occupy the lowest paying positions, the rates of sexual harassment are on the rise. Seventy percent of a survey of public officers in Korea acknowledged experiencing sexual harassment.[72] Eighty-four percent of Chinese women participating in research conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences confirmed their exposure, and in one sample of women from Malaysia, 88 percent reported sexual harassment.[73]

"Laws against sexual harassment might be okay, but sex is natural. It involves natural forces that move men to do things that are against morality. This is millions of years of human behaviour. You can't change this."

In many countries, sexual harassment is a relatively new legal and social concept. The attitudes that promulgate sexual violence in the larger community are reiterated within the workplace. One manager from Bulgaria, for example, stated, "Laws against sexual harassment might be okay, but sex is natural. It involves natural forces that move men to do things that are against morality. This is millions of years of human behaviour. You can't change this."[74] A Russian women's rights lawyer dismissed the problem of workplace sexual harassment by insisting women "like compliments".[75]

At the same time that the perpetrator's responsibility for his actions is minimised, the victim is blamed. A social worker in Poland commented that one woman exposed to sexual harassment "did not set up the right distance between herself and her boss in the beginning. … She did not recognise the signs of the situation. Often women who are victims do not recognise the signs until it is too late."[76] Attitudes that blame the victim and the threat of losing a job force women to silently endure workplace abuse until it becomes intolerable, at which point they may choose to quit rather than fight an unresponsive system. According to the Special Rapporteur, women are nine times more likely than men to leave their job as a result of sexual harassment.[77]

The Ciudad Juarez example

The volatile combination of sexual harassment in the workplace and sexual violence in the community is perhaps most glaringly evident in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Since 1993, hundreds of women have been brutally killed and hundreds more have disappeared in the small border city. Most of the victims are young and poor migrants who have left their families in other parts of the country to work in one of Ciudad Juarez's many *maquiladoras* (assembly factories), where the salaries are meagre and labour rights violations are rampant. Sexual violence is commonplace, both inside the factories and in the community, and the government has taken little action to stem the tide of violence. Instead, culpability falls to the victim. In 1999, one government official said, "Women who have a night life, go out late and come in contact with drinkers are at risk. It's hard to go out on the street when it's raining and not get wet."[78] In Ciudad Juarez, as in other parts of the world, "to strive to live and work outside the watchful gaze of the family and community is to risk becoming a target for male violence."[79]

Breaking the silence

Rape and other forms of sexual violence cause a variety of short- and long-term physical and psychological afflictions, including chronic pelvic and other pain syndromes, unwanted pregnancies, negative pregnancy outcomes, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, substance abuse, suicidal tendencies and self-harm, depression, anxiety and difficulties in sexual and interpersonal relationships.[80] The risk of HIV/AIDS — increased in instances of sexual violence because of physical trauma such as cuts and abrasions — adds another element of fear and anxiety.[81]

The majority of survivors of sexual violence never receive medical treatment or psychosocial support. Those who are willing or able to report the crime are much more likely to have access to healthcare. In research from the United States, more than half the women who reported being raped received medical treatment, compared to less than one-fifth of those who did not come forward.[82] Clearly, one of the most crucial strategies for mitigating the effects of sexual violence is to create environments that are conducive to reporting.

Such environments would include, at minimum, a rapid and compassionate response by health professionals trained to not "look for

signs of rape", but rather to collect forensic evidence and provide testimony during court cases.[83] Health workers also need to be able to provide emergency contraception, as well as antiretrovirals that can reduce the risk of HIV transmission. Supportive counselling and advocacy services also should be available to survivors to address their psychological needs and, if necessary, to assist them through the judicial process. Survivors also must be able to count on respectful and responsive police who are specially qualified to investigate sexual assaults.

Legislation that only defines rape in terms of penile penetration of the vagina — still the case in many countries of the world — should be expanded to include anal or oral penetration or penetration with an object, and judiciaries need to be trained in applying these expanded definitions.[84] Laws also need to account for marital rape, as well as for rapes by other known assailants, so that a woman is not discouraged from reporting an experience that falls outside the stereotype of stranger rape. According to the WHO, several countries in Asia with recent legislation that significantly broadens the definition of rape and mandates state assistance have seen a substantial increase in reporting.[85]

Perhaps the most important way to encourage victims to come forward is to ensure that perpetrators are prosecuted. Globally, rape is among the least convicted of all crimes. On average, only 10 percent of all rapists will ever serve a jail sentence, and in many settings that number is likely to be even lower.[86] The response of the legal-justice system to rape "is a yardstick against which the seriousness of the crime is measured."[87]

The current low levels of prosecution for sexual crimes reinforce attitudes that explicitly or implicitly condone violence against women.

