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# Getting Back on Track with SDG 5: Seven actions to eliminate violence against women and girls





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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out a formidable road map to realise a more equitable world for people and the planet, leaving no one behind. At this midpoint moment, with less than seven years to the 2030 deadline, there is significant work remaining when half of the population still faces daily threats to their well-being, bodily autonomy, and safety. Across diverse ages, nationalities, and (dis)abilities, women and girls are at risk of experiencing violence because of their gender. This risk becomes even more grave for women and girls who face intersecting levels of discrimination due to age, citizenship, sexuality, employment status, gender identity, geography, and other structural factors.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a global epidemic and urgent public health crisis affecting women and girls in their homes, in their schools, on the streets, online, and at their workplaces.<sup>1</sup> 1 in 3 women and girls globally report experiencing sexual or physical violence in their lifetime, a figure that has remained constant over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> In the most severe cases, this violence results in femicide. 81,000 women and girls were intentionally killed in 2021, of which 45,000 (56%) were killed by intimate partners or other family members, showing that home is not a safe place for many women and girls.<sup>3</sup>

ABOVE: Woman making herself aware about various laws regarding domestic violence through the leaflets provided by the mobile information service under a community project (P.A.C.E.) implemented by CARE Bangladesh. This project aims to enhance the capacity of urban women migrant workers for advancement in personal, professional and community life by providing them with necessary counsel and training. Konabari, Gazipur. © Tapash Paul/CARE

Global circumstances due to conflict, climate-induced disasters, COVID-19, and technology have exacerbated the situation of violence and reinforced the need for urgent action. In conflict-affected settings, VAWG is a driver of armed conflict and undermines transitions to peace and long-term stability. In the two most conflict-affected communities in South Sudan, more than 70% of non-partner sexual violence occurred during armed conflict.<sup>4</sup> Following climate-induced disasters, women and girls face increased risk of violence, including rape, sexual assault and harassment, intimate partner violence, child marriage, trafficking, and sexual exploitation.<sup>5</sup> COVID-19 unearthed a shadow pandemic of VAWG, with 45% of women reporting knowing someone who has experienced violence since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Since the outbreak of the pandemic, calls to domestic violence helplines increased rapidly and more than 50% of women believe that sexual harassment in the public has worsened.<sup>7</sup> As people's lives increasingly shifted online, the pandemic also highlighted the growing risks of technology-facilitated GBV. Globally, it is estimated that 85% of women have witnessed or experienced online violence.<sup>8</sup>

The consequences of this violence are far-reaching, impacting women physically, psychologically, socially, and economically. Communities burdened by high rates of violence experience lost wages, worsened productivity, disrupted access to education and incur high costs for response services.<sup>9</sup> Conservative estimates suggest that national governments can lose almost 4% per cent of their GDP due to the direct and indirect costs of VAWG.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, violence denies women, their families, communities, and societies the opportunity to reach their potential.

Addressing VAWG is essential to meet 14 of the 17 SDGs, affecting goals related to poverty, hunger, health and well-being, education, climate change, and economic insecurity across the entire humanitarian-development-peace nexus.<sup>11</sup> Tackling VAWG must therefore be a priority to make progress on the SDGs by 2030. Here are seven concrete actions for the next seven years that policymakers, donors, and practitioners can take:

## ACTION

# 1

## Invest in evidence-based VAWG prevention programming.

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Since the SDGs were launched, governments, donors, and non-governmental organisations have mobilised rigorous, policy-relevant evidence to demonstrate that violence is no longer inevitable, but is preventable. Over half of the prevention pilots evaluated under Phase 1 of the UK's What Works to Prevent Violence Programme led to significant reductions in VAWG of around 50%. For example, Ghana's Gender Centre's Community-Based Action Teams (COMBAT), a community mobilisation strategy aimed at reducing the incidence of VAWG, resulted in a 50% reduction in past-year physical partner violence and a 55% reduction in past-year sexual partner violence.<sup>12</sup> In Tajikistan, Zindagii Shoista, a combined gender norm-change and economic empowerment intervention, reduced VAWG rates by 50% and improved relationship and gender equality indicators.<sup>13</sup>

The World Health Organisation and UN Women’s RESPECT framework outlines specific steps for a public health and human rights approach to scaling up prevention of violence against women programming.<sup>14</sup> Phase 1 of What Works also identified key elements of effective violence prevention programming, based on rigorous evaluations across a range of contexts (see box on the right).

