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Indicators of violence against women

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The final strategic priority proposed at the symposium on the harmonisation of gender indicators states categorically 'combat violence against women'. The indicator suggested is an apparently simple one: establish the prevalence and track. Let's turn our minds to that end.

I have worked for 25 years in Papua New Guinea in several contexts: as a designer of projects, as a gender advisor on a police project, as a consultant monitoring the social impact of mining on local communities, and as an academic researcher with a special interest in women and gender relations. In each of these roles the collection of factual material that identifies social problems and establishes their dimensions is crucial. But having the facts and tracking their transformations does not ensure that interventions can be made nor that policies will ensue.

Data collection: A reality check

Let's begin with some more 'facts'. Collecting reliable, verifiable statistical data on women's lives is difficult. It is often intrusive. It is sometimes revelatory, but it often simply confirms what we already knew, with numbers attached. It is also time consuming. If your data collection is to withstand scrutiny and provide useful information for designing, implementing and evaluating projects aimed at improving women's lives, status or well-being then it has to be done with accuracy, care and dedication. It is an extremely expensive process. It is therefore not surprising that 'few national statistical bodies collect data on the topic [of violence against women] and few of the available studies yield information that is comparable across countries or regions' (Grown et al. 2005:112).

In Papua New Guinea in the 1980s a large research project on domestic violence was undertaken under the auspices of the Law Reform Commission. A series of volumes was produced. The data were solid, the analyses compellingly presented, the findings terrible. Prevalence rates in some areas were greater than 70 per cent. The recommendations were impressive. The actions taken were limited. There were few attempts to evaluate the effects of interventions, policies and programmes that ensued.

It stands now as a distant baseline study. For such studies to be valuable as tools for effecting change they must be followed up by further studies, and that too is a costly business.

Methodological issues

With that in mind, let me raise some of the methodological problems with prevalence studies and their usefulness. First the study has to be designed so that claims of representivity can be made. To begin with, you need to know, with reasonable accuracy, how many women are in the population. There are three main ways that people collect data on violence against women: through police reports of crimes reported, through direct surveys of populations of women, and through examination of medical records. All are fraught with problems of reliability. In Papua New Guinea women in communities repeatedly report the failure of police to act on complaints of domestic or partner violence. In my own work, monitoring crime in an area where there is a large mining project, I note the reports that are recorded in the occurrence book, noting every person who comes and speaks to the police officer at the desk. I also note whether any action was taken, any investigation or charges laid. Does she withdraw the charges? Does this lead to a court case? Does the victim of the crime turn up to court? Is the person convicted? Depending on which data set I chose to go with I could have a prevalence rate of 0.5 per cent or 15 per cent. I know that under-reporting is a problem in all countries, but how do I decide what to multiply it by to estimate actual prevalence?

I can also ask women in meetings to put a cross on a small piece of paper if they have been physically assaulted, or a circle if they have not. Interestingly, my ethical concerns about privacy and confidentiality are not shared by the women who often recount their stories publicly with much discussion. On the basis of these studies the figures are consistently between 60-70 per cent. Perhaps the context allows women to speak more freely, but even then there are likely to be some women who feel ashamed or embarrassed. Certainly, many who work in a medical setting report that women are reluctant to discuss violence.

At the clinic, women who present with injuries consistent with violent assault are not always recorded as having experienced violence. Interviewing medical staff yields more complicated data; many observe minor injuries when they are dealing with a patient with malaria. Women, they believe, lie about the causes of some injuries that are presented or detected to save face or because the perpetrator has actually brought them for treatment. The data are suggestive but unreliable.

What if we were to depend on police statistics and found that in the period during a project for the empowerment of women the number of reported criminal assaults by intimate partners soared? Numbers are not transparent. Is this because the project has led to women asserting themselves at home and getting beaten up more? Is it because police involved the project are taking women's reports more seriously, recording or investigating them more diligently? Is it because women, recognising their rights as citizens to protection against assault, are reporting crime more often? Or is it because coincidentally a bus service has been established, linking villages to the town where the police station is, enabling women to travel there? Statistics have to be qualitatively analysed and interpreted.

Conclusion

Undertaking the collection of good verifiable data that demonstrates the effectiveness of programmes supporting women's development will be an expensive business. It will take time. At present in the Pacific most of this work would have to be done by highly educated people from Western countries. It would need to be done rigorously and would require cooperation between numerous agencies within Australia and in other countries. It would require training programmes wherever it was to be done. In the Australian context it would require that the anti-intellectualism and suspicion that often characterises the responses of public servants and aid providers to academics is set aside; that researchers and people working in development find ways of working together — dare I use the word — productively.

At present, Western advanced capitalist countries are entranced by the values of corporatism. The jargon that was first generated in corporate boardrooms when 'auditing' procedures were extended beyond the realm of finance permeates other institutions. There is widespread agreement that achievements must be measurable, that transparency and accountability must be demonstrable. Words like 'outputs', 'value-added', 'productivity', and so on, formerly confined to consenting businessmen in the privacy of their boardrooms, trip off the tongues and into the reports of educators, aid project managers and public servants. We work in an environment where words and deeds increasingly have to be represented in numbers.

The numbers and graphs will sit dully between the covers of reports unless they are used. The prevalence of violence against women in all countries is undisputed. Wherever you look for it you find it. Counting it accurately will not reduce it. Indicators do not solve problems, they have to be *used* to inform effective programmes aimed at eliminating violence, by people who are committed to improving the lives of women.

In conclusion, I would like us to keep in mind the words of a formidable mathematical genius, Albert Einstein: 'Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts'.

Reference

Grown, C, GR Gupta and A Kes 2005, *Taking action: Achieving gender equality and empowering women*, Earthscan, London.