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Geneva, March 10 (RHC)-- One in three women worldwide have been subject to sexual or physical violence during their lifetime, according to a new report by the World Health Organization (WHO). The

Geneva-based UN agency released the study on Tuesday, urging governments to prevent violence, improve services for victims, and tackle economic inequalities that often leave women and girls trapped in abusive relationships.

About 31 percent of women aged 15-49 -- or up to 852 million women -- have experienced physical or sexual violence, the WHO said in what it called the largest-ever such study, encompassing national data and surveys from 2000-2018.

Boys should be taught in school about the need for mutual respect in relationships and mutual consent in sex, WHO officials said. "Violence against women is endemic in every country and culture, causing harm to millions of women and their families, and has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic," WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

A husband or intimate partner is the most common perpetrator and a disproportionate number of victims are in the poorest countries, the report said. One in four women are subjected to violence perpetrated by their intimate partners, it said, adding abuse sometimes starts at the "alarming young" age of 15.

True figures are likely far higher because of under-reporting of sexual abuse, a heavily stigmatised crime.

With the start of the coronavirus pandemic a year ago, women's exposure to intimate violence has intensified as people were forced to stay at home with their abuser while access to formal and informal support systems -- friends, extended family, work colleagues -- was removed or disrupted.

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