

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS

Lead

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Living a life free of violence is a fundamental human right, but...

“Millions of women and girls around the world are assaulted, beaten, raped, mutilated or even murdered in what constitutes appalling violations of their human rights...” (former UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon).

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) are phenomena rooted in inequality, discrimination and power imbalances which become manifested as physical, psychological, economic and other forms of abuse. VAWG affects women and girls across the life course from child and forced marriage to rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, human trafficking, harassment in the workplace and also elder and widow abuse. Children who experience domestic violence often suffer in silence. Deeply ingrained patriarchal structures reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and violate women's rights to bodily integrity and autonomy. These effects are often compounded by structural inequalities and institutional violence based on race, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion, immigration or IDP status, age, homelessness, imprisonment, marital status, health, disability and socio-economic class, making an intersectional approach essential. Intersectionality offers an essential framework for understanding the experiences of individuals whose identities intersect at points of oppression. The media also plays a pivotal role in the objectification of women and girls and the retrenchment of harmful gender norms. VAWG is evolving and rapid advancements in new technologies have facilitated and increased cyber VAWG, online harassment, and non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, as well as child pornography. Gun violence, particularly in North America, can be a specific form of VAWG and GBV.

Most VAWG cases go unreported. Family and community pressures, lack of information and financial resources, language barriers, immigration status and lack of trust in and revictimization by local institutions, including the police and the judicial system, may prevent women reporting of VAWG. On average, only 13% of cases of VAWG across Europe are ever reported, and only a fraction result in conviction (EIGE, 2019). Moreover, accusations of domestic violence are often ignored under civil law in child custody decisions, allowing perpetrators to retain parental rights.

Gender stereotypes remain a challenge with VAWG often being perceived as a “women’s problem.” Toxic masculinities and sexist attitudes further exacerbate this problem. It is often seen as a private family matter rather than a public or political one, making it difficult for authorities to intervene. Some members of this group have also suggested investigating the Every Woman Treaty. Despite these many dimensions of VAWG, women’s agency and resilience remain strong, and civil society continues to make its voice heard.

VAWG is an obstacle to the achievement of the SDGs.

UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, stated in 2018 that whilst women’s empowerment was central to the success of the Sustainable Development Agenda, this could not be achieved without eliminating violence against women and girls (VAWG). Most countries in the UNECE region make the link between the BPFA and the SDGs, especially Goal 5, but the alignment between the two frameworks is not often clearly stated.

Survey results Answers to questions regarding the UNECE region

(Based on 43 national country report reviews, 55 CSO questionnaires and VAWG WG discussions with additional input from online comments and feedback provided during the CSO Forum, 28.10.2019).

- 1. Main structural barriers:** Insufficient access to justice; lack of training of judiciary, police, health and social workers about VAWG; lack of specialized courts; lack of education, awareness and data on VAWG, including feminist analyses; lack of women in leadership, especially in faith bodies and religious institutions; lack of knowledge, implementation and enforcement of laws, misinterpretation of the law; austerity measures, lack of funding for specialised services for VAWG survivors, e.g. shelters, legal aid, job training, sexual and reproductive health services (including abortion and birth control); socio-economic and cultural barriers and harmful gender norms, roles and stereotypes that disproportionately affect women of already marginalised groups.
- 2. Most prevalent and concerning forms of VAWG:** Domestic violence, sexual violence (including conflict-related sexual violence), psychological and emotional abuse, human trafficking, cyber violence, sexual harassment, child marriage, FGM and other harmful practices such as widow abuse, femicide and sexual exploitation.
- 3. De jure and de facto progress:** Most governments have advanced in some of the 12 critical areas of the BPFA both de jure and de facto, albeit to different extents, e.g. little progress in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, a backlash against the #MeToo movement in Canada, Denmark and other countries.
- 4. Examples of positive practices include:**
 1. Free legal aid for VAWG survivors regardless of background and financial income
 2. Social support services for protection and empowerment of girls and women.
 3. Supporting women’s independence, free childcare for work/study, tax credit for single mothers.
 4. #MeToo movement which empowered women to speak up about their experiences of violence.



Recommendations beyond Beijing+25

1. Improve access to justice

Priority 1: Remove barriers to reporting VAWG and stop impunity of perpetrators (especially for victims of sexual violence). Ensure more effective, fast track investigations, prosecutions and compensation for victims of GBV, better coordination between sectors, safety of victims, media privacy, immediate interventions (e.g. emergency restraining orders, child protection orders, crisis ambulance services, professional, medical and psychological help and forensic data collection) and free and accurate legal aid for survivors. Use multisectoral teams of well-trained police, judges, health and social workers, and work to rehabilitate perpetrators and engage men and boys in campaigns to eliminate GBV e.g. the White Ribbon Campaign.

Priority 2: Strengthen legal protections against VAWG through affirmative consent laws and the inclusion of emerging forms of violence such as cyber VAWG and unlawful violations of internet privacy. Ratify and implement existing comprehensive international legal frameworks such as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), CEDAW and the new ILO Convention 190 on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work. Improve law enforcement mechanisms and ensure equality and non-discrimination under the law, especially on grounds of race, socio-economic class, immigration status, and gender identity and sex characteristics in accordance with international human rights standards. Whilst laws are important, a comprehensive approach is essential together with community funding for survivors.

2. Establish and improve National Action Plans on eliminating VAWG based on gender equality mainstreaming and budgeting which promote empowerment and civic engagement for all.

Priority 1: Provide adequate and sustainable funding for a range of community driven resources for survivors' services, including women's shelters, rape crisis centres or sexual violence referral centres, free legal aid, psychological support and childcare and healthcare for survivors. Pay particular attention to marginalised groups and people facing additional challenges due to intersecting inequalities. Ensure effective responses to all cases of VAWG based on the due diligence standard, and increase the range, diversity and quality of available support services while minimizing the duplication of their function. Engage more actively CSOs which have specialized knowledge and expertise in the respective areas.

Priority 2: Collect integrated, reliable, disaggregated and confidential data on all forms of violence. Improve structures to assess VAWG and establish reliable monitoring and independent evaluation mechanisms to oversee EVAWG efforts, expenditures and results.

Priority 3: Set transparent accountability processes and spaces for full participation of CSOs, feminist and women's organisations.

3. Focus on prevention of VAWG through education and awareness

Priority 1: Educate students from pre-kindergarten through secondary school on internet safety, gender equality, human rights, mutual respect, diversity and tolerance; teach adolescents about consent and provide comprehensive sexuality education, social skills and anger management counselling where needed.

Priority 2: Address gender stereotypes in schools and homes and through the training and involvement of teachers, police, healthcare professionals and the media.

Priority 3: Work with CSOs, women's organisations and feminist movements to mobilise women and girls at the grassroots level and with men and boys to take a stand against GBV. Engage local governments, employers and public institutions (Parliaments, ministries, local authorities, municipalities, etc.) to prevent domestic violence, including using mobile units and smartphone apps with guaranteed confidentiality.

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