Large-scale VAWG prevention can be delivered at low cost when implemented with modest human resources requirements.<sup>15</sup> However, this work is chronically underfunded. Data suggests that over the last five years, overseas development assistance (ODA) spending on VAWG has fallen by 13%.<sup>16</sup> VAWG prevention is estimated to have accounted for just 0.19% of overall aid in 2022, and just 42% of countries reporting to WHO have national budget commitments for VAW.<sup>17</sup> Ending VAWG will require new investments in strengthening the capacity of implementers, adapting and scaling evidence-based approaches on prevention, and facilitating learning and knowledge exchange between stakeholders. ●

**Phase 1 of the What Works to Prevent Violence research programme identified effective design elements of prevention interventions such as:**

- Addressing multiple drivers of violence, such as gender inequity and poor communication between couples
- Using group-based participatory learning that emphasises critical reflection
- Working with both women and men, rather than working with women or men only which can be insufficient to change gender relations and may cause backlash
- Ensuring sufficient programme intensity and duration - about 3 years to facilitate transformative social norm change and reduce the likelihood of harm
- Selecting and supporting well-trained gender-equitable staff and facilitators
- Integrating support for survivors of violence through direct engagement or community-based referrals.<sup>18</sup>

**ACTION**

**2**

**Scale up comprehensive, accessible and quality services for survivors.**

Responding to violence requires meaningful collaboration across stakeholders to create a reliable, survivor-centred network of services that meet the economic, housing, legal, medical, and psychological needs of survivors and their families. It is also a prerequisite to ethical and effective prevention. Even where basic services exist, they are often underfunded, understaffed, and fail to meet quality standards. WHO recommends offering and facilitating reporting for women who wish to do so, identifying intimate partner violence through clinical enquiry (as opposed to universal screening), offering first-line support to all survivors who disclose violence, developing an enabling environment through policy and budget commitments, and ensuring confidentiality, including explaining to survivors the limits to confidentiality where health-care providers are legally obligated to report.<sup>19</sup> ●

**ACTION****3**

## **Integrate VAWG into large-scale sector programmes and systems, such as health, education, legal and justice, and social protection, to optimise their impact on preventing and responding to VAWG.**

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Integrating VAWG into different sectors can help ensure a comprehensive, sustainable, and cost-effective approach to ending all forms of VAWG, while simultaneously accelerating the achievement of all SDGs. For example, the education sector has transformative potential to address violence at scale with minimal additional cost. Through Phase 1 of the UK's What Works to Prevent Violence Programme, we have good evidence that it is possible to prevent violence and shape gender norms using school-based interventions, including a play-based life skills project in Pakistan<sup>20</sup> and a school-based peace and community education project in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, economic interventions, such as cash transfers combined with behaviour change elements and women's group work, can reduce rates of intimate partner violence by up to 66%.<sup>22</sup> The health sector, particularly antenatal and post-natal settings, can also provide important opportunities to intervene to mitigate harm, prevent recurrence of violence and increase women's safety. Integrating VAWG response and prevention across sectors is a cost-effective approach that not only reduces violence but also yields positive outcomes in various sectors. For example, mainstreaming violence prevention into education systems can improve learning outcomes. In Rwanda, students who feel unsafe at school scored 36% lower on maths tests, and their reading fluency was 12% lower than the average.<sup>23</sup> ●

**ACTION****4**

## **Develop a costed, cross-sectoral national action plan to end GBV that delineates specific actors, responsibilities, programmes, budgets and timelines to strengthen the enabling environment.**

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National Action Plans provide a centralised, coordinated mechanism that brings together various stakeholders, works across all sectors, and unites under a shared vision of a violence-free future. 81% of countries have multi-sectoral plans of action, with 42% committing budgets to tackle violence against women.<sup>24</sup> Good practices highlight the importance of comprehensive response services, including funding for safe accommodation options for survivors, healthcare, legal, and law enforcement services. Meanwhile, prevention efforts focus on scaling up evidence-based interventions and building a workforce specialised in violence prevention,

spanning specialist family violence services, primary prevention, community services, health, justice and education. For example, in Victoria, Australia, the state government’s workforce development plan emphasises the critical need to recruit and equip people from a diversity of backgrounds to respond to violence.<sup>25</sup> In Fiji, the process of developing the plan was used to increase awareness and change behaviour among stakeholders, as well as build a shared understanding of prevention.<sup>26</sup> To help policymakers and practitioners, UN Women and the Equality Institute have developed a forthcoming National Action Plan handbook, which draws upon lessons from several countries.<sup>27</sup> ●

