



Preventing and responding to gender-based violence: technical note

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Published by: Sida, Thematic Support Unit, January 2025 | **Copyright:** Sida

Layout and Print: Ljungbergs tryckeri | **Cover photo:** Sida

Art.No.: Sida62739en | urn:nbn:se:Sida-62739en

This publication can be downloaded from: <http://www.sida.se/publications>

1. INTRODUCTION

This technical note gives an overview of what gender-based violence (GBV) is and how Sida works to prevent and respond to GBV.¹ It includes relevant international commitments and policy frameworks, areas for dialogue with partners, stakeholders and other donors, as well as forms of GBV. GBV is an area of high priority for Swedish development cooperation. Work to prevent and respond to GBV is mainly done within the thematic areas of gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), peace and security and humanitarian assistance. Therefore, this technical note aims to incorporate GBV from these four areas. The main target group for this technical note is staff working for Sida at Sida HQ and Swedish Foreign Missions. The technical note may also be useful for Sida's partners and others who are interested in the intersection between development cooperation, humanitarian assistance and work against GBV.

GBV is one of the most obvious expressions of unequal gender relations in a society. It is a grave violation of human rights with consequences for individuals, families and societies. GBV is both an expression of unequal gender relations, and a means through which these are upheld.² It is both a consequence and a cause of gender inequality: as long as GBV exists it keeps perpetuating gender inequalities.³ GBV has significant costs for individuals, their families and immediate surroundings, as well as for communities, businesses, the development of countries and their possibilities of reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.⁴

All over the world, women, youth and children, in particular girls, are statistically by far the most affected by GBV as victims and survivors⁵, and most perpetrators are men. Estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that globally one in three women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner, or sexual violence by a non-partner, during their lifespan.⁶ National and

regional statistics show that the numbers of women and girls exposed may be even higher when all forms of violence in all arenas of the society, in all groups and in all kinds of relationships are included.^{7,8} Men, boys and non-binary⁹ are also exposed to GBV, but women and girls are most often victims and survivors. In countries with available data, it is estimated that less than 40 per cent of the women who experience violence seek help of any sort, with fewer than 10 per cent of those seeking support reported the violence to the police.¹⁰

Research to end GBV

The South Africa-based, feminist, women-led Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) is one of the world's largest networks advancing research on violence against women, children, and other forms of gender-based violence. SVRI supports and funds innovative research, strengthens capacity for impactful, policy-relevant work, fosters partnerships, and drives change. With a focus on research led by experts in low- and middle-income countries, SVRI is a field-building network that unites researchers, practitioners, donors, activists, and policy-makers to transform the fight against violence.

<https://www.svri.org>

Policies and efforts to combat GBV have increased during the last decades but the problem persists and there is still need for further evidence in the area. Measuring the prevalence of GBV involves challenges, however, we know that the level of exposure to this form of violence remains very high.¹¹ All over the world, GBV continues to be widespread in all parts of the society. Over the years, forms of violence that have been widespread for centuries continue, and new forms emerge, such as online and technology facilitated GBV (TFGBV). The costs of GBV are enormous, see box 1.

Box 1: The costs of GBV

The costs of GBV - direct and indirect, tangible and intangible - are enormous at all levels: individual, family, community and society.¹² According to the World Bank Group, the cost of violence may be up to 3,7 per cent of GDP, which is more than double of what most countries spend on education.¹³ In spite of this, the aid spending on GBV is low. For example, a report from the Equality Institute and Accelerator for GBV Prevention shows that over the years 2018-2023, only 0,2 per cent of overall aid and development spending targeted GBV prevention.¹⁴ In humanitarian assistance, GBV remains one of the least funded areas under the protection cluster, despite great needs.¹⁵

In all kinds of emergencies, crises and conflicts, GBV increases and the consequences are harder to deal with both for the individual and the society. During the Covid 19 pandemic, GBV, and in particular violence in the domestic sphere, intensified to the extent that it was called a “shadow pandemic”.¹⁶ GBV prevalence is also heightened in conflict, when the protective environment, including national systems such as health, education and legal systems, and community and social support networks are weakened, which adds to the risks and vulnerabilities.¹⁷

The immediate and long-term consequences of GBV can be devastating and include physical, psychological, sexual and economic aspects, sometimes with deadly outcomes.¹⁸ A report from UNODC and UN Women estimates that in 2022, more than 133 women or girls globally were killed every day by a family member, that is almost 50 000 women and girls every year, and 89 000 women in total were victims of femicide, i.e. gender-related murders.¹⁹

Groups and communities that are marginalised and face other kinds of discrimination are particularly exposed. Women and girls with disabilities, migrant women and girls, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people are among the groups particularly at risk.^{20 21} A study about disability inclusion in GBV programming in Asia and the Pacific states that women with disabilities are at two to four times higher risk of experiencing intimate partner violence.²²

The intersection of multiple forms of discrimination needs to be considered when preventing and responding to GBV. This is done by considering how gender intersects with other identities such as age, disability, ethnicity, social class, race and sexual orientation and gender identity and how these combined affects a person’s access to or lack of power.²³

Systemic racism and colonial legacies exacerbate the harms of GBV for people of certain ethnicities and indigenous communities, as they face both an increased risk of suffering from GBV and unequal access to justice and support systems such as health care.²⁴ The situations in which people live – in urban and rural settings, in refugee camps, in internal displacements, in host communities etc. – are important when understanding their exposure to GBV. Age is a key aspect that needs to be taken into consideration. Girls, young and old women are

particularly exposed to GBV and face specific consequences and difficulties related to their age.^{25 26} The intersection of discriminations depend on contexts.²⁷ A focus on the most disadvantaged make the transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind possible.²⁸

Defining gender-based violence

Sida defines GBV as:

Any harm or suffering that is perpetrated against a woman or girl, man or boy, or non-binary person that causes physical, sexual, psychological and/or economic harm, and has negative impact on the development and identity of the person. The cause of this violence is founded in gender-based power inequalities and gender-based discrimination.

