

# The Economy of Safety: The Importance of Financial Freedom for Women

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*This post is part of an ongoing series on the intersection of law and how it interacts with violence against women, illuminating how it is equally critical to make effective implementation of law, as well as the legislation itself, a priority.*

Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is largely thought of as occurring in private, within the home. However, violence perpetrated by men against women occurs in the public sphere more often than one might think. Physical intimate partner violence is only one element in a larger framework that subordinates women. Societies all over the world use the law to maintain social norms that define the role of women and limit their independence. Remarkably, it is exactly these legal restrictions that hinder countries' economic prosperity and development.

The World Bank Group recently released a Report examining the laws of 173 of 196 countries in the world. In focusing on seven indicators of economic opportunity – accessing institutions, using property, getting a job, providing incentives to work, going to court, building credit and protecting women from violence – the report finds that 90 percent of countries reviewed have at least one law impeding women's economic opportunities. The report noted the direct correlation between a woman's economic empowerment and being protected from violence.

The World Bank report confirmed what many domestic violence advocates already know: laws restricting women's economic opportunities leave women and girls much more vulnerable to domestic violence. In some countries laws prevent women from applying for passports on their own, getting a job without permission, traveling outside the country, or even opening a bank account without male approval. For example, in some countries – such as Ghana – loan applicants are required to show that they have assets before a bank will lend to them. Often banks prefer land and buildings as collateral, but where women have little to no ability to own their own property, they have no access to formal credit. A woman who is prevented by her government or by social practices from earning her own income, maintaining her own credit, and owning her own property is less likely to have the financial resources to remove herself and her children from an abusive household.

The importance of economic opportunities and financial freedom for women was recently highlighted by an exposé by BBC Capital about a dynamic and determined woman from Southern India. Despite being uneducated and poor, Shantha developed a women's "self-help" group in rural India. She worked with women in her community to build financial resources through the sale of rice and cow's milk, and worked to gain financing for their business opportunities. The group that Shantha created helped 26 women obtain employment. The exposé details the immediate impact

Shantha had on the women in her village allowing these women to contribute to family income, break free from poverty and establish a degree of independence. The stories of the women impacted by this group are staggering – one woman, whose alcoholic husband set her on fire, was able to build enough resources to leave the abusive situation. Without the group’s help, her very survival would have been uncertain.

Governmentally sanctioned restrictions also reinforce the use of financially abusive behavior by domestic violence perpetrators. The forms of economic abuse can vary greatly. It can include the perpetrator continually calling the victim at her place of employment or showing up unannounced. It can include withholding access to money and transportation so the victim is unable to get to and from work on a regular basis. It can also include intentionally withholding personal necessities such as clothes, shelter, hygiene or medication – all of which can affect a woman’s ability to work. In the United States, between 21-60 percent of victims of domestic violence lose their jobs due to reasons stemming from the abuse.

The effect of gender bias in legislation and domestic and economic violence extend much further than the confines of the household. For instance, in Tanzania, the earnings of women in formal wage work who are exposed to severe partner violence are 60 percent lower than the earnings of women who are not victims of violence. Analogously, a woman’s life expectancy increases in countries where the laws provide protection from domestic violence. In the United States alone, victims of domestic violence lose eight million days of paid work and the cost of domestic violence exceeds \$8.3 billion each year. It should come as no surprise that economies suffer a high financial penalty when half of the world’s population is constrained from participating in them, whether through legal or violence-related restrictions. A recent report by the McKinsey Global Institute concluded that advancing women’s equality would add between \$12 and \$28 trillion in global growth.

Not only does the World Bank Group report highlight the legal barriers that face women who are trying to obtain gainful employment, it also exposes the prevalence of sexual harassment of women in the workplace. Globally, more than seven percent of women have been sexually harassed by someone other than a partner, much of which occurs in the workplace and other public spaces. The global workforce is a competitive place and various positions and industries are more welcoming to women than others. Therefore, a woman, who may have very few options of where she is employed in the first place, may likely be subject to sexual harassment with no legal recourse. At least 41 of the 173 economies examined had no laws on sexual harassment. Women who have experienced sexual harassment are 2.3 times more likely to have an alcohol disorder and 2.6 times more likely to suffer from anxiety or depression.

The cycle of violence against women and girls worldwide is reinforced by the combination of legally mandated economic restrictions and the impunity with which men are allowed to use violence to undermine women’s economic independence. While many countries have exhibited progress by enacting laws prohibiting domestic violence, the World Bank Group report demonstrates a need for additional improvement in removing these economically obstructive laws. Organizations such as Global Rights for Women play an important role in achieving effective legal and system reform to

combat violence against women and girls. Global Rights for Women works with advocates, legal professionals, and service providers around the world to develop and implement strategies for legal reform so that countries effectively respond to cases of violence against women, prioritize victim safety and hold offenders accountable.

*\*This article originally appeared on the Global Rights for Women website on March 29, 2016 and is republished with their permission. Global Rights for Women is a Minnesota-based nonprofit that collaborates with partners around the world to promote women's human rights to equality and freedom from violence through legal reform and systems change. You can learn more at [www.globalrightsforwomen.org](http://www.globalrightsforwomen.org).*

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