



## Feminist Pocketbook

### TIP SHEET #7:

## Violence against men and boys

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](http://www.cofemsocialchange.org).

*Tip Sheet 7 seeks to clarify the differences between violence against women and girls (VAWG) and violence experienced by men and boys. It explains the importance of using the term 'gender-based violence' for VAWG only, and not in reference to violence against males; it also emphasises the need for discrete and targeted programming to address different forms of violence.*

### Key points

- Violence against men and boys has different root causes from violence against women and girls (VAWG). Although violence against men and boys can have gendered dimensions, it does not stem from structural gender-based inequality, which is the root cause of gender-based violence (GBV).
- Expanding the term 'GBV' to include violence against men and boys confuses diverse experiences of violence and ignores the central role of gender-based power inequalities in the violence experienced by women and girls. This shift in the use of the term 'GBV' to describe violence against males creates misunderstanding about the different drivers of various forms of violence and does a disservice to all groups who require support. It also risks pulling away attention and resources from work to address VAWG.
- Addressing VAWG and violence against men and boys require different approaches.

### What is the issue?

Women working in the field of 'GBV' are often asked, 'What about violence against men?' In the past decade, some actors have increasingly used the term 'GBV' to include different forms of violence experienced by groups other than women and girls. In particular, men's experience of sexual violence in conflict and humanitarian settings is being integrated under the 'GBV' umbrella. Advocates for this approach have argued that the focus on women and girls in GBV theory and practice ignores the needs of men and boys.

Although all violence is a violation of fundamental human rights, categorising violence against men as 'GBV' is problematic because it confuses diverse experiences and drivers of violence, makes invisible the central role of gender-based power inequalities in violence experienced by women and girls and disempowers all groups who require support.

### Why does it matter?

Women's activists and practitioners have been advocating for decades for attention and resources

to focus on action against violence against women and girls, which is also referred to as 'GBV'. However, this space is being crowded increasingly with multiple forms of gendered and sexualised violence. This reframing is happening most prominently in humanitarian contexts, where VAWG remains pervasive and significantly under-resourced.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the crisis in Syria, GBV programmes addressing the needs of women and girls are majorly under-resourced yet also being pressured to meet the needs of male survivors of violence. This shift to incorporate men's issues within GBV programming reflects the tendency of patriarchal institutions to drift continuously toward male priorities such that policy and programming prioritise men's needs at the cost of work to address VAWG.<sup>2</sup>

## What does violence against men and boys look like?

Compared to VAWG, there is a smaller body of knowledge on prevalence rates, risks, protective factors and the impacts of different forms of violence against men and boys, particularly sexual violence. There is no empirical evidence base confirming that the different types of violence experienced by men and boys has a common underlying determinant, which is the case with VAWG. Available evidence, however, indicates that sexual violence against

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***The vast majority of violence is perpetrated by men.***

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boys in the family or community — often perpetrated by a male relative or community member, such as a neighbor or religious leader — and sexual violence against men and boys in conflict settings are both widespread (see box below).

Similarly to many forms of VAWG, a key challenge in understanding the nature and scope of sexual violence against men and boys is linked to low levels of reporting. However, the reasons for low reporting may be different for males than females. Whereas females may be afraid of secondary victimisation (e.g. being forced to marry the rapist or leave the household with no resources, retaliation by intimate partners, etc.), ideas around masculinity that emphasise men as strong and invulnerable can be barriers to men disclosing their experiences of sexual violence. There is at least one characteristic, however, that is universally shared between VAWG and all forms

## Sexual violence against men and boys in conflict

Men and boys in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) comprise 4-10 per cent of the total number of survivors of sexual violence who seek medical treatment.<sup>3</sup> In Liberia, a survey of 1,666 adults found that 32.6 per cent of male combatants experienced sexual violence, while 16.5 per cent were forced to be sexual servants.<sup>4</sup> A 2012 IMAGES study conducted by Sonke Gender Justice in DRC that surveyed 1,500 men and women found that 10 per cent of men reported that they had been forced to have sex or were forced to perpetrate rape, and 17 per cent were forced to witness a rape of another woman or man.

Although evidence suggests that the rate of sexual violence is lower for males than females, men and

boys experience a range of sexual violence in conflict settings, from rape to coerced genital self-mutilation. Men and boys may also face sexualised forms of torture such as being coerced to perpetuate sexual violence against other men and women. Boys and young men can be sexually exploited, forced to trade sexual acts for food, clothing or other basic needs. Migrant men and boys can be forced into prostitution to pay debts or experience violence in asylum institutions. Intersecting factors influence the likelihood of particular groups of men experiencing sexual violence, for example, sexual minority adolescents and men are often forced to live in poor conditions and may also face increased threats of extortion and sexual exploitation.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Autesserre, S. (2012) "Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and their Unintended Consequences", *African Affairs*, v. 111 (443).

