

## 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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### Through sleet and snow: overcoming challenges in the field during the first national study on violence against women in Mongolia

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#### Abstract:

The Mongolia National Statistics Office supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) undertook a national study on the prevalence of violence against women for the first time in 2017. Using the methodology of the World Health Organization Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against women, the study reached 7,300 women across one of the world's largest and most sparsely populated countries.

Carefully selected women were trained for three weeks as interviewers/enumerators. The fieldwork took place over 60 days and reached all 21 aimags (provinces) across the country. Interviewer teams had to overcome many obstacles in reaching households and gathering information from women: from cars being bogged on rural roads, to teams being mistaken for political election campaigners. For several of the interviewers, this was a very personal journey. The story of Badmaa, an interviewer who was herself a survivor of partner violence, shows how many of them had to confront their own trauma to do the important work of gathering stories and bringing them to light.

Survey results show that prevalence rates of partner violence are relatively high in Mongolia at rates around the global average of one woman in every three having experienced partner violence at some point in their lives. The study found that 32% of ever-partnered women experienced physical and/or sexual partner violence in their lifetime and 13% in the last 12 months. The proportion of women experiencing non-partner sexual violence in lifetime (rape and other sexual violence) is 14% (twice as much as the global average).

Fieldwork for research on violence against women is a challenge in any setting, making these some of the most complicated and interesting studies that a national statistical system can conduct. The Mongolia survey is an excellent example of how personal experiences shape the interviewers' ability to establish rapport and gather data, while at the same time resulting in high quality results towards monitoring the sustainable development goals and the principles of leaving no-one behind.

**Keywords:** VAW prevalence survey, engaging users, leaving no one behind, sustainable development goals, fieldwork

#### 1. Introduction:

Violence against women (VAW) is a global problem that crosses cultural, geographic, religious, social and economic boundaries and is one of the most prevalent forms of human rights violations. It deprives women of their right to fully take part in social and economic life and causes a myriad of physical and mental health issues and, in some cases, results in loss of life. Limited understanding of the magnitude of VAW, its causes and consequences, and the trends and patterns across cultures and countries hinders the efforts to address it.

Until recently, very little has been known about violence against women and domestic violence in Mongolia. There has been a real need for evidence to learn more about the prevalence, causes and consequences of VAW, to inform policy directions. To address this lack of data, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Mongolia Country office initiated a project to strengthen national capacity

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to combat gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence. In 2016, UNFPA Mongolia was awarded funding from Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) to implement the project, and the nationwide study on VAW and domestic violence was conducted. This was the first large-scale quantitative and qualitative study on this topic ever conducted in Mongolia.

Mongolia is located in the northeastern part of East Asia, occupying a territory of 1,565 thousand square kilometres (19<sup>th</sup> largest in the world). Landlocked between the Russian Federation in the north and the People's Republic of China in the south (Figure 1), it is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world. Around three million people live in this vast country with a population density of two people per square kilometre, second only to Greenland.<sup>1</sup> However, around half the population live in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar. The terrain varies from desert in the south, to vast steppes in the east, and mountains and forests in the west. Around 30% of the population still lead nomadic farming lifestyles.

Figure 1 Map of Mongolia



Mongolia has experienced strong economic growth in recent decades and is ranked as a lower-middle-income economy by the World Bank. A steady rise in life expectancy (74 years for women and 65 years for men in 2017), improvements in education and increase in Gross National Income (GNI) show a rise in human development.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Methodology:

Nationally representative survey fieldwork in a vast and sparsely populated country is always a challenge. Surveys on violence against women are even more complex as safety protocols guide everything from how the sample is designed to how interviewers and their teams are trained and supported to conduct the survey in the field. The 2017 survey in Mongolia covered all 21 provinces and 9 districts of Ulaanbaatar and reached 7,860 households. With one woman per household selected by Kish Grid method, around 7,300 women aged 15-64 years were interviewed.

