



Fact sheet on

Gender based violence: A responsibility to protect

- In a 10 country study on women's health and domestic violence conducted by WHO, between 15% and 71% of women reported physical or sexual violence by a husband or partner.
- Between 7 and 48 % of girls and young women aged 10-24 years report their first sexual encounter as coerced (28% in Tanzania, 40% in South Africa).
- Between 4% and 12% of women reported being physically abused during pregnancy
- About 5,000 women are murdered by family members in the name of honour each year worldwide.
- Trafficking of women and girls for forced labour and sex is widespread and often affects the most vulnerable.
- Forced marriages and child marriages violate the human rights of women and girls, yet they are widely practiced in many countries in Asia, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa.
- Worldwide, up to one in five women and one in 10 men report experiencing sexual abuse as children. Children subjected to sexual abuse are much more likely to encounter other forms of abuse later in life.
- Violence against women is a major public health problem and a violation of human rights.
- Lack of access to education and opportunities, and low social status in communities are linked to violence against women.
- Violence by an intimate partner is one of the most common forms of violence against women.
- A wide range of physical, mental, sexual and reproductive, and maternal health problems can result from violence against women.
- Many women do not seek help or report violence when it occurs.

Violence against women is a political issue requiring strong political will in order to be addressed as a matter of priority.



■ Often treated as a marginal issue by governments ■ GBV is a global phenomenon and impacts people at all levels of society.

What is gender based violence (GBV)?

The United Nations defines gender based violence as any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to men or women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Violence, the UN role is preponderantly inflicted by men on women and girls.

What forms does gender based violence take?

There are many forms of violence against women, including:

- Sexual, physical, or emotional abuse by an intimate partner
- Physical or sexual abuse by family members or others
- Sexual harassment and abuse by authority figures (such as teachers, police officers or employers)
- Trafficking for forced labour or sex
- Harmful traditional practices such as as forced or child marriages and dowry-related violence
- Honour killings, when women are murdered in the name of family honour
- Systematic sexual abuse in conflict situations is another form of violence against women.

What factors fuel the GBV epidemic amongst women and girls?

There is a growing recognition that women and girls' risk of, and vulnerability to, HIV infection is shaped by deep-rooted and pervasive gender inequalities and violence against them in particular. Women's low status in society is the most striking underlying factor for gender based violence. Other common underlying and situational factors include:

- Gender inequality
- Social norms supportive of traditional gender roles and associating masculinity with violence
- Poverty, economic stress and unemployment
- Weak community sanctions

- Lack of institutional support from police and judicial systems
- Where there are restrictive laws on divorce and ownership and inheritance of property
- Alcohol and substance misuse
- Dysfunctional, unhealthy relationships characterised by inequality, power imbalances and conflict
- Where there is social breakdown due to conflicts or disasters

Why should policy makers address GBV?

The single greatest threat to the expansion of human capabilities in the southern Africa region today remains the HIV epidemic, is undermining human development objectives and thereby reversing the positive effects of national and regional development. Sexual violence directly and indirectly increases the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection. Ending sexual violence is one vital step in efforts to stop the spread of HIV. Gender based violence is increasingly becoming an urgent public health and human rights problem particularly in the context of HIV. Evidence from the sub-region is demonstrating that violence against women has reached epidemic levels thereby perpetuating women and girls' vulnerability and susceptibility to HIV infection:

- In sub-Saharan Africa, young women (15-24 years) account for 75 % of HIV infections and are approximately three times more likely to be infected than young men of the same age.
- Studies from Rwanda, Tanzania, and South Africa show up to three-fold increases in risk of contracting HIV among women who have experienced violence compared to those who have not.
- Women and girls continue to be disproportionately affected by HIV in sub-Saharan Africa. Throughout the region, women account for 60% of all HIV infections.
- Violence and fear of violence makes it difficult for women to negotiate for safer sex, including condom use with their sexual partners.
- Fear of violence prevents women from accessing HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services.
- **■ 90,000 children were newly infected with HIV in 2008.** More than 90% of HIV infections in infants and children are passed on by mothers during pregnancy, labour, delivery or breastfeeding. Without preventing new HIV infection, the region will not manage to meet the majority of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
- Sub Saharan Africa recorded **1.9 million new HIV infections in 2008 alone.**

Gender based violence is an abuse of human rights and failure to address it amounts to complicity. The cost of not addressing gender based violence is significant both socially and economically.

