



## Policy Brief

### **The Family as a Protective Factor for Violence against Women**

The topic of “*violence against women and girls*” and the responsibility of Member States in that regard has long been at the forefront of discussions at the UN. As a result, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 12, encourages states to adopt legislation and other measures to eliminate violence against women.<sup>1</sup> And, the UN Sustainable Development Goals address violence specifically in SDG Target 5.2, calling upon governments to “eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.”

Yet, a closer look at this grave subject shows that, despite all the discussion and the appearance of placing an emphasis on the protection of women and girls, two important factors at the root of this issue are rarely affirmed.

First, if violence against women and girls is to be curbed, the family must be regarded and strengthened, as one of the most important protective factors for women and children is to be living within a stable, married, mother/father family. In addition to considering the family as a protective factor, pornography must be recognized and addressed as a key driver and cause of violence.

#### *The Family as a Protective Factor*

An important measure any State can take that would protect women and girls is to promote strong and healthy family life. Decades of research demonstrate that women who are married and girls who live with their married parents are less likely to experience domestic violence, other crime and child abuse. Unfortunately, a narrative often advanced in UN negotiations is the claim that marriages and families are a main source of violence against women and children and that a married woman may be more at risk for violence than a single woman. This narrative, though oft repeated, is completely unfounded. While certainly some women and children are abused in a married family setting, overwhelmingly the data show that, over all, marriage and family are significant protective factors in preventing violence against women and girls.

The term “domestic violence” is not a good term to use if we want to determine where the most abuse is occurring. Instead, “cohabitating violence” is a better descriptor. That is because it is among non-married cohabitating couples (i.e., mom living with her boyfriend), not among married couples, where the majority of “*violence against women*” occurs worldwide.

Decades of research demonstrate that women who are married and girls who live with their married parents are not only less likely to experience domestic violence, but they are not as likely to be victims of other crime and child abuse as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 12: Violence Against Women, Retrieved from: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1\\_Global/INT\\_CEDAW\\_GEC\\_5831\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CEDAW_GEC_5831_E.pdf).

## Domestic Violence

As a group of family scholars has noted, compared to marriage, cohabitation is associated with higher rates of violence, including fatal violence, by partners.<sup>2</sup> They point to another study that found cohabiting couples were three times more likely to report violent arguments than married couples.<sup>3</sup> Another study of 5,159 couples concluded that “cohabitators were more likely to engage in future violent relationships than spouses.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, scholars noted that “cohabitation is a risk factor for intimate partner violence” even after controlling for “sociodemographic characteristics, relationship commitment, quality, and constraints as well as prior experience with violence.” This is particularly true for those who had cohabited with a number of partners.<sup>5</sup> This basic discrepancy has been confirmed in many other studies.<sup>6</sup>

Women seem to be at increased risk. One large study found: “Among women, cohabitators report significantly higher levels of relationship violence than either marrieds or daters.”<sup>7</sup> The *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence* notes “women in cohabiting relationships are at a higher risk of violent victimization by their partners.”<sup>8</sup> An early Canadian study found that women in cohabiting relationships were more likely to be killed by their partners than were married women by their spouses.<sup>9</sup> A later study “found that women in cohabiting relationships were nine times more likely to be killed by their partners than were women who were in marital relationships.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wilcox, W. Bradford. (2011). *Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences*. New York, NY: Institute for American Values. Retrieved from: <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/64484987/files/uploaded/Why-Marriage-Matters-Third-Edition-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Waite, Linda, Gallagher, Maggie. (2000) *The Case for Marriage*.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, Nicky Ali. (1996) “Observational Experiences of Intrapersonal Conflict and Teenage Victimization: A Comparative Study among Spouses and Cohabitators” 11 *Journal of Family Violence* 191. Retrieved from: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF02336940>.

<sup>5</sup> Manning, Wendy D., Longmore, Monica A., Giordano, Peggy C. Giordano. (2018) “Cohabitation and Intimate Partner Violence During Emerging Adulthood: High Constraints and Low Commitment” 39 *Journal of Family Issues* 1030. Retrieved from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0192513X16686132>.

