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U.S. Efforts to Address Global Violence Against Women

Overview

During the past two decades, U.S. policymakers, as well as many in the international community, have increasingly recognized violence against women (VAW, also referred to as gender-based violence) as a significant global health, human rights, and security issue. Violence against women, which includes random acts of violence as well as sustained abuse over time, can be physical, psychological, or sexual in nature. Many experts view it as a symptom of the historically unequal power relationship between men and women and maintain that over time this imbalance has led to pervasive cultural stereotypes and attitudes that perpetuate a cycle of violence.

There are many different types of violence perpetrated against women, including

- *Intimate partner violence*, one of the most common forms, can include forced sex, physical violence, and psychological abuse.
- *Honor killings* can involve cases when women are stoned, burned, or beaten to death, often by their own family members, in order to preserve the family honor.
- *Dowry-related violence* can arise when victims are attacked or killed by in-laws for not bringing a large enough dowry to the marriage.
- *Female genital cutting (FGC)*, a procedure that intentionally alters female genital organs for non-medical reasons, is a continued problem in some African and Middle Eastern countries.
- *Trafficking in persons*, which disproportionately affects women and girls.

Violence against women occurs in all geographic regions, countries, cultures, and economic classes, although some studies have found that women in developing countries experience higher rates of violence than those in developed countries. A 2013 World Health Organization (WHO) review of global data found that 35% of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.

Violence against women is a key area of concern in many humanitarian crises, armed conflict, and post-conflict situations, where women and girls are often particularly vulnerable. Many experts agree that current levels of violence reported through studies and law enforcement records underrepresent the number of actual cases. Incidents are often not reported because of the shame associated with being a victim, fear of reprisal, or lack of adequate law enforcement infrastructure.

Global efforts to address the issue are wide-ranging. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and international organizations such as the United Nations implement large and small-scale anti-VAW activities. International mechanisms, including the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, have also sought to address the issue.

Administration Initiatives

President Obama and past Presidents have generally supported efforts to combat global violence against women—often as components of broader foreign aid initiatives. Key implementing agencies and offices include the Department of State (including the Office of Global Women’s Issues) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) (including the Office of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment). The Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Justice, and Labor also support such activities.

“[Gender-based] violence ... significantly hinders the ability of individuals to fully participate in and contribute to their families and communities – economically, politically, and socially.” *U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence Globally, August 2012*

The Obama Administration has expressed its commitment to incorporating anti-VAW efforts into all aspects of U.S. foreign policy. In August 2012, President Obama issued an executive order to launch the multi-year *U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally*. The Strategy calls on agencies to integrate prevention and response into current programs; improve data collection and analysis; and enhance existing government programs that address the issue. It also establishes an interagency working group led by State and USAID to coordinate U.S. efforts worldwide. The Strategy is meant to build on existing U.S. efforts to combat violence against women and to complement related Administration policies such as the *U.S. National Action Plan on Peace and Security* and State Department and USAID policies on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Efforts to implement the Strategy are ongoing and include the establishment of new interagency GBV committees, training and capacity building, and additional funding for GBV in priority countries and emergency situations.

Congressional Actions

For more than two decades, Congress has demonstrated an ongoing interest in addressing international violence against women. It has passed legislation focusing on specific types of violence, such as human trafficking and FGC, and has adopted legislation addressing violence against women in

different regions and countries. In some cases, Congress has incorporated anti-VAW components into appropriations legislation and programs addressing international HIV prevention and foreign military and law enforcement training. Members have also considered various iterations of the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) in recent Congresses, which have aimed to coordinate and provide additional funding for U.S. efforts to address the issue. Versions of IVAWA introduced during the 114th Congress (H.R. 1340 and S. 713) would, among other things, codify current State Department and USAID offices and positions addressing global women's issues.

U.S. Funding

Generally, it is difficult to determine the full scope of funding for U.S. programs and activities that, either in whole or in part, address international violence against women. While some activities specifically focus on violence against women, others are cross-cutting and address the issue in the context of broader U.S. foreign assistance matters such as health care, crime, human rights, economic development, security training, and education. In 2012, the Obama Administration reported that based on prior year classifications, U.S. spending on gender-based violence (GBV) programming totaled about \$92 million annually over the previous four years. However, this estimate did not include some related activities under the Global Health Initiative and the Global Food Security Initiative (Feed the Future), among others. Most recently, State/foreign operations appropriations acts from FY2014 through FY2016 provided \$150 million “to implement a multi-year strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in countries where it is common in conflict and non-conflict settings.”

Key Issues and Challenges

Funding and further integration of U.S. activities. Some experts and policymakers maintain that, in addition to receiving attention as a stand-alone global health and human rights issue, anti-VAW efforts should be a fully integrated component of broader U.S. foreign assistance efforts—including health services, development, human rights, foreign military training and law enforcement training, humanitarian assistance, and legal and political reform. They argue that additional funding is needed to adequately coordinate government-wide efforts and fund current and future U.S. anti-VAW activities.

Implementation of the U.S. strategy. Members of Congress may consider monitoring efforts to incorporate the *U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally* into U.S. foreign policy; coordination among participating agencies and departments; and any challenges or lessons learned that could arise during the course of implementation.

International cooperation. NGOs, international organizations, and other entities support a range of activities addressing violence against women worldwide. Some experts contend that providing financial support to

organizations that address the issue is a particularly effective use of U.S. resources because it allows the United States to share costs and other burdens with others. Opponents argue that United States should focus on its own initiatives, and emphasize that international activities may not always align with U.S. priorities.

Lack of comparable data. Existing research offers little in the way of comparative data. Many researchers use different sampling techniques, methodologies, and criteria for defining violence against women and conducting surveys—which may lead to inconsistent and varied findings on the scope of the problem and impact of programs to combat violence against women.

Infrastructure and priorities at the country level. Some governments, particularly those of developing countries, may lack the political, legislative, and financial infrastructures to establish and implement policies and programs to eliminate violence against women. This may be a challenge to donors who aim to distribute anti-VAW funding and resources in the most effective manner.

Evaluation and assessment. Hundreds of global anti-VAW programs are implemented annually, but few of these programs are evaluated for effectiveness. Many activities are short in duration and have small budgets, which may leave little time and financial resources for evaluations. Consequently, U.S. policymakers might have difficulty gauging a program's effectiveness and thus may reduce resources to programs that cannot demonstrate impact.

Current and emerging issues. Some key areas in research, prevention, and treatment include the following:

- *Links to discrimination.* Many experts increasingly view violence as a form of discrimination against women, and maintain that discrimination causes violence. To combat the issue, they contend, equal attention should be paid to the causes and impacts of gender discrimination.
- *Role of men and boys.* Research on violence against women has evolved to include not only treatment and prevalence but also root causes. As a result, many experts and policymakers have increasingly focused on the role of men and boys in preventing VAW.
- *Links to peace and security.* Some experts have argued that global GBV, particularly sexual violence in conflict situations, may be linked to national and international security and stability.
- *Humanitarian crises and armed conflict.* Policymakers have increasingly focused on developing strategies to protect women and girls from violence in humanitarian and conflict settings. Many experts view increasing the capacity of states and host communities as a priority for implementing sustained, effective measures.

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