



Feminist Pocketbook

TIP SHEET #2:

Why does GBV programming focus on 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 2 discusses why it is important to centre gender-based violence (GBV) programmes around the experiences of women and girls even when synchronising work with other groups, and why and how to be accountable to principles of gender equality and feminist activism in all work to end GBV.

Key points

- Gender-based violence (GBV) programming focuses on women and girls (1) because women and girls are at greater risk of experiencing certain types of violence because of their subordinate status to men and boys globally, and (2) to address the underlying causes of violence against women and girls (VAWG): gender discrimination and unequal power between females and males.
- In some contexts, the definition of GBV is shifting away from a focus on women and girls with the result that GBV programmes are diluted from a clear, feminist-oriented focus on women and girls and toward a more diffused approach that includes other groups.
- There is no theoretical or evidence base to inform or support this shift; instead, it reflects a trend toward gender neutrality and depoliticisation of gender in GBV work.
- Working collaboratively and in alliance with others focused on different populations experiencing violence — rather than including diverse forms of violence under a GBV umbrella — will lead to more effective approaches that better serve feminist aims to achieve gender equality and end VAWG.

What does 'GBV' mean? Whom does it include?

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a gendered phenomenon. It is perpetrated overwhelmingly by men and is produced and reinforced by structural inequalities. Structural inequalities refer to the societal systems of oppression that privilege men over women.

To better describe this reality, women's rights activists use the term 'gender-based violence' to talk about VAWG. The term was formally adopted in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW 1993), an international agreement in which violence against women is defined as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual

or psychological harm or suffering to women.” DEVAW makes a clear link between patriarchy and GBV, emphasising that GBV is “a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women.”

Women-centred programmes and policies to end GBV stem from this feminist-informed understanding of GBV. GBV programmes aim to end all forms of violence and discrimination faced by women and girls. Toward this end, GBV programmes also aim to transform systems of gender inequality and create a more equitable world for women, men, girls and boys.

However, recent reinterpretations of this term — perhaps advanced because of misunderstandings of the feminist intent of ‘GBV’ or because of strategic efforts to bring attention to the needs of other groups — threaten to undermine GBV programming’s political aim to transform patriarchal structures and end VAWG through women and girl-centred efforts.

The issue of language

By using the term ‘GBV’ to highlight discrimination and inequality as the root cause of VAWG, feminist activists sought to emphasise this violence as a fundamental human rights violation. Shifting to ‘GBV’ from ‘VAWG’ was a strategy for underscoring accountability of states to address gender inequality as part of their responsibility to protect and promote the human rights of women and girls.

Some emerging definitions of ‘GBV’ have sought to shift focus away from the political project of ending structural gender inequalities toward a more neutral and de-politicised understanding of GBV. The expansion of GBV as an ‘umbrella’ term to refer to gendered or sexualised violence beyond VAWG sometimes has resulted in pressure on GBV programming to address other forms of violence, such as violence against men and boys.

GBV includes multiple types of violence

Across the globe, there are many different forms of GBV that affect women, including intimate partner violence, rape and sexual violence by partners and non-partners (including in conflict), female infanticide, early and forced marriage, pre-natal sex selection, dowry-related violence, female genital mutilation, honour-based violence, and trafficking. Women and girls are at risk of experiencing violence throughout their lives, reflecting the devaluation of women’s health, safety and well-being across the life course.

Such a reframing runs the risk of conflating diverse experiences of violence — once again making invisible the central role of gender-power inequalities in VAWG — and does a disservice to all people and groups who require support. Violence against any person constitutes a human rights violation and deserves attention. However, VAWG is unique because it is caused by gender discrimination of females in the context of global patriarchy. The specific aim of political, feminist-informed efforts to end GBV is to dismantle the gender hierarchy in which women hold lower status and power than men. When core issues of male privilege and women’s oppression within patriarchy become decentred or neutral, GBV programmes no longer operate based on feminist principles. This disconnection results in less effective programming overall and shrinking space for women and girls across all contexts.

Why is it important to focus on women and girls in GBV programming?

GBV is a complex phenomenon. A woman or girl’s risk of experiencing GBV is informed by personal, situational and social factors. At the same time, there are over-arching gender dynamics that harm all women and girls and contribute to their risk of

Case study: GBV programming in Syria

In the current Syria crisis, programmes to meet the specific needs of women and girls are under resourced and prioritised. At the same time, there is a push to mobilise resources to meet the needs of male survivors of violence. The entry point for services for men is often through the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services sector, such as programmes designed for victims of torture. However, in Syria, it is not clear whether these entry points have adequate specialisation for psychosocial support to male sexual violence survivors.

Some donors expect that men should be supported through existing GBV programmes for women and girls. Programmes that support male and female victims — if they work on GBV at all — address incidents from a clinical perspective rather than a rights-based one. The pressure to support male survivors of sexual violence places an additional burden on already underfunded programmes, detracts attention and focus away from the needs of women and girls and does not provide men and boys with quality support.