<sup>6</sup> J. E. Straus and M. A. Stets, “The Marriage License as Hitting License: A Comparison of Assaults in Dating, Cohabiting and Married Couples,” 4 *Journal of Family Violence* 161 (1989), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF01006627>; Catherine T. Kenney & Sara S. McLanahan, “Why Are Cohabiting Relationships More Violent Than Marriages?” 43 *Demography* 127 (2006), [https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137235?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137235?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents); Jan E. Stets, “Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation” 53 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 669 (1991), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/352742.pdf>; Galena K. Rhoades, et al., “Physical Aggression in Unmarried Relationships: The Roles of Commitment and Constraints” 24 *Journal of Family Psychology* 678 (2010), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3058822/>; Scott Stanley, “Aggression in Twentysomethings’ Cohabiting, Dating, and Marriage Relationships” *Family Studies* (January 18, 2017), <https://ifstudies.org/blog/aggression-in-twentysomethings-cohabiting-dating-and-marriage-relationships>.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Susan L. Brown, Bulanda, Jennifer Roebuck Bulanda. (2008) “Relationship Violence in Young Adulthood: A Comparison of Daters, Cohabitators, and Marrieds” 37 *Social Science Research* 73. Retrieved from: <http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/center-for-family-and-demographic-research/documents/working-papers/2006/CFDR-Working-Paper-2006-06-Relationship-Violence-in-Young-Adulthood-A-Comparison-of-Daters-Cohabitators-and-Marrieds.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Pirog, Maureen, Vargas, Edward D.; Jackson, Nicky Ali, ed. (2007) “Cohabiting Violence,” in *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence*. New York, NY: Routledge. Retrieved from: <http://edwardvargas.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Encyclopedia-of-Domestic-Violence-1.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, Margo I, Daly, Martin. (1992) “Who Kills Whom in Spouse Killings? On the Exceptional Sex Ratio of Spousal Homicides in the United States” 30 *Criminology* 189. Retrieved from: [https://www.martindaly.ca/uploads/2/3/7/0/23707972/wilson\\_\\_daly\\_1992\\_srok.pdf](https://www.martindaly.ca/uploads/2/3/7/0/23707972/wilson__daly_1992_srok.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Pirog, Maureen, Vargas, Edward D.; Jackson, Nicky Ali, ed. (2007) “Cohabiting Violence,” in *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence*. New York, NY: Routledge. (Citing Todd K. Shackelford, “Cohabitation, Marriage and

As two prominent academics summarized: “Married women are notably safer than their unmarried peers.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Other Crime*

Though not as extensively studied, there is strong evidence that marriage and married-families are associated with decreased victimization from other crimes. In *Why Marriage Matters*, family scholars explain:

Overall, single and divorced women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crime in any given year than are married women. Single and divorced women are almost ten times more likely than are wives to be raped, and about three times more likely to be the victims of aggravated assault. For instance, the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that the violent victimization rate was 17 per 1000 married women compared to more than 60 per 1000 single and divorced women in 1992–1993.<sup>12</sup>

Dr. W. Bradford Wilcox and Professor Robin Fretwell Wilson again summarize: “The bottom line is that married women are less likely to be raped, assaulted, or robbed than their unmarried peers.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Child Abuse*

Professors Wilcox and Wilson provide a pithy summary of the evidence of child abuse by married fathers, saying: “girls raised in a home with their married father are markedly less likely to be abused or assaulted than children living without their own father.”<sup>14</sup>

A report to Congress laid out evidence that children in homes without married fathers are at increased risk of abuse.<sup>15</sup> Children living with two biological parents were significantly less likely to experience various

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Murder” 27 *Aggressive Behavior* 284 (2001)). Retrieved from: <http://edwardvargas.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Encyclopedia-of-Domestic-Violence-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Wilcox, W. Bradford, Wilson, Fretwell. (2014, June 10). One Way to End Violence Against Women? Married Dads. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/10/the-best-way-to-end-violence-against-women-stop-taking-lovers-and-get-married/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.45f442b890c7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/10/the-best-way-to-end-violence-against-women-stop-taking-lovers-and-get-married/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.45f442b890c7).

