



Feminist Pocketbook

TIP SHEET #1:

Why does a feminist perspective matter in work to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls?

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), created in 2017 to reassert a feminist perspective in violence against women and girls (VAWG) work, is a collective of activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end VAWG.

This Tip Sheet is part of the COFEM Feminist Pocketbook. For access to the full Pocketbook, go to: www.cofemsocialchange.org.

Tip Sheet 1 introduces a feminist perspective to violence against women and girls' (VAWG), explores key feminist concepts and highlights the need to reassert a feminist approach in addressing VAWG.

Key points

- The root cause of violence against women and girls (VAWG) is gender inequality, or unequal power between women and men.
- The main goal of feminist-oriented work to end VAWG is to establish equality between women and men because equality between the sexes is the basis for ending VAWG.
- A feminist perspective in work to end VAWG helps us focus on inequality — and the resulting oppression of women and girls — as the root cause of violence.
- In the current climate of the depoliticisation of VAWG and backlash against feminism, reasserting a feminist approach is critical to the success of all work to end VAWG.

What is a feminist perspective?

Violence against women and girls¹ is a gendered phenomenon. Men are the primary perpetrators of VAWG. Unequal power between women and men produces and reinforces VAWG. Gender inequality exists in individual relationships between men and women and also exists in, and is reinforced by, political, economic and social systems, practices, and institutions. This is referred to as 'structural' inequality.

A feminist perspective to address VAWG focuses on recognising and tackling these unequal systems of power as a whole. A feminist frame for VAWG draws attention to the ways in which interpersonal violence is underpinned and exacerbated by structural violence.

Feminist activism has been instrumental in advancing women's rights, including action to address VAWG. Although the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed positive developments regard-

¹ Violence against women and girls is also referred to as gender-based violence. Refer to Tip Sheet 2 for further information on these two terms.

ing VAWG globally, many of these gains are now under threat. In many countries, women's recently won human rights are being eroded. We see shrinking space for women's movements and women's rights work across local, national and global contexts. For example, in 2017, the Trump administration rolled back reproductive rights and access to family planning for women both in the U.S. and around the world. The U.S. administration reinstated the 'Global Gag Rule', cutting billions of dollars in foreign aid funding from health programs globally that provide or even mention abortion services.

A vigorous feminist perspective and approach to addressing VAWG is needed to address these challenges, regain lost momentum and accelerate the transformation necessary for securing women and girls' full and equal rights.

What is gender inequality?

Gender inequality, and gender more broadly, are central concepts within a feminist perspective of VAWG. The term 'gender' refers to the social construction of what are considered appropriate roles, behaviours and relations among women, men, girls and boys. The social processes related to gender change over time and vary from place to place.

Gender inequality refers to the status and value given to men and male gender roles, behaviours and stereotypes, versus women and female gender roles, behaviours and stereotypes. Gender inequality is embedded in society and upheld by structural inequality — the political, social and economic systems, practices and institutions that make up society. Often gender inequality appears 'normal' or 'natural.' However, there is nothing inherently normal about women holding lower status than men in society. Gender inequality has been normalised in societies but it is not rooted in biology. When we challenge gender inequality, we are involved in political acts to end a type of discrimination faced by half the world's population. Women's rights activists draw attention to gender because it helps to clarify male privilege and female subordination, or gender inequality.

Today, however, the terms 'gender' and 'gender inequality' have become apolitical and decontextualised from their historical context. In other words, they are not used in ways that reflect power relations or that centre discrimination and VAWG. Instead, we see a problematic rise of gender-neutral concepts and practices, particularly evident in three domains of work that inform efforts to ad-



There are many different models of feminism that reflect different theoretical perspectives and lived experiences of women across geographies and contexts. However, all models share a common goal: To define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social equality between the sexes. Feminism is a movement and commitment to ending patriarchal domination for the benefit of all people.

Feminism recognises the need to transform fundamentally unequal power structures. Because women worldwide have been and continue to be oppressed in relation to and by men, feminism aims to increase women's rights, voices, access and opportunities.

However, not all women are the same and not all women experience oppression and inequality in the same way. Kimberlé Crenshaw, legal scholar and critical race theorist, coined the terms 'intersectionality' and 'intersectionality theory' in 1989 to identify and examine the dynamics of gender and racial inequalities as experienced by women of colour. Crenshaw argued that these experiences reflect multiple, intersecting forms of power and oppression that the feminist movement must be conscious of and address.

dress VAWG: gender mainstreaming, intersectional frameworks and protection/ist agendas.

What is gender mainstreaming and is it working?

Gender mainstreaming — the integration of gender equality concerns into the analysis and formulation of all policies, programs and projects — was introduced in the 1980s as a public policy tool to promote women's empowerment and interests. Prior to this time, public policy was based almost entirely on the interests and needs of men. Thus, the feminist rationale for this strategy was to bring women's rights, interests and needs into centre stage. As such, gender mainstreaming was the overall strategy adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 to support the goal of gender equality.

