

# Spotlight



There is a role for leadership and legislators to make violence against women illegal, and to punish offenders.

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Former executive director of UN Women

**VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

# The danger of saying 'NO'

Civil society organizations, governments must do more to raise awareness and prevent violence against women, experts say

Rawan Radwan Jeddah

Last week, Nayera Ashraf, a student at Mansoura University in Egypt, was beaten and stabbed in broad daylight as bystanders looked on in horror. She died later that day. The attacker was restrained and arrested. His motive for such a dreadful crime? The refusal of a marriage proposal.

Alexis Gabe, 24, went missing in January this year. It is thought that she was murdered by an ex-boyfriend in Antioch, California. In June, Vanessa Virgioni, 29, was murdered in her home in Brampton, Canada. In October 2018, 46-year-old Gayle Potter died after she was hit by a car in the driveway of her home in Traralgon, Victoria, Australia. Iman Ersheid, 18, was gunned down this month on a university campus in Amman, Jordan.

Such stories of attacks on women by former partners or men they have rejected are too common for comfort. A disappearance in Breitung, Germany; a stabbing in Delhi, India; another in Sharjah in the UAE; a shooting in the US state of Oklahoma; a death by drowning in Townsville, Australia. In some cases, the victims are discovered immediately, in others it can take years. The remains of some are never found.

It is difficult to determine precisely how many women are attacked because they rejected the advances of a man. The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as UN Women, categorizes such killings as "femicide," a term used to describe the murder of women, usually by men. A common denominator in many cases is that the woman was the object of unrequited affection from a partner, former partner, or a man whose advances were rebuffed.

The Arab world was rocked by reports of three murders of women in this past week alone. Ashraf's killer claimed that his victim "used me to achieve things and when she did, she dumped me."

During a court hearing, he told prosecutors: "I also wanted to kill her, if I had the chance" because she had refused his romantic advances and rejected a marriage proposal.

In Jordan, authorities tracked down Ersheid's killer to a town north of Zarqa. As they urged him to surrender,



Nursing student Iman Ersheid, 18, was shot to death in Jordan. Reuters



Nayera Ashraf, a 21-year-old arts student, was stabbed to death in Egypt. Reuters



he fatally shot himself. The case in Sharjah involved a husband who stabbed his wife 16 times over a dispute. CCTV footage from a parking lot at the woman's residence showed the killer attacking the woman in her car. He was later found on a beach and arrested.

But such cases are hardly unique to countries such as Egypt, Jordan or the UAE, or to the wider Middle East. Yet some media outlets, such as Monte Carlo Doualiya, formerly known as RMC Moyen-Orient, a French public radio service, have wrongly described them as a uniquely "Arab problem."

Ibrahim Al-Zibin, a professor of sociology at Imam Mohammed ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, told Arab News that it is a global problem that is not specific to any single region or society. Studies have shown gender-based crimes, especially those against women, are more common in conservative and lower-income communities, he added.

"Violence against women disproportionately affects low and lower-middle-income countries and regions," he said. "That's not to say that violence doesn't occur in other social classes but financially burdened individuals are most likely to be driven towards violence of any kind, and there's an associated mental health issue when it comes to committing a murder."

In what UN Women describes as the "shadow pandemic," studies have shown that rates of violence against women have increased in recent decades, and that there was a significant rise in cases of domestic violence following the start of COVID-19 pandemic.

UN Women reports that an estimated 736 million women worldwide, which is 30 percent of all women age 15 or older, have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, sexual violence by a non-partner, or both, at least once in their lives.

Many cases of gender-based violence go unreported, with less than 40 percent of women reporting such crimes or seeking help of any sort, UN Women said in 2021. Assaults and murders considered "crimes of passion," or as a result of rejection, often make the news as a result of initial citizen reports on social media that attract the attention of authorities.

Social media offers unprecedented opportunities to raise awareness about violence against women and girls, which in many instances historically has gone unpunished. However, advances in technology have made online reporting more accessible to the average person.

