

Women's Studies Spotlight on Faculty

STEALTH PANDEMIC: **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN 2007/2008**

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Global organizations such as the United Nations' Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as national and local organizations worldwide, have made much progress over the last few decades at moving the issue of violence against women from being a matter of private family or employer relations to being a public health issue to being an issue framed with full rhetorical power of the label "human rights". Newer framing makes the case of this violence's tangible economic impact. Yet, violence against women remains somewhat of a stealth pandemic. It exists every day in almost every neighborhood on earth. Yet, while some forms of violence against women such as acid attacks and female genital mutilation occasionally command attention in national and world news, many of the ways in which this pandemic plays out never do so. This is disconcerting, because one reason this pandemic flies under the radar (as compared to many other human rights/public health issues) is that so many of its forms, like domestic abuse, rape, and sexual harassment, are unfortunately part of the normal rhythm of life for so many persons in so many places. One part of the necessary multi-faceted response to the pandemic of violence against women is to fully understand the scope of the problem in all of its forms. Like any public health issue, constant monitoring of violence against women is crucial to treatment. We must gauge its status at any given time/place and detect changes. Like any human rights issue, dignity is owed to all persons everywhere, so it is morally important to detect occurrence and to understand the situation of victims, wherever they be and whatever may be the form of abuse they encounter.

This paper serves two express functions. First, it introduces a new multi-dimensional measurement scheme of violence against women that, in conjunction with other measures, we hope will in some way assist the understanding and treatment of the problem by aiding monitoring. As far as we know, while there have certainly been many world reports (e.g., UNIFEM's tri-annual Progress of the World's Women) there have been no previous systematic measures of violence against women created with which a global overview has been conducted. Second, we provide a global overview of levels of violence against women in 2007/2008 and test some basic hypotheses regarding possible social, political, and economic factors that may be systematically related to violence against women. Our findings provide confirmation of the pandemic nature of the problem and reveal interesting patterns in the granting of legal guarantees addressing violence against women. And, while a gap between law and practice is always to be expected, the gap we find is an abyss. Also, we find economic factors to be much stronger associates of violence against women than political factors. Finally, we find that a country's merely having a majority-Muslim population is a strong factor in predicting levels of violence against women, even controlling for other reliable factors.

For more information on Dr. Richards and his research, please visit his website,
http://www.memphis.edu/polisci/richards_bio_new.htm

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