

Domestic Violence

Women's Way Out

Elizabeth Shrader and Monserrat Sagot



Pan American Health Organization

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PREFACE

We already know that violence against women and girls is a health and human rights problem of staggering proportions. We know, for example, that at least one of every five women worldwide will have been abused physically or sexually at some point in her life. We know that for women of childbearing age, violence has been estimated to be as serious a cause of death and disability as cancer. Sadly, we also know that domestic violence—violence perpetrated by a current or former partner—is the most common form of violence that women suffer. And, regrettably, research confirms that the situation in our Region of the Americas is no different.

The Pan American Health Organization has spearheaded several efforts designed to understand the problem and measure its magnitude, as well as to advocate the development of strategies, policies, and initiatives to combat domestic violence. This protocol was developed to identify the services, organizations, and persons to which battered women turn. It has been applied in all seven Central American countries and in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador, with enlightening results. It has yielded critical information on how women who are victims of domestic violence go about seeking help—a critical first step in improving existing services and creating new needed ones. We now offer the English version of the protocol, so it can be put to good use in our Region's English-speaking countries. We hope that it will become an effective weapon in the fight against domestic violence, and, as such, help eliminate one of the most egregious manifestations of gender inequality.

George A. O. Alleyne
Director

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Program on Women, Health, and Development (HDW) of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), with support from Norway and Sweden coordinated the development of the research protocol *Domestic Violence: Women's Way Out*, in the framework of the HDW Program's subregional project *Strengthening and Organization of Women and Coordinated Action between the State and Civil Society at the Local Level to Prevent and Address Family Violence*.

The specific issue of family violence is a priority area of action for the Program. *Domestic Violence: Women's Way Out* is intended to draw attention to violence against women and girls as a priority problem and to identify resources that can help to address it. The situation analysis of domestic violence reveals the complexity of the problem and shows that solving it will require coordinated intersectoral policies and action, with the participation of both the State and civil society.

This research protocol is the result of the cumulative work and commitment of numerous investigators, activists, and officials to address violence against women and improve the services available for women affected by it.

The development of the protocol began with the drafting and review of a preliminary version by the team of investigators in the course of three workshops. The final protocol was applied in 15 communities in 10 countries, 7 in Central America and 3 in the Andean area, and it was tailored to each country's conditions. Through field interviews, qualitative data were collected from a wide range of women, service providers, and community members, representing groups of varying age, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, and marital status.

As do other organizations, PAHO considers the problem of family violence within a social context. All governmental and nongovernmental institutions—in the social, professional, political, judicial, law enforcement, and civil society spheres—that seek to promote equity between men and women need to understand the path followed by women who are affected by family violence in order to provide the best possible response to their situation.

It is our hope that this protocol will be an effective instrument of support in the effort to prevent and control violence in society, and especially violence against women and children.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Introduction	ix

THE PROTOCOL

1. Purpose of the Project "Action to Prevent Family Violence 1995-1997"	2
2. Expected Outcomes of the Project 1995-1997	2
3. Research Topic	2
Research Question	3
Study Objectives	3
Purpose of the Study	3
4. Background	3
5. Conceptual Framework	4
Family Violence against Women	4
Selecting the Qualitative Methodology	8
Definition of Concepts	10
6. Assumptions	15
7. Selection of Information Sources and Data Collection	17
Site Selection	17
Approaching the Community and Identifying the Study Groups	19
Information Source: Service Providers	20
Information Source: Institutional Documents	22
Information Source: Women Affected by Violence Who Have Embarked upon the Critical Path	23
Information Source: Women and Men from the Community	27
8. Research Instruments	28
Identification Form for Care and Prevention Service Providers	28
Interview Guides for Service Providers	31
Identification Form for Document Sources	42

