



Peer facilitators during a self-help group session for women victims of violence in Viet Nam © 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. Women's motivation to migrate may be influenced by situations where discrimination, for example in the labour market, is prevalent. Prejudice against certain categories, such as single mothers, wives, widows and homosexuals, can also act as a 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

Prevalence of violence against migrant women – a few examples:

- In Spain, in 2006, 12.1 per cent of women migrants (as against 6% of Spanish women) indicated that they had been victims of violence at the hands of their (former) 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).
- In Switzerland, 6,700 women and girls coming from regions where female genital mutilation is practiced are estimated to be mutilated or at risk. (<http://www.unicef.ch>).
- Although the global scale of human trafficking is difficult to quantify, as many as 800,000 people may be trafficked across international borders annually. Women and girls are estimated to make up 80 per cent of these victims of trafficking (IOM website).

status as foreigners. Often, these two main causes of vulnerability intersect with additional risk factors.



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“When my husband arrived home, he asked me for the residence registration paper. I said I was too tired and that I would get it back the next day. As a result, he swore at me, beat me, burned me with his cigarette and took a knife and threatened to cut me. He kicked me and sprayed me with mosquito killer spray.” (Migrant woman in Viet Nam, in Steibelt/IOM, 2009)

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 or ethnicity. 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, the Organization 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

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. This act includes: battering; intimate partner violence, including marital rape; sexual violence; sexual abuse of female children in the household; and non-spousal violence.

In Viet Nam, IOM supported the establishment of self-help groups to empower migrant women who have experienced violence. They were offered counselling and training to become facilitators of self-help groups for other migrant women. For women who often lack access to services, the self-help groups provided the basis for referrals to professional health and social services. The 128 women involved were able to articulate their needs and priorities to the government, mass organizations, media, and the wider community, through awareness-raising activities and the distribution of information and education materials.

Although domestic violence appears 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). Men may resort to violence to uphold their role as the dominant family head, especially in situations when 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 in 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 Nepal, IOM conducts Cultural Orientation Training for refugees bound for resettlement in the United States, Canada, Australia and European countries. The “Family Violence” lesson is held regularly at the Transit Centre with separate classes for men and women. Refugees of both sexes, but especially the women, report that they find it easier to express their thoughts when members of the opposite sex (and their spouses) are not present. Many questions about dating, male/female relationships, sexual harassment and other such topics come up during these sessions. In addition to increasing refugee knowledge about domestic violence, the cultural orientation programme continues to try to modify attitudes towards the issue. Many young people express that attitudes towards domestic violence are changing in the refugee camps. There is increased awareness of Western values and the repercussions of abuse. Nevertheless, many refugees, women included, still consider it all right to “hit or slap one’s partner a few times, every now and then,” as long as it is not a complete thrashing and as long as it is not a daily ritual. (For more information see: <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/nepal>)

When harmful practices migrate with families

Migration can create situations where violent practices associated with the harmful traditions 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 honour killings. In situations where integration is difficult, increased compliance or pressure to comply with

“I was ironing; he came up to me from behind and pushed me to the floor. He raped me. Afterwards he forced me to the kitchen and pulled out a big knife and held it against my chest. He said: ‘If you tell anyone, I will kill you or if I don’t kill you, I will tell the government about you and you will be deported’. So I didn’t say anything, although I felt so bad, I was so scared. Then one day, about a month later he came for me again. But this time, his wife saw, his wife started to fight her husband and then she turned on me. She beat me with a stick and threw a knife at me. I left the house and never went back.”

(Ethiopian domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, in IOM, 2006)

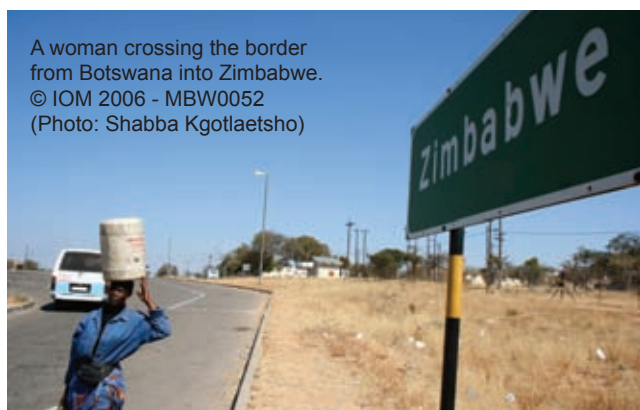
these practices may be used to maintain a link to the country of origin. This is especially the case in receiving societies where women have more freedom of choice and expression, as compared to the community of origin. In this case, such harmful practices can also be used as a way of consolidating traditional gender roles and controlling women’s behaviour and sexuality, for example 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 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 tolerate 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



A woman crossing the border from Botswana into Zimbabwe.
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(Photo: Shabba Kgotlaetsho)

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.

Discriminative policies increase migrant women’s vulnerability to violence

Forms of discrimination occur at several levels. Often, policies regulating entry, access to labour market and 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 socioeconomic opportunities, as well as a lack of security 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 face deportation when they attempt to leave.

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



A victim of trafficking.
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(Photo: Iurie Foca)

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 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 and has implemented 500 projects in 85 countries and provided assistance to approximately 15,000 trafficked persons, three-quarters of them women. 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 include physical symptoms and injuries, mental health trauma, 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).

In 2009, IOM developed a handbook entitled *Caring for Trafficked Persons: Guidance for Health Providers*, with the support of the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, and in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. The handbook provides practical, non-clinical advice to help concerned health providers understand the phenomenon of human trafficking, recognize some of the associated health problems, and consider safe and appropriate approaches to providing health care for trafficked persons.

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 indirect cost, which hits migrant women especially 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).

As part of a multi-country initiative to assess the HIV vulnerabilities of undocumented migrants, IOM conducted rapid assessments which revealed that Sudanese female migrants in Egypt were more vulnerable to HIV due to higher illiteracy rates, incidents of rape in their country of origin, lack of access to health care services, and fear of stigmatization and potential deportation, should their status be discovered.

Violence's costs 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 networks 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 efforts are needed to particularly 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, 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.

IOM Policy Objectives

In the framework of its activities, IOM strives to protect women migrants 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 phenomena, 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 the police, prosecutors and judges, health and social services providers, labour attachés, etc. 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;
- 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 Fact Sheets

- *Supporting the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation in the Context of Migration*
- *International Legal Framework to Prevent and Address Violence against Migrant Women*

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. For information on the framework applicable to migrant women facing violence and discrimination, please refer to the information sheet on the International Legal Framework to Prevent and Address Violence against Migrant Women. See also the [Compendium of International Migration Law Instruments](#) and the [International Migration Law Database](#).

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