

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN EMERGENCIES

Overview

In every humanitarian crisis, humanitarian agencies, donors, and governments should seek to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls (VAWG) and gender-based violence (GBV) in emergencies, by:

- Reducing the risks of GBV/VAWG for beneficiaries of humanitarian programmes;
- Supporting long-term efforts to tackle the causes of GBV/VAWG in recovery and transition strategies;
- Supporting survivors' access to safe, confidential services; and
- Placing all of the above in the context of efforts to tackle the broader gendered impacts of crises, in order to meet the needs of women, men, girls and boys, and to find opportunities to promote women's rights and gender equality in the long term.

As well as encouraging other actors to undertake these actions, Oxfam is committed to promoting gender equality and preventing GBV/VAWG, through the implementation of its Minimum Standards for Gender in Emergencies.

In addition, and particularly in conflict and transition contexts, donors, governments, UN agencies, civil society, armed forces, and peacekeepers, should advance women's rights, and undertake special measures to ensure their protection from GBV/VAWG.

1 Background

Gender-based violence (GBV) covers any physical, mental, or social abuse committed on the basis of the victim's gender. Rooted in unequal power relations between men and women, most examples are **violence against women and girls** (VAWG) committed by men or boys, but they might also suffer instances of GBV, where they are targeted because of their gender roles, or perceived as deviating from their roles as men (for example, as can be seen with violence against gay men).

GBV/VAWG covers sexual and domestic violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), harm to men's genitals, forced early marriage, and widow killings. According to the UN, one woman in three experiences physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.¹ In addition to being a violation of rights, it is a major obstacle to women's and girls' development, and the welfare of communities and societies as a whole.²

Such violence results from a complex interplay of individual, family, community, and social factors. Though women are at risk in every society, they are not equally vulnerable,³ and GBV/VAWG often increases at times of crises because of, for example, risks associated with displacement, the use of rape as a weapon of war, and increased impunity through the breakdown of law and order. Domestic violence, which can be exacerbated by the availability of arms, may increase both during and after a conflict.⁴ But the effects on women and girls are not



limited to conflicts; in the food crisis in Yemen in 2012, Oxfam saw increased rates of forced early marriage, condemning another generation of girls to the poor health and social outcomes often associated with this.⁵ Women and girls in emergencies are sometimes forced to engage in sex in exchange for money, resources, or access to services and assets. In Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, insecurity and sexual violence have been pervasive.⁶ In many refugee camps, it is often women who walk long distances from the camps to forage for wood where they are vulnerable to sexual assault.

States are obliged to protect against forms of GBV/VAWG under general provisions of international law. States should exercise 'due diligence' to prevent GBV/VAWG. Where it occurs they must act to halt and investigate it, and, where necessary punish the perpetrators and ensure reparation for victims. States are also responsible for preventing and prosecuting human rights abuses committed by individuals or groups. In addition, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which applies in situations of armed conflict, includes provisions against many acts which constitute GBV/VAWG – for example, indecent assault and rape, and the targeting of civilians. Armed groups, as well as states, are accountable under IHL.⁷

States, however, bear the primary responsibility for protecting their civilians, although in some cases they may be unwilling or unable to do so, for example where the state has lost de facto control of an area. For this reason, the UN Security Council has developed means to improve the protection of civilians (PoC), including through UN peacekeeping missions.⁸

Beyond the immediate threats, crises can radically affect social, cultural, and political structures across both private and public spheres. They can exacerbate inequalities, but also sometimes provide opportunities for change, where discriminatory gender norms and unequal power relations might be challenged.⁹

2 Oxfam's position on GBV/VAWG in emergencies

If humanitarian action is planned without gender equality in mind, it can fail to address women and men's specific needs, and can fail to mitigate immediate threats to their safety. It will also miss the opportunity to support broader efforts to promote gender equality.

In emergency situations, where states may be less able to protect civilians and the risk of GBV/VAWG often increases, Oxfam encourages all those involved in the humanitarian response – including humanitarian agencies, donors, and governments – to:

I. Reduce the risk of GBV/VAWG for beneficiaries of humanitarian programmes

Rapid situational analyses should gather specific information on GBV/VAWG to inform action plans to tackle the risks directly. Women should be fully involved in decision making on the placement and design of services, such as water, sanitation and shelter. Food distribution services, for example, can use 'safe spaces' and separate queues for women, and be timed to enable women to return home before dark. Training and sensitization of humanitarian staff on such 'safe programming' approaches in all relevant organizations is crucial.

II. Support access to safe, confidential services for survivors of GBV/VAWG

Services for survivors must be appropriate to the context and meet the needs of vulnerable individuals. At a minimum, services must seek to address psychological trauma, provide access to emergency reproductive health services, safe spaces for survivors in the recovery process, and support (legal, financial and psychosocial) through the justice process as required.

Oxfam's self-referral programme in Yemen (2012–13)

In crises, Oxfam staff, partners, and volunteers are regularly approached with requests for information and advice about where people can get help or find a particular service, including for GBV/VAWG.

