

# Researching Violence Against Women



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A PRACTICAL GUIDE  
FOR RESEARCHERS AND ACTIVISTS

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World Health  
Organization



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**Mary Ellsberg ■ Lori Heise**

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# Introduction

**T**wenty years ago, violence against women was not considered an issue worthy of international attention or concern. Victims of violence suffered in silence, with little public recognition of their plight. This began to change in the 1980s as women's groups organized locally and internationally to demand attention to the physical, psychological, and economic abuse of women. Gradually, violence against women has come to be recognized as a legitimate human rights issue and as a significant threat to women's health and well-being.

Now that international attention is focused on gender-based violence, methodologically rigorous research is needed to guide the formulation and implementation of effective interventions, policies, and prevention strategies. Until fairly recently, the majority of research on violence consisted of anecdotal accounts or exploratory studies performed on nonrepresentative samples of women, such as those attending services for battered women. While this research has played a critical role in bringing to light the issues of wife abuse, rape, trafficking, incest, and other manifestations of gender-based violence, it is less useful for understanding the dimensions or characteristics of abuse among the broader population.

This manual has been developed in response to the growing need to improve the quality, quantity, and comparability of

international data on physical and sexual abuse. It outlines some of the methodological and ethical challenges of conducting research on violence against women and describes a range of innovative techniques that have been used to address these challenges. We hope that the manual will be useful for those interested in pursuing research on violence, especially in developing countries and other resource-poor settings.

The manual draws on the collective experiences and insights of many individuals, most notably the members of the International Research Network on Violence Against Women (IRNVAW), an ad hoc group of researchers and activists that meets periodically to share experiences regarding research on violence. The Network arose out of a two-day meeting on methodology and research ethics organized in June 1995 by the Center for Health and Gender Equity. To date the IRNVAW has sponsored four international meetings and several members have collaborated with the World Health Organization (WHO) in the design and implementation of a multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence. Many of the examples and insights included in this manual come from the pioneering work of IRNVAW members, as well as the WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence, a household survey of women that has been conducted in

at least ten countries to date. We have also drawn extensively from our own research experiences, primarily in Nicaragua, Indonesia, and Ethiopia.

### **Readership**

This manual is written for anyone interested in the application of social science and public health research methods to the study of gender-based violence. The manual assumes a certain level of familiarity with the logic of research and is not a substitute for training in research or research methodologies.

It is designed for **researchers** who want to know more about adapting traditional research techniques to the special case of investigating physical and sexual abuse. And it is designed for **activists, community workers, and service providers** who want to become conversant in methodological issues. One of the goals of this manual is to facilitate collaborations between researchers and community-based workers and activists by providing practitioners with an introduction to the tools and language of research, and by giving researchers greater insight into the specific issues that accompany research on violence.

### **Focus of the manual**

For the sake of brevity, this manual focuses primarily on the issue of **violence against women by their intimate partners**. Gender-based violence assumes many forms, including rape, sexual assault and coercion, stalking, incest, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, and trafficking in women. Although many of the insights presented herein will apply to these other types of violence, no single manual could exhaustively address all forms of abuse. Additionally, we concentrate on **applied research**, as opposed to research designed to advance theory or to address questions of primarily academic relevance.

The manual is directed particularly to those researchers interested in the intersection of **violence and health in developing countries**, given the clear impact that gender violence has on women's health status. However, much of the information presented in the manual is applicable to violence research as it relates to other issues, such as human rights, the well-being of families and children, and economic development. Similarly, the lessons for developing countries may be relevant to some violence research undertaken in industrialized countries, particularly among economically marginalized and/or politically disenfranchised populations.

Finally, the manual advances an ethic of research that is action-oriented, accountable to the antiviolence movement, and responsive to the needs of women living with violence. It strongly encourages collaboration between researchers and those working directly on violence as activists and/or practitioners. Recent experiences in countries as diverse as Canada, Zimbabwe, Indonesia, South Africa, Nicaragua, and Cambodia have shown that powerful synergies can be achieved from partnerships between researchers and advocates. Whereas researchers help to ensure that the endeavor is grounded in the principles of scientific inquiry, the involvement of advocates and service providers helps ensure that the right questions are asked in the right way, and that the knowledge generated is used for social change.

This document was based on the contributions of thousands of women from around the world who shared their stories and personal experiences in the hopes that their voices would contribute to diminishing the suffering of future generations of women from violence. The publication is dedicated to them.