

Violence against women and the girl child

Intimate partner violence



Key points

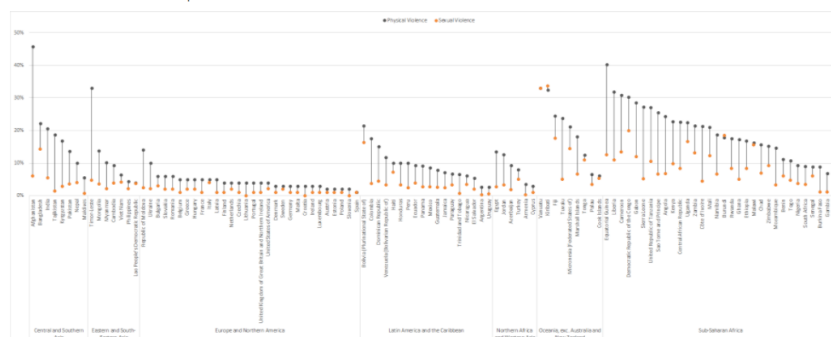
- Women across the world, regardless of income, age or education, are subjected to physical and sexual violence perpetrated by current or former intimate partners.
- One in three women will experience physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in her life.
- 18% of women and girls have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months.
- The prevalence of intimate partner violence in the previous 12 months varies widely between countries, from 2% to 46%.
- Regional differences in the rates of intimate partner violence also persist, with women in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa regions at greatest risk.
- Younger women (aged 15–29) are also at increased risk of experiencing intimate partner violence.
- In terms of trend analysis, 58% of countries have recorded a decrease in intimate partner violence since 2005.
- The periods of lockdown called for in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have put women and girls at increased risk of experiencing intimate partner violence.
- Forthcoming international estimates accounting for methodological differences between studies will improve the cross-country comparability of data on violence against women perpetrated by intimate partners.
- As at 2020, at least 153 countries have passed laws on domestic violence.

Background

Violence against women and girls is an extreme manifestation of gender inequality and intimate partner violence, is one of the most common form of violence faced by women and girls worldwide. One in three women will experience physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in her life.¹ Given prevailing social norms that sanction male dominance over women, violence between intimate partners is often perceived as an ordinary and/or normal element of relationships, particularly in the context of marriage or other unions.

Based on the latest available data for 112 countries during the period from 2005 to 2018, it is estimated that, worldwide, 18% of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15–49 have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence during the previous 12 months. Based on data from 112 countries, 14% of women have experienced physical violence and 6% of women have experienced sexual violence at the hands of intimate partners during the previous 12 months. As shown in figure I, this proportion varies widely across regions and countries.

Figure I: Proportion of women and girls aged 15-49 who experienced intimate partner physical or sexual violence in the previous 12 months: 2005 - 2018 (latest available)



Source: Compiled by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, from various sources, including national surveys and demographic and health surveys.

Regional differences in the rates of intimate partner violence persist, with women in the Pacific, Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa regions at greatest risk. In Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand, the average 12-month prevalence rate for intimate partner violence was 35%. The rates of intimate partner violence in Southern Asia (23%) and sub-Saharan Africa (22%) were above the global average of 18%. In contrast, the prevalence rate of recent intimate partner violence is lower, in Latin America and the Caribbean, at an average of 12%, and lower still in Europe, where the 12-month prevalence rate is 6%.

Focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean, population-based evidence confirms that intimate partner violence against women remains a widespread public health and human rights problem, with a reported prevalence of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence during the previous 12 months across countries ranging from 3% to 27% of women and girls.

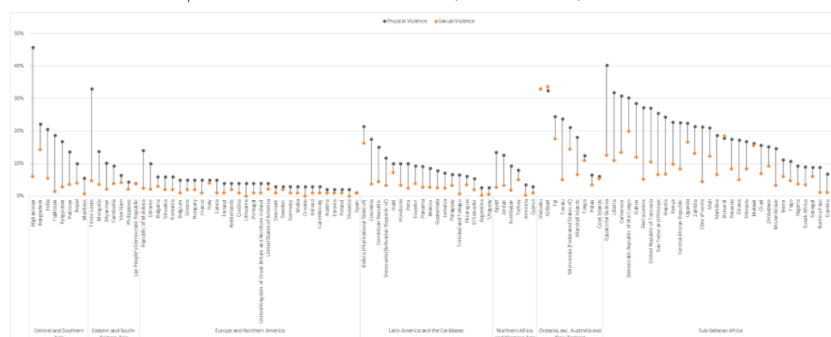
A survey carried out in Europe in 2019, led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and covering seven countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, found that 6.7%² of women had been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months. Prevalence rates over the 12-month period ranged from 3.1% in Republic of North Macedonia to 9.4% in the Republic of Moldova.

