

Women's rights are human rights

The [Beijing Platform for Action](#), developed at a 1995 United Nations conference, set an agenda for women's empowerment and identified 12 critical areas of concern. Twenty years after Beijing, ShareAmerica assesses global progress in [each critical area](#). This article focuses on women's human rights.

The movement for [women's human rights](#) has expanded beyond the 19th and 20th century suffrage movements to a movement of women from many different geographic and cultural backgrounds working for social, economic, and political equality.

Women suffer human rights abuses  around the world. This mural in Juarez, Mexico, commemorates several hundred women murdered there. (© AP Images)

"Human rights are women's rights," then-U.S. first lady [Hillary Clinton declared](#) at the 1995 Beijing conference. "Women must enjoy the right to participate fully in the social and political lives of their countries if we want freedom and democracy to thrive and endure."

The United Nations endorses this formula:

- In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination](#). Often described as an international bill of rights for women, the convention aims to eliminate gender discrimination and promote equality "in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."
- In 2000, the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution on "[Women, Peace & Security](#)" that affirms the rights of women in conflict zones and in war.

Globally, women have united to ensure women's human rights are not abused. (© AP Images) 

The U.N. and Beijing agreements carry ethical and political weight. Activists and officials cite them to raise awareness about gender-based discrimination, inequality, and violence, to justify new policies and laws, and to fight for women's rights in both the public and private spheres.

Some governments distinguish between "public" and "private" spheres of life, and argue that government may not intervene in the latter. The result can be that domestic discrimination and violence against women and girls remains hidden, or that perpetrators are not punished for their actions.

Women in Rosario, Argentina, conduct a "safety audit" to identify dangerous areas as part of  Women in Cities International outreach. (Courtesy of U.N. Women)

Tabassum Adnan and Rosa Julieta Montaña Salvatierra are among [women of courage](#) taking stands against gender-based violence. [Women in Cities International](#) partners with local governments and

NGOs around the world to make cities safer for women through research, education, and improvements to infrastructure.

Have you joined #16days yet? Learn more at yali.state.gov/16days and [pledge](#) today to help end Gender-Based Violence.

[When she's a victim, it hurts everyone](#)

A 13-year-old former sex worker peers out the window of a school in Sierra Leone. (UNICEF) 

One woman in three has faced gender-based violence. It's a [global epidemic](#), but you can help stop it.

For starters, help raise awareness during this year's "[16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence](#)" (#16days) campaign. It starts November 25 and continues through December 10.

You can also let others know that when women and girls are allowed to participate fully and equally in society, everyone benefits.

Investing in girls' education is "the highest-return investment"

(USAID/Bobby Neptune) 

There's a lot of evidence for this:

- Economist Lawrence Summers says that "investment in girls' education may well be the [highest-return investment](#) available in the developing world."
- Entrepreneur Daniel Epstein says that in emerging markets, educated girls [reinvest 90 percent](#) of their incomes in the futures of their families, compared with 35 percent for educated boys.
- An education not only allows a girl the opportunity to have a greater economic impact, but also can improve her [family's health](#) due to fewer maternal and infant deaths, lower rates of HIV and AIDS and better child nutrition. When girls are educated, [communities are better equipped](#) to cope with adversity, withstand crises, and make investments in the future.

First lady Michelle Obama has taken up the cause. Her [Let Girls Learn](#) initiative supports hundreds of community projects to keep girls in school.

Empowered rural women can feed the world

(Pecold/Shutterstock) 

Many women in developing countries work in agriculture, but they have [less access than men](#) to land, training, and new technologies and thus are usually less productive. In a [2015 report](#), the U.N. said closing the gender gap in agricultural productivity could potentially lift as many as 238,000 people out of poverty in Malawi, 80,000 people in Tanzania, and 119,000 people in Uganda.

You can help spread awareness of how empowering women and girls ultimately helps everyone. Join the YALI Network's #16days campaign. Learn more at yali.state.gov/16days and [pledge](#) today to help end gender-based violence in your community.