Sida’s definition is in line with international instruments’ and standards’ definitions of violence against women, grounded in the human right to live a life free from violence (see below).²⁹ GBV is rooted in gendered power inequalities and gendered social norms.³⁰ Thus, GBV takes place in a context of intersectional power imbalances. GBV is often surrounded by silence and treated as a normal part of male-female relationships.^{31 32 33}

In different contexts, various concepts are used to describe the phenomena. For example, sometimes the term sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is used to underline both the sexual component and the fact that it is a form of gender discrimination. Also, the term conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is used to point out the specific grave forms of violence perpetrated against women, men, girls, boys or non-binary persons that are directly or indirectly linked to a conflict.^{34 35 36} CRSV is one of the most serious violations of international law, including international human rights and international humanitarian law. It can also amount to a crime under international criminal law.³⁷

GBV is the most common term, along with “violence against women”. Sida, in line with many actors such as multilateral organisations, civil society organisations and research institutions use “GBV”, “sexual violence” and “violence against women” as interchangeable concepts.³⁸

Addressing gender-based violence for sustainable development and securing human rights

Tackling GBV is crucial for all aspects of sustainable development including the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and thus for poverty reduction.³⁹ Evidence suggests that unless GBV is ended, at least 14 of the 17 SDGs will not be fulfilled.⁴⁰ The fifth goal of the SDGs include explicit targets concerning GBV (see box 2 below), although other SDGs also have targets that are relevant for addressing GBV, for example SDG 3 that focuses good health and well-being, SDG 10 about reduced inequalities and SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.⁴¹

Women and girls living in poverty are disproportionately effected by GBV as poverty may increase the risk of being exposed to violence, particularly for women, youth and girls facing multiple forms of discrimination. Sida applies a conceptual framework for multidimensional poverty analysis (MDPA) that recognises four dimensions of poverty: 1) Resources

(e.g. money, literacy, food, water and sanitation, skills, health and land); 2) Opportunities and choice (e.g. access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, energy, markets, information and employment); 3) Power and voice (e.g. ability to exercise human rights, concerns and needs and decision-making); and 4) Human security (e.g. physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence). Wherever it occurs, GBV is related to all four dimensions of poverty, see box 3 for Sida's framework for MDPA.⁴²

The poverty dimension *human security* most obviously addresses those who are direct victims and survivors of all forms of violence, but also those who are indirectly exposed (as relatives, friends, communities etc). GBV is also a direct hindrance of *access to resources*, of the *power and voice* of those who are exposed, and their possibilities to make *choices* and have *opportunities* in life.⁴³ Therefore, work against GBV is part of addressing and fighting all dimensions of poverty, key to achieve all aspects of sustainable development, an obstacle to all aspects of gender equality and a violation of fundamental human rights.^{44 45}

Box 2: SDG 5 Gender Equality

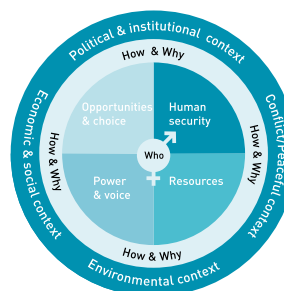
SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Target 5.2: "Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and all other types of exploitation".

Target 5.3: "Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation"



Box 3: Sida's framework for MDPA



2. INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS TO ADDRESS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

GBV is a violation of human rights and International Humanitarian Law (IHL).⁴⁶ This is reflected in numerous international conventions and policy documents. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women from 1993 is the foundation for today's understanding of and efforts to tackle GBV. During the following years the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme for Action in 1994 and the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 confirmed the importance of addressing GBV. Since then it has been continuously confirmed in policy frameworks.

Global conventions and human rights treaties

The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) from 1979 laid the ground for international agreements on gender equality and women's human rights. Even though CEDAW does not mention violence against women or GBV, its definition of discrimination against women paves the way for international instruments formulating the right to live a life free from violence.⁴⁷ In 1993 came the *UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, which is the document that is the foundation for today's definitions of GBV:

*"The term 'violence against women' means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation, whether occurring in public or private life."*⁴⁸

The declaration's definition of violence encompasses physical, sexual and psychological violence in the family including battering, abuse of children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other forms of harmful traditional practices, non-spousal violence and exploitation and in the community including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, violence at work and in educational institutions, trafficking and forced prostitution; as well as "perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs".⁴⁹

A number of other human rights treaties and bodies are also relevant for action against GBV. The obligations of States, once ratified a treaty, implies State parties are required not only to ensure that State

officials do not themselves engage in gender-based violence against women, but also that they take appropriate measures to prevent the infliction of violence by private actors. They are also required to investigate and punish such actions, and to provide protection and support for the survivors of violence.⁵⁰

One of the UN Special Rapporteurs is devoted to the work against GBV: the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, established in 1994.⁵¹ The mandate includes seeking and receiving information, recommend measures, ways and means to eliminate violence, work closely with all special procedures and other human rights mechanisms and to adopt a comprehensive and universal approach to the elimination of violence against women and girls.⁵²

In 1994 the *International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action* was a landmark where 179 states politically committed that inclusive sustainable development is not possible without prioritising human rights, including reproductive rights; empowering women and girls; and addressing inequalities as well as the needs, aspirations and rights of individual women and men. The states also committed to eliminate violence against women.⁵³ One year later, in 1995, the most progressive global blueprint for women's rights was agreed upon and 189 states unanimously adopted the *Beijing Platform for Action*. The Beijing Platform for Action marks a turning point for gender equality globally and still serves as foundation for global work on gender equality as well as for the annual *Committee on the Status of Women* (CSW), where violence against women is one of twelve critical areas of concern.⁵⁴

