



Women taking part in a communication campaign encouraging Vietnamese migrant women affected by violence to speak out © IOM

Taking Action against Violence and Discrimination Affecting Migrant Women and Girls¹

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental body, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration, advance understanding of migration issues, encourage social and economic development through migration, and work towards effective respect of the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

Violence against women is one of the most pervasive global and systemic forms of human rights violations that exist today. Even though many migrant women do not encounter violence and benefit from migration, for some of the 105 million international migrant women worldwide (UN DESA, 2009), violence and discrimination² can appear at the very start of the migration process. In fact, in some cases, discrimination and violence in the private or public sphere can even act as women's main motivation to migrate, although in many instances they may not be identified as such. For example, prejudice against certain categories of women, such as single mothers, wives, widows and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex) individuals, can act as a strong push factor.

On arrival in the country of destination, violence and discrimination continue to be part of the lives of many migrant women as they experience dual vulnerability to violence. This is primarily due to their status as women, reflecting gender inequalities existing in both origin and destination societies, as well as their status as foreigners. Often, these two main causes of vulnerability intersect with additional risk factors.

Prevalence of violence against migrant women – a few examples:

- In Spain, in 2006, 12.1 per cent of women migrants (compared to 6% of Spanish women) indicated that they had been victims of violence at the hands of their former or current spouse (PACE, 2009).
- Of 145 domestic workers from Sri Lanka working in the Arab states and sampled in a study, 17 per cent had been sexually harassed and 5 per cent had been raped (UNDP/IOM et al., 2008).
- According to the European Parliament, some 500,000 women and girls living in Europe have been subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM), with another 180,000 at risk every year of undergoing the procedure (European Parliament, 2009). In the European Union, approximately 20,000 women and girls seek asylum from FGM-practicing countries of origin every year, with France, Italy, Sweden, and the United Kingdom representing the main countries of asylum for these women and girls in 2011 (UNHCR, 2013).
- In 2011, the United Kingdom government's Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) gave support or advice in 1468 instances related to a possible forced marriage. Of these instances, 78 per cent of the victims were women and girls (<https://www.gov.uk>).
- In a study of 207 women from 14 countries who had been recently released from a trafficking situation in Europe, 60 per cent reported having been physically and/or sexually abused before being trafficked. Moreover, 95 per cent reported physical and/or sexual violence while in the trafficking situation (LSHTM/IOM et al., 2006).



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Individual trajectories and circumstances influence risks of experiencing violence

The risk of facing violence is increased by factors such as – but not limited to – legal status, age, class, culture, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability. In addition, the lack of local language skills, inadequate access to appropriate jobs, limited knowledge of their rights and, in certain cases, earlier experiences of violence in their home communities all combine to reduce migrant women’s capacity to protect themselves against abusive situations (Steibelt/IOM, 2009). Social isolation and diminished contact with family and community networks, especially in societies where the extended family plays an important role in intra-couple behaviour, may increase the likelihood of migrant women suffering from severe forms of violence and for longer periods of time.

The issue of violence against women and girls and their special need for protection was one of the main factors leading to the adoption of the IOM gender policy in 1995. Since then, IOM has been committed to “ensuring that the particular needs of all migrant women are identified, taken into consideration and addressed by IOM projects and services” (IOM, 1995).

Violence against migrant women and girls within the family



Nicaraguan women taking part in an IOM programme to prevent violence against women and risky migration through economic empowerment © IOM

Migration may trigger or aggravate domestic violence

Violence against women in the private sphere is most commonly perpetrated by the husband or male partner, but it can also be carried out by another family member. Forms of violence include battering; intimate partner violence, including marital rape and other sexual violence; sexual abuse of female children in the household; and non-spousal violence.

In Viet Nam, IOM provided health, psychosocial, and other support to internal migrant women who have experienced harassment and violence, including domestic violence, at the workplace and in the home. Self-help groups for the women were formed to empower them to speak out and raise awareness of violence against women, strengthening policy development and implementation. Self-help groups were also formed for migrant men to increase their awareness on issues of gender inequality and violence against women, as well as to encourage them to adopt and advocate alternative non-violent models of masculinity. The project saw reported changes in attitudes and behaviour among a significant number of male participants, while female participants emphasized that the self-help groups had become a crucial source of support and knowledge to deal with gender-based violence (GBV). Altogether, the project reached over 1000 participants, including 255 men, and contributed to a reduction in GBV in target communities. Similar initiatives have been implemented by IOM in Zambia and Nepal.