Improving reporting and prosecution, while important, cannot be the end goals if the objective is long-term prevention of sexual violence. The final frontier of prevention must focus on changing the beliefs and behaviours that promote sexual abuse. The line between acceptable and unacceptable sexual conduct must be shifted, and with it, social assumptions and values regarding men's and women's behaviour.

The current low levels of prosecution for sexual crimes reinforce attitudes that explicitly or implicitly condone violence against women.

Where male aggression and control is emphasised, sexual violence is likely to be more common. Where women are disempowered — economically, socially and politically — they are unlikely to step beyond the veil of silence that conceals the crimes against them and, in turn, protects their perpetrators. In an increasing number of countries, men are taking a stand against violence against women by developing advocacy campaigns and community-based education about gender and nonviolence. Just as crucial, however, are initiatives that improve the lives of women and girls, including increased access to education and economic empowerment. The ultimate aim is mutual respect, where power is shared equitably between the sexes, rather than monopolised by men and expressed in acts of violence against women's bodies. ■

Azara's Story

"My name is 'Azara' and I am 25 years old. I was born into slavery — my whole family were slaves. My parents and I served the same master. I have two children, both from when my master raped me. My daughter, Khdiza, is eight years old and my son, Mahamout, is three years old. I had three children, but one died. I feel very bitter about having my master's children, but all I can do is accept it. It is very hard to accept.

"As a slave I had to labour so hard, pounding millet and fetching water all the time. I worked day and night. I had to do whatever my master told me to do. It was out of the question to say no. If I ever said no, I was beaten so hard. I tried once to resist but he beat me with his hands.

"Both of my sisters are still slaves to him. We were three women serving one man. I can't count the number of times he raped me. As far back as I can remember he sexually abused me — I was probably the age of my daughter. He used to take me to his tent, often tie my legs to the bed and rape me. His wife left him when she found out he was sleeping with a slave. If I ever tried to resist, he used to beat me. I had to give in. He never gave me any reason. He didn't consider me to be worth anything.

"He considered me as his own property. I was considered as his animal. I escaped one and a half years ago when I couldn't bear anymore."

Azara made her way to a major city in Niger where she was directed to Timidria, a human rights agency that helps slaves. When Azara arrived she was wearing no shoes and a rag round her upper body. She looked disturbed and was very thin; filthy and with pimples over her body. It took a long time for her to tell her story.

Representatives from Timidria went to the house of Azara's master with the local police to rescue her daughter. With a court case pending against him, he was afraid to do anything against Azara. The master is being charged with owning a slave and rape. The agency currently is pursuing 30 similar cases, of which they have won only a single case to date. They know their fight is difficult. "Poverty is a big factor, when slaves escape they are faced with the difficulty of finding food and survival necessities. Many have to return to their masters."

Images: Georgina Cranston/IRIN

Halima's story

"I am a Tuareg but I am a slave. My master forced me to get married, and I now have three children. We are all slaves — he sees my children as his slaves as well.

"My master treated me so badly and often raped me. He would take me to his farm and sexually abuse me there in secrecy. He would not take me into his house, as I am a slave. Instead, he would put a headscarf on me to make me look like a proper Tuareg, because it's not good for him to be seen sleeping with a slave like me. It made him think I was not a slave during the time he raped me. He used to tell me that his traditional doctor said that if he slept with a slave he would be cured from illness. I had no choice but to accept. The way my master treated me made me feel valueless."

"Halima" didn't want to admit that one of her children was from the master, but someone sitting nearby said to her, "Why don't you tell the truth, that your son is a child of the master?" It was too humiliating for Halima to say it herself.

At the time of this interview, Halima's master, afraid of the Niger law that forbids slavery, was treating her better and allowing her more freedom. A local human rights organization recently reported that with their help, Halima had lodged a complaint against her master. Shortly thereafter she was liberated by her master, who suggested they make a peaceful out-of-court agreement. Her children, however, are still his slaves.

Images: Georgina Cranston/IRIN