In Yemen in 2012, a range of local authorities, national and international NGOs, and UN agencies were providing specialist services in Aden and Abyan, such as medical, psychosocial, legal, family reunification, mine risk education. An earlier protection assessment had found that Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) had limited information about these services, and about the risks and benefits that could help them make informed choices about whether to use them.

Under the self-referral programme in Yemen, Oxfam staff and partners disseminated information about emergency services and referral pathways so that those affected by violence and abuse could access them quickly and safely where Oxfam and its partners were implementing community-based water, sanitation and hygiene promotion (WASH) activities.

The programme involved:

1. **Service mapping** of protection-related services in Aden and Abyan;
2. A **baseline survey** of information needs amongst IDPs in the locations where Oxfam's WASH activities were;
3. Development of **standard operating procedures** (SOPs) for dealing with requests and queries from IDPs;
4. Training of Oxfam staff and partners on how to reactively and proactively disseminate information, and **information dissemination activities** (continued beyond the initial pilot phase);
5. Working within the **Protection Cluster** to collaborate with service providers for survivors of GBV/VAWG and other protection concerns;¹⁰
6. **Advocacy** where necessary for adequate service provision where it was lacking; and
7. **General training on protection and gender** issues for Oxfam staff and partners.

III. Support long-term efforts to tackle the root causes of GBV/VAWG in recovery and transition strategies

This includes:

- Supporting women's rights and other local organizations which challenge attitudes on gender equality and seek to hold duty bearers to account; and
- Engaging with men and boys to challenge attitudes and beliefs that undermine women's rights, and to promote positive masculinities and acceptance of gender equality.

The Oxfam-initiated *We Can End All Violence Against Women* campaign launched in South Asia, and later replicated in several African, East Asian and Northern countries, has encouraged millions of women and men, girls and boys, to become 'change-makers', pledged to stop VAWG in their own lives, and to convince their families, colleagues and others to end inequality and violence. The campaign found situations where men and boys were ridiculed for being 'too soft on their women' or for speaking up against violence, and encouraged them to reflect that a man does not need to be violent to be a 'real man'.¹¹

Community protection initiatives can also help hold duty bearers to account on a range of protection needs including GBV/VAWG. The local protection committees that Oxfam supports in eastern DRC are one example of this; they work alongside a separate women's forum that provides a safe space for women to discuss their needs and feeds into the protection committees' agenda and decisions.¹²

IV. Placing all these approaches in the context of efforts to tackle the broader gendered impacts of crises, in order to meet the needs of women, men, girls and boys, and seek opportunities to promote women’s rights and gender equality in the long term.

Empowering women is critical in order to build their resilience, tackle GBV/VAWG and create a positive or holistic peace. Emergency responses should look for opportunities to support women and men in ways that transform gender power-relations. This should lay the groundwork for the promotion of women’s rights towards gender equality over the long term and address gendered vulnerabilities in building resilience to crises. Responses should ensure women not only survive one shock after another, but thrive despite shocks, stresses and uncertainty. For further information, see Oxfam’s companion note on *Gender Issues in Conflict and Humanitarian Action*.¹³

V. Advance women’s rights, and undertake special measures to ensure protection from GBV/VAWG.

All of the above should apply to all relevant actors in humanitarian crises. Where relevant, particularly in conflict and transition contexts, it is also important that international and national institutions, which focus on protection, also undertake special measures against GBV/VAWG.

- **UN and UN-mandated peacekeeping missions** should serve the interests of women, men, girls and boys with explicit mandates to work directly and proactively with conflict-affected communities to identify and act against threats of GBV/VAWG, for example, through appropriate patrols of relief camps. Key posts should be well-staffed, including female translators and female officers mandated to follow-up on GBV threats,¹⁴ and peacekeepers’ pre-deployment training should include identifying and responding to GBV/VAWG.
- **National governments’ security and justice sectors** should be adequately equipped and trained to provide protection against GBV/VAWG. Assessing threats specific to men and women should be achieved through consultation with women, men, girls and boys, and their perspectives should play an important part in evaluation processes. Special attention should be given to recruiting women to security and justice institutions, within a supportive environment. Female staff must be provided with training and opportunities for promotion to play a meaningful – not just symbolic – role in security services.¹⁵ In many cases, this will require both the generous support and the active influence of donor governments.

Women and the Afghan police (2013)

In 2013 Oxfam called for a more female-friendly Afghan National Police Force to respond to high levels of VAWG (in 2008 as many as 87 per cent of Afghan women suffered some form of physical, sexual or psychological abuse), and help implement the 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women law, which criminalized child marriage, forced marriage, rape and other violent acts against women and girls.

To tackle under-reporting – in part due to social norms preventing women approaching male police officers – Oxfam recommended accelerating the recruitment of policewomen. To improve retention rates, female police must be safe from abuse and respected. Once trained, they should be assigned to professional policing roles, particularly within Family Response Units and in community policing. At the same time, male police should receive effective gender training in order to better understand laws designed to protect women from abuse.

