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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Punished for Being Female

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Bride burnings, honor killings, female infanticide, sex trafficking, mass rape as a weapon of war and many other hideous forms of violence against women are documented in a report released last month by the United Nations.

The report, a compilation of many studies from around the world, should have been seen as the latest dispatch from that permanent world war — the war against women all over the planet. Instead, the news media greeted its shocking contents with a collective yawn.

The war analogy is not an overstatement. In many parts of the world, men beat, torture, rape and kill women with impunity. In Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican city on the Texas border, 300 to 400 women have been murdered over the past several years. Many were raped and mutilated. The widespread belief that punishment for these crimes was unlikely was a “key factor” in their occurrence, the report said.

Each year thousands of wives in India are murdered and maimed — many of them doused with kerosene and set ablaze — by husbands dissatisfied by the size of their dowries or angry about their wives’ behavior. In Ethiopia, the abduction and rape of young girls is a commonplace way to obtain a bride. In many instances the parents agree to the marriage, believing that the raped child is no longer fit to marry anyone else.

In Pakistan, a woman cannot legally prove that she was raped unless four “virtuous” Muslim men testify that they witnessed the attack. Without those four witnesses, the woman herself is vulnerable to prosecution for fornication or adultery.

While it's undoubtedly true that men maim and kill other men in astonishing numbers, what I'm talking about here is the way that women, by the millions, are systematically targeted for attack because they are women.

In some cases the sexual violence comes in vast, sickening waves. Just think, for example, of Darfur, Congo, Sudan and the former Yugoslavia. As the report noted, "The incidence of violence against women in armed conflict, particularly sexual violence, including rape, has been increasingly acknowledged and documented."

More than 130 million girls and women are living with the consequences of genital mutilation, and many others have died from this barbaric practice. Jessica Neuwirth, the president of Equality Now, an international women's rights organization, said, "Everyone who's been cut knows someone who died from the cutting. They die from bleeding, or later from infection, or sometime later in life they have enormous health problems."

The litany of serious abuses against women and girls can seem endless: child marriages, forced marriages, kidnapping and forced prostitution, sex slavery. According to the U.N. report, "A study in India estimated that prenatal sex selection and infanticide have accounted for half a million missing girls per year for the past two decades."

The most common form of serious abuse against women and girls around the globe is violence by intimate partners. Huge percentages of female murder victims, even in such developed countries as Australia, Canada, Israel and the United States, are killed by current or former husbands or boyfriends.

A study of young, female murder victims in the U.S. found that homicide was the second leading cause of death for girls 15 to 18, and that 78 percent of all the homicide victims in the study had been killed by an acquaintance or intimate partner.

The U.N. report tells us what we should already have concluded: that this pervasive violence against women, "whether perpetrated by the state and its agents, or by family members or strangers, in the public or

private sphere, in peacetime or in times of conflict,” is unacceptable.

Not only are we not doing enough to counter this wholesale destruction of the lives of so many women and girls, we’re not even paying close attention. There are women’s movements in even the smallest countries fighting against the violence and other forms of abuse. But they are underfunded and get very little support from those in a position to help. (Even in Afghanistan under the Taliban there were women who ran underground schools, and girls who risked their lives to go to them.)

There was a time when activists cried out for our consciousness to be raised. It’s not too late. We can start by recognizing that the systematic subordination and brutalization of women and girls around the world is, in fact, occurring — and that we need to do something about it.

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