Although domestic violence occurs in all societies and at all socio-economic levels, some of its triggers may be more prevalent in migrant households. Studies in Europe have shown that migrant women make up a significant percentage of women who report intimate partner violence (PACE, 2009). Moreover, research in the United States indicates that intimate partner violence against migrant women often begins or increases after migration (Dutton et al., 2000). Men may resort to violence to uphold their role as the dominant family head, especially in situations where they feel that they have failed to live up to a culturally defined role of breadwinner, or when they believe themselves to be less successful than their spouse at integrating into their new professional or social life. Some migrant women work in specific sectors with a stable demand for labour, such as care and domestic work, and may find employment more easily. This represents a shift in traditional gender roles, which can be a major source of domestic violence (Jampaklay et al./IOM, 2009). Job insecurity and financial difficulties or other money-related issues, for example in relation to remittances, can also be a source of conflict.

In Ecuador, IOM, local authorities and community organizations launched a comprehensive sensitization campaign against GBV that included discussions, radio messages, film screenings and workshops. The campaign took place in a region of the country which hosts displaced populations from Colombia and reached out to nearly 3000 people. In addition, workshops and trainings for government officials on GBV prevention were organized, and psychosocial support and family therapy sessions were provided to over 1500 women having experienced violence, including domestic violence, and their families.

When harmful practices migrate with families

Migration can create situations where harmful practices associated with the social norms of a particular group are imported into the host society. Harmful practices include, inter alia, dowry-related violence, female infanticide, female genital mutilation/ cutting, early and forced marriage as well as so-called “honour” crimes. In situations where integration is difficult, increased compliance or pressure to comply with these practices may be used to maintain a link to the country of origin. This is especially the case in receiving societies where women have more freedom of choice and expression, as compared to the community of origin. In this case, such harmful practices can also be used as a way of consolidating traditional gender roles and controlling women’s behaviour and sexuality, for example to prevent perceived promiscuity (UN Special Rapporteur, 2007).

In order to respond to the unique challenges arising from the transposition of female genital mutilation (FGM) in industrialized countries, IOM has adopted a comprehensive and human rights-based approach. This four-pronged strategy seeks to: empower communities for the collective and sustainable abandonment of FGM; raise awareness among all stakeholders in destination countries and support civil society action; build the capacity of relevant professionals; and build bridges across continents.

Beyond traditional practices, young women and girls may suffer from restrictions on their freedom of movement and limitations with respect to their choice of career or partner. These can impair their social development and integration into the host society and limit their educational opportunities. Awareness of these issues is needed to avoid approaching violence in migrant families with cultural relativism or too hastily tolerating it as a family matter.

Violence in the public sphere

Violence and discrimination in the public sphere are acts of physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the receiving society. Migrant women are at risk from physical violence by state actors, such as police officers, customs officers or workers in detention centres, throughout the migration cycle. Acts of violence may also be committed by employers or by members of the general population. When travelling, women may be compelled or forced to exchange sex for transportation, food or accommodation, which puts them at increased risk of violence.

IOM has recently been involved in several projects to address the needs of migrants whose sexual orientation or gender identity has compelled them to leave their country of origin or poses specific challenges to integration in their country of first asylum, including exposure to abuse, ostracism and violence. Through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), IOM Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs) have implemented a “safe space” initiative in which a welcoming and confidential space is created to ensure lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) refugees feel certain that those assisting them in their settlement are supportive and will not share sensitive information with their family members or the community. IOM RSCs are also distributing handouts to ensure that those who do not share their sexual orientation or gender identity still receive critical information needed to make informed decisions about their resettlement cases.

In parallel, IOM has been training RSC staff on ways to address the needs and protect the dignity of LGBTI migrants. Trainings are already taking place in South Asia, and further trainings will be offered to staff serving in North Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Latin America and Central Asia in 2013.

IOM’s observation has been that lesbian and bisexual women and transgender individuals may be less likely than gay men to share their sexual orientation or gender identity. Women in particular may be subjected to intense pressure from the community and family to adhere to traditional gender roles. This can lead to forced marriages and higher levels of domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and even marital and “corrective” rape, resulting in less visibility of these populations to the humanitarian community.

Discriminative policies increase migrant women’s vulnerability to violence

Forms of discrimination occur at several levels. Often, policies regulating entry to the labour market and access to public services result in de facto discrimination against migrant women with regard to access to legal recourse, social security, housing, education, health care, employment and other socio-economic opportunities, as well as a lack of security



Young men reading posters on safe migration for women, part of an IOM information campaign to prevent violence against Bangladeshi migrant women throughout the migration process © IOM

and protection from violence. The end result is usually the systematic disempowerment of migrant women, which further increases their vulnerability to various forms of discrimination and violence.