Source: L. Hancock (2013) ‘Women and the Afghan Police: Why a law enforcement agency that respects and protects females is crucial for progress’, Oxford: Oxfam, <http://oxf.am/UuB>

In conflict contexts, **women should be fully involved in peace processes and women's rights enshrined in any post-conflict settlement**, alongside sustained campaigns to challenge attitudes that entrench GBV/VAWG long after a conflict has formally ended.

4 Oxfam's commitment to promote gender equality and prevent GBV/VAWG in humanitarian responses

Oxfam commits to promote gender equality and prevent GBV/VAWG by implementing its Minimum Standards for Gender in Emergencies.¹⁶ These include: consulting women, men, boys and girls on their needs and safety requirements; implementing and monitoring interventions to ensure safe programming; and protecting beneficiaries from sexual exploitation and abuse by staff and partners.¹⁷

For further information, please see the Oxfam Humanitarian Policy Note: *Gender Issues in Conflict and Humanitarian Action*.¹⁸

Notes

- ¹ UN DPI (2008) 'UNITE to end Violence Against Women: Fact Sheet', <http://www.un.org/en/women/endviolence/pdf/VAW.pdf>
- ² D. Rosche (2013) 'Ending Violence Against Women: The case for a comprehensive international action plan', Oxford: Oxfam, http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/ending-violence-against-women-the-case-for-a-comprehensive-international-action-270089?utm_source=oxf.am&utm_medium=3KZ&utm_content=redirect
- ³ R. Manjoo (2011) 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences', UN Human Rights Council, para 21, http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/UN/wps_reportofthespecialrapporteuronviolenceagainstwomenscausesandconsequences_un_may2011.pdf
- ⁴ Amnesty International, IANSA, Oxfam (2005) 'The Impact of Guns on Women's Lives', Oxford: Oxfam, p.44, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-impact-of-guns-on-womens-lives-112463>
- ⁵ S. Begum (2012) 'Still Waiting for Change: Making the political transition work for women in Yemen', Oxford: Oxfam, p4, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/still-waiting-for-change-making-the-political-transition-work-for-women-in-yemen-244731>
- ⁶ See, for example: 'The Human Costs of the Funding Shortfalls for the Dadaab refugee camps', CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran World Federation, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam and Terre des Hommes, <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/the-human-costs-of-the-funding-shortfalls-for-the-dadaab-refugee-camps.pdf>
- ⁷ Amnesty International, IANSA, Oxfam (2005) *op. cit.*
- ⁸ Oxfam (2012) 'The role of UN Peacekeeping missions in the protection of civilians', Oxfam Humanitarian Policy Note, Oxford: Oxfam, <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/humanitarian-policy-notes>
- ⁹ Oxfam (2013) 'Gender Issues in Conflict and Humanitarian Action', Oxfam Humanitarian Policy Note, Oxford: Oxfam, <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/humanitarian-policy-notes>
- ¹⁰ The Protection Cluster has four Areas of Responsibility focussing on GBV, Child Protection, Housing, Land and Property Rights, and Mines Action. For further information see: <http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/>
- ¹¹ M. Raab (2012) 'Ending Violence Against Women: An Oxfam Guide', Oxford: Oxfam, p5, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/ending-violence-against-women-an-oxfam-guide-254118>
- ¹² Oxfam (2012) 'Protecting Communities in the DRC', Oxford: Oxfam, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/protecting-communities-in-the-drc-understanding-gender-dynamics-and-empowering-247194>
- ¹³ Oxfam (2013) 'Gender Issues in Conflict and Humanitarian Action', *op. cit.*
- ¹⁴ Oxfam (2012) *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵ S. Wijeyaratne (2012) 'The Accountability of National Security Forces to Civilians', Oxfam Humanitarian Policy Note, <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/humanitarian-policy-notes>
- ¹⁶ Oxfam (2013) 'Minimum Standards for Gender in Emergencies', Oxford: Oxfam, <http://oxf.am/w5E>

¹⁷ Humanitarian agencies like Oxfam have an absolute obligation to do everything they can to prevent the sexual exploitation or abuse (PSEA) of beneficiaries. The working context of many crises includes a male-dominated culture, and large numbers of male staff far from home. Every humanitarian worker must be aware of what is expected of them, and the consequences for any breach, under the guidelines on PSEA of their own agency and the UN Inter Agency Standing Committee. Training, induction and leadership are key, as is a balance of male and female staff. Effective complaint mechanisms are critical, accessible to women, men, girls and boys, so that they can make feedback and, where necessary, complaints. (Oxfam has developed various innovations in this regard, including through the use of cell phone technology)

¹⁸ Oxfam (2013) 'Gender Issues in Conflict and Humanitarian Action', *op. cit.*

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78077-513-5 in November 2013. Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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