There have been many positive outcomes of gender mainstreaming for women and girls over the last

two decades. However, this work is losing ground because it increasingly fails to prioritise a focus on transformative change toward gender equality. For example, gender analysis is often disconnected from an analysis of patriarchal power relations, or men's status over women. Gender mainstreaming guidelines may promote 'gender-sensitive' approaches to analyse and address the differential needs of men, women, girls and boys. Although this may appear harmless, both the language and practice of 'gender sensitivity' represent a delinking of 'gender' from the hierarchy between men and women that privileges males over females. This distances gender analysis and mainstreaming from their purpose of addressing the rights, needs and interests of women and girls, especially their equality and empowerment.

In the gender mainstreaming approach, gender programming is undertaken not because a thorough analysis of gender power imbalances has been completed, but because of a simple analysis that what one group has, the other must have, too. In the new gender-neutral construct, targeted initiatives focusing on women are now even sometimes viewed as discriminatory against men. In reality, gender-neutral approaches are not effective in addressing the structural changes needed to end VAWG. Feminist action to achieve gender equality and end VAWG requires social transformation, not gender neutrality.

What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality is a framework to understand how various social characteristics, such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability, birth country, etc., co-exist and give some people power over others. Although all women — including trans women and women of all sexualities — face discrimination in the context of global patriarchy, some women face multiple forms of oppressions because of their race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, abilities and sexual orientation, which, in turn, shape their experiences of violence. Intersectionality highlights how women experience discrimination based on these different forms of oppression. For example, a Black, lesbian woman will face inequality based, at minimum, on her gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Applying intersectional feminism to practice means ensuring that feminist activism and advocacy recognises the different ways in which women experience oppression and inequality. Intersectionality is oriented explicitly towards transformation, building coalitions among different groups and working towards social justice. Recognition of the

Intersectionality is not a theory of 'difference'. It is a theory of oppression.



different and intersecting forms of oppression opens up opportunities for alliances among marginalised groups who share a common political interest in transforming gender inequality and related forms of oppression.

However, in some instances, the concept and practice of intersectionality is being de-politicised, replaced with ideas of 'difference' and omitting the 'oppression' part. For example, some people use intersectionality to rationalise a focus on men in gender mainstreaming programmes, arguing that intersectionality is about addressing the needs of all people. Like gender neutrality, this generic focus on difference — and the resulting inclusion of groups who historically and currently enjoy social advantage — masks the purpose of intersectionality and hinders our ability to address multiple oppressions and transform inequalities to achieve gender justice and end VAWG. Intersectionality is not a theory of 'difference'. It is a theory of oppression.

What is a 'broad protection agenda' and does it meet the needs of women and girls?

The language of a 'broad protection approach' is used often in humanitarian settings and also exists in non-humanitarian settings. A broad protection approach is a type of programming that tends to focus on people's immediate safety and security risks and is often gender neutral. For example, protection assessments in humanitarian settings often are implemented to determine whether — instead of how — women and girls constitute an 'at-risk' group despite clear guidance that VAWG and risk are to be assumed, particularly in emergency contexts. This approach fails to recognise and anticipate women and girls' specific vulnerabilities to violence and limited access to resources, rights and remedies. This can delay crucial start-up funding for programmes to respond to women's experiences of violence, and leave women and girls without support or services, leading to even greater risk.

A 'protectionist' angle takes the broad approach a step further by viewing women as passive victims in need of protection. In doing so, protectionist

approaches fail to recognise and build women's agency and, as a result, do not work to transform the conditions that create inequality, subordination and violence in the first place.

Moreover, broad protection and protectionist approaches reinforce gender inequality by obscuring the different and specific needs of women and girls compared to men and boys. Further, they fail generally to challenge gender inequality on structural and institutional levels. Such approaches risk defining women and girls as victims rather than

as agents of change, which serves to uphold rather than upend patriarchal power relations that privilege males over females. Although these approaches have a purpose in meeting specific and short-term safety and security needs, that purpose should not displace longer-term, transformative work. For these reasons, a feminist perspective is needed to direct attention away from protection as a central concern, to focus instead on the transformational change needed to create equality and eradicate violence.

Practical tips



Practitioners, researchers, donors and policy-makers

- Recognise and acknowledge gender inequality as the core driver of VAWG.
- Consider your own social positions, identities and relationships, and how these might shape the perspectives and outcomes of your work; those with access to power must step back or out, and facilitate access for, and with, women and girls who may not typically have such access.
- Move away from a broad protection agenda that risks neither recognising the distinct needs and risks faced by women and girls nor empowering them to address these risks.
- Distinguish between the drivers of VAWG and the causes of other types of violence, for

example, violence against men or violence against children.

- Articulate your commitment to transformational social change around gender as a strategy to end VAWG, and reflect this in VAWG initiatives, programmes and research.

Donors and policy-makers

- Fund and support VAWG work that is grounded in strong feminist theory and evidence, including through dedicated funding streams.
- Engage feminist-informed VAWG experts in funding decisions and every phase of the development of policies, programmes and monitoring and evaluation.
- Consider adopting feminist-oriented foreign assistance policies to address VAWG.



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