

## 2020 Asia–Pacific Statistics Week

### A decade of action for the 2030 Agenda: Statistics that leaves no one and nowhere behind

15-19 JUNE 2020 | Bangkok, Thailand

#### Golden principles for ethical and safe interviewing in surveys on violence against women

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#### Abstract:

Collecting quality data on violence against women (VAW) through special surveys is crucial if we want to understand and end this scourge. This is challenging, however, because regardless of how well the method and tools are designed, VAW surveys do not measure the actual number of women who have been abused, but rather the number of women who are willing and able to disclose abuse. And surveys always miss the most severe cases, including those institutionalized, locked up, too scared to talk or murdered.

Despite the challenges, we need accurate data to convince governments and policy-makers to take the issue of VAW seriously, and to craft better policy and legislation. Further, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has made monitoring of VAW a must, not a choice.

There are still enormous gaps in such statistics, as well as in national and regional capacities to properly collect data on VAW. Now in the Asia-Pacific region, this need is being addressed by the kNOwVAWdata Initiative, led by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, with support from the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), in partnership with the University of Melbourne and Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS).

By far the most important factor in getting reliable stories from survivors through surveys is the skill and training of the enumerator, who must embody six 'golden principles' for interviewing women who may have experienced violence: (1) empathy and maturity; (2) sensitization; (3) confidentiality and safety; (4) minimizing distress and providing information on support; (5) reaching the unreachable; and (6) taking care of the enumerator's own wellbeing.

The stories of survivors are both a burden and a gift. They can be a burden for the enumerator (also referred to as interviewer), because hearing painful stories often makes the enumerator feel responsible for the survey respondent's wellbeing or feel angry or helpless for not being able to save the woman. It may also cause the interviewer to relive her own past experiences of violence.

But it can also be seen as an exchange of gifts: the interviewer receives a woman's most painful secrets in exchange for lending a listening ear, an empathetic heart and making the woman realize that she is worthy and her story is valuable. If an interviewer reaches this level, she can be a truly effective interviewer. Field examples demonstrate how this is an empowering and transformative experience, and a motivation to push for positive change.

**Keywords:** kNOwVAWdata; Data collection; Ethics and safety; Empathy; Wellbeing

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### 1. Introduction:

Violence against women (VAW) affects women across the globe. This grave human rights violation can harm women's health and wellbeing, including their educational and earning potential. The burden is experienced across the development spectrum, from a family's financial stability through to an economic toll on the health, social services and justice sectors. It can also impact women's capacity to care for their children, as well as children's learning abilities. And, it increases the likelihood of ongoing cycles of violence. VAW is not only a strain on the whole community; it also burdens countries across the world.

In the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993, violence against women is defined as:

*“Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”*

Global estimates suggest that on average, one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence in her lifetime, most often at the hands of an intimate partner (WHO 2013).