[Join #16days Against Gender-Based Violence](#)

This 11-year-old girl from the Democratic Republic of the  Congo was raped by a family friend, and her suffering continued at school, where she faced social stigma, isolation, and teasing. (USAID)

At least [one in three](#) women and girls will be subject to violence or abuse during her lifetime. If that isn't outrageous enough, then also consider:

- One in five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime.
- An estimated [133 million](#) [PDF] girls and women today live with the consequences of genital mutilation.
- Almost one-third of women who have been in a relationship say they have experienced some kind of physical and/or sexual abuse [by their partner](#), and 38 percent of murders of women have been committed by a current or former partner.

These grim statistics are why the United Nations, in partnership with the Rutgers University-based Center for Women's Global Leadership, calls upon you to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25 and to take part in the accompanying 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence.

From November 25 through December 10, which marks International Human Rights Day, activists all over the world will raise awareness that gender-based violence not only violates girls' and women's human rights, but also robs their societies of women's and girls' talents and knowledge.

For 2016, the global theme for the 16 Days Campaign is "From Peace in the Home to Peace in the World: Make Education Safe for All." That means creating safe spaces for all children to realize their universal rights to education, strengthening laws to protect them, or training teachers to give them the support they need to thrive.

Actor Patrick Stewart, who as a boy witnessed his mother's victimization, said violence against women is learned. "Each of us must examine — and change — the ways in which our own behavior might contribute to, enable, ignore or excuse all such forms of violence," he said. "I promise to do so and to invite other men and allies to do the same."

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Domestic abuse might seem personal. But it harms the whole community

A domestic violence victim takes refuge at a California safe house. 

(© AP Images)

Women who face beatings or other forms of domestic violence typically have only three choices: They can fight back, and likely face a worse beating; they can submit; or they can leave — if there's someone they can turn to and somewhere they can go.

Helping such women is Rose Thelen's cause. She's fought [domestic violence](#) for more than three decades and heads the Gender Violence Institute in Minnesota. There she advocates for laws that empower victims to seek justice and for useful services, such as telephone hotlines that allow victims to report abuse.

Women are "overwhelmingly the victims" of battering or domestic violence, Thelen says. The violence "is usually ongoing and can lead to serious injury and death." But she said additional victims can include children, the health care system, the criminal justice system, businesses, families, friends, and society.

And violence is not the only cost. Add in greater health care and legal expenses. And lost productivity. And, most fundamentally, every contribution that battered women could have made to the moral, social and political fabric of their nations.

Shelters and telephone hotlines are important first steps. Hotlines, Thelen says, link women to the help they need and, by providing information about the scope of the problem, help advocates argue for additional steps to address the violence.

Protect the victim. But also deter the abuser.

Providing a victim with refuge and services to rebuild her life is only half of the solution, Thelen says. The abuser must be deterred.

Because most abusers employ violence to assert power and control over their victims, the

community response must deprive the abuser of those perceived “benefits.” Thelen recommends laws that do these things:

- Make domestic violence a crime.
- Allow courts to forbid abusers from even approaching their victims.
- Consider, in divorce and child-custody cases, the impact that past abuse has on the child as well as the adult victim.

Thelen similarly calls on [police](#) and the courts to improve how they assess, investigate and prosecute domestic-abuse cases.

The goal: Shift responsibility for ending the violence from the victim, who is least able to stop it, to police, courts, and the community itself.

Thelen concludes that men must be part of the solution: “I think we will see rapid societal changes as more men ... say it is no longer okay to abuse the woman you love.”

Have you joined the YALI Network’s #16days campaign? Learn more at yali.state.gov/16days and [pledge](#) today to help end gender-based violence in your community.

[She grew up with domestic violence. Today it shapes her police work](#)

(Shutterstock)



Here is a horrifying statistic: At least [1 in 3](#) women and girls will be subject to violence or abuse during their lifetimes.