Calculating exact figures for crimes of femicide can be challenging and so accurate counts or reliable estimates for the global prevalence of its various forms are difficult to come by. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that 47,000 women and girls worldwide were killed by an intimate partner or family member in 2020.

But attempts to understand the psyche and motives of the men who carry out such crimes raise a number of questions. Are those who kill women just "ordinary people" who suddenly and unexpectedly fly into



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murderous rages, or are the killings premeditated and planned?

"There is an underlying cause that drives one to premeditated murder; it's not spontaneous," said Al-Zibin. Each murder has unique characteristics, he added; in many instances, killers believe they have found the right circumstances to act but, in reality, a mental illness might be driving their actions.

"Violence does not always, or immediately, lead a woman to her death but the consequences of these acts are equally debilitating; the physical, psychological and social effects of violence vary and most murderers will find a way to use that to their advantage," he added.

"Triggers vary in nature. In some cases they are non-existent but to a criminal, it's real. The threat of violence manifests itself in various ways in women's lives. Retribution for rejection is a common enough threat."

Social taboos and shame can lead women to tolerate and even accept as unavoidable aggression by a male, a situation Al-Zibin said can be a recipe for disaster, and so greater social awareness of the issue is needed to change attitudes.

"Women get used to the idea that they have to prepare themselves, that they have to respond 'appropriately' to men's advances," he said. "But in truth, women need to be more aware of a man's aggressive behavior — no matter the relationship — and protect themselves through reporting it to a family member or law enforcement, which is the best option. It's one way of fixing the problem."

"There's no shame in a woman falling victim to an abusive partner, a drug user, a stalker or someone who holds a grudge against her. It's not something to be ashamed of; the taboo needs to be ignored.

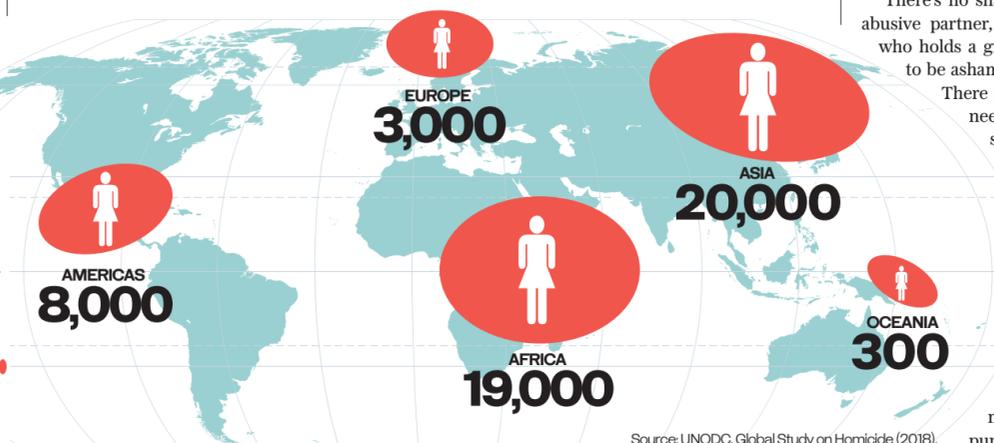
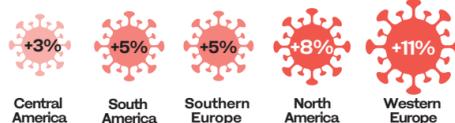
There are laws to protect women but more needs to be done to fix this global issue, starting with local governments and authorities."

Al-Zibin believes that if a woman attempts to deal with a man's aggressive behavior on her own by defending herself, it can lead to an escalation in the harassment, which might ultimately lead to murder. No matter how strong or confident she might be, Al-Zibin said, the actions of a woman who tries to protect herself can be misinterpreted by the individual who is pursuing her and fuel their spite or hate.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ON THE RISE

A woman or girl is killed by someone in her family every 11 minutes.

Female homicides by partners or family members increased from 2019-2020.



Source: UNODC, Global Study on Homicide (2018).