<sup>12</sup> Wilcox, W. Bradford, et al., *Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences* 40 (2011), <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/64484987/files/uploaded/Why-Marriage-Matters-Third-Edition-FINAL.pdf> (summarizing data from Ronet Bachman, “Violence Against Women,” A National Crime Victimization Survey Report, NCK-145325, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics (1995), tables 2 and 3, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/145325NCJRS.pdf>).

<sup>13</sup> Wilcox, W. Bradford, Wilson, Fretwell. (2014, June 10). One Way to End Violence Against Women? Married Dads. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/10/the-best-way-to-end-violence-against-women-stop-taking-lovers-and-get-married/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.45f442b890c7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/10/the-best-way-to-end-violence-against-women-stop-taking-lovers-and-get-married/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.45f442b890c7).

<sup>14</sup> Wilcox, W. Bradford, Wilson, Fretwell. (2014, June 10). One Way to End Violence Against Women? Married Dads. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/10/the-best-way-to-end-violence-against-women-stop-taking-lovers-and-get-married/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.45f442b890c7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/10/the-best-way-to-end-violence-against-women-stop-taking-lovers-and-get-married/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.45f442b890c7).

<sup>15</sup> Sedlak, Andrea J., et al., (2010) *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families 2010) at 5-32, [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4\\_report\\_congress\\_full\\_pdf\\_jan2010.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf).

kinds of maltreatment than children living in other family structures as illustrated by the figure from the report shown below.

