

C o m m e n t a r y

VIOLENCE, HEALTH, AND  
HUMAN RIGHTS:  
Toward a Shared Agenda for Prevention

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**T**he *World Report on Violence and Health*, launched in October 2002 by the World Health Organization, shows with alarming clarity the devastating effects that violence has on global health. Violence, in its various forms, leaves no nation or community untouched. People throughout the world experience its effects, which extend beyond mortality, injury, and disability, to cause and exacerbate depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and sexually transmitted infections. At a state level, morbidity and mortality that result from violence drain scarce health resources and impose substantial direct and indirect costs on all sectors of society. The causes and consequences of violence pose significant barriers to achieving the fundamental right to the highest attainable standard of health—"the right to health"—as enshrined in WHO's Constitution and international human rights law. Nevertheless, as violence is not an inevitable part of the human condition, the time has come to tackle this obstacle to human well-being on all fronts.

The roots of violence are complex and not fully understood, but they are not immutable. Violence and its risk factors do not occur randomly throughout the world, an indication that active measures can be taken to ameliorate the

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conditions that give rise to violence as well as to mediate peoples' vulnerability to violence. To reduce the burden of violence on individuals and communities, actions must move beyond providing services, detecting violence, and punishing perpetrators. Creative solutions must be found to address the underlying societal conditions that lead people to believe that violence is a reasonable alternative.

Indeed, community and societal factors, such as those relating to economic conditions and gender, provide a fertile environment in which violence can flourish. The *World Report on Violence and Health* specifically recommends that, to diminish and ultimately eradicate violence, countries must work to reduce economic, gender-related, and social inequalities and to fulfill their obligation to ensure the human rights of all individuals.

Since the end of the Cold War, heightened attention to economic and social rights, together with the more widely recognized civil and political rights, is increasing the focus of human rights theory and practice toward the reduction of social inequalities. International human rights law suggests a multidimensional and intersectoral approach to reducing social and gender inequalities. It does this by recognizing that all sectors of government have an obligation to promote and protect human rights and by making freedom from discrimination—including sex, race, religion, and social status—a government responsibility. This responsibility includes ensuring equal protection and opportunity under the law, as well as the de facto enjoyment of rights, such as those related to health, social security, education, housing, and work.

Of particular relevance is that countries must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical and psychological violence, as endorsed in the Convention on the Rights of Child—a legally binding treaty that has had virtually universal ratification. Moreover, other key human rights provisions relevant to violence prevention are enshrined broadly across the human rights instruments. These range from freedom to seek, receive, and impart information, which can break taboos and silence

about violence—particularly domestic violence—to the rights to life, health, and security of the person.

Overall, respecting, protecting, and fulfilling all human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political, and social—can only serve to diminish violence. Governments' ongoing efforts to realize individuals' human rights and to adhere to human rights principles in programming can change the underlying societal conditions that render people and communities vulnerable to violence. This relationship between human rights and violence prevention holds great promise.

Complacency is, however, a formidable barrier to violence prevention. For decades, human rights advocates have challenged the status quo, urging governments to renew and strengthen their commitments to respect, protect, and fulfill rights. In this spirit, the public health community must work to help policymakers understand that current levels of violence are neither inevitable nor tolerable and that both human rights and public health measures can be instrumental in reducing people's vulnerability to violence.

The global burden of violence cannot be ameliorated by using only a "public health approach" or a "human rights approach." Eradicating violence requires that the common aim and intrinsic connections between health and human rights are used to safeguard human dignity and improve well-being. The *World Report on Violence and Health* illustrates that violence undeniably impairs the quality of life and achievement of health for thousands of people worldwide.

I welcome this special issue of *Health and Human Rights* as evidence of the growing commitment to expand our thinking about violence—viewing it as a problem of health and human rights, and not just as crime—and to search for new ways the health sector and the human rights field can work together for the prevention of violence. ♦