The *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (UNSCR 1325), adopted in year 2000 concerning the agenda for Women, Peace and Security is another key document. The UNSCR 1325 calls on "all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from GBV, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict", and it emphasizes the responsibility of states to end impunity and prosecute those responsible for this violence.⁵⁵ The following additional resolutions either focused on women's participation in peacebuilding, or aimed at preventing and addressing sexual violence in conflict.⁵⁶ The first in line among the

latter was the UNSCR 1820 adopted in 2008.⁵⁷ The year before UNSCR 1325, the Security Council adopted the first resolution on children in conflict, condemning six violations including killing and maiming of, and sexual violence against, children.⁵⁸

Another guiding document is the *DAC recommendation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of All Women and Girls in Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Assistance* from 2024, which also include a recommendation to states to uphold and advocate for the protection against SGBV.⁵⁹

Regional conventions and frameworks

In all regions of the world there are frameworks directly addressing or relevant for combatting GBV that are building on global and regional human rights treaties and agreements. These include for example the *Inter American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belem do Para)* adopted already in 1994.⁶⁰ The convention states women's rights to live a life free from violence, and that violence against women is a violation of human rights.⁶¹ In 2003 *The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* (the Maputo Protocol)⁶² was adopted by the African Union and laid the ground for work towards gender equality, specified in the 2018-2028 *African Union Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*.⁶³ Pillar 2 of this strategy points out that women's and girls' right to "dignity, security and resilience" are compromised as "Violence against women and related harmful traditional practices are symptomatic of the accepted social norms in many countries and communities."⁶⁴ The 2016-2025 *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women* states that despite international agreements there has been little improvement in the elimination of violence against women. The plan sets out necessary key strategies and actions, including prevention, protection, legal frameworks, capacity building and research.⁶⁵

The most important regional document for Swedish and other European actors working both nationally and internationally is the first European convention targeting GBV: the *Istanbul Convention*, or the *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, adopted in 2011. The Istanbul Convention is a legally binding document that sets out the obligation for states that

have ratified the convention to prevent violence, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators. The convention uses a definition of violence in line with the UN, but it adds economic violence as a particular form, see box 4:

*"violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life"*⁶⁶

Box 4: Forms of gender-based violence

Physical violence is any act which causes physical harm as a result of unlawful physical force, such as serious and minor assault, deprivation of liberty and manslaughter.

Sexual violence is any sexual act performed on an individual without their consent, such as rape or sexual assault.

Psychological violence is any act which causes psychological harm to an individual, such as threats, coercion, defamation, verbal insult or harassment.

Economic violence is any act or behaviour which causes economic harm to an individual, such as property damage, restricting access to financial resources, education or the labour market.

Another key document, that mirrors the Istanbul Convention's definition of GBV with particular importance for development cooperation as it guides EU's external action, is the *EU Gender Action Plan III* (valid 2021-2025, prolonged until 2027). It calls for accelerating progress in identified key thematic areas of engagement, one of them is to end GBV.⁶⁷ EU is continuously updating measures to combat violence against women/GBV.⁶⁸

At regional level there are also a number of instruments for implementing the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the following. For example, women, peace and security (WPS) along with GBV are two key thematic areas (out of six) in the EU Gender Action Plan III.⁶⁹

National legislations, policies and action plans

At national level the most important tool to address GBV is national legislation. National legislation is a prerequisite for ending impunity for perpetrators and for counteracting societal acceptance of GBV. It also contributes to changing norms and to protection of the human rights of victims and survivors.⁷⁰ Over the last decades, many countries have strengthened their legislation, but much more needs to be done before this is comprehensive. The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) annual report of 2023 states, again, that although comprehensive legal frameworks is the most important tool to address GBV only 12 countries (out of 178) have such legislation. Moreover, 46 countries do not criminalise domestic violence, 70 countries do not have a rape legislation based on consent and 48 countries do not criminalize sexual harassment.⁷¹ Even when legislation is in place, implementation remains a huge challenge all over the world.⁷² In total, 86 per cent of all women and girls are living in countries that lack robust legal protection from GBV, and data thereof.⁷³

Sweden has a long history of prioritising gender equality in general, and tackling GBV in particular, both nationally and in development cooperation. Currently, a ten-year strategy designed to prevent and counter men's violence against women is implemented through national action plans.⁷⁴ Sida works in accordance with Sweden's policy for international development assistance *Development assistance for a new era - freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth*, also referred to as the reform agenda. The reform agenda states the intention to "combating all forms of sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices, promoting protection of – and support to – victims of violence, and involving men and boys in the work". It also states that Sweden will work actively to ensure that women and girls are free to decide for themselves over their lives and bodies by: "supporting action against all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation in prostitution and

human trafficking, and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and forced sterilisation; prioritising efforts to combat child marriage in relevant contexts in locations where it is customary or legal, with a view to strengthening legislative work and action against child marriage; contributing to accountability in conflicts, especially for sexual violence and abuse".⁷⁵

At national level, in Sweden and all around the world, National Action Plans (NAP) for women, peace and security are central for preventing and responding to GBV in conflict, along with shadow reports from national civil society organisations. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) continuously monitor these NAPs. The first plan was developed in 2005, and by 2024 56 per cent of the UN member states, 108 countries, have adopted a NAP.⁷⁶

Civil societies and feminist movements follow up on national governments' commitments to combat GBV through CEDAW shadow reports as well as other human rights instruments such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. See box 5 for the importance of feminists movements in the work to combat GBV.

Box 5: Feminist movements make a difference⁷⁷

The present historic number of laws and policies addressing different forms of GBV is to a large extent due to sustained and strategic advocacy from women's rights organisations across the globe. Research has shown correlation between strong and independent feminist movements and comprehensive legal frameworks protecting women from violence.