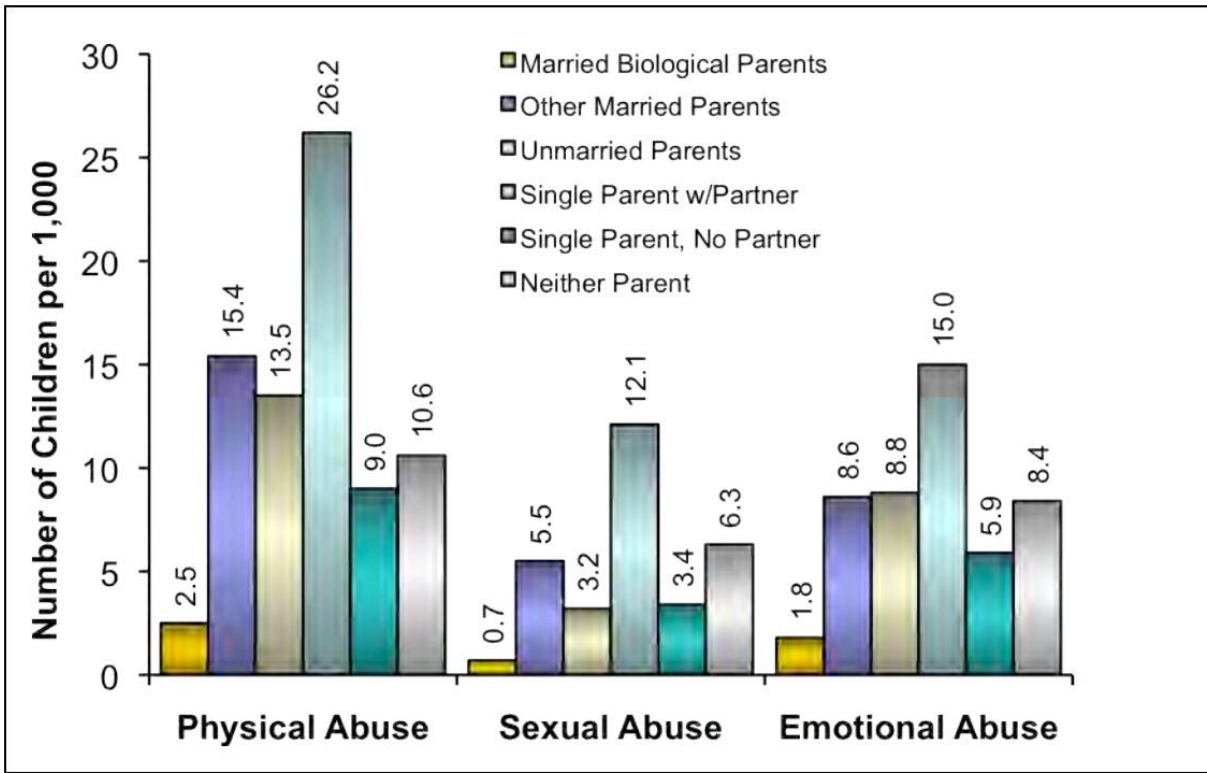


Figure 5–10. Incidence of Endangerment Standard Abuse by Family Structure and Living Arrangement.

Another large U.S. survey made a similar finding specific to sexual abuse and pointed out that “girls showed markedly higher risk under all family circumstances except that of living with two natural parents.”<sup>16</sup> Research on child deaths caused by maltreatment focused on one U.S. state. It found that only 6.5% of perpetrators were biological parents of the child.<sup>17</sup>

British data is similar. It shows, “that rates of serious abuse of children are lowest in the intact married family but six times higher in the step family, 14 times higher in the always-single-mother family, 20 times higher in cohabiting-biological parent families, and 33 times higher when the mother is cohabiting with a boyfriend who is not the father of her children.”<sup>18</sup> Fatal abuse “is lowest in intact always-married families, three times higher in the step family, nine times higher in the always-single-mother family, 18 times higher in the cohabiting-biological parents family, and 73 times higher in families where the mother

<sup>16</sup> Finkelhor, David et al., (1990) “Sexual Abuse in a National Survey of Adult Men and Women: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Risk Factors” 14 *Child Abuse & Neglect* 19, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Schnitzer, Patricia G., Ewigman, Bernard G. (November 2005) “Child Deaths Resulting From Inflicted Injuries: Household Risk Factors and Perpetrator Characteristics” 116 *Pediatrics* e687. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/116/5/e687.full.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Robert E. Rector, Patrick F. Fagan & Kirk A. Johnson, “Marriage: Still the Safest Place For Women and Children” *Heritage Foundation* (March 9, 2004), <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/marriage-still-the-safest-place-women-and-children#pgfid-1075836>.

cohabits with a boyfriend.”<sup>19</sup> Another study found, “although mothers' boyfriends perform relatively little child care, they are responsible for substantially more child abuse than other nonparental caregivers.”<sup>20</sup>

One analysis focused specifically on risks to girls and found the “presence of a stepfather in the home doubles the risk for girls, not only for being abused by the stepfather but also for being abused by other men prior to the arrival of the stepfather in the home.”<sup>21</sup> Another analysis noted, “a significant body of research indicates that the presence of a step-father or mother’s boyfriend greatly increases the risk of sexual molestation for young girls.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to measures and legislation that would strengthen the family as the key protective factor against violence toward women and girls, a key driver—pornography—must also be addressed.

### *Pornography*

Pornography is a leading and rapidly growing cause of marital and family breakdown and also a root cause of violence and sexual crimes against women and children. Pornography contributes to prostitution and trafficking in persons. In addition, the use of pornography is associated with numerous negative emotional, psychological, and physical health outcomes for individuals, families and societies. The CEDAW Committee has recognized that pornography that exploits women by depicting them as sex objects contributes to gender-based violence.<sup>23</sup>

Since as long ago as 1995, up until as recently as 2016, studies have emerged showing how pornography viewing is a major driver of violence against women and girls. If we want to protect women and girls from violence, we must eliminate of pornography from our societies, or at a minimum, enact stricter regulations on pornography distribution. The following research finding show a strong connection between pornography viewing and violence as follows:

- Men who were exposed to film depictions of sexual violence were more accepting of sexual violence and more attracted to it and less sympathetic to victims.<sup>24</sup>
- Meta-analysis showed pornography use was correlated with attitudes of support for violence against women, particularly if the pornography itself was violent.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> Margolin, Leslie. (July 1992). “Child Abuse by Mothers’ Boyfriends: Why the Overrepresentation?” 16 *Child Abuse & Neglect* 541.