Although many countries collect information on violence against women, direct comparisons are often difficult to make because of differences in data collection methodology.³ In particular, some developed countries regularly publish statistics on intimate partner violence based on victimization surveys and complement these statistics with the number of cases reported to the police in order to measure prevalence of violence as well as coverage of reported cases. While these sources provide valuable information, they can not be used to produce comparable prevalence rates.

Since 2010, among countries with comparable data (47 countries),⁴ the proportion of women and girls experiencing intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence in the past 12 months ranged from 3.5% in Armenia (2015–2016) to 46.1% in Afghanistan (2015).

Some issues with comparability persisting to the absence of agreed international definitions in historical data, as well as inconsistent age ranges used in different surveys. Putting these differences to one side, available data for the 112 countries up to 2018 show that the proportion of women experiencing intimate partner physical or sexual violence in the past 12 months ranged from 2.0% in Spain (2012) and Slovenia (2012) to a rate of 46.1% in Afghanistan (2015).

Figure I: Proportion of women and girls aged 15-49 who experienced intimate partner physical or sexual violence in the previous 12 months: 2005 - 2018 (latest available)

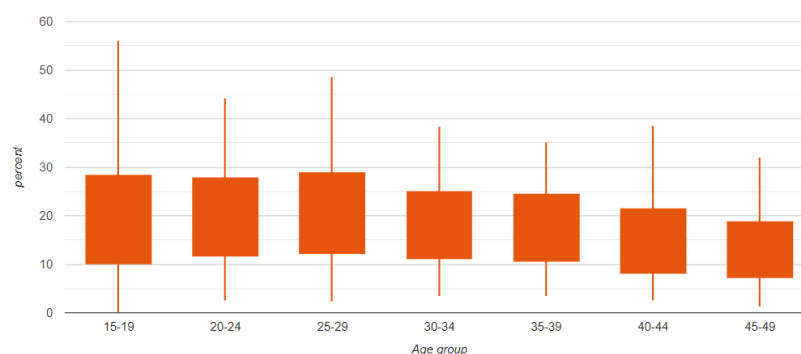


Source: Compiled by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, from various sources, including national surveys and demographic and health surveys.

Survey data from 63 countries indicate that the prevalence of intimate partner violence generally decreases with age. Based on available data disaggregated by 5-year-age groups, younger women (aged 15–19, 20–24 and 25–29) are at the greatest risk of experiencing intimate partner violence, although rates of intimate partner violence by broad age group vary widely across countries (see figure II).

Between 2005 and 2017, 36 countries conducted more than one survey to measure the prevalence of intimate partner violence in the 12 months prior to the survey. Evidence of the magnitude of change in the level of intimate partner violence is mixed, with 21 countries (58%) recording decreases in intimate partner violence and 10 countries (28%) recording increases. The trend was unclear in five countries (14%).

Figure II Proportion of women and girls who experienced intimate partner physical or sexual violence in the previous 12 months, by age: 2005 - 2017 (latest available)



Source: : Source: SDGs database (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>) (accessed in July 2020).

COVID-19

The lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have confined many women and girls to their homes, sometimes with abusive partners, putting them at greater risk of domestic violence. Reports from several countries reveal an increase in reported cases of domestic violence to helplines, women's shelters and the police. In some countries, however, there has been a decrease in the number of reported incidents of domestic violence, possibly owing to the fact that women and girls confined in the home with an abusive partner have limited privacy and may lack access to mobile phones or to the Internet, making it difficult for them to reach out for help.

While as yet there is no solid evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on the percentage of women and girls subjected to intimate partner violence, past evidence has shown that violence is more severe and frequent for those already in abusive relationships when intimate partners spend more time at home (for example, during the holidays). While robust statistics on the impact of COVID-19 are still being produced, there are reasons to believe that the pandemic is likely to increase the risk that women may experience different forms of violence, specifically intimate partner domestic violence: 15 years of survey data show that the great majority of women survivors of violence never report it to the police, helplines or other service providers.

Laws on domestic violence

As of 2020, at least 153 countries have passed laws on domestic violence. Developed countries, including countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Oceania, have the highest coverage, with over 90% of countries in these regions having laws on domestic violence: this stands in stark contrast to the situation in countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Northern and Western Asia, less than 65% of which have specifically criminalized domestic violence.