Women's rights organisations often have a deep contextualized knowledge and long experience of supporting and providing services to victims and survivors of GBV.

Key aspects of gender-based violence

The global, regional and national human rights instruments point at the following key aspects of GBV, that are all intertwined and can be understood as a continuum of violence:⁷⁸

- GBV is a violation of human rights, a severe hindrance to sustainable development and adds to all dimensions of poverty.
- The violence is gendered in the sense that it must be understood in the context of norms for gender and gendered power relations, and that mostly women, youth, girls and non-binary persons are exploited by men and boys, but that also men and boys are victims of GBV.
- GBV is a manifestation of unequal power relations, and it is also a crucial mechanism to uphold these unequal power relations: a cause and a consequence of gender inequalities.
- GBV cuts across all kinds of boundaries and must be understood in a context of different intersecting power relations, including but not limited to age, disability, ethnicity, social class, race and sexual orientation and gender identity.
- GBV occurs in different forms, including but not limited to physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence.
- GBV takes place in different relationships (e.g. partners, relatives, friends, employers), and outside relationships (e.g. strangers, public officials).
- GBV takes place in different arenas, in peace and conflict, in private as well as public spaces (at home, in schools, at workplaces, in the streets, in refugee camps, in public transportation etc).
- GBV have multiple effects and severe consequences for the individual, community and the society at large.
- GBV impacts all systems in respect to e.g. increased cost such as health-, education-, justice- and the social system.
- GBV is linked to, but not limited to the level of education (primary, secondary and tertiary levels), national income and access to justice.
- GBV increases in emergencies and during war and armed conflicts, including for example rape, arbitrary killings, human trafficking, torture, sexual violence and forced marriages.

3. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES, CONFLICT AND INTERSECTING WITH SRHR

Sida's work against GBV covers a broad range of contexts and thematic areas. However, the importance of GBV prevention and response in humanitarian crises and in conflict settings is particularly emphasised in this technical note, as well as the intersection of GBV and SRHR.

Gender-based violence in times of humanitarian crises

There is an increased risk of GBV in times of crises and emergencies. In humanitarian settings, 70 per cent of women experience GBV (compared to 1 in 3 overall, see above).⁷⁹ Poor welfare services and the break-down of social networks and justice systems make it more difficult for victims and survivors of violence to escape and receive support and health care, and leave the perpetrators unpunished.⁸⁰ When violence in general is more present in a society and in situations of increased militarisation, subordinated groups in the society become more vulnerable in public arenas as well as in private. Displacement and heightened tensions within communities and households aggravate the risk of GBV, and existing inequalities risk being further exacerbated both during and after a crisis. Different situations of crises and conflicts also increase the vulnerability of exposure to sexual corruption, i.e. sex in exchange for basic needs such as food, water, education and health care (see below).

Flourish – a map to end GBV

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has developed a map, Flourish, that sets a vision to end GBV including in the context of the climate crisis and the advent of technology. It includes multi-sectoral, comprehensive and coordinated action across four dynamic pillars: Response, Prevention, Data and Research and Enabling Environments with a view to increasing resilience and ending violence at an individual, community and systems level. [Flourish](#) is complemented by the [UNFPA Strategy and Operational Plan for GBV in emergencies](#). A key resource supporting working across the continuum is the UNFPA publication [Addressing GBV Across Contexts](#).

Conflict-related sexual violence

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) remains pervasive across the globe and refers to "rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys

that are directly or indirectly linked to a conflict". CRSV is widespread and the list of places where it has been reported can be very long and include for example: Europe during World War II, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, Liberia, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan, Iraq, Libya, Guatemala, Burkina Faso, Mali, Syria, Palestine, Israel and Ukraine. The escalation of conflicts in recent years, fuelled by arms proliferation and increased militarization, heightens the level of CRSV. The UN Secretary-General has pointed out that the increased risk of sexual violence, particularly in displacement, is an emerging concern. CRSV generates profit for armed and violent extremist groups, including through conflict-driven trafficking in persons. In some conflicts sexual violence is used as a 'weapon of war', i.e. when state and non-state armed actors use rape and forced pregnancy as instruments of ethnic cleansing and to degrade and humiliate women, girls or boys, non-binary persons and men – directly and indirectly. Despite women and girls being the main targets for perpetrators of all forms of CRSV, and adolescent girls particularly so, men and boys are also exposed.⁸¹ The need to frame GBV as a security issue and the responsibility to protect goes beyond meeting immediate security needs of women. Implementing globally agreed frameworks is essential for sustainable peace. When women are not safe nor protected, they cannot fully participate in political life or in peace processes and recovery efforts. Research points at the importance of involving men in the women, peace and security agenda and when gender is mainstreamed the response to insecurity is better.⁸²

Femme au Fone

Local women's organisations play an essential role for protection and support to victims and survivors, for long term prevention and change. This is not the least true in conflict areas where the state often is unprepared, unable or unwilling. In the Democratic Republic of Congo Kvinna till kvinna supported AFEM to develop new tools to report sexual violence: Femme au Fone. This allows victims and survivors to report violence through encrypted messages and puts pressure on authorities to respond. It is used as an early-warning mechanism, a tool to share information and a political advocacy platform for local women. [They came together not to be silenced—GBV in conflict & the role of women's rights organisations \(kvinnatillkvinna.org\)](#)

Sexual and reproductive health and rights intertwined with gender-based violence

Gender-based violence, including forced sex, is closely linked to lack of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and lack of comprehensive sexual education.⁸³ Please see Box 6 for Sida's definition of SRHR. GBV is a component of SRHR and it includes prevention, detection, immediate services and referrals for victims and survivors of GBV.⁸⁴ In order for this to be realised systems need to be in place, including, but not limited to health, justice and social services. In addition, in humanitarian and conflict settings, integrating SRHR in GBV risk mitigation efforts across sectors can significantly strengthen humanitarian response's ability to prevent and respond to GBV.⁸⁵

Moreover, GBV and its consequences cause various sexual and reproductive health problems, such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies. Unintended pregnancies can have serious repercussions, including unsafe abortions, death due to high-risk pregnancies for girls, and ostracism by family members leading to social isolation, suicide and sometimes murder. In addition, violence before, during and after pregnancy is linked to a range of pregnancy-related problems, such as miscarriage, preterm labour or maternal mortality.