What are the international and regional policy instruments that policy makers can refer to when taking action to make a difference?

Significant steps have been taken by leaders at global, regional and country level to improve the legal and policy environment to prevent and respond to gender based violence. Although the existence of such instruments cannot bring about the fundamental changes necessary to combat gender based violence, they however pave the way for concrete action at national level that can influence local responses. It is important for policy makers and in particular parliamentarians due to their oversight role, to understand the laws and policies pertaining to combating GBV. In addition parliamentarians must be conversant with the enforcement mechanisms of such legal and policy instruments.

- **1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD-Cairo)**

The programme of Action affirms that women's rights are an integral part of all human rights. Women's empowerment is recognised as central to politics, government and other professions and personal relationships. It makes recommendations for actions by governments including prohibiting the trafficking of children and women, protecting women from violence through education and establishing measures and rehabilitation programmes for survivors of violence. The ICPD was the first international forum to acknowledge the enjoyment of sexual health as an integral part of reproductive rights.

- **1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),**

CEDAW elaborates on the significant roles states and private actors must play in ending GBV. It guarantees women equal rights with men in all spheres of life, including education, employment, healthcare, voting, nationality and marriage. The Committee on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women was established to review reports which all countries that are signatories to the convention must submit on women's status.

- **1995 Beijing Global Platform for Action-adopted at the 4th World Conference on Women**

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action recognises that all governments, irrespective of their political, economic and cultural systems are responsible for protecting and promoting women's human rights. It has a broad based agenda for promoting and protecting women's human rights and establishes the principle of shared power and responsibility between men and women. This document specifically identifies violence against women as one of the 12 critical areas of concern and obstacle to the achievement of women's human rights.

- **2008 SADC Protocol on Gender and Development**

The SADC Protocol on Gender and Development encompasses commitments made in all regional, global and continental instruments for achieving gender equality and enhances these instruments by addressing gaps and setting specific measurable targets where these do not already exist. The protocol advances gender equality by ensuring accountability by all SADC Member States, as well as providing a forum for the sharing of best practices, peer support and review.

Effective change requires a strong institutional framework and national bodies that have the power and the capacity to take action.

What must policy makers do to curb the GBV epidemic in southern Africa?

Policy makers have an important role in catalysing action to prevent and address GBV at national level. Some key actions for policy makers include the following:

- Policy makers must raise the visibility of gender based violence, have access to accurate data, and know about violence against women.
- Policies must recognise that GBV increases HIV risk both directly and indirectly through, increasing high risk practices. Both GBV survivors and perpetrators are at high risk of contracting HIV. GBV is actionable – the policy paradigm must address primary prevention (stopping the risk by reducing GBV), secondary prevention (taking steps to ensure that GBV does not lead to HIV) and tertiary prevention (reducing the consequences of HIV).
- Advocate for enactment and implementation of laws that comprehensively address GBV in all its forms.
- Take leadership and spearhead policy review that clearly articulates the country's position on gender based violence and HIV prevention. Key questions that should be addressed by such policies include the recognition of the role of GBV in increasing the HIV risk of victims and recognition of the special HIV risk and subsequent role of GBV.
- Policy makers must lead their countries in developing national actions plans for violence prevention that prioritise prevention of violence against women.
- The highest political level possible should be mandated to coordinate a multi-sectoral response to gender-based violence at national level. Such multi-sectoral actors include health and social services, religious organisations, the judiciary and police, trade unions and businesses, and the media.
- Integrate responses to violence against women in existing programmes for the prevention of HIV, and for the promotion of adolescent health.

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