## ACTION 5

### Support autonomous women’s rights organisations and movements to lead VAWG efforts.

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Empirical evidence demonstrates that feminist civil society movements contribute significantly to ending violence. A dataset of social movements and VAWG policies across 70 countries revealed that autonomous women’s movements are the single biggest predictor of progressive policy change related to ending violence against women.<sup>28</sup> Women’s rights organisations (WROs) are often on the frontlines of VAWG prevention and response, serving as first responders in emergencies before international mobilisation, filling in essential access gaps with established trust.<sup>29</sup> In combination with already high VAWG prevalence rates and the pandemic’s exacerbation, efforts to address violence against women and girls have also been affected by coordinated and well-funded efforts to roll back women’s and girls’ rights from regressive actors. These anti-gender movements are limiting freedoms at the community, national and international levels and are amplified by a rising global trend towards authoritarianism.<sup>30</sup>

To achieve transformative change, there is a need to fund the full ecosystem – both grassroots WROs and mid-size WROs that play a critical role in movement-building and driving action at scale. Phase 2 of the What Works Programme conducted a consultation to understand better how WROs could best access donor funding to prevent VAWG. The findings suggested that multilateral and bilateral donors should provide flexible funding, create accessible and responsive systems for requests for proposals, customise due diligence to meet the needs of WROs, and build sufficient programme length.<sup>31</sup> Increasing funding through both well-established and newer innovative accessible mechanisms, such as women’s funds, some private foundations, the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, and the Equality Fund, is urgently needed to build resilient and sustainable women’s rights organisations and movements to end VAWG. ●

## ACTION

# 6

## Invest in coordinated, secure, and gender-sensitive research and data collection.

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Consistent, reliable data collection and research help governments understand the full scope of the problem, what interventions are working well, and what gaps persist, including addressing violence against women and girls most at risk. Disaggregating data and researching effective adaptation of approaches better respond to the needs of those most at risk, particularly women and girls facing multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination, including age, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality. Building anonymised processes, service referral, and safety protocols enable a survivor-centred approach to data collection and mitigate the potential of re-traumatisation for victims. Lastly, expanding research to deepen understanding of forms of violence where there is less knowledge, such as in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, technology-facilitated GBV, and sexual harassment in public spaces and workplaces, can advance efforts to end violence in all its forms). ●

## ACTION

# 7

## Prioritise women and girls at greatest risk.

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Women and girls face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as disability, age, sexuality, gender identity and ethnicity. For example, women with disabilities are 2 to 4 times more likely to experience intimate partner violence and often face stigma, reducing their ability to seek help.<sup>32</sup> LGBTQI+ people also face alarming rates of violence, with 56% of sexual and gender minorities in Southern and Eastern Africa having experienced violence in their lifetime.<sup>33</sup> To address this urgent issue, investing in programmes and research with women and girls most at risk of violence is important. Initiatives like the What Works programme are adapting interventions to reach those facing the most frequent and severe violence, including individuals experiencing multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination. For example, the programme funds innovative projects with young LBT people in Nigeria and Nepal. A key element is supporting local specialist organisations at the frontlines of preventing violence, such as refugee women-led organisations, organisations of persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ organisations. Ensuring sufficient time and resources for meaningful engagement is essential, in line with the motto 'Nothing about us without us'.<sup>34</sup> Promising government efforts include Argentina's protocol for comprehensive care for victims of sexual violence, which supports survivors with disabilities,<sup>35</sup> and South Africa's recognition of LGBTQIA+ people as a priority group in their National Strategic Plan on GBV and Femicide.<sup>36</sup> ●

## Endnotes

- 1 To align with language used in the SDGs and the What Works 2 Programme, this brief uses the term "violence against women and girls (VAWG)". However, this term is sometimes used instead of, or interchangeably with gender-based violence. Read to learn more about the difference between the terms here: <https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Paper-2-Reframing-language-of-%E2%80%98GBV%E2%80%99-away-from-feminist-underpinnings.pdf>
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