

MEASURING PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: Key terminology



There is no universal consensus on the terminology used in the collection of data on violence against women. Definitions of many of the most commonly used terms vary historically and culturally, and also vary among organizations and sectors, such as among healthcare providers and legal professions. Definitions also vary among researchers of different disciplines. Some terms remain sensitive and contentious.

The definitions of the terms here reflect current common usage in collection data on violence against women. Where possible we have used United Nations definitions. We welcome feedback on this glossary.

1 Umbrella terms

The following terms are commonly used interchangeably, although they are not exactly the same. The terms originate from various disciplines and conceptual backgrounds, and they continue to evolve.

1.1 Violence Against Women

Violence against women (VAW) is defined by the United Nations as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.’

It encompasses, but is not limited to:

- physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women;
- non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;
- physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere;
- trafficking in women and forced prostitution; and
- physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs.

1.2 Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV), in its original meaning, is ‘violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty’. (...) ‘Gender-based violence, which impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms under general international law or under human rights conventions, is discrimination within the meaning of Article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.’ (General recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 1992)

While the terms ‘gender-based violence’ and ‘violence against women’ are frequently used interchangeably in literature and by advocates, the term ‘gender-based violence’ highlights the gender dimension, in other words, the relationship between (1) women’s subordinate status in society and (2) their increased vulnerability to violence because of unequal power relations and gender roles. The use of the term ‘gender-based violence’ provides a context in which to examine and understand the phenomenon of violence against women. It shifts the focus from women as victims to gender and the unequal power relationships between women and men created and maintained by gender stereotypes as the basic underlying cause of violence against women (UNIFEM, 2001). This also means that women can be victims of gender-based violence perpetrated by other women to reinforce the patriarchal order, as for example from their own mother or their mother-in-law.

It is important to note that the term is increasingly being used to include the notion that men and boys may also be victims of gender-based violence, especially sexual violence, as are those who step out of strict/traditional gender roles, including LGBTI.

Note: There are various, shifting, and at times conflicting, views on what gender-based violence is and what it is not. While for some, gender-based violence is synonymous with violence against women, for others, GBV is violence used against women, girls, men and boys to assert and reproduce gender roles and norms. In a third interpretation, in particular used by some protection actors in humanitarian settings, GBV is a broad term including different forms of gendered and sexualized violence, such as sexual violence directed at men and

forced recruitment of boys into fighting forces. A fourth use, which has become surprisingly common, is to use the term 'GBV' in place of 'VAW' in order to conceal that it is more often women who are victims and men who are perpetrators. While this goes against the original concept and ignores recognizing gender inequality as an underlying cause, the rationalization is that it makes work on VAW more acceptable, in particular in contexts where promoting gender equality is challenging. These different uses are problematic and risk taking attention and resources away from women and girls and away from evidence-based practice in this area.

1.3 Domestic Violence

Domestic violence (DV) refers to abusive behaviour (physical, sexual, emotional violence and neglect) that occurs within the private, domestic sphere, generally between individuals who are related through blood or intimacy. In most contexts, 'intimate partner violence' (IPV) is the main type of domestic violence, but in some societies violence by in-laws can also be the most dominant form. The term, 'domestic violence' should be used carefully in order to avoid confusion, since (1) it overlaps with 'intimate partner violence' and 'gender-based violence' and (2) it is not confined to women. For example, domestic violence also includes child abuse and elderly abuse in the domestic sphere.

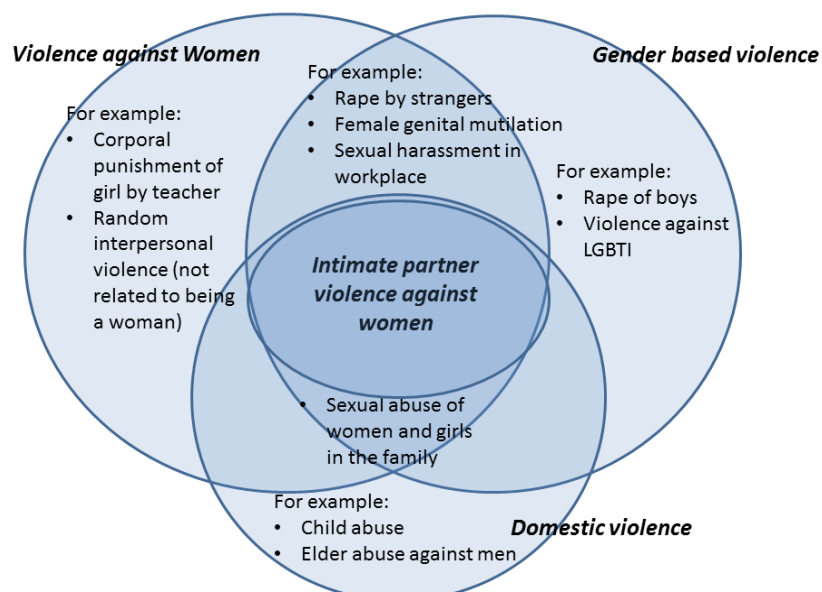
Legal definitions of domestic violence vary among countries; they often include violence against domestic workers who live in the same household.