Economic violence and exploitation of migrant women

In 2009, IOM published a compendium called *Working to Prevent and Address Violence against Women Migrant Workers*, presenting the holistic approach the Organization adopts towards the protection and empowerment of women migrant workers. It also published a policy-oriented research publication, *Gender and Labour Migration in Asia*. Both publications seek to better inform policymakers, practitioners and the public of the vulnerability of women migrant workers and of good practices for the protection of their human rights throughout the labour migration cycle.

Sectors in which migrant women are predominantly employed include domestic, care-giving, factory, agriculture, entertainment and sex work. These sectors, often gender-segregated, low-paid and unregulated, are rarely covered by national labour laws and thus offer little protection (IOM, 2009). Migrant women workers are therefore exposed to violence in unconventional forms, including exploitative working conditions such as long working hours, non-payment of wages, forced confinement, starvation, beatings, rape, or sexual abuse and exploitation. Employers may also threaten them with incarceration and/or deportation, using psychological violence to ensure their compliance. Unskilled and/or irregular workers, particularly domestic workers, are generally more vulnerable to violence, as they are often dependent on a single employer and may face deportation if they attempt to leave. In 2011, the International Labour

In several countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, there have been numerous reports of abuse and exploitation committed by employers against female migrant domestic workers. A new IOM project will provide direct assistance to 150 exploited and highly vulnerable migrant workers in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Syria, with a special focus on female domestic workers. Support services will include the provision of targeted direct assistance such as immediate humanitarian aid, psychosocial assistance, legal aid, and voluntary return and reintegration assistance. The project will also undertake awareness raising at the governmental, community and diaspora level to ensure that the rights of migrants are better protected. Such actions will be complemented by research to shed light on the plight of migrant workers exploited within the region and on additional action to be taken. The project also builds upon ongoing national initiatives within the region.

Organization adopted the Convention concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers, requiring States to take specific protective measures for these workers; however, as of March 2012, only four member States have ratified the Convention.

Trafficking: one of the worst forms of violence against women migrants³

Because many potential migrants lack access to information about legal channels to migrate for work purposes, some fall prey to traffickers who exploit them. In transit or at their destination, trafficked victims are exposed to severe forms of exploitation, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, begging, forced marriage and other practices similar to slavery. Trafficked persons are also vulnerable to domestic violence and stigmatization after the trafficking experience. Trafficked women often experience severe physical violence and need specialized assistance and (re)integration options, including access to medical services, psychosocial support, legal counselling, training and/or educational support.

IOM has been working to counter the phenomenon of trafficking in persons since 1994. The Organization has implemented roughly 800 projects in over 100 countries and provided assistance to approximately 30,000 trafficked persons, two-thirds of them women and girls. IOM conducts counter-trafficking training for governmental and civil society actors in many parts of the world. In terms of data collection, IOM manages and operates a global human trafficking database, the largest global source of primary data on trafficking victims. The database serves as a valuable tool for identifying, analysing and better understanding the causes, processes, trends and consequences of human trafficking. IOM is also involved in direct assistance to victims and has published the *Direct Assistance Handbook for Victims of Trafficking*, available in several languages.

Consequences and costs of violence against women

The health-associated consequences of violence against migrant women include physical symptoms and injuries, mental health trauma, and transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Poorer work performance and social and economic impacts on the women as well as their children can also be among the consequences of violence (UN Secretary-General, 2006). Threats of violence and actual or perceived danger of sexual assault by strangers may limit the freedom of movement of migrant women and can generate self-imposed restrictions, resulting in a possible withdrawal from the host community (Steibelt/IOM, 2009).

Violence against migrant women creates different kinds of direct and indirect costs. Direct costs include services such as health care, legal justice services, shelters and child care in the wake of violence. Lost employment is an example of an indirect cost, which hits migrant women especially hard as they often work in precarious situations where they might not be able to take days off and might need to go to work despite injuries. The most difficult to measure are costs in human pain and suffering (UN Secretary-General, 2006).

The costs of violence are also closely linked to integration: on the one hand, they hinder women's integration into the host society; on the other hand, lack of integration increases domestic violence and keeps women from reporting it (PACE, 2009). It is therefore necessary to design support services that are non-stigmatizing, targeted and able to inspire enough confidence so as to reach women in need.

