

# GENDER BASED VIOLENCE & THE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

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Although there is plenty of information available about the subject of gender-based violence (GBV), most does not take into account the unique problems faced by humanitarian workers. These difficulties include the complexities of working on multicultural teams, the absence of counseling/healthcare options, and failures in the legal system to ensure that victims will be treated respectfully and perpetrators are brought to justice. Most of the information designed for humanitarian workers is on the topic of how to work with beneficiaries who are the victims of GBV. However, humanitarian and relief workers are increasingly at risk themselves for becoming victims of GBV.

The socially defined gender context is both powerful and subtle. Often it is difficult for a woman to articulate her concerns about safety and security. Often it is difficult for men to understand and take the increased risk exposure of women seriously. There are several ways that organizations increase the risk for women through direct or indirect communication of cultural norms. One common example is when risk taking is admired. Another is the message that self-care is not valued. When the leaders of an organization are uncomfortable with topics related to sex and violence they increase the likelihood that problems will go unrecognized or unreported. An organization that does not treat men and women equally in regard to power and authority also sets up a system that increases the risk for GBV.

When someone dies or is robbed, a community knows the importance of presence, words of sympathy, and justice. In the case of rape or other forms of GBV, it is harder to know how to be helpful or even to acknowledge what has happened. We hope that this brief introduction will answer some basic questions about how to respond.

## What is Gender Based Violence?

- Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is any harmful act that is done against someone's will and is based on gender differences between men and women.
- GBV is an aggressive act motivated by power and control.
- Gender-based violence can take many forms. It is often sexual in nature. It can include non-consensual sex such as rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, genital mutilation, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and child sexual abuse. It also includes other practices that cause harm such as domestic violence, forced and early marriage, forced pregnancy or sterilization, honor killings, etc.
- Most victims are female and most perpetrators are male. Because of this, males play an important role in prevention of GBV.



- In most cases, the perpetrator is someone the victim knows and perhaps knows well, such as a current or former intimate partner, co-worker, or relative. These cases can be the most difficult for a woman to report. It is important to remember that even when a woman knows her attacker she is not at fault for the outcome.
- GBV has both short- and long-term physical, psychological, and spiritual effects on health and well-being. These effects vary markedly depending upon the person, the cultural context, and the circumstances of the event.
- The majority of GBV incidents go unreported. Women may experience it as a mark of disgrace, find it difficult to discuss something so personal in a work context, or worry that drawing attention to the situation will make their life or job situation worse. In many cases women may feel that reporting the incident will bring more harm than good, due to the lack of health or legal services.

### Who is at risk?

Although anyone can become a victim of GBV, there are some groups that are more vulnerable and need extra protection. You will notice that some of these are associated with being a humanitarian aid worker. These include:

- Women who are traveling, working, or living alone
- Women in cultures of gender inequality
- Lone female heads of households
- Those under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Individuals in an abusive intimate or dependent relationship
- Individuals in war or armed conflict situations
- Those with a history of rape or sexual abuse

### What are the consequences for health and well-being?:

People who have experienced GBV may encounter a wide range of health consequences. There can be both short- and long-term emotional, social, spiritual and physical harm. Death is the most extreme outcome, but it is not uncommon even in less severe cases for the event to change the person's entire life course. Some of the physical effects can include traumatic injury, pregnancy, and infections such as STDs, or HIV.

Psychological effects can include panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares, feeling disconnected from feelings or people, depression, anxiety, fears, suicidal thoughts and behavior, substance abuse or overuse, eating disorders, sexual problems, headaches, upset stomach, sleep disturbances, mood swings, avoidance, difficulty switching off negative thinking, self-blame, fear of another assault, anger, or embarrassment. See our training module on trauma for greater detail (<http://headington-institute.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1783>).



GBV can also have a negative impact on relationships that can affect both work and personal life. These can include a desire to avoid others or a fear of being alone. Unfortunately, it might also include being stigmatized by others. GBV varies across different cultures. These include differences in how GBV is acted out. Culture also influences how women will respond to GBV and what kind of consequences occur for both the victim and perpetrator. Because of the reality of negative social consequences, individuals are often understandably afraid to report the event or even to seek help. For example, a woman humanitarian aid worker who has been the victim of rape in the field may hesitate to let others know for a host of reasons including fear that it will affect her personal and work relationships and future career opportunities.

### What kind of help do victims need?

The safety, health, and well-being of the victim should be the highest priority. This includes ensuring that the victim is able to maintain her safety and dignity. If possible, the victim should be given immediate medical, legal and counseling support by providers who have had specialized training in providing services for victims of GBV. The providers also need to be aware of the relevant local protocols, rules, and laws. If resources are not available locally, decisions will have to be made by the victim and her supporters about whether she needs to go to a location where such help is available.

