

GBV AoR HELPDESK

Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies

Briefing Note: GBV Risk Mitigation – An Essential Approach to Meeting Core Humanitarian Priorities



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Introduction

In 2015, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) endorsed for publication the IASC [Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action](#). These “GBV Guidelines” firmly establish that GBV risk mitigation is a responsibility of all humanitarian actors, and they provide operational guidance for humanitarian sectors to undertake activities that can significantly reduce exposure to GBV for populations affected by crises. The GBV Guidelines have been rolled out in virtually every humanitarian response globally.¹

As important as addressing GBV in humanitarian action is, there are additional cross-cutting issues that humanitarian sectors are expected to address (e.g. disability, protection, etc.). One proposed solution to reducing duplication or multiplicity of cross-cutting responsibilities for sectors is taking a **streamlined approach** — where cross-cutting issues are grouped under a single overarching humanitarian approach or thematic priority, such as accountability to affected populations or localization. While this streamlined approach is meant to maximize resources and make humanitarian response more efficient and effective, there may be limitations to taking a streamlined approach to GBV risk mitigation. Streamlining GBV risk mitigation may actually reduce the effectiveness of sector interventions, rather than improve them.

This briefing note explores this concern. Written primarily for non-GBV specialists—those who work in sectors of humanitarian response other than GBV—the note begins with a review of what GBV risk mitigation entails and how GBV risk mitigation supports good humanitarian programming. It then looks at two thematic priorities within humanitarian response—accountability to affected populations (AAP) and localization — and explores how undertaking GBV risk mitigation can support these agendas. It goes on to discuss some of the potential limitations for sector actors of streamlining or merging GBV risk mitigation into these broader thematic areas. The note concludes with a few key takeaways about how to promote success in GBV risk mitigation across all sectors of humanitarian response and ensure the best outcomes for sector programming.

¹ For access to the GBV Guidelines and supplemental materials, as well as for information about joining a community of practice with other humanitarian professionals undertaking GBV risk mitigation, see the GBV Guidelines website: <https://gbvguidelines.org>. To access Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the GBV Guidelines, please visit <https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/GBV-Guidelines-Key-Questions-Answered-Nov15.pdf>

What is GBV risk mitigation?

The overall objective of GBV risk mitigation is to make humanitarian systems and services safe and responsive to the needs and rights of women and girls who are at risk of or have experienced violence. GBV risk mitigation cuts across all sectors of humanitarian response. It is distinct from – but complementary to – GBV-specialized programming, which focuses on response services for GBV survivors (such as clinical care and psychosocial support) and longer-term prevention interventions. An important feature of GBV risk mitigation is that the responsibilities outlined in the GBV Guidelines are not meant to increase the workload for humanitarian actors, but rather to assist them to do their work more efficiently and effectively.

How does GBV risk mitigation support core humanitarian outcomes?

As highlighted in the GBV Guidelines, risk mitigation not only supports sectors **to reduce the risks of GBV** linked to program implementation, GBV risk mitigation also **promotes resilience of affected populations**, and **aids recovery** of communities and societies. The rights-based, survivor-centered and feminist-informed principles and approaches that guide GBV risk mitigation are aligned with many core humanitarian outcomes, such as durable and sustainable solutions, inclusion, representation, accountability, and partnership, to name a few.

Sector and program-level evaluations and case studies illustrate how GBV risk mitigation is good practice because it supports sector programs to better meet their own goals.² Some sectors have created their own global cluster guidance that builds on and reinforces the GBV Guidelines.³ GBV risk mitigation links to many current priorities in humanitarian action. Two of these—AAP and localization—are described further below.

What are the specific links between GBV risk mitigation and accountability to affected populations?

Accountability to affected populations is described by the IASC as “an active commitment to use power responsibly, by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organizations seek to assist.”⁴ GBV risk mitigation supports AAP across all three of these areas.

- √ **Taking account** means giving communities meaningful influence over decision making in a way that is inclusive, non-discriminatory and accounts for the diversity of communities. GBV risk mitigation plays a significant role in shaping the humanitarian approach to AAP by identifying and supporting attention to and leadership of women and girls. GBV risk mitigation makes consultations with women and girls systematic in program assessments and monitoring and evaluation. AS well, GBV risk mitigation focuses not only on meeting the immediate needs of those most affected, but also on promoting the rights and long-term empowerment of diverse women and girls at every stage of humanitarian intervention.
- √ **Giving account** is about the sharing of information in an effective and transparent way across communities. GBV risk mitigation not only promotes engagement with affected communities, but also supports the development of frameworks for monitoring interventions and outcomes. GBV risk mitigation also strives to ensure safety and ethics in data collection and data sharing, so that

² See, for example, Fisher J, Reed B, Vidal J. (2018). Lighting the Way: Lighting, sanitation and the risk of gender-based violence in Omugo extension camp, Uganda. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620606/rr-lighting-the-way-research-uganda-211218-en.pdf?sequence=3>; Oxfam (2018). Shining a light: how lighting in