Measuring the prevalence of violence against women is done with well-designed and tested surveys based on international standards and using highly skilled interviewers. In such a survey, every woman in a selected age range (in this case age 15-64) has the chance to be selected. For the woman selected to be interviewed, it is not known in advance if she has experienced violence. All women are asked the

<sup>1</sup> World Bank Data: Population density (people per square kilometre of land area).

[https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST?year\\_high\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST?year_high_desc=false).

<sup>2</sup> UNDP. 2018. Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update – Briefing note for countries on the 2018 Statistical Update: Mongolia. <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/MNG.pdf>.

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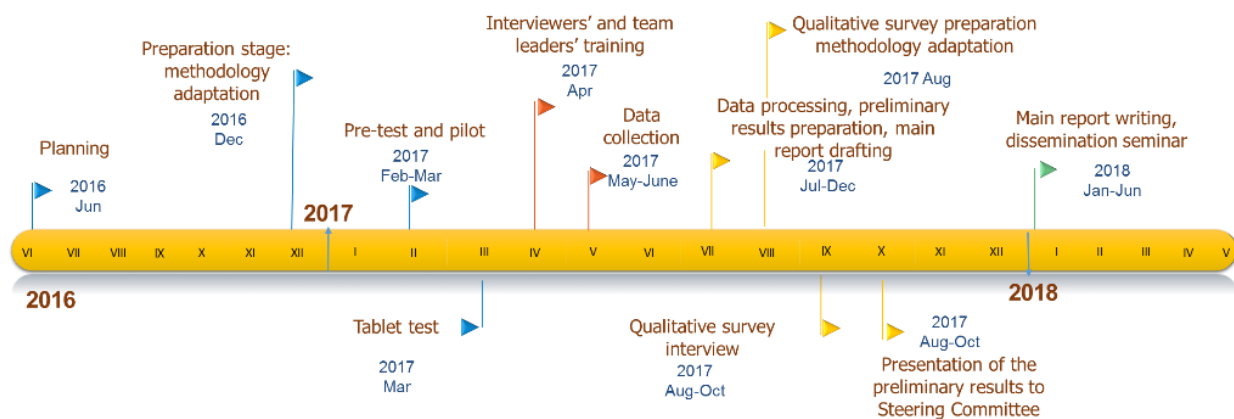
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same questions, using the same techniques, by interviewers who received intensive training over three weeks to carry out the survey. Ethical and safety procedures are paramount when collecting information of such a sensitive nature. Procedures are put in place to ensure the confidentiality and safety of the women interviewed. Use of this robust methodology produces reliable results and makes the study replicable and comparable across contexts and countries.

Preparations for the survey began in June 2016. A Steering Committee and Advisory Panel guided and oversaw the work. Planning and implementation took place between June 2016 and May 2018. More than 100 interviewers were trained for three weeks in April 2017 with most graduating successfully and being recruited to conduct the fieldwork between May and June 2017 (Figure 2). The work was done by 15 teams, each comprising five enumerators, one supervisor and two drivers. Data was captured using tablets and transmitted electronically to the NSO daily. Government officers and local officials provided essential assistance to locate households and help conduct the fieldwork smoothly.

Figure 2 Timeframe and key milestones for the Mongolia Violence against Women study



The focus of the survey was on measuring intimate partner violence (e.g. by her current or former husband, fiancé, boyfriend), be that physical, sexual, emotional, or economic violence, or controlling behaviors. The survey does not ask women if they have experienced ‘violence’, but rather asks detailed questions of their experience of specific acts of violence:

- Physical violence such as being slapped, pushed, kicked, hit, shoved, choked, or threatened with a gun, knife or other weapon;
- Sexual violence such as being physically forced to have sexual intercourse or engage in other unwanted sexual acts;
- Emotional violence such as being insulted, belittled or humiliated in front of others; him scaring or intimidating her on purpose; him verbally threatening to hurt her or people she cares about;
- Controlling behaviours such as him keeping her from seeing her friends; restricting contact with her family; insisting on knowing where she is at all times; and being often suspicious she is unfaithful;
- Economic violence such as prohibiting her from getting a job; taking her earnings against her will; or refusing to give money for household expenses.