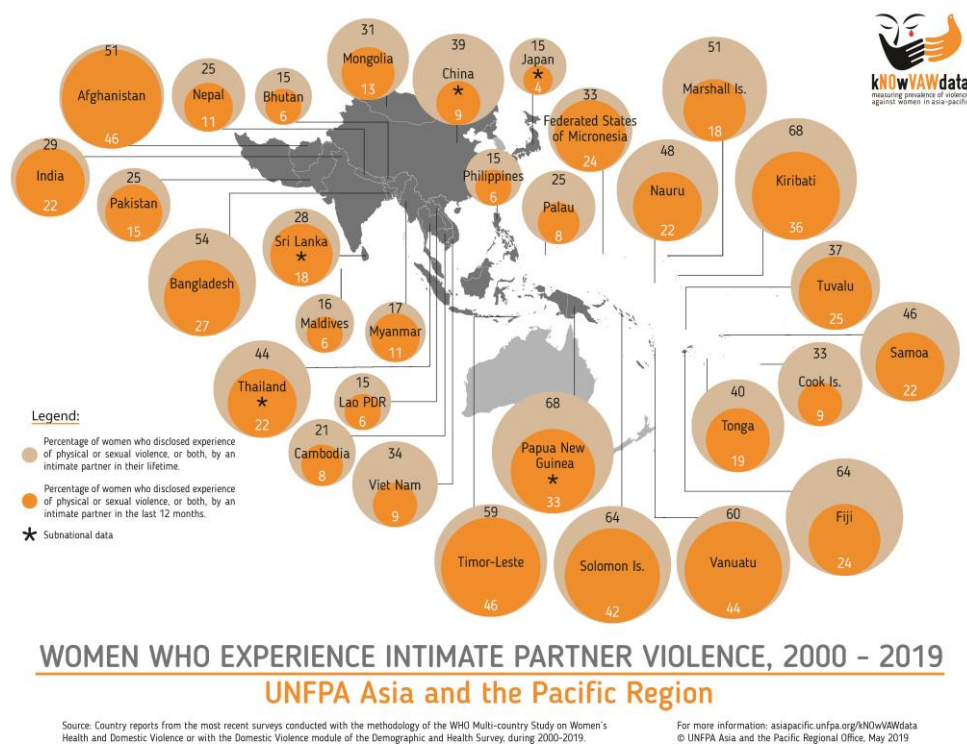


Figure 1 - Asia-Pacific regional violence against women map

Figure 1 illuminates that in countries in Asia and the Pacific between 15 and 68 percent of women disclosed experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, using data from surveys conducted between the years 2000 and 2019—either with the methodology of the World Health Organization (WHO) Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence, or the Domestic Violence module of the Demographic and Health Survey.

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Having data at the national level about the prevalence of VAW is the first step to understanding how to end it. A recent push for VAW prevalence data is one of the driving forces behind the surveys conducted across the Asia-Pacific region and worldwide, as countries are required to measure progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 for gender equality. With Target 5.2—to “eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in private and public spheres, including trafficking, sexual exploitation and other types of exploitation”—and its dedicated indicators on intimate partner violence and sexual violence by perpetrators other than partners, the demand for VAW prevalence data has increased.

Due to the sensitivity and stigma of the topic and the safety risks for participants, special approaches and skillsets are required to measure VAW, but these capacities are still scarce. In light of the increased demand for more accurate, reliable and comparable VAW prevalence data, and to strengthen capacities, the kNOwVAWdata Initiative launched in 2016. kNOwVAWdata builds on a long history of support from DFAT and UNFPA to countries conducting VAW prevalence studies throughout Asia and the Pacific. A hallmark of this flagship DFAT-UNFPA initiative is a partnership with the University of Melbourne and Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS). Under this partnership, UNFPA and the University of Melbourne have developed and implemented a standard 4-week kNOwVAWdata course on the Measurement of Violence against Women. A key component of the course includes the unique, context-specific training to equip enumerators (or interviewers) with the ‘soft skills’ to go alongside the technical skills of interviewing women about their experiences of violence.

## 2. Methodology:

Intimate partner violence is a phenomenon that is usually hidden and stigmatised, so its measurement is sensitive to the personality and skills of the interviewers and the context of the interview. For this reason, it is critical to properly recruit and train enumerators for a VAW prevalence survey.

Next, we will outline the six golden principles for interviewing women who may have experienced violence:

**Empathy and maturity:** It is crucial that enumerators are able to engage with people from different backgrounds with empathy and without judgment, to build rapport and to deal with sensitive issues. Many women have never disclosed their experiences of violence to anyone before, so the enumerator must strive to make women feel safe, valued and supported.

**Sensitization:** Training for interviewers must include a basic understanding of gender-based violence, its dynamics and causes, and its impact on the health and well-being of women and children. With a deeper understanding of these issues, she will be able to confront and expunge her own biases and prejudices, such as victim blaming, which is essential to building a good rapport during the interview for full and honest disclosure.

