



Violence Against Women:

Civilization's Unfinished Business

by The Hon. Patricia Wald

The following is excerpted from the keynote address Judge Wald, U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, delivered on May 27, 1994 at the International Conference of Women Judges in Rome.

We have come together from all corners of the globe to confront—and ultimately to overcome—that most intractable and heart-breaking crime—domestic violence. Across centuries, cultures, and classes, it remains the cardinal sin against women. Four million women are battered in the United States every year—a woman beaten every 12 seconds—more than are assaulted on the streets of our most dangerous cities. In Asia, sixty million women are “missing” through murder and maltreatment; the percentage of women in the total Asian population has shrunk persistently over the decades. One in 4 Mexican women claim to have experienced violence in their homes. Every year almost 5,000 young Indian wives are murdered by husbands frustrated with small dowries; in Bombay alone, a woman “accidentally” burns to death every five days. In a cross-cultural survey, 75 out of 90 societies found wife-beating acceptable. Because our data collection is so poor, no one is really sure if the problem is getting worse or better.

The Causes

First, because domestic violence is embedded in the family; the victim is more vulnerable, and the solution more complicated. Outsiders—official or unofficial—have always been reluctant to intervene in that most private of sanctums, the home. Societies from time immemorial have been willing to trade off the exploitation of their women and children for family privacy.

Until recently, in most countries assaults within the family were not “real crimes.” The abused wife (and her children) usually depends on her assailant for food, shelter, and even her identity. The cruel choice of women throughout history was to be beaten or to be poor. A society which offers the abused woman no alternatives finds it prudent to ignore her dilemma.

There is also the cultural theme that runs through time and geography that says it's all right to beat your wife or girlfriend. Some fundamentalist religions actually legitimize wife-beating; the 1990 Revolutionary Command Council of Iraq empowered men to physically punish their wives for

adultery. Koranic verses have been interpreted to say that women's intellect and spirituality are “diminished,” so they must be guided and controlled by men. In many cultures still, “machista” values prevail; despite Supreme Court pronouncements to the contrary, juries regularly acquit on a “defense of honor” Brazilian men who kill their wives for suspected adultery. In Uganda, a disobedient wife can legally be disciplined by her husband or returned to her family for correction.

Societies organized along patriarchal lines, where men control family resources and consign women to uncompensated

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The Conference convenes—Justice Gabriella Luccioli, President of L'Associazione Donne Magistrato Italiane (standing), welcomed more than 200 women judges from 50 nations to the “International Conference On Domestic Violence: A Hidden Problem Exposed,” at the opening ceremonies on May 27, 1994. From l. to r. on either side of Justice Luccioli are the Hon. Nilde Iotti, former President of the Italian Parliament; the Hon. Irene Pivetti, current President of the Parliament; the Hon. Patricia Wald, U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia and keynote speaker, and the Hon. Arline Pacht, IAWJ President.