Efforts to reduce these problems include addressing GBV. The stigma associated with sex and sexuality may deter women, girls, boys, men and non-binary persons from seeking or receiving medical services. This is especially true when the perpetrator is a family member or relative as well as in the case of adolescent girls who are assumed not to need sexual health services because they are not expected to be having sex. The staff at health services are often not adequately trained and equipped to deal with health problems related to female genital mutilation (FGM), rape and other forms of sexual violence, which leaves underlying problems not dealt with. Tackling GBV is crucial also in reversing the spread of HIV and other STIs.⁸⁶ Tears or abrasions associated with violent sexual encounters increase women's biological risk of contracting infections, especially for young girls.⁸⁷ Fear of GBV, or the stigma associated with having been victimised, is also an obstacle to accessing information, care and treatment for HIV/AIDS.⁸⁸

Box 6: Sida's definition of SRHR⁸⁹

Sida uses the Gutmacher-Lancet definition of SRHR which reads: "Sexual and reproductive health is a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellbeing in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity."

4. HOW SIDA ADDRESSES GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Sida addresses GBV in two ways: through supporting prevention efforts and response mechanisms.

Prevention, to stop GBV from happening, is mainly done through transforming norms of gender roles, behaviour and acceptability of violence that underpin GBV.

Response is needed when violence has taken place and includes what the Istanbul Convention defines as *protection* of victims and survivors, and legal and policy frameworks to allow *prosecution* of perpetrators.⁹⁰

These approaches are intertwined and depend on each other. Sida's work to combat GBV is carried out through *integrating* efforts to tackle GBV in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, *targeted* interventions aiming to prevent and/or respond to GBV and through the presence of GBV concerns in *dialogue*.⁹¹

In order to effectively address GBV we need to engage multiple sectors at multiple levels. Sida's support should contribute to strengthen coordination between different service providers and referral mechanisms,⁹² and as such, improving existing national and local systems across different sectors. Coordination and system strengthening applies in development as well as humanitarian settings.⁹³

Grants dedicated to end GBV

The UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund), established in 1996, is the only global grant-making mechanism dedicated to eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls. Its work focuses on preventing violence, implementing laws and policies, and improving access to vital services for survivors. The UN Trust Fund provides critical funding, builds organisational resilience, and promotes knowledge exchange with its partners, largely composed of grassroots, women-led organisations. <https://untf.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-the-un-trust-fund-to-end-violence-against-women>

Prevention

GBV prevention strategies are intrinsically linked to efforts to increase gender equality more generally. Hence, rather than disconnecting and treating GBV as a separate and isolated problem, it must be situated in the context of gender inequalities and human rights. It needs to be analysed and addressed from an intersectional perspective whilst recognizing that preventing GBV is part of both development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. All humanitarian actors should integrate GBV risk mitigation in its interventions, irrespective of sector. GBV risk mitigation comprises a range of activities within humanitarian response that aim to first identify GBV risks and then take specific actions to reduce those risks.

Sida's overall prevention strategy is to transform norms and behaviour that underpin GBV. The logic of GBV is based on gender stereotypes, such as ideals linking masculinity to oppression, macho behaviour and violence whilst linking femininity to chastity, submission and victimhood. Formal and non-formal education at all levels are key sites for normative change.

Education and education institutions can play an essential role in changing gendered social norms and acceptance of violence. Girls that receive education have greater opportunities for economic empowerment and agency – factors that can lower risks of intimate partner violence. Moreover, educated girls and women could be more prone to acknowledge and label experiences of abuse and to leave a violent partner. Research shows that "countries with higher rates of female secondary school enrolment and those with inheritance laws that are more gender-equal had lower prevalence of intimate partner violence against adolescent girls."⁹⁴

Prevention of GBV also includes to increase women's participation and influence. This includes participation in politics, and support to the women, peace and security agenda and in particular the participation of women's rights organisations and the participation of victims and survivors in policy development.⁹⁵ In many countries, in particular in fragile settings, women's political representation is still very low, and women are often excluded from formal peace negotiations. This has devastating consequences for the possibility to end GBV. As stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, women's rights and survivors' needs must be at the centre of conflict prevention and conflict resolution. All parties to armed conflict must make commitments to protect women and girls from GBV, particularly sexual violence, and to combat sexual violence through prohibition, codes of conduct and other means. Nevertheless, many violent acts continue because laws are not put into practice. Equal participation, along with for example economic justice, is closely linked to the prevention of and work against GBV.⁹⁶

Efforts to increase women's economic empowerment (WEE) is key in the long term prevention of GBV. It is important not only for women's ability to leave abusive relationships but GBV is also a severe barrier to WEE. For instance, GBV can prevent women from leaving home or access public transportation to get to work. Sida's work includes strengthening women's entrepreneurship and employment opportunities,

improving women's access to land, property rights and financial instruments, promoting equal sharing of unpaid care work between women and men, and encouraging access to quality education, financial literacy and digitalisation.⁹⁷

Enjoying SRHR are also closely intertwined with efforts to combat GBV. Promotion and protection of women's, girls' and non-binary persons' right to have control and decide freely over matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, access to contraception, safe abortion and prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections including HIV/Aids are all parts of preventing GBV. Access to information and knowledge is key, including comprehensive sexuality education.⁹⁸

Although most perpetrators are men, boys and men can also be victims and survivors. Men's and boys' particular vulnerabilities and needs in relation to GBV, especially in the context of armed conflict must be recognised, as well as the fact that they can be agents of change. Rather than simply 'bringing men in' to address violence against women, there is a need to work towards transformed norms around gender relations, violence and masculinity. A failure to recognise and address this can contribute to the perpetuation of cycles of GBV. There is thus a need to work with perpetrators to stop violent behaviour from reoccurring.