	Interview Guide for Women Affected by Family Violence . . .	44
	Focus Group Guide	48
9.	Field Work	50
	Getting Acquainted with the Community	50
	Collecting the Information	52
	Guidelines for Recording Information from the Field	52
10.	Analysis of Qualitative Data	55
	Guidelines for Analysis of the Information Obtained	56
	Categorization and Coding	56
	Relationships between Categories of Information	71
	Presenting the Data	73
11.	Dissemination	80
	National Reports	80
	Local and Regional Meetings	84
	Consultation Process with Respondents and other Concerned Parties	84
	Future Publications and Presentations	84
12.	Logistical Considerations	84
	Resources Needed for the Field Work	85
	Management of the Study	87
	Work Plan	88
	Timetable of Activities	90
13.	Ethical Considerations	94
14.	Observations on the Application of the Protocol	95
	Methodological Observations	96
	Logistical Observations	97
	Ethical Observations	98

ANNEXES

A.	Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women "Convention of Belém do Pará"	103
B.	Training Workshops	111
C.	Participants in the Research Project	123

GRAPHICS

Itinerary within the Legal/Judicial System	14
The Critical Path: Schematic Representation	15
Components of the Qualitative Data Analysis:	
An Interactive Model	55
Sample Explanatory Network: Itinerary of an Affected Woman	76
Sample Taxonomy: Public Health Perspectives toward Violence	77
Sample Decision Tree: Making the Decision to Embark upon the Critical Path	79

TABLES

Study Design Summary	18
Table for Determining the Number of In-depth Interviews	27
Sample Form for Care and Prevention Service Providers	30
Sample Form for Document Sources	43
Factors that Motivate or Inhibit Women Affected by Family Violence to Follow the Critical Path	74
Timetable of Activities	91

BOXES

Snowball Sampling Technique	25
Terms of Reference: Leading Investigator	85
Terms of Reference: Assistant Investigator	86
Terms of Reference: Transcriber	86

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Health Sector	32
Legal/Judicial/Law Enforcement Sector	35
Education Sector	38
Community/NGO Sector	40
Women Affected by Family Violence	46
Focus Group	48

LISTS

Suggested List of Service Providers	21
List of Essential and Optional Service Provider Interviews	22
List of Service Providers (Category, Code, Definition)	58
List of Women Affected by Family Violence (Category, Code, Definition)	62
List of Document Sources (Category, Code, Definition)	66
List of Community Members (Category, Code, Definition)	69
List of Participants	123
Proposed Outline for the National Reports	83

THE PROTOCOL

1. PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT "ACTION TO PREVENT FAMILY VIOLENCE 1995-1997"

To reduce the incidence and prevalence of family violence, with emphasis on women between 12 and 49 years of age, through plans, programs, and activities at the policy-setting levels of the health sector and in the selected communities, with the coordinated participation of the State and civil society.

2. EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT 1995-1997

- Organized community-level women's groups and networks working to prevent and address family violence, particularly violence against women.
- Mechanisms for the collection, processing, and analysis of data on family violence and proposals for their incorporation into the national health information system.
- Proposals for national health policies and services of proven effectiveness at the local level for preventing and addressing family violence against women, in coordination with various social actors.
- Support for initiatives to adapt existing legislation and efficiently address family violence.
- A project management system at the subregional and national levels and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating within the framework of the Program on Women, Health and Development in Central America.

3. RESEARCH TOPIC

Given the nature of family violence, its incidence, and its scope, measures to prevent and address it must be taken in both the governmental sphere and in civil society. As a part of these efforts, and in keeping with the second, third, and fourth expected outcomes of the project Action to Prevent Family Violence, the following topic is proposed to be studied in the seven Central American countries: The critical path followed by women over 15 years of age who are victims of family violence. In the case of the three Andean countries, the topic will be adjusted in accordance with specific expected outcomes for that region's project.

Research Question

What is the critical path followed by women older 15 years of age who are victims of family violence and what factors influence that process?

Study Objectives

- To ascertain the actions taken by women who are victims of family violence and the path they follow to seek attention and attempt to solve their violence-related problems.
- To ascertain which factors encourage or discourage women who are victims of family violence to embark upon the critical path.
- To ascertain how women who are victims of family violence view the responses found in their search for assistance and solution to their violence-related problems.
- To ascertain the social perceptions and responses of service providers in regard to family violence.