<sup>21</sup> Putman, Frank W. (March 2003) “Ten-Year Research Update Review: Child Sexual Abuse” 42 *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 269, 271. Retrieved from: [https://www2.umc.edu/uploadedfiles/umcedu/content/administration/health\\_equities/childrens\\_justice\\_center/putnamupdatecsa.pdf](https://www2.umc.edu/uploadedfiles/umcedu/content/administration/health_equities/childrens_justice_center/putnamupdatecsa.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, Robin Fretwell. (2010) “Trusting Mothers: A Critique of the American Law Institute’s Treatment of De Facto Parents” 38 *Hofstra Law Review* 1103, 1123.

[https://law.hofstra.edu/pdf/academics/journals/lawreview/lrv\\_issues\\_v38n04\\_cc3\\_wilson\\_final.pdf](https://law.hofstra.edu/pdf/academics/journals/lawreview/lrv_issues_v38n04_cc3_wilson_final.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> CEDAW Committee. General Recommendation No. 19 (11th session, 1992). Violence Against Women. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Monica G. Weisz & Christopher M. Earls, “The Effects of Exposure to Filmed Sexual Violence on Attitudes Toward Rape” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 10(1) (1995).

<sup>25</sup> Gert Martin Hald, Neil M. Malamuth & Carlin Yuen, “Pornography and attitudes supporting violence against women: revisiting the relationship in nonexperimental studies” *Aggressive Behavior* 36(1):14-20 (January/February 2010).

- A review of 22 studies from 7 countries showed consumption of pornography was associated with verbal and physical sexual aggression.<sup>26</sup>
- Study of college-age men found strong association between use of almost all forms of pornography and “rape and rape proclivity.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Based on the overwhelming body of evidence, in order to eliminate violence against women and girls, we must address two key—yet often overlooked factors—one causative (pornography) and one protective (marriage).

Attempts by international and national institutions including the United Nations to eliminate violence have largely ignored the evidence showing that pornography is a causative factor with multiple studies confirming the “consistent significant association between pornography” and “attitudes supporting violence against women and actual aggressive behavior.”<sup>28</sup>

International bodies, as well as nongovernmental organizations, should address, legislate against and otherwise restrict pornography the distribution and access to pornography, recognizing pornography as a key driver of violence against women and children.

And, most importantly, Member States must recognize and promote the family as a protective factor for violence against women. For as scholar and professor David Forte has stated, “We know from undeniable social facts that strong families are the best environment in which women can live safely, thrive, and, with their husbands, raise children who understand how to respect others and how to handle interpersonal difficulties.”<sup>29</sup>

This proposed double-pronged approach of addressing both pornography as a key cause of violence, while supporting and strengthening the family as a main protector against violence, is imperative as it is the only truly effective and long-term approach that will help us reach SDG Target 5.2 eliminate violence against women and girls, calling upon governments to “eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.”

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<sup>26</sup> Paul J. Wright, Robert S. Tokunaga & Ashley Kraus “A Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies” *Journal of Communication* 66(1):183-205 (February 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Scot B. Boeringer, “Pornography and sexual aggression: Associations of violent and nonviolent depictions with rape and rape proclivity” *Deviant Behavior* 15(3):289-304 (1994)

<sup>28</sup> Hald, Gert Martin, Malamuth, Neil M., Yuen, Carlin. (2010) “Pornography and Attitudes Supporting Violence Against Women: Revisiting the Relationship in Nonexperimental Studies,” *Aggressive Behavior* 36:14-20. Accessed at: [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/ab.20328?purchase\\_referrer=www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov&tracking\\_action=preview\\_click&r3\\_referrer=wol&show\\_checkout=1](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/ab.20328?purchase_referrer=www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov&tracking_action=preview_click&r3_referrer=wol&show_checkout=1)

<sup>29</sup> Forte, David F. *Convention on the Rights of the Family Commentary*, <https://ordoiuris.pl/pliki/dokumenty/Convention%20on%20the%20Rights%20of%20the%20Family,%20Commentary.pdf>.