Response

Responding to GBV includes securing protection for victims and survivors as well as supporting prosecution of perpetrators.

Strengthening legal and policy frameworks forms an important part of both prevention and response to GBV. Enabling provision of justice for victims and survivors, legal frameworks shape norms in society and might work as deterrents. All national legislations need to be founded on human rights and gender equality in order to protect bodily integrity and the right to live a life free from violence. Perpetrators must be held accountable under national and international law, including in transitional justice mechanisms. However, strategies to improve legislation should not have a narrow focus, but take into account and strive for improved legislation in other areas as well, for example family law and women's legal rights to property, land, inheritance, employment and financial services.

Victims and survivors have rights to protection and

access to services. Sida supports service providers for quality service provision, as well as works to strengthen and enhance multi-sectorial protection and services at all levels and the referral between them through different cooperation partners. These systems include, but are not limited to, the justice-, education-, health-, police- and social system. An important aspect of a successful response is that professionals that are supporting victims and survivors such as police officers, social services and medical staff have the competences to do so based on the needs and wishes of the victims and survivors. Health care providers have a particular role in the response as they are often among the first point of contact for victims and survivors. A holistic response is crucial to mitigate the suffering and trauma for victims and survivors. Sida's work to respond to GBV include access to legal assistance; one stop centers; safe houses/safe shelters; psychosocial counseling and health care; adequate information; redress; and ensuring investigation prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of violence, including IHL defined grave violations. Moreover, it can focus on supporting national hotlines and training of professionals that are to support and protect victims and survivors of GBV. Protection and services must always be grounded in a victim's and survivor's perspective.

Although the state is responsible, evidence show that women's rights organisations are important actors as they raise awareness about GBV, advocate for ending GBV and support victims and survivors. Women's rights organisations often have a deep contextualised knowledge and long experience in this field. In fragile contexts, it is particularly important that systems and different services are effectively coordinated with clear referrals between, and include support to shelters including those run by independent actors (for example women's and LGBTIQ rights organisations).

Bridging the gap between law and practice is important. While solid legislation acknowledging the rights of GBV victims and survivors is a prerequisite, a major obstacle often lies in the implementation of such frameworks. There needs to be a clear link between international commitments, national laws and policies, the different systems and the justice sector. Strengthening accountability mechanisms to follow up on and evaluate how laws are being implemented is therefore crucial. These accountability mechanisms include for example media, civil society and UN special rapporteurs.

5. ENTRY POINTS AND KEY AREAS FOR DIALOGUE

While prioritisation and design of interventions always need be context-specific, the following areas illustrate important entry points and potential areas for dialogue.

Dialogue with partners and other stakeholders

- Apply a victim/survivor centred approach, i.e. inclusive participation of victims and survivors in decisions effecting them;
- Recognise the link between prevention, mitigation and response;
- Highlight relevant policy and legal frameworks, such as, IHL, international and regional human rights conventions and the SDGs;
- Build on a country's human rights commitment to address GBV;
- Support national systems, strategies and policy work for a holistic approach to address GBV and efforts to ensure state responsibility when possible;
- Emphasise the need for broad engagement of women and girls, as well as men and boys, and non-binary persons as actors of change to end GBV;
- Recognise that men and boys can be perpetrators of GBV, but also victims and survivors;
- Support services for victims and survivors of GBV;
- Push for inclusive and evidence-based programming which involves experts and partners;
- Support efforts which can increase funding for women's and LGBTIQ rights organisations;
- Support media and civil society to raise awareness of GBV to change attitudes of the population, and to hold governments to account;
- Emphasise systematic monitoring and evaluation of results from a results-based approach;⁹⁹
- Integrate protection and risk reduction in programming;
- Emphasise the link between GBV and women's human rights, education, SRHR, women's economic empowerment, women's participation in decision-making and the women, peace and security agenda;
- Strengthen legislation so it is respectful of gender equality and human rights and supports justice for survivors;
- Emphasise the importance of bridging the gap between legislation and implementation, to end impunity;
- Strengthen accountability and redress;
- Strengthen legislation indirectly linked to GBV, such as family law and women's legal rights to property/land, inheritance, employment, financial services;
- Support research and data collection;
- Support the inclusion of an intersectional perspective and a Gender Transformative Approach;
- Integrate GBV prevention, mitigation and response in other sectors;
- Stress the importance to work with private sector actors to prevent GBV.

6. FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Different forms of GBV takes place in different contexts and arenas, and in different kinds of relationships. GBV includes a wide range of expressions of violence that occur in a continuum.¹⁰⁰ It may nevertheless be relevant to talk about these different forms and different contexts, in order to be able to effectively prevent and respond to the violence. The forms and contexts are, unfortunately, endless and different actors put emphasis on different forms, contexts, arenas and relationships.¹⁰¹ Below are some examples relevant for Sida's work.