Vulnerable groups

Rates of domestic violence against indigenous women are often significantly higher than the rest of the population. Surveys to measure violence against women must include these populations in order to ensure no one is left behind. In 2016, in analysis carried out by the Domestic Violence Resource Centre in the Australian state of Victoria⁵ it was reported that Aboriginal women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalized from family violence⁶ and almost 11 times more likely to be killed as a result of violent assault.

Older women are also at risk of family violence⁷ and are often not included in the population covered by surveys on the topic. One country that reports on violence against senior women is Canada, where risk of being the victim of a violent crime generally decreases with age. As a reflection of this overall pattern, seniors had the lowest rates of police-reported violent crime, regardless of whether violence was perpetrated by a family member or someone outside the family network. However, senior victims of family violence are more likely to sustain injuries than other victims of family violence.⁸ The Canadian data suggest that, as women age, they are at greater risk of experiencing violence at the hands of their grown children while still at risk of violence from their domestic partners. In 2010, 36% of perpetrators of violence against seniors aged 65–69 were their grown children, followed by their spouses (30%).

Data on the prevalence of violence against women and girls is often still lacking for women and girls with disabilities, ethnic minorities, migrant workers and older women. Even where such data exist, comparability between countries and within countries remains challenging.

Countries in focus

Intimate partner violence is often unreported. In Kazakhstan, 51% of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence have never shared the information with anyone.

Based on data from 2016, intimate partner violence in Mexico remains a significant issue, with almost one out of four women 15 and older (23.9%) reporting having experienced violence in the previous 12 months (a slight reduction from 24.7% in 2011).

About the data

Coverage

Women and girls aged 15–49.

Availability

Data on the proportion of women and girls who have experienced physical or sexual violence in the previous 12 months (2005–2018) is available for 112 countries (31 developed countries and 81 developing countries), including 36 countries with multiple data points, allowing for trend analysis.

Oceania (excl) refers to Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand throughout the publication.

Definitions

- Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 5.2.1.⁹ measures the percentage of ever-partnered women and girls who have experienced physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months. While physical and sexual intimate partner violence are generally well defined and measured, this is not the case with psychological partner violence, which may be conceptualized differently across cultures and in different contexts. Therefore, this indicator currently reports on the global level of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence only. A majority of data come from demographic and health surveys, which typically sample only women and girls aged 15–49. There is a lack of consistency in the age range of sample populations across country surveys: in the case of surveys that interview a sample of women and girls from a different age group, the prevalence for data on the 15–49 age group is often published or can be calculated from available data. The global indicator therefore currently reports violence experienced by ever-partnered women and girls 15–49 years of age.
- Physical violence consists of acts aimed at physically hurting the victim and include, but are not limited to, pushing, grabbing, twisting the arm, pulling the hair, slapping, kicking, biting or hitting with the fist or object, trying to strangle or suffocate, burning or scalding on purpose and/or threatening or attacking with some sort of weapon, gun or knife.
- Sexual violence is defined as any sort of harmful or unwanted sexual behaviour that is imposed on someone. It includes acts of abusive sexual contact, forced engagement in sexual acts, attempted or completed sexual acts without consent, incest and/or sexual harassment. In intimate partner relationships, sexual violence is commonly defined as being forced to have sexual intercourse, having sexual intercourse out of fear for what the partner might do and/or being forced to do something sexual that the woman or girl considers humiliating or degrading.

Sources

- [United States Agency for International Development \(USAID\), Demographic and Health Surveys program, STATcompiler](#) (last accessed 15 August 2019).
- [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Survey on violence against women in the European Union, 2012.](#)
- [Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization, Intimate Partner Violence in the Americas: Data and Action.](#)
- [Sustainable Development Goals database](#) (last accessed July 2020).
- [Organization for Security and Cooperation \(OSCE\), OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women, 2019 .](#)
- [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Development \(UNDESA\), Statistics Division, master file on violence against women surveys.](#)

Footnotes

1. [World Health Organization \(WHO\), Global and regional estimates of violence against women](#) .
2. Including psychological violence, the rate is 20%: psychological violence, which is defined as acts which cause psychological harm to an individual, can take many forms, including coercion, defamation, verbal insult and/or harassment.
3. [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) metadata for indicator 5.2.1](#).
4. Demographic and health surveys.
5. Australian Productivity Commission, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2014*, Canberra, 2014.
6. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Family Violence Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, Canberra, 2006.
7. Family violence refers to violence committed by spouses, children, siblings and members of the extended family.
8. [Statistics Canada, 2012, "Family violence against seniors"](#) .
9. Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15-49 years subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age (Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.2.1).