According to the United Nations, [less than 40 percent](#) of these victims will seek help. Those who do usually reach out to friends or family. Only rarely — less than 10 percent of the time — do victims reach out to the people who can best help them end the abuse and find the resources they need to move on: the police.

Las Vegas policewoman Cindy Rodriguez is well aware of this. Actually, she knows it firsthand.

Growing up, Rodriguez witnessed her mother’s abuse at the hands of her father. “I saw how violence could occur in a household since I was very small,” she said. To prevent her mother from leaving, her father threatened the life of a loved one. Her mother eventually left the marriage, but endured years of financial hardship, aided only by the fact that her daughter was old enough to take care of her younger brothers.

As a law enforcement officer, “it was really important for me to have that experience myself,”

Rodriguez said. Because she understands why victims stay with their abusers, she is better prepared to respond to domestic violence calls.

She said in a typical scenario the abuser, usually male, gets caught or for some other reason pledges to end the violent attacks. After a brief “honeymoon phase” the violence resumes almost without warning, triggered by anything from a casual remark to a burned dinner. But the victims often stay.

“He woos her. She obviously loves him. There may be financial difficulties. Maybe she doesn’t work. Or there are children involved,” she said. There are already clear consequences to ending the partnership, “and now you bring the abuse aspect into it and it just complicates things even more,” Rodriguez said.

To help mitigate this, Rodriguez said, the same officers will routinely patrol the same areas — whether in a rural region where most people know each other, or a defined city precinct — and regularly interact with that community. When a call comes from a neighbor, or from someone within the household, the officer knows immediately if the complaint comes from a location that the police had already visited. The officer is able to spot abusive patterns and offer appropriate assistance. She also said police are using social media to circulate public-service announcements, including telling victims how to get help.

Help spread the word that domestic violence is a crime and give victims a voice. Join the YALI Network’s #16days campaign. Learn more at yali.state.gov/16days and [pledge](#) today to help end gender-based violence in your community.

[To combat gender violence, women have a natural ally: men](#)

Most men agree that gender-based violence is wrong. But many also mistakenly think it is rare.

In fact, most men “probably know and love women who have been victimized, and men who have perpetrated,” said Rus Funk, Coordinator of Male Engagement at [The Center for Women and Families](#).

Funk and Ben Atherton-Zeman, a spokesman for the National Organization for Men Against Sexism, have traveled extensively to get men to question male and female stereotypes and urge them to take a stand against abuse wherever they find it.

Understanding gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) can harm men or women, but women are most often victims. “[It] cannot exist without a culture that favors my gender, my race, heterosexuals, etc.,” Atherton-Zeman said. “If we work to end the pressure to ‘be a man’ or ‘act like a lady’ in certain rigid ways,” he said, “then we will see a day when gender-based violence is a thing of the past.” He notes that younger

people increasingly reject the male and female stereotypes that can underpin gender-based violence.

He himself has learned a lot by listening to women. “What I hear them say is: a) GBV cuts across all races, cultures, sexual orientations, genders, etc.; b) most GBV is perpetrated by men; and c) not enough men are speaking out against it.”

Funk teaches men to recognize that they may regularly receive messages that conflict with each other. First, their cultures may tolerate or even encourage male dominance. At the same time, their cultures expect men to value women and girls. He holds workshops in which he challenges men to realize that dominant behavior can and does get in the way of a man’s being a “good and healthy dating partner.”

Participants in the workshops come up with ways that men can create social environments that encourage a man to be the kind of person someone would want to date and put being that person ahead of any code of dominant behavior.

Atherton-Zeman uses humor to get the message through. His 36-minute play “Voices of Men” includes celebrity impressions such as [James Bond and Austin Powers](#) to help men realize their own role in perpetuating violence or abuse.

“The humor helps to reduce audience defensiveness and victim-blaming — they are so busy laughing, they learn things without even realizing it,” he said.

Approximately one in three women will experience physical or sexual violence at some point in her life. Learn about what you can do in your own community at yali.state.gov/16days.