Purpose of the Study

To formulate recommendations for all local social actors, based on the findings of the study, with a view to contributing to the development of a model for preventing and addressing family violence.

4. BACKGROUND

During the 1980s, violence against women was increasingly viewed as an issue worthy of international concern and action. Women's organizations worldwide took up gender-based violence as a priority issue during the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985). The United Nations General Assembly adopted its first resolution on violence against women in November 1985.

Since then, the United Nations has sponsored several meetings of expert groups on violence against women and has followed up on the issue through its Commission on the Status of Women, the Economic and Social Council, the United Nations Statistics Division, and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

Two new international instruments have been formulated that recognize all types of gender-based violence as a violation of human rights: the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* and the more comprehensive *Inter-American Convention for the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women* ("the Convention of Belém do Pará"),¹

¹ The text of the Convention appears in Annex A.

which originated within the Organization of American States and has been ratified by almost every country in the Region of the Americas.

Similarly, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), in its *Strategic and Programmatic Orientations, 1991-1994*, emphasized the need to incorporate women into development efforts and identified abuse of women as a public health problem requiring priority attention. At its 13th Meeting, held in April 1993, PAHO's Subcommittee on Women, Health, and Development called on the Organization to establish a strategy and develop lines of action that would consider violence against women as a public health emergency that calls for immediate attention.

In 1994 the Subregional Project on Family Violence Against Women in Central America was approved, with funding from Sweden and Norway. In 1995, this project was extended to the Andean countries of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, with Dutch funding. The research project described in this publication seeks to enhance all these international and local efforts to prevent and control violence against women.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As a brief introduction to the complex issue of violence against women, a conceptual framework of family violence as a health and development problem in Latin America will be presented. The selection of the qualitative methodology warrants a theoretical discussion, in order to place this study in a research context. Definitions of the concepts that will be utilized in the study also are included. These definitions are important for all the investigators who will participate in the study, so they can familiarize themselves with the theoretical and operational concepts to be used.

Family Violence against Women

Family violence is a large-scale social problem that affect sizable segments of the population on a regular basis. Women, children of both sexes, and elderly persons of both sexes bear the greatest brunt. The abuse of women by their partners is an endemic form of family violence. The manifestations of family violence include physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. According to studies conducted in Latin America, between one-fourth and more than one-half of women report having been abused by their partners.^{2,3}

² Heise, Lori. *Violencia contra la mujer: la carga oculta sobre la salud*. Washington, D.C.: Organización Panamericana de la Salud, Programa Mujer, Salud y Desarrollo; 1994.

³ Ellsburg, Mary et al. *Confites en el infierno. Prevalencia y características de la violencia conyugal hacia las mujeres en Nicaragua*. León, Nicaragua: Departamento de Medicina Preventiva, UNAN; 1996.

The high prevalence of family violence is not only a serious health problem, it also constitutes a hidden obstacle to socioeconomic development and a flagrant violation of human rights. The impact of violence on health is evident. Rape and domestic violence account for significant numbers of deaths and disabilities among women of child-bearing age. Women victimized by violence not only may sustain bruises, wounds, broken bones, loss of hearing, retinal detachment, sexually transmitted diseases, miscarriage, and even death, but they also may suffer from chronic stress and related conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma, and obesity. Frequently, as a consequence of both physical and psychological abuse, women suffer chronic headaches, sexual disorders, depression, phobias, and persistent fear.⁴ In addition, they often have low self-esteem, which directly affects their behavior, productivity in the workplace, and ability to report the abuse and seek protection.⁵