A range of safety measures are needed to conduct a survey on violence against women so it minimizes any risk of harm to respondents and interviewers. This includes using a safe name for the household survey: “Women’s Health and Life Experiences” was used so the public or other household members did not know that violence was being discussed. The true nature of the survey is not promoted in the media or discussed with local officials. Only the woman interviewed, and the interviewers know what the survey is really about. Other safety measures include getting informed consent from the woman being interviewed, and all enumerators signed a confidentiality agreement as part of their work contract.



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#### 3. Result:

Fieldwork began in the suburbs around the capital with the women interviewers working in small teams. Once familiarised with the work, and sensitised to the personal and emotional responses that often went with it, they were deployed across the 331 districts of Mongolia and tasked with tracking down and interviewing the women from households assigned randomly to their teams by the National Statistics Office. In all, 7319 women were interviewed by the teams of enumerators. The fieldwork was completed successfully as planned over 60 days with a response rate of 98%

With a country as vast as Mongolia, the fieldwork teams faced many challenges. The survey took place in the summer months, but the unpredictable weather patterns still took a toll. Teams were pitted against the beautiful but harsh Mongolian landscape. Snow, sandstorms and boggy terrain provided many logistical challenges. The challenges of the weather and the terrain forced the teams 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," one the survey enumerator explained. "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."

One vital protocol of the survey is that interviews need to be conducted in a private setting where no one else can overhear the discussion. With many people living in small apartments in the city or one room homes in the countryside, establishing a private setting can be a major challenge. Interviewers would use the car or go out into the fields themselves to sit down with women so they could talk privately (Figure 3).

*Figure 3 Interviews being conducted in a private setting, Mongolia 2017*



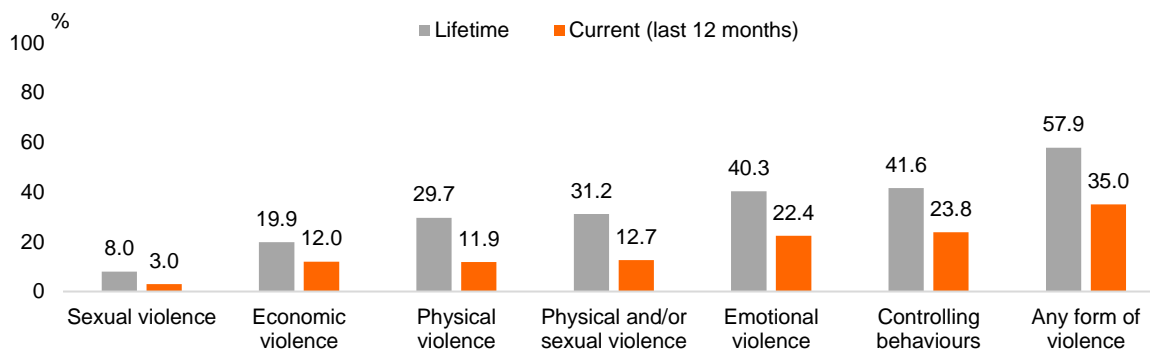
They survey found high levels of partner violence across the country. Almost one third of women (31.2%) had experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by a current or former partner during their lives. For 12.7% of women, this had occurred recently, in the last 12 months. Emotional and economic violence are no less significant than physical or sexual violence and can affect women even more than other forms of violence. The most reported form of violence by the women interviewed were controlling behaviours (41.6% of women in their lifetime) and emotional violence (40.3%). With all five forms of partner violence combined, more than half (57.9%) of women interviewed have experience it their lifetime and 35% in the last 12 months.

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Figure 4 Percentage of ever-partnered women who have experienced partner violence, by type of violence and reference period, Mongolia 2017 (N=6914)



Note: N=6914 – The number of ever-partnered women (those women who had ever been in an intimate partner relationship). Source: National Statistics Office of Mongolia. 2018. Breaking the Silence for Equality: 2017 National Study on Gender-based Violence in Mongolia. Ulaanbaatar.