Forms of violence in conventions

The forms of violence that are listed in the above-mentioned conventions relevant for GBV are physical, sexual, psychological and (since the Istanbul Convention) economic violence. Below are the definitions of these forms of violence used by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).¹⁰²

Intimate partner violence

Intimate partner, or domestic, violence, in particular men's violence against women and children in their own family, is the most prevalent form of GBV. WHO estimates that almost one third, 27 per cent, of girls and women (age 15-49) who have been in a relationship report that they have been exposed to physical and/or sexual violence.¹⁰³ Intimate partner violence is often repeated, systematic and contains parallel physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence. Violence may be interpreted as a 'normal' part of a relationship, as the limits for what is seen as violence, by the perpetrator as well as the victim, is gradually pushed, the precedence of interpretation of the perpetrator gradually grows and the life of the victim is more and more circumscribed (these are some of the aspects of the 'normalization process of violence').¹⁰⁴ It may take many different forms, be conducted by different perpetrators throughout the lifetime, and have severe direct and indirect health consequences.¹⁰⁵ Children who witness violence are both direct and indirect victims, and are also likely to be exposed themselves, and the intersection between violence against women and violence against children is manifold and a field of growing attention in research and in practice.¹⁰⁶

The Exhibition "Break the Silence. Ending Violence Behind Walls" was set up by **Kosovo Women's Network** in 2020 and has travelled around Kosovo. The exhibition reveals real stories of women and men who have suffered violence. It engages people, informs them about GBV and on how to report: what key institutions provide and how citizens can reach those institutions to exercise their rights. <https://womensnetwork.org/the-exhibition-break-the-silence-ending-violence-behind-walls-returns-to-pristina/>

Sexual violence

The Hague Principles on sexual violence from 2020 is the outcome of experiences from 500 survivors along with civil society organisations, experts and academics. They call for a broad understanding of sexual violence that encompasses all violations of sexual autonomy and integrity, often characterized by humiliation, domination and destruction.¹⁰⁷ There is no universal view on what counts as a "sexual" experience or harm, as this varies according to context, but it must never be trivialized and overlooked.¹⁰⁸ It involves acts which in a particular context is perceived by the victim, the perpetrator and/or the community in which it takes place as sexual in nature.¹⁰⁹ We know that sexual violence is frequent and occur everywhere, and that statistics tend to show a picture that underestimate the problem. Nevertheless, numbers are sometimes shockingly high. A study from 2020, presenting a trend analysis on the worldwide prevalence of sexual violence, uses a global number from 2013 stating that 35,6 per cent of women have experienced sexual violence over their lifetime. Men are also exposed, but to a lesser extent. The study concludes that the rate of sexual violence varies but has not remarkably dropped over time.¹¹⁰ Around fifteen million adolescent girls have experienced forced sex, but only 1 percent of these have sought help.¹¹¹ Today, we see a backlash in the right to safe abortion, also when the pregnancy is the result of sexual violence. This will lead to even less women and girls seeking help, and in many contexts access to abortion or not may be a matter of life and death.¹¹²

Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment

Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance (SEAH) has rapidly gained increased attention during the last years. Action has been taken by key development actors, including the UN, OECD, financial institutions and humanitarian actors. Sida has developed an approach to preventing and responding to SEAH, and it is included in Sida's standard agreements.¹¹³

Sexual corruption

Sexual corruption is a form of GBV, and a form of corruption. Sexual corruption “occurs when a person with entrusted authority abuses this authority to obtain a sexual favour” and “the *quid pro quo*, this for that, involves conditioning a service or benefit, which is connected to the entrusted position, on a sexual favour”.¹¹⁴ Since December 2023, sexual corruption is included in the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC).¹¹⁵

Economic violence

The Istanbul Convention added economic violence to the forms of GBV, defined as “an act or behaviour that causes economic harm to an individual”.¹¹⁶ The World Bank Group’s annual report *Women, Business and the Law* from 2024 links women’s economic empowerment and GBV by introducing a new indicator on forms of violence that have significant impact on women’s economic empowerment: child marriage, sexual harassment, domestic violence and femicide.¹¹⁷

Femicide/feminicide

Globally, close to 89 000 women and girls were intentionally killed in 2022, which is the highest annual number in the last two decades. Most of these cases were gender-related, cases of femicide/feminicide. Although most victims of homicide are men and boys, women and girls are more likely to be killed at home, and by an intimate partner.¹¹⁸ While 12 per cent of male homicide were perpetrated in the private sphere, 55 per cent of femicide cases were committed by an intimate partner or other family member.¹¹⁹ The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women has pointed at the need for further progress in the prevention of gender-related killings of women and girls.¹²⁰

Female genital mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM)¹²¹ affects more than 200 million girls and women around the world.¹²² FGM refers to all procedures of non-medical partial or total removal, or other injury, of female genitalia.¹²³ It is most widely practiced in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the Middle East, but also occurs in Northern Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas.¹²⁴ FGM is often carried out by traditional practitioners, not by medical personnel, although the medicalization of FGM is

increasing. However, there is no medical justification for the practice. Even when the procedure is performed in a sterile environment by a health care provider, there is risk of health consequences immediately and later in life. FGM lies at the intersection of sensitive issues including men’s control over women’s bodies and men’s perceptions of women’s sexuality, and it is also an example of GBV that is sustained by women performing the practice, and a frequent reason for supporting FGM is ‘social acceptance’.¹²⁵ Both the attitudes and the practice vary according to levels of education, economic wealth, and location, but the number of girls that risk undergo FGM has decreased and attitudes have become more negative to the practice.¹²⁶

Ending FGM

In Kenya, Girls not Brides support Msichana Empowerment Kuria, a girl-led community-based organisation working to end violence against girls. They work closely with marginalised girls living in rural and cross-border communities, traditional leaders, parents, government and the community as a whole to address child marriage and FGM. Their methods include providing safe spaces, legal and health care support, as well as supporting girls’ education, menstrual health care and economic empowerment.