Family violence against women takes a high economic and social toll on the State and society, and it may also hinder socioeconomic development. Some studies estimate that sexual and physical abuse of women lowers their income between 3% and 20%, owing to its impact on their health and educational achievement, which, in turn affects their work.⁶ In market economies, family violence accounts for almost one year of life lost for every five years of healthy life among women aged 15 to 44 years.² With the growing feminization of poverty in the Region, abused women are increasingly vulnerable to "economic violence," which impairs their ability to participate in the labor market or threatens their accumulated assets. By threatening the human potential of these abused women, family violence limits their full incorporation into social, political, and economic development processes. This situation perpetuates injustice and discrimination by denying abused women equal access to society's resources, while also preventing them from contributing fully to social development.⁷

Family violence also implies that the victims' liberty, dignity, and freedom of movement are restricted, and there also is a direct violation of their personal integrity.⁸ Many types of family violence are, in

⁴ Larraín, Soledad and Teresa Rodríguez. Orígenes y control de la violencia doméstica contra la mujer. In: *Género, mujer y salud en las Américas*. Washington, D.C.: Organización Panamericana de la Salud; 1993. (Publicación Científica 541).

⁵ Paltiel, Freda L. La salud mental de mujeres en las Américas. In: *Género, mujer y salud en las Américas*. Washington, D.C.: Organización Panamericana de la Salud; 1993. (Publicación Científica 541).

⁶ Nelson, Toni. Violence Against Women. *World Watch* July/August 1996.

⁷ Carrillo, Roxana. La violencia contra la mujer: obstáculo para el desarrollo. In: V. Guzmán et al., eds. *Una nueva lectura: género en el desarrollo*. Lima, Peru: Flora Tristan Ediciones; 1991: pp. 161-192.

⁸ Bunch, Charlotte. Los derechos de la mujer como derechos humanos. In: *Mujer y violencia doméstica*. Santiago, Chile: Instituto de la Mujer; 1991: pp. 15-31.

fact, forms of torture, imprisonment in the home, sexual terrorism, or slavery. Seen this way, family violence represents a violation of abused women's human rights.⁹

A typical feature of various forms of family violence is their hidden quality. Substantial underreporting of cases within the institutions that care for victims exacerbates this lack of visibility. For example, according to recent estimates, only 2% of cases of sexual abuse of children within the family, only 6% of cases of sexual abuse outside the family, and between 5% and 8% of cases of sexual abuse of adults are reported.² Studies in several Latin American countries reveal that only an estimated 15%–20% of cases of family violence against adult women are reported.^{10,11}

This underreporting is due to numerous factors. First among them is the fact that incidents of family violence are regarded as isolated acts occurring in the private realm, not as a social problem. Second, acts of violence are viewed as normal occurrences in family dynamics. In other words, family violence is seen as a legitimate act. Third, those affected, mainly women, tend to blame themselves for provoking violent acts, a mindset that is strongly reinforced by society's attitudes. Finally, many women believe that there are no social services or responses available to support them in solving their problem of violence, or that existing services are inadequate and even detrimental to them.

As a consequence of all these factors, affected women refuse or are unable to report violence. Institutions that provide services, particularly those in the legal/judicial, law enforcement, health, education, and NGO sectors, do not have adequate detection and record-keeping systems, which serves to further mask this serious social problem. The lack of records, in turn, leads to diagnoses, prevention policies, and models of care that cannot truly respond to the needs of the affected women or address the complexity and magnitude of the family violence problems.

In addition to the lack of visibility and underreporting, there are other serious problems in understanding the dynamics of violent relationships and the experiences of the affected individuals. In general, there is little understanding of the specific dynamics of the different types of violence and their consequences. This lack of understanding of family violence and of the particular experiences of the affected indi-

⁹ At the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in 1993, family violence against women was recognized for the first time in history as a human rights violation.

¹⁰ CEFEMINA. *Mujeres hacia el 2000: deteniendo la violencia*. San José, Costa Rica: Programa "Mujer no Estás Sola," CEFEMINA; 1994.

¹¹ Shrader Cox, Elizabeth. Developing Strategies: Efforts to End Violence Against Women in Mexico. In: Schuler, M., ed. *Freedom from Violence: Women's Strategies around the World*. New York: OEF International; 1992: 175-198.

viduals also has an effect on the policies of public institutions and on programs aimed at addressing and preventing violence.

