

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: TRANSLATING INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY INTO CONCRETE CHANGE

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I was planning today to give my general talk about how gender violence affects women's reproductive health. But after hearing the other presentations, I thought that I would instead give some concrete examples of how women's activism at the international level can work to benefit groups working at the grassroots level.

Often when we address complex issues like violence, we tend to fall back on our disciplinary training—we look at the world as lawyers, or psychologists, or doctors. As a result, we can get “tunnel vision,” and easily lose sight of how our work relates to the overarching whole. Sometimes it is useful to stand back and ask “What are we really trying to accomplish here?” and “How does my work build toward concrete change in the real world?”

I would like to give you an example of how the theoretical debates we have discussed here can actually contribute to substantive changes in the real world. The example I will use is the global effort to organize around violence against women.

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

In the late 1980s, activists began to work strategically to raise international awareness of violence against women. Despite its prominence at the grassroots level, the issue of violence against women was previously virtually absent from policy and funding agendas at the international level. Because women's groups—especially those from the South—are almost entirely dependent on donor support, this oversight had severe consequences for groups seeking to survive in an era of shrinking resources.

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The strategy adopted was to gain credibility and funding for violence-related projects by demonstrating how gender-based abuse relates to issues already high on the international agenda: human rights, health, international development, and AIDS prevention. Indeed, much of the progress made within mainstream institutions has been the result of directed efforts on the part of advocates to construct arguments about violence that are compelling to different constituencies. Among the most successful of these efforts has been the campaign to frame gender violence as an abuse of human rights. Slightly less well-developed, but still promising, has been the effort to link abuse to health and development concerns, such as unwanted pregnancy, AIDS and STD transmission, and women's participation in development projects.

THE CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Despite the existence of many international instruments that guarantee all individuals the right to life, bodily integrity, and security of person, mainstream human rights discourse has failed—until recently—to recognize rape and domestic violence by private individuals as abuses of women's human rights. This incongruence stems in part from a general reluctance on the part of the human rights community to take women's issues seriously. It is reinforced by the mainstream's insistence on maintaining a distinction between abuses in the public and private spheres.

Traditional human rights theory focuses primarily on violations that are perpetrated by the State against individuals, such as torture, wrongful imprisonment, and arbitrary execution. Under this framework, theorists do not recognize wife assault and other forms of violence against women as human rights violations because such acts are perpetrated by private individuals, not the State. But as women have pointed out repeatedly, the human rights community has proven willing to stretch the boundaries of "State responsibility" to accommodate the concerns of men. There are U.N. Conventions against racism, major campaigns against the murder of indigenous rubber tappers in Brazil, and outrage over "disappearances" in Latin America—all abuses perpetrated by private individuals. But when it comes to the systematic violation of women's bodies and minds, suddenly the hands of the international community are tied.

In the late 1980s, however, women came together to protest the failure of the human rights community to address gender-based forms of persecution. Eventually, more than 1000 women's groups joined the Campaign for Women's Human Rights, an international effort to

get the United Nations to integrate gender into all facets of its human rights machinery. The campaign included major initiatives to redefine the contours of human rights law to include rape and domestic violence as violations of human rights, regardless of who is the perpetrator. In 1993, at the Second World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, women presented delegates with almost 500,000 signatures from 128 countries demanding that they recognize violence as an abuse of women's rights. They also held an international tribunal, moderated by an esteemed panel of judges, where women presented well-documented and moving cases of gender-based abuse. Widely recognized as the best organized lobby at the conference, women eventually achieved virtually all of their demands. The final declaration out of Vienna recognized violence against women in the private sphere as an abuse of human rights and affirmed that women's rights are an "inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights."

More than just a symbolic gesture, the "reframing" of violence as a human rights issue has yielded some concrete benefits. In response to the campaign, the United Nations has appointed a special rapporteur on violence against women charged with investigating and reporting on gender violence worldwide. This means that a U.N. emissary with high level clearance and investigatory powers can now help ensure that ignorance of abuse can no longer be an excuse for inaction.

Major human rights NGOs have also implemented women's programs to undertake field missions designed to document violence against women in the same way that they have traditionally documented abuses of civil and political rights, such as wrongful imprisonment. The Women's Rights Project of Human Rights Watch, for example, has published detailed reports of domestic violence in Brazil, rape in Pakistan, abuse of Asian Maids in Kuwait, trafficking in women from Burma to Thailand, and the imposition of forced "virginity tests" in Turkey.

Finally, with the signing of the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women, abused women now have recourse to the Latin American Court of Justice. Already, a case is being prepared on behalf of sixteen women raped by military officers in Haiti.

As these examples demonstrate, framing violence as a human rights issue offers several strategic advantages. It gives the movement access to the intuitive power of "rights" language and appeals to "bodily integrity" and "security of person." It gives us access to new tools and

new venues, including international law, international courts, and the human rights machinery of the United Nations. It also potentially gives us access to new sanctions (such as withdrawal of trade rights or economic or military assistance), which have been applied previously for non-gender-based violations of human rights.

FRAMING VIOLENCE AS A HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUE

Despite the rhetorical power of “rights” language and the usefulness of testimony as a form of documentation, the human rights field has little to offer in terms of either “remedies” for victims or insights for prevention. Thus, in the late 1980s, a small group of activists began working to frame gender violence as a public health and international development issue. Increasingly, evidence was emerging that documented the links between abuse and women’s physical and mental well-being, as well as their ability to participate fully in social and economic development. Thus, the health and development community appeared as an obvious constituency to target for increased involvement.

As a strategy, framing violence as a health issue posed both opportunities and risks. The field of public health offers extensive experience in research and in the design and implementation of interventions to change behavior and provide psychological support—skills badly needed in the anti-violence movement. A public health perspective also adds an important emphasis on the “prevention” of violence rather than focusing solely on its victims. Finally, health and family planning services are one of the few institutions that regularly have ongoing contact with women, making health centers an ideal site for identifying and referring women to other available support services.

The major danger in framing violence as a health issue is in the risk of “medicalizing” what is essentially a social and political issue. This problem can be avoided in part by drawing guidance and support more from the field of public health than from medicine *per se*. A public health perspective keeps the focus on prevention and behavior change rather than on treatment and cure. Further, it provides many opportunities to integrate questions related to violence and coercion into other research projects, such as ongoing research related to sexuality, HIV, and family planning.

Women have achieved some major successes in their efforts to engage the health and development community. As a result of women’s lobbying, the World Health Organization sponsored a major panel discussion on violence against women as part of their

Geneva-based activities on World Health Day 1993. Likewise, the World Bank's 1993 World Development Report, *Investing in Health*, included a box highlighting the health impacts of gender-based abuse. Further, a recent World Bank document on women's health includes screening and referral for abuse as part of its package of "essential minimum services."

Perhaps most impressive, however, have been collaborations between advocates and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). The Women's Health and Development Program at PAHO made violence against women its priority theme in 1994. With input from advocates, PAHO has raised several million dollars to be invested over the next three years on violence and health projects in Central America and the Andean countries. This is one of the concrete ways that action and dynamism at the international level has helped marshal resources and strengthen action at the local level.

It is important to document and claim these victories in order to remind us of why we are here, and to help us remain accountable to groups working on the front lines. Theory-building, international advocacy, and conferences are all fine and good, but we must always keep in mind our ultimate aim: making the world safer for women and their children.