They survey found that women experience violence regardless of their age, education, employment status or geographic location. Also, that it has significant impacts on the health of women - 42.8% of the women who experienced violence from their partners were injured, and, of those, 71.6% were severely injured. Women who experienced physical and/or sexual violence are more likely to self-assess their general health as poor and also report a greater number of symptoms of mental health disorders. The survey collected much more information on the patterns and consequences of violence against women that are not presented here (including associations between violence and disability) but are available in the main report released in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

The interviewers had to manage their own personal wellbeing during long days in the field listening to the difficult stories of many women. The experience of working on a survey on violence against women is often described as life changing. The interviewers are selected as they have the skills, empathy, and maturity to build rapport with women and encourage them to disclose their experiences during the interview. This can take a toll on both interviewer and respondent, but, when asked at the end of the survey, almost all respondents say they feel better after the interview. Some have spoken aloud about their experiences for the first time and many feel assured knowing it will contribute to evidence about the issue and, hopefully, action to enforce change.

*“A woman cried her heart out during the interview which we conducted in a car. And when we were finished with it, she kissed me on the cheek and thanked me, as if I did something very valuable for her. It was heartbreaking to interview a woman, who experienced violence from her previous and current partner, but was more concerned with the violent situation her older sister lives in. And even more heartbreaking was to hear that these women didn’t have anyone to help them!”*

Interviewer, 2017 Mongolia Violence against Women Survey

There were over 100 interviewers involved in the fieldwork and, without knowing or asking their personal histories, it is possible and likely that a significant proportion of them had experienced partner violence themselves. For them, this can be a very personal and confronting journey. One interviewer, Badmaa, chose to share her own personal story as a survivor of violence as she reflected on the experience of being an enumerator in the 2017 survey. Telling her story through video, Badmaa has given a brave and inspiring account that will support other women on a similar journey (Figure 4).

<sup>3</sup> UNFPA Mongolia: Breaking the silence for equality: 2017 National Study on Gender-based Violence in Mongolia. <https://mongolia.unfpa.org/en/publications/breaking-silence-equality-2017-national-study-gender-based-violence-mongolia>

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Figure 5 A video was produced on Badmaa's Story – the personal experiences of one of the survey enumerators



Source: <https://knowvawdata.com/stories/the-journey-mongolia/>

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

The work involved in conducting a household survey on violence against women is life changing. It changes the lives of those people involved, exposing them to some of the most difficult stories they will ever hear and, for some, forcing them to confront their own personal experiences or those closest to them.

Involving the right people and expertise was a key ingredient for overcoming the challenges of conducting a survey on the sensitive topic of violence against women. The Mongolia NSO is a highly professional and capable organization but conducting this study for the first time meant they relied on international methods and expertise to guide them.

Engaging stakeholders at both technical and political levels, and from donor organizations was also crucial to the success of the Mongolia survey. The results of the study in Mongolia were to be used to inform the placement of new services. This meant the sample needed to be bigger in order to provide reliable estimates at least down to the provincial (aimag) level. Stakeholders making decisions on the sample size needed to be informed about the importance of keeping the sample as small as possible. This was not only due to financial implications, but to minimize the risks and potential impact on the women in communities who will respond to the survey and those women conducting the interviews and gathering the stories.

Recruitment of the interviewers was done by collecting applications and conducting a computer skills test with potential candidates. This was the usual way of recruiting interviewers, but for a study like this, soft skills like empathy, sensitivity to gender concerns and ability to build rapport with respondents are just as important. This type of study requires interviewers be gentle, compassionate, understanding and non-judgmental, which can only be tested through personal interviews.

This paper documents only some of the lessons learned during the fieldwork and all phases of the violence against women survey in Mongolia. A summary of lessons learned is being prepared with the support of the UNFPA kNOwVAWdata Project - an initiative by UNFPA and the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to support and strengthen regional and national capacity to measure violence against women in Asia and the Pacific.

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1. National Statistics Office of Mongolia. 2018. Breaking the Silence for Equality: 2017 National Study on Gender-based Violence in Mongolia. Ulaanbaatar.
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