GBV. Addressing gender inequality as the key driver of GBV is essential for effective GBV programming.

Gender inequality at individual, community and societal levels manifests as GBV. GBV is normalised under a patriarchal system of oppression that views women as having lower status than men. For example, when people in a community believe that a man is justified in beating his wife, women across the community are more likely to experience GBV. As another example, men who have more gender-inequitable attitudes about women's position in society are more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence compared with men who do not hold these beliefs. Conversely, when communities tackle harmful social norms rooted in gender inequality, GBV can decline. For example, research in Uganda shows that when communities address issues of unequal power between women and men, and move toward more equal power-sharing relationships, the prevalence of intimate partner violence decreases. This is why maintaining a core commitment to dismantling unequal power between men and women in society keeps the focus of GBV programming squarely on the underlying drivers of gender discrimination and inequality.

When GBV programmes focus on women and girls, they also remain accountable to feminist principles. Central feminist tenets include the leadership of women to end VAWG, as well as ensuring the voices and experiences of women and girls are kept at the centre of all conversations and actions, including at every level of programming. This means that women and girls' experiences of GBV should inform and guide programme work, and programmes should be led by women and girls.

Women-centred GBV programmes should also be attuned to intersectionality and the differences of experience among women and girls. Although all women — including trans women and women of all

There is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives.

— Audre Lorde



sexualities — face discrimination in the context of global patriarchy, specific groups of 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. As feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde wrote, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” Effective and accountable GBV programming, while focused on women and girls generally, must also pay attention to the diverse challenges and forms of oppression that different groups of women experience.

What happens when GBV programmes do not tackle gender inequality?

When GBV programmes shift focus away from tackling gender inequality, patriarchy and intersectionality, the programme funding, design and implementation also become decentred from women and girls' needs and rights. For example, expanding the definition of GBV to include men and boys' experiences of sexual violence can lead to a dilution of (already constrained) funds available for programmes targeted directly toward women and girls. Also, GBV actors can feel pressured to respond to donors and others who demand a shift of focus away from women and girls, threatening both the

Case study: European Union definition of GBV

The European Union (EU) defines gender-based violence as “violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or as violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately.”

This definition uses gender as a demographic characteristic (rather than employing a feminist-informed frame for the social analysis of hierarchy and discrimination between males and females), suggesting that GBV can happen because a person is male, female, or somewhere else along the gender spectrum.

The EU definition appears to have been adapted from the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women

and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention, 2011), which states “gender-based violence against women shall mean violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.” In the more recent EU definition, ‘woman’ has been replaced with ‘gender’.

The space that was once reserved for attention to, and action on, the violence that women and girls face is now crowded with multiple forms of violence deemed to have any sort of gendered dimension, regardless of whether the violence is grounded in sexuality, gender identity, gender relations or gender norms, rather than inherent, fundamental or systematic gender discrimination and inequality.

quality and quantity of resources and care available to both females and males affected by sexual and other forms of violence.

Programme design also can become too diffuse for practical purposes. When GBV programmes shift away from a targeted focus on women and girls, they lose conceptual clarity on how to provide adequate services and prevent violence. A broader definition of GBV often does not translate into complex, synchronised programming that reveals the foundations of, and overlaps among, multiple forms of violence, for example, as seen in the case

study on GBV programming in Syria above. Rather, it is more likely to neutralise the core political project of GBV programming — to transform gender inequality and address VAWG — and shift away from evidence-based programme design.

Given these important consequences, we underscore the need for synchronised programming to end all forms of violence. Synchronised programming can include coordination among different sectors, referrals and shared trainings, while also promoting the value and importance of a core and distinct focus on women and girls in the context of GBV programming.¹

Practical tips



Practitioners, researchers, donors and policy-makers

- Advocate for synchronising work with other groups but do not subsume violence affecting different groups, e.g. violence experienced by men or violence that is based on homophobia, under the 'GBV' umbrella.
- Educate partners and colleagues on the importance of women-centred programming.
- Insist that women and girls are the focus of GBV programmes.
- Make sure the voices and perspectives of marginalised women are heard and reflected in programming.
- Integrate feminist principles into women-centred GBV programming.



- Keep local women at the forefront of GBV programming and consult and engage women-led civil society organisations and activists in all sectors and contexts.

Practitioners

- Take the lead role in reiterating the need for a specialised focus on women and girls in GBV programming.

Donors and policy-makers

- Engage feminist-informed GBV experts in decision-making processes around funding, programme design and implementation progress.
- Prioritise and commit dedicated funding to women-centred GBV programmes.



www.cofemsocialchange.org



@COFEM_EVAV

Feminist Pocketbook	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
---------------------	----	-----------	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----

Suggested citation: Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), *Why does GBV programming focus on women and girls?*, *Feminist Pocketbook Tip Sheet 2*, 2018.

COFEM would like to acknowledge the Equality Institute for its role in writing the Feminist Pocketbook and the many COFEM members who contributed to it.