In all cases, the following guiding principles should be observed:

- **Security & Safety.** The highest immediate priority must be the safety and security of the victim. Whatever measures are necessary to ensure her physical and psychological safety should be undertaken. This might include altering her transportation, living, or working conditions, ensuring that she is not alone, arranging for her to leave the area where the event has taken place, etc.
- **Confidentiality & Privacy.** GBV is a highly personal and private event. The victim's privacy and confidentiality must be safeguarded in work, legal, and medical processes. In all cases, adult victims should have control over who and when others are informed of their case. The exceptions to confidentiality are those cases of abuse of a minor or other dependent person or where there is likelihood of violent harm to self or other. In these cases, authorities who have the ability to prevent further violent harm must be notified. Notification should be done in a way that includes the victim and respects her concerns, needs, rights, and dignity.
- **Respect & Autonomy.** Victims have the right to informed consent that is appropriate to their age and ability. This means that they should be given information that is easy to understand and allowed to participate in all decisions that affect them.
- **Avoidance of re-victimization.** At times, attempts to help victims can re-traumatize them and even put them at greater risk in their community. Any actions must be taken under the principle of "do no harm." For example, a well-meaning co-worker who knows of the event might tell others with the intent of creating a sympathetic work environment. However, this may have the reverse effect, inadvertently increasing the victim's sense of helplessness, shame, anger, and isolation. In some cases, the result may be social stigma and alienation. Forcing someone to re-tell the details of the event when she is not emotionally prepared to do so may also result in harm.



## If you are a victim of GBV, what can you do to heal?

- **Physical safety should be your first concern.** Do whatever is necessary and possible to prevent further attacks. Beyond physical safety is your psychological security. Your own sense of safety is an important matter. To restore it, you will need to think through, perhaps with a concerned friend, what would help you feel safer. Maybe it's being accompanied whenever possible, adding security protection in your residence, staying with a friend for a time, being in more frequent contact with friends or family at home, etc. Though it may feel silly or embarrassing, it is essential that you insist on procedures and precautions that will make you feel safe.
- **Filing a report.** Whether to file a report must be your own decision. Filing a report is not an easy choice, because it means you will have to continue to be involved with the situation in a way you may not choose to do. On the other hand, it may help you to regain a sense of empowerment to do something constructive. It can also contribute to the future safety of others by identifying dangerous people or situations. Of course, filing a report does not necessarily bring about justice. Even cases where legal justice can be pursued may not bring psychological closure. You will need to work through the healing process regardless of the legal pathway and outcome of your case.
- **Obtain medical attention.** If you have sustained any physical injuries, as soon as possible it is important to find a facility where they have the training and expertise to provide you will appropriate treatment.
- **Seek counseling or social support.** People often find it useful to have someone to talk to. In fact, telling your story to others can be one of the most important pathways to healing. Who are the trusted friends, family, clergy, or colleagues who will listen? This can be very important to overcome the shame, helplessness, anger, and isolation that often follow. How and when you choose to tell your story is up to you. You may choose to do that publicly, in your local community where it happened or through writing about your experience for others, or more privately, in your friendship circle or faith community. Whether, when, how, and where you choose to seek social support is part of your path to empowerment.
- **Use your tried and true coping responses or find new ones.** Some people write in journals, meditate, pray, or read self-help or spiritual books. Others prefer to be with people. Sleep and physical exercise are essential to releasing the body's natural healing processes. These can counter depression and anxiety and increase your feeling of physical strength.
- **Restore control in your life.** Often this involves making choices and decisions even about small aspects of your life. The safety and security steps you decide on will be part of this process of restoring control. It could also mean making choices about how you spend your time, whether you take a leave from work or decide to spend some time away from the town where the attack took place, etc. Helplessness is invariably part of a trauma response. Each victim has to find her way through helplessness to empowerment, which is the journey from victim to survivor.

## What can we do to prevent GBV?

The rise in incidence in gender-based violence is everybody's problem. Though it is primarily the women in humanitarian and relief work who are likely to be the victims, men are vital to the prevention effort. No one can afford to ignore or deny that this problem is epidemic, with devastating consequences for the victim and her community. Any form of gender discrimination, even as minor as sexual jokes and innuendos, can contribute to a climate where women are at greater risk for victimization or hindered from getting needed support when an incident occurs. The following practices can make a difference.



- **Break the silence.** Training and ongoing discussion can raise awareness and reduce reluctance to address the issue within teams and organizations. Be sure that voices of women are heard. Careful listening, empathy, and respect for their safety concerns will contribute to their security and empowerment.
- **Ensure safety.** Humanitarian organizations should routinely assess gender security threats along with their other security protocols. Women should not be unaccompanied or isolated in their transportation, work, and living arrangements. However, keep in mind that most incidents of GBV occur between a victim and perpetrator who know each other. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that women are safe with their male co-workers. Women should not be required to advocate strenuously for their own safety. It should be institutional policy to care for their security needs.
- **Zero tolerance.** Any organization should make it clear in its written policies and protocols that there is zero tolerance for sexual harassment, gender discrimination, or other forms of GBV. Consequences for perpetrators should be immediate and severe.
- **Clear reporting guidelines.** Guidelines for reporting should be accessible, clear, and communicated throughout the organization. The reporting process should ensure privacy, confidentiality, and absence of retaliation or other obstacles. Victims should be guaranteed that their employment will not be at risk due to their involvement or reporting of a GBV event.
- **Identify local resources.** Every effort should be made to keep an updated list of local medical, psychological, and legal providers who are specifically trained to be sensitive to issues of GBV. Waiting until an event has occurred to search for help is inadequate. Organizations in some locations should have PEP (post exposure prophylaxis) kits on hand in order to protect victims exposed to HIV virus. In addition, up to date information should be kept on reporting authorities.
- **Power & Authority.** Every effort must be made to avoid an unequal gender distribution of power and authority in organizations and teams. The presence of women in leadership is one of the most effective tools in the fight against GBV.

#### For further reading:

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/fslst-specific-women.asp>

<http://unfpa.org/gender/violence.htm>

[http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/publications/violence/med\\_leg\\_guidelines/en/](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/med_leg_guidelines/en/)