Note: Sometimes the term, 'family violence', is used interchangeably with 'domestic violence'. In the field of sociology, family violence refers to all forms of abuse in the family regardless of age or sex of the victim or perpetrator.

1.4 Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) usually consists of a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviours, including physical, sexual and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, by a current or former intimate partner. It can occur within heterosexual or same-sex relationships and does not require sexual relations. Garcia-Moreno et al (2005) define intimate partner violence as "behaviour in an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, and psychological abuse and controlling behaviours."

Overlap among violence against women, gender-based violence, domestic violence and intimate partner violence against women



2 Partner

'Partner' is a challenging concept. In work on violence against women it is often used as a short term for 'intimate partner', and even then it is often misunderstood. This is because in many countries and contexts, the concept of partner in everyday use is not understood as including spouse or husband. Rather, depending on the context, it is understood as business partner, colleague, extramarital relationship, or 'sweetheart', or only as common-law or as 'same-sex partner'.

The definitions below are based on use in data collection on violence against women.

2.1 Intimate Partner

An intimate partner is a person with whom one has a close personal relationship that may be characterized by the partners' (1) emotional connectedness, (2) regular contact, (3) on-going physical contact and sexual behaviour, (4) identity as a couple or (5) familiarity with and knowledge about each other's lives. The relationship need not involve all of these dimensions.

Intimate partner relationships include current or former:

- spouses (married spouses, common-law spouses, civil union spouses, domestic partners)
- boyfriends/girlfriends
- dating partners; and
- ongoing sexual partners.

Intimate partners may or may not be cohabitating. They can be opposite sex or same-sex. And if the victim and the perpetrator have a child in common, and a previous relationship but no current relationship, then by definition they fit into the category of 'former intimate partners' (CDC, 2015).

Countries differ as to what constitutes common-law (de facto) marriage. Other societies have no concept of a partner that is NOT a spouse; such societies don't recognize 'partnerships' between men and women outside of marriage.

Note:

1. *In publications, questionnaires and other documents on IPV, the terms 'partners' and 'intimate partners' are often used interchangeably, with 'partners' being used as a short way to say 'intimate partners'.*
2. *In contexts where the term 'partner' does not reflect the above meaning, for surveys measuring IPV the term will need to be adapted or replaced by a term that reflects the above meaning of 'intimate partner' to avoid a situation where answers given to questions about partner violence will reflect violence by those other than partners.*

2.2 Non-partner

In surveys on violence against women, the term 'non-partners' is sometimes used for anyone who is not perceived to be a 'partner' according to the way the term 'partner' is understood in that country or context. 'Non-partners' can therefore include parents, in-laws and other relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances and strangers.

3 Types of violence commonly measured in surveys on prevalence of VAW

Intimate partner violence or abuse includes the following major types of violence: physical violence, sexual violence/abuse, emotional/psychological violence/abuse and economic violence. Studies show that women who experience violence do not always recognize their experience as violence, or if they do, they usually do not name or label the separate types of violence they experience. The experience of these different types of violence often overlaps and the acts are usually part of a 'course of conduct', a persistent pattern of conduct, composed of a series of acts over time, evidencing a continuity of purpose.

In the measurement of violence in surveys, however, we need to 'operationalize' violence; a process of defining difficult to measure concepts into measurable factors. In order to do so, intimate partner violence is broken down into the aforementioned 'types' and for each of these types of violence questions are formulated on a range of different specific behavioural acts. In these questions terms like 'violence' or 'abuse' are avoided.