Lack of legal status and compromised trust keep migrant women from reporting violence

Migrant women whose legal status depends on their husbands, fathers or employers, as well as irregular migrants, including victims of trafficking, are unlikely to report interpersonal violence for fear of the repercussions (UN Secretary-General, 2006). The risk factors that increase vulnerability, coupled with shame, concern for their children, fear of retaliation and stigmatization, as well as a lack of awareness of services and trust in law enforcement, keep women from seeking help in abusive relationships or when they experience violence and discrimination in their professional environment. In addition, social support networks, such as family and friends, are often no longer available to offer assistance (Steibelt/IOM, 2009).

The limited awareness and sensitivity on the part of law enforcement officials, courts and social service providers adds another layer of difficulty. Special



Participants in a psychosocial health counselling session conducted by IOM for host communities affected by high rates of incoming migration in north-eastern Kenya © IOM

efforts are particularly needed to reach women who do not work outside their home and hence are even more secluded from protection and assistance.

Levels of reporting are usually very low among migrant women victims of violence, calling for innovative ways of assessing the magnitude of the phenomenon as well as for caution in using data.

More use should be made of the international legal framework

A number of international and regional human rights instruments constitute the legal framework protecting migrant women and girls against violence and discrimination.⁴ They are general human rights instruments or mechanisms usually targeting the protection of women and girls, the elimination of violence or the protection of migrants; rarely all elements are included under a sole instrument.

One of the main challenges remains the ratification, implementation and enforcement of these existing human rights instruments, which is needed to ensure the protection of women migrants from violence and the formulation of a coherent policy response to this multifaceted problem. Many policy and programmatic interventions exist in isolation and are focused on addressing the symptoms and not the causes of violence against migrant women, thereby perpetuating the risks and vulnerabilities of these women.

Prevention and Multisectoral Response and Services

In order to effectively address violence against migrant women and girls, coordinated multisectoral approaches are essential to tackle the root causes of violence and properly assist victims. Laws and policies, as well as accepted social and cultural practices, norms and behaviours, must all be targeted to prevent and reduce violence within and across all settings (UN Women, 2012).

These holistic, comprehensive approaches to prevention are necessary not only to eliminate violence, but also to address underlying discrimination and inequalities that often support violent practices and behaviours. In addition, it is crucial that specific multisectoral response services be provided, including police and justice responses, shelters, legal assistance, health care services, psychosocial support, 24-hour hotlines, economic and employment assistance, and social reintegration support for victims, as well as rehabilitation programmes for perpetrators (ECOSOC, 2012).

IOM Policy Objectives

In the framework of its activities, IOM strives to protect migrant women and girls from discrimination and violence by:

- promoting the formulation of multifaceted and evidence-based responses to gender-based violence and discrimination against migrant women that go beyond the symptoms and address the underlying factors, links and correlations;
- providing services and direct assistance to migrant girls and women victims of violence;
- implementing community human rights education and empowerment programmes to help migrant women better know their rights and be empowered to demand and exercise them, as well as ensure community leadership in combating violence against women;
- promoting safe and legal migration and policies that regulate sectors in which women migrant workers are employed;
- encouraging, through analysis of IOM programmes coupled with action-orientated, policy-driven research, a comprehensive approach to human trafficking that includes: prevention of the phenomenon, prosecution of the offenders, and protection of the victims;
- supporting governments in adapting their legislation in order to include the protection of migrant women in their strategies to combat violence against women;
- capacitating policymakers to ensure that migration-related policies do not perpetuate or exacerbate causes of violence against migrant women and, instead, actively support the prevention and elimination of violence against migrant women;
- designing and implementing training and support programmes for, inter alia, the police, prosecutors and judges, health and social services providers and labour attachés to ensure that migrant women have access to justice, redress and assistance and that perpetrators of violence against migrant women do not enjoy impunity;
- including violence against women as a key issue in international migration policy discussions and promoting the creation of an enabling and engendered environment for migrant women and men;
- strengthening partnerships, cooperation and collaborations among organizations, governments and other stakeholders taking action against violence and discrimination affecting migrant women, in order to maximize synergies, experiences and expertise as well as make effective use of resources and capacities; and
- strengthening the knowledge base on all forms of violence against women through data collection, research and dissemination of good practices to inform policy and strategy development.

Related IOM Factsheet

- [Supporting the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation in the Context of Migration](#)

Endnotes

1. This fact sheet does not cover violence against women in conflict or crisis situations.
2. Violence against women constitutes a form of gender-based discrimination and discrimination is a major cause of such violence, according to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.
3. For a definition, see [here](#) or the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.
4. This includes, inter alia, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990); and the Convention concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (2011). In addition, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted General Recommendation No. 26 on Women Migrant Workers (2008), and the Committee on Migrant Workers adopted General Comment No. 1 on Migrant Domestic Workers (2011).

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