<sup>4</sup> Johnson et al. (2008) "Association of combatant status and sexual violence with health and mental health outcomes in postconflict Liberia", *JAMA*, 300(6).

<sup>1</sup> See Tip Sheet 8 for discussion of how to best maximise impact in coordinated efforts to address different forms of violence.

<sup>2</sup> See Tip Sheet 2, Why does GBV programming focus on women and girls?, for a discussion of how expanded definitions of GBV fail largely to reflect feminist theory and principles.

## Limited funding for gender equality and GBV programming

In 2014, Syria, South Sudan and the Philippines received the greatest proportion of overall humanitarian assistance targeting gender equality and women's needs compared to other countries — but this still only amounted to a mere 1% of the total humanitarian aid to each of these countries — and was disbursed across GBV programming and other gender-related issues.<sup>5</sup> In 2016, only 0.6% of humanitarian funding went to GBV programming.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> OCHA, World Humanitarian Data and Trends, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> OCHA, World Humanitarian Data and Trends, 2017.

of violence against males: The vast majority of violence is perpetrated by men.

As with VAWG, intersecting factors shape how men experience different types of violence. For example, several studies have found that men with disabilities are more likely to report sexual violence or attempted sexual violence than men without disabilities, and men who have sex with men may be subject to higher levels of violence in some settings because of homophobia. Although intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence experienced by women and girls, the World Health Organization reports that approximately 80% of homicides target men (with 15-29 year olds being most at risk) and are perpetrated primarily by men.

### What's wrong with using 'GBV' to describe men's experiences of violence?

The fact that certain types of violence may be targeted at a man or groups of men does not mean that violence can be defined as 'GBV'. It is true that most violence has a gendered dimension; every individual who experiences and perpetrates violence is influenced by gender roles and norms and all violence occurs within a gendered social context. In this way, many forms of violence against men and boys have gendered elements, meaning the violence is related in some way to gender norms, roles, or masculinities. For example, in conflict settings, sexual violence may be perpetrated against other men to undermine their masculinity and enforce power differentials between groups. This violence serves to diminish the wellbeing and power of par-

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ticular men, such as men from a rival political or ethnic group.

However, even though men are more likely to experience certain types of violence, they do not experience this violence because their status as men is subordinated and oppressed. This is different from women's experiences of GBV, which occurs because all women are subordinated in the global gender hierarchy. As discussed in Tip Sheet 2, feminist activists first introduced the language of 'GBV' to highlight how gender discrimination and inequality frame women's experiences of violence. Therefore the language of 'GBV' is inherently political. GBV impacts all women — including transwomen and women of all sexualities — regardless of economic status, race and ethnicity.

Applying the term 'GBV' to violence against men (including males from minority groups) co-opts this term and conflates different issues, implying misleadingly that males and females suffer similarly and even equally from the prevailing gender order and its related norms, structures and practices. Including forms of violence against men under the 'GBV' umbrella also limits the effectiveness of programmes and services for all groups and can lead to a dilution of already limited funds available for programmes targeted toward women and girls. Violence against men and boys has its own distinct causes and impacts, and therefore requires specific programming that is different from VAWG.

## Practical tips



### Practitioners, researchers, donors and policy-makers

- Learn about and articulate the differences between different forms of violence against men and boys, and violence against women and girls, rather than grouping all violence under the term 'GBV'.
- Recognise the different drivers and impacts of different types of violence, and insist on specialised programming, services and responses to meet the needs of women and girls as distinct from those of men and boys.
- Centre GBV programs around the experiences of women and girls and commit to ending gender inequality as the foundation for ending GBV. This includes prioritising and dedicating resources to GBV programmes.

### Practitioners

- When working on different forms of violence against men and boys, work with — rather than in isolation from or in competition with — practitioners focused on VAWG. By working

separately but collaboratively, interventions can better meet the specific needs of different groups, and at the same time work toward the shared goal of ending violence.

### Researchers

- Gather further evidence on the prevalence, patterns and drivers of different forms of violence against men and boys and use it to generate theory and evidence. Building the evidence base and theoretical understandings of this violence will help reduce the conflation of violence against men and boys with 'GBV'. This will help create better responses to different types of violence against men and boys.

### Donors

- Dedicate new funding in the field of prevention, mitigation and response to violence against men and boys. It is essential that addressing various forms of violence against men and boys and male perpetration does not compete with, and reduce funding for, existing efforts to prevent and respond to VAWG.



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