It is challenging to develop sets of questions that capture violence in a way that is fully comparable and at the same time accurately reflects women's experiences in different contexts. Survey methods using standard questionnaires strive for comparability. At the same time methodological development on how best to measure violence is ongoing. Currently the most common VAW study methodologies (the *WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence*, the Domestic Violence module in the Demographic and Health Survey) are able to measure physical violence in a reasonably adequate and standardized way. Questions that aim to capture sexual violence are somewhat less standardized between methods, and there is currently still a lack of agreement on standard measures of emotional/psychological partner violence. There is also an ongoing discussion on the difference, and the possible cut-off, between abuse and violence.

3.1 Physical Violence

'Physical violence' refers to the intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, injury or harm.

How it is measured in surveys: *To measure physical violence, interviewers ask about specific acts, such as slapping, pushing, shoving, biting, hair pulling, kicking, throwing things, choking, burning and the use of, or threats to use, a weapon including a gun, knife or other object.*

3.2 Sexual Violence/Abuse

Sexual violence refers to any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act, or unwanted sexual comments or acts to traffic, that are directed against a person's sexuality using coercion by anyone, regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including at home and at work.

How it is measured in surveys: *Women are asked about specific acts, usually to distinguish three types of sexual violence: (1) that involving forced/coerced intercourse, including intercourse out of fear of what her intimate partner may do if she refuses; (2) contact sexual violence (for example, unwanted touching, but excluding intercourse - this includes sexual acts that a woman has to do but she finds humiliating or degrading; and (3) non-contact sexual violence, for example, threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism, verbal sexual harassment and the use of sexual text and images on phones and electronic social media.*

Rape is the term that is commonly used for the first type of sexual violence mentioned above (forced/coerced intercourse). Rape can be defined as non-consensual sexual penetration, however slight, of any part of the body of the victim with a sexual organ, or of the anal or genital opening of the victim with any object or any other part of the body. The invasion is committed by force, or by threat of force or coercion, such as that caused by fear of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression or abuse of power, against such person or another person, or by taking advantage of a coercive environment, or committed against a person incapable of giving genuine consent.

Marital Rape: Sexual intercourse forced on a woman by her husband, knowingly against her will.

Context-specific legal and cultural definitions of rape often differ from the definition given here, and these need to be kept in mind when describing and interpreting survey results.

3.3 Psychological Violence/Abuse

'Psychological violence' (often also referred to as 'emotional violence') refers to any act or omission that damages the self-esteem, identity or development of the individual. It includes, but is not limited to, humiliation, threatening loss of custody of children, forced isolation from family or friends, threatening to harm the individual or someone they care about, repeated yelling or degradation, inducing fear through intimidating words or gestures, controlling behaviour, and the destruction of possessions.

***How it is measured in surveys:** Although acts of psychological violence can differ among contexts, when measuring psychological violence, researchers commonly ask women questions on acts that reflects controlling behaviours and emotional abuse committed against them.*

Here are examples:

- **Controlling behaviours/coercive control:** When the husband/intimate partner prevents her from seeing friends; limits her contact with family; insists on knowing where she is at all times; insists that she ask permission to seek health care.
- **Emotional abuse:** Belittling, humiliating (e.g., constant criticism), verbal insults and name-calling; doing things that make her feel scared or intimidated; threats by words or gestures to harm her or someone she cares about.

3.4 Economic Violence/Abuse

'Economic violence' includes denying a woman access to and control over basic resources (UN General Assembly, 2006). It causes, or attempts to cause, an individual to become financially dependent on another person, by obstructing their access to or control over resources and/or independent economic activity. It includes acts such as the denial of funds, refusal to contribute financially, denial of food and basic needs, and controlling access to health care or employment.

***How it is measured in surveys:** Questions to identify economic abuse vary depending on context, but may include: "Does your partner NOT trust you with, or let you have, money?" or "Does your partner control money that you earn or receive?" or "Does your partner prevent you working for money?"*

Note that these acts are sometimes also considered controlling behaviours.

4 Terminology related to reporting of results

4.1 Prevalence

'Prevalence' is a central term used when presenting results of a survey on violence against women. The prevalence of violence against women refers to the proportion of women who have experienced violence as part of the population of women 'at risk'. Prevalence rates are thus based on counting people rather than events or incidents. For some types of violence, such as sexual violence, all women may be considered to be 'at risk'. For others, such as intimate partner violence, only women who have, or have had, an intimate partner would be considered 'at risk'. Prevalence estimates usually present the percentage of women who have experienced violence either during the previous 12 months (also sometimes called 'prevalence rate of current violence') or at any time in their life ('prevalence rate of lifetime violence' or 'lifetime prevalence').