Family violence is not the result of inexplicable cases of deviant or pathological behavior. On the contrary, it is a learned, conscious, and deliberate behavior that is the product of a social structure that is based on inequality. Family violence is the result of unequal power relationships, and it is practiced by those who feel they have a right to intimidate and control others. Within the family, the inequalities associated with gender and age are the main determinants of the violent relationships that develop.

Hence, the use of violence against the least powerful family members is not only a means of control and oppression, but it also is one of the most brutal and explicit expressions of gender- and age-based domination and subordination. This model of power and domination, which leads to the daily practice of family violence, cuts across all social classes, educational levels, and ethnic and age groups. In other words, family violence occurs in all sectors of society.

Although the legal right to perpetrate this type of violence is no longer explicitly recognized in most Western societies, the legacy of old laws and openly condoned social practices continues to create conditions that permit widespread family violence.¹² Although current laws no longer explicitly sanction the practice of violence, omissions, indifference, and inefficient and contradictory policies and procedures of social institutions continue to reflect the structure of domination and subordination that produces and legitimizes family violence against women.

Family violence against women is such a complex problem that its solution requires strategically and intersectorally coordinated policies and actions, with the participation of both the State and civil society. In this context, the health, regulatory (judicial/legal/law enforcement), education, and nongovernmental sectors are of fundamental importance. Each of these sectors will have a critical role to play in detecting, recording, addressing, and preventing family violence. In real terms, however, the responses of these sectors as service providers are inadequate and insufficient in the majority of cases, given the perceptions and opinions that exist in regard to the problem of violence against women.

Hence, it is crucial to study the responses that social institutions give women affected by family violence. This study will help elucidate the actions taken by victims of family violence in their search for assistance, the obstacles encountered, and in general, the social perceptions or connotations and the significance attached to family violence by personnel of the institutions that should be addressing this

¹² Sagot, Monserrat. Socialización de género, violencia y femicidio. *Revista Reflexiones* 1995. In press.

problem. Only through understanding these situations will it be possible to design effective intersectoral strategies to prevent, address, and control family violence.

Selecting the Qualitative Methodology

The central topics of this study are the experiences of affected women as they search for assistance, the process followed, and the social connotations and significance attached to violence by both service providers and the affected women themselves. Accordingly, qualitative methodologies were selected to research these topics. This research strategy is especially well suited to the present study, because one of its principal strengths is that it permits a better understanding of the subjective and symbolic dimensions of human behavior.

Given that the study's central focus is to determine the factors that influence the demand for services and the process followed in the search for solutions, as well as the supply and quality of services and social responses, a qualitative methodological strategy was needed. This strategy is considered particularly appropriate in this case, since it will yield a better understanding of the processes experienced; it also will allow new and previously unknown data to be collected.

Moreover, while quantitative research analyzes the social sphere in terms of variables and produces numerical data, qualitative research provides a means of obtaining rich descriptions and explanations of processes in local contexts, expressed in the words of the social actors themselves. Qualitative data, therefore, make it possible to preserve the chronological sequence of events, place them in the same context in which they occurred, and derive explanations that are strongly grounded in the sociocultural reality under study.¹³ In other words, qualitative research makes it possible to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the actors themselves.¹⁴

In terms of research ethics, the qualitative paradigm has a series of implications. Qualitative research rejects the positions of the traditional scientific paradigm, which establishes separations between the subjects and the objects of research or deems that personal experiences and popular knowledge have no scientific validity. Qualitative research implies establishing an egalitarian and horizontal relationship between the investigator and the research subjects. Hierarchical and vertical modalities for conducting research are replaced by more participatory modalities that promote collaboration between the investigator and the respondents.

¹³ Miles, Michael and Michael Huberman. *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Los Angeles, California: Sage Publications; 1994.

¹⁴ Taylor SJ, Bogdan R. *Introducción a los métodos cualitativos de investigación*. Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós; 1992.