Violence in the name of honour

Violence in the name of honour, or honour violence, refers to violence against family members (most often women and girls) conducted with reference to the shame and dishonour a person is supposed to have brought to their family and/or community. This may include kin in a wide sense, but also religious, ethnic, national, political or regional affiliation.¹²⁷ Honour violence may include physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence as well as other forms of control such as forced marriages or coerced marriages of women with the men who raped them. Not only ‘actual’ behaviour, but also how the community perceives a woman’s, or in some cases a man’s, behaviour can be interpreted as shameful. Lost virginity, adultery or rumours of the same are perceived as an irreparable dishonour on the family/community, which in extreme cases lead to decisions to murder – an ‘honour killing’.¹²⁸ It is difficult to tell the frequency, where and among which groups honour

violence occurs. The definition and forms of honour violence varies across contexts.¹²⁹ It is sometimes perceived as an Islamic phenomenon, which is not true: honour violence occurs among Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and in other religious and non-religious groups. The drafters of the Istanbul Convention did not call for a separate 'honour crime' but instead decided to ban attempts to justify criminal behaviour on the basis of culture, custom, religion, tradition or so called 'honour'.¹³⁰

Child, early and forced marriage

Child, early and forced marriage, a formal or informal union before the age of 18, is a form of GBV as it robs girls and adolescents of their right to childhood, health, education and security. Worldwide, 650 million girls, or one in every five, is married.¹³¹ Consequences of early/child marriages can include for example domestic violence and rape, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, inadequate or lack of pregnancy follow-up and antenatal care leading to high risk delivery and heightened risk of maternal mortality, but also loss of power over one's life, sexual health, economic agency and education.¹³² Early/child marriage often occurs in contexts of poverty, and is increasingly an issue amongst conflict affected communities. According to Girls not Brides, the ten countries where early/child marriages are most common are fragile or extremely fragile, and 12 out of 20 are in deep humanitarian crises.¹³³

Violence against LGBTIQ people

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people face high levels of discrimination and GBV worldwide. Virtually every country in the world retains legal provisions that impinge on the rights of transgender people, exposing them to some of the highest rates of violence of any group of people in the world, along lesbian women. Nevertheless, they often get the least attention.¹³⁴ In 2024, 64 countries criminalise private, consensual same-sex activities.¹³⁵ Violence against LGBTIQ persons is often labelled "hate crimes": A person is victimised because of their gender or sexual orientation. When LGBTIQ persons are struck, GBV becomes a way of controlling and punishing those who are not seen as "real/proper" men or women and therefore threatening traditional norms of masculinity and femininity. Women and girls who are either lesbian, perceived to be lesbian, or

both, can be subject to so called 'corrective rapes', including gang rapes by men, and forced into heterosexual marriages. The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial-, summary or arbitrary executions has regularly drawn attention to persons killed because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and particularly lifts transgender persons as a group in a situation of particular vulnerability.¹³⁶ Most cases of violence against LGBTIQ people are not reported due to fear of secondary victimisation, which results in most victims/survivors avoiding or delaying accessing healthcare, criminal justice services and psychosocial support.

Violence against persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities are at greater risk than those without disabilities to be subjected to GBV.¹³⁷ Studies from different parts of the world show that women with disabilities are at particularly high risk of experiencing GBV.¹³⁸ This is true both in comparison to men with disabilities, and women without disabilities.¹³⁹ Children with disabilities are particularly exposed. For example, a study from five countries in Africa showed that both boys and girls with disabilities face multiple forms violence from various perpetrators, and the forms of violence differ by gender; while boys were more vulnerable to physical violence, more girls with disability faced sexual violence.¹⁴⁰ GBV against persons with disabilities take the same form as GBV against others, but may also have features linked to their specific situation, such as more dependences threats and to withhold medication or assistance, and emotional abuse linked to the disability.¹⁴¹

Human trafficking

Human trafficking – the trade and exploitation of people for profit – can be a form of GBV. A significant portion of this criminal industry is the trafficking of women, girls and boys for sexual purposes. This is a form of GBV that has grave consequences for victims and survivors,¹⁴² as well as society at large as human trafficking is the world's third largest profitable criminal industry, after trafficking of illicit drugs and weapons.¹⁴³ Conflict-related sexual violence also encompasses trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual violence and/or exploitation, when committed in situations of armed conflict.

Online and technology facilitated gender-based violence

Sida uses the definition of Online and Technology Facilitated GBV (TFGBV) developed by the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) as acts of GBV that are “committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as mobile phones, the internet, social media platforms, and email”. TFGBV is prevalent; in a recent study 38 per cent of women reported having personal experiences and 85 per cent witnessing others being exposed, and young women are the most exposed.¹⁴⁴ For further exploration of this topic, see the Sida brief on Gender-Based Violence Online.¹⁴⁵

Gender-based violence against women human rights defenders

Feminist activists and women human rights defenders face GBV, both because who they are and what

they do. A report from the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, points at gendered risks and obstacles, while recognizing their key role in promotion of human rights.¹⁴⁶ All over the world, women environmental activists are particularly exposed.¹⁴⁷

Gender-based violence in politics

Gender-based violence in politics may take many forms, and tend to vary between men and women and between different groups.¹⁴⁸ Women’s increased participation in politics is often met by harassment, intimidation and violence and this violence often take sexualised forms. For further exploration of this topic, see the Sida brief and technical note on Women’s Participation in Politics.¹⁴⁹

Further readings

[UN Women – Ending violence against women](#)

[Interactive facts about Violence against Women, UN Women](#)

[The Hague Principles on Sexual Violence](#)

[Sexual violence research initiative \(SVRI\)](#)

[Spotlight initiative](#)

[Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies](#)

[Gender Based Violence Area of Responsibility](#)

[WHO statistics on violence against women](#)

[UNFPA - Gender-based violence](#)

[United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict](#)

[What works to prevent violence](#)

[RESPECT - Preventing violence against women: A framework for policymakers](#)

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