**Confidentiality and safety:** Enumerators must be trained to keep the interview private and the information gathered confidential. Survey respondents are often afraid to speak out for fear of more violence if her intimate partner discovers that she participated in a VAW survey. Utmost care must be taken that nobody in the household or community learns about the topic of interest. Enumerators will need to know how to explain the survey without compromising their own or respondents’ safety.

**Minimizing distress and providing support info:** Enumerators should develop skills to be aware of possible distress during the interview and know how to respond if a woman withdraws into herself or gets upset. Interviewers should be empathetic and supportive, but they cannot and should not take on the role of counsellor. At the end of the interview, interviewers must provide all respondents with a list

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### A decade of action for the 2030 Agenda: Statistics that leaves no one and nowhere behind

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of support services. Interviewers should also be trained to refer women who are in danger, who request assistance or otherwise need urgent help to available local support services.

**Reaching the unreachable:** Occasionally a woman selected to be interviewed will prove difficult to track down; or she may be reluctant to participate or it may be hard to find privacy to conduct the interview. A woman selected as part of a sample cannot be replaced by another woman; every effort should be made to locate the originally selected woman and talk to her in private. We have noticed many times that the women who are the hardest to find or hardest to interview are most likely to be survivors of violence.

**Taking care of enumerators' own wellbeing:** Better data is collected by enumerators who are emotionally well and who know how to take care of themselves. Having come to terms with their own possible experience of violence and understanding how to care for their own wellbeing is therefore also part of the training. Opportunities for relaxation, discharging, debriefing and counselling during the field work are critical.

### 3. Result:

In this section, examples from two VAW prevalence surveys from the Asia-Pacific region illustrate the six golden principles for interviewing women in practice. The first is the Belau Family Health and Safety Study (2014) conducted in the Pacific Island of Palau, managed by the Republic of Palau Ministry of Health with financial and technical support from UNFPA—including from the author of this paper,—and funding from DFAT. The second is the National Study on Gender-based Violence in Mongolia (2017). This survey was facilitated by Mongolia's National Statistics Office with technical assistance by UNFPA, including from the author of this paper, and funded by Swiss Development Cooperation and DFAT. Both surveys used the methodology of the WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence.

**Empathy and maturity:** In Palau, enumerators were selected for their empathy and maturity, and the training process honed their ability to establish bonds with survey respondents. The Belau survey coordinator found that in the field, a rapport between enumerators and respondents built over the course of an interview. It was quite common for enumerators to get through the entire questionnaire with no reports of violence, but then at the very end, women would suddenly start talking about their experiences of abuse. If a woman disclosed violence at this final stage, the interviewer was instructed to go back and correct the answers previously given, if they had consent from the respondent to do so.

**Sensitization:** Mongolia's National Statistics Office had never organized a survey of this nature before, which sought extremely personal information from women about many forms of violence, including physical, emotional, sexual and economic. The enumerator training showed the survey team how to talk about gender-based violence in a way that is descriptive enough that respondents will know exactly what the enumerator is referencing, while doing so sensitively.

*"Violence is something we all know happens. It is distant and close to us always—but we didn't know how to talk about it." - Survey enumerator in Mongolia*

**Confidentiality and safety:** In a small country such as Palau, it is easy to determine who people are, even with very little information. It was somewhat difficult to maintain this confidentiality while also allowing the interviewers to share their experiences during enumerator debriefings. It was vital that all the interviewers knew to keep what they had heard within the group confidential, and they all took an oath stating that. To ensure the topic of the survey remained concealed from the community, enumerators in Palau could not take their training or other survey materials home. During the training, role-playing with the enumerators on how to discuss the project and talk about it in their own homes and work contexts helped the interviewers keep the survey topic confidential.