Commonly used terms for women who have experienced violence: abused women, victims, survivors, women who report violence ('report' is used here in the sense of having told the interviewer in a survey).

Commonly used terms for persons who have used violence: perpetrators, abusers, batterers.

4.2 Incidence/Incidents/Frequency

In epidemiology, 'incidence' refers to the number of new cases in a specific reference period. In crime studies, incidence of violence is generally measured as the number of assaults (incidents or events) per inhabitant. In surveys on violence against women, the incidence rate refers to the number of times women experience violent events during a specific period, such as in one year, or lifetime. However, in surveys on violence against women, the concept of incidence can be confusing when referring to intimate partner violence, where it is often not possible to speak of separate events because partner violence often manifests as a course of conduct, happening continuously. Discreet counts of events are rarely possible and it would be difficult to see these events as new cases. Despite this complexity, it is important to get a measure of the number of incidents or frequency. This is generally measured using categories like 'once', 'a few times' and 'many times', and could be seen as an approximate measure of the incidence rate.

4.3 Reference Periods for Experience of Violence

Prevalence rates usually give the proportions of women who have been subjected to violence since age 15 ('lifetime' or 'ever') or during the last 12 months (current).

The box below summarizes how to interpret and use these two most commonly used reference periods for violence statistics:

	INTERPRETATION	USE
12-month (current)	<p>The 12-month prevalence rate shows the proportion of women who experienced one or more acts of violence in the previous 12 months, and is thus near to time of measurement.</p> <p>It includes violence that has just started as well as violence that could have been going on for many years. It could have stopped in the past 12 months or still be on-going at the time of measurement, as long as it took place in this 12-month period.</p>	<p>These data are very important for planning services because they show how many women are living with violence at this time (or very recently) and who may be in need of services.</p> <p>The 12-month prevalence rate is also useful to show the effectiveness of a policy or programme, as this rate is sensitive to picking up change if measured again in a follow-up survey a few years later.</p>
Lifetime (ever)	<p>The prevalence rate shows us the proportion of women who ever experienced one or more acts of violence at any time in their life (most commonly since age 15). Therefore, by definition, it includes women who are also measured in 12-month prevalence.</p> <p>As with 12-month prevalence, it does not tell us how long it lasted or how often it occurred, it just tells us if it ever happened, even if it was only once.</p>	<p>These data are very important for advocacy purposes and awareness campaigns because they show the proportion of women who have experienced violence ever in their life.</p> <p>The lifetime prevalence rate is not useful to measure effectiveness of a policy or programme because it is not sensitive enough to measure change in the short run. For example a woman who has ever experienced one incident of violence, when asked, “Did you ever experience violence?” in any subsequent survey, will in principle report the same violence every time, and thus the one incident will always be counted in her ‘lifetime experience’ even if she has no new experiences of violence since the first survey in which she participated.</p>

Note: In addition to the interpretation of the prevalence for the two reference periods by themselves, the ratio of 12-month versus lifetime prevalence is an estimate of the proportion of women who are still living with violence among those who ever experienced it. This gives very important information about how difficult or easy it is to stop the violence or to leave a violent relationship.

5 Terminology on 'gender' and difference between 'gender' and 'sex'

5.1 Gender

'Gender' refers to the norms, roles and social relations between men and women. It is socially constructed. Gender roles are learned, changeable over time and vary widely both within and between cultures. Gender is a socio-economic variable to analyze roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of men and women in any context.

5.2 Gender Roles

These are learned behaviours in a given society/community or other social group that condition which activities, tasks and responsibilities are perceived as masculine or feminine. Gender roles are affected by age, class, race, ethnicity, religion and ideology, and also by the geographical, economic and political environment. Changes in gender roles often occur in response to changing economic, natural or political circumstances, including development efforts or macro-economic policies, or other forces both national and international. The gender roles of men and women within a given social context may be flexible or rigid, similar or different, and complementary or conflicting.

5.3 Gender Norms

These are social expectations that define what is considered appropriate behaviour for women and men. The different roles and behaviours of females and males, and of children as well as adults, are shaped and reinforced by gender norms within society.

5.4 Sex

The term 'sex' refers to biologically and genetically determined differences between men and women that are generally permanent and universal.

5.5 Masculinities

This refers to the different notions of what it means to be a man, including ideals about men's characteristics, roles and identities, which are constructed based on cultural, social and biological factors and which change over time.

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