## 2020 Asia–Pacific Statistics Week

### A decade of action for the 2030 Agenda: Statistics that leaves no one and nowhere behind

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*“[An enumerator’s] co-workers were sort of interrogating her [about the survey topic], so she made up stories like ‘it’s about women’s health and menstruation.’ After that people said, ‘Oh okay, we don’t want to hear about it’. [The enumerators] got pretty good at that, so the [role-playing] was one of the biggest tools that helped us.” – Palau Study coordinator*

**Minimizing distress and providing support info:** In Palau, the women who disclosed violence were very often in need of support or just someone to talk to. The enumerators were able to provide this basic compassion but then referred women to a guidance counsellor and other services, as appropriate. Often a real bond had developed between the enumerators and the interviewees, but it was important to remember that enumerators are not counsellors.

*“[The enumerator] comes back [from an interview] and says, ‘I’ve been talking for the past however many hours’. And really the interview might have taken 30 minutes to an hour, but [the interviewee] was just talking, talking, talking. Most [enumerators] just let them talk, I think because we are a smaller population and [the enumerators] realised there was a big need for support out there.” – Palau Study coordinator*

**Reaching the unreachable:** In Palau, it became clear that the most difficult households to reach almost always had cases of violence, so it was crucial to be persistent about interviewing these women.

*“All the interviewers said the households that were the hardest to get always had some kind of [violence], even the smallest issue like a slap, but there was still a bit.” – Palau Study coordinator*

With a country as vast as Mongolia, the National Statistics Office faced many logistical challenges. The survey took place in the summer months, but the unpredictable weather patterns and terrain still made it difficult to reach sample households. Enumerators were often forced to take gruelling detours and deviations to reach the women.

*“Our car got stuck one evening so I asked someone to take me on a motorcycle. When I got to my destination, there was no road. I had to climb up a hill. By the time I got to the address, it was quite late at night and everyone was asleep. I had to wake the woman up to interview her.” – Survey enumerator in Mongolia*

**Taking care of enumerators’ own wellbeing:** One-on-one, small group and full-team enumerator debriefing sessions were an important tool to help manage enumerators’ stress from conducting the emotionally challenging interviews in Palau. While there was a professional counsellor available to the enumerators, they found that just talking to each other was most beneficial.

These are just a few anecdotes to shed light on the significance of context-specific enumerator training for the success of VAW prevalence surveys. These principles are increasingly embedded in survey planning processes throughout Asia and the Pacific, thanks to the kNowVAWdata Initiative, which is working to build regional capacity to undertake ethical, reliable and comparable VAW surveys.

#### 4. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations:

Studies that were specifically developed to collect prevalence data on VAW across cultures, like the 2005 WHO Multi-country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence against Women, made an invisible problem visible and quantifiable. The WHO study showed that data on VAW could be collected from the population, provided that appropriate techniques and ethical and safety measures were put in place, and support for participants in the studies was available (WHO 2001).

## 2020 Asia–Pacific Statistics Week

### A decade of action for the 2030 Agenda: Statistics that leaves no one and nowhere behind

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An essential part for quality and safe data collection on VAW is a diligent enumerator training process. As we have shown, training enumerators with the skills to ask women about some of their darkest secrets in a delicate fashion is the foundation to obtaining reliable data that in aggregate reveal hidden truths about women's experiences with violence. The six golden principles of interviewing women who may have experienced violence, contributes significantly to high quality evidence needed to put in place effective, targeted policies and programmes that support survivors of violence and prevent future violence from occurring, crucial to achieve commitments to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Finally, it must be reiterated that even the soundest VAW surveys only reflect what women are willing to disclose to the interviewers. We know that stigma, shame and comfort to reveal personal experiences differ between contexts and cultures, and over time. We can be sure that the reality of violence is worse than captured in any survey. This is exacerbated by the fact that the nature of a household survey results in exclusion of the most severe cases: those who live in institutions; who fled their violent home; who are incapacitated, possibly due to results of violence; who are locked up; or those too afraid to open doors. This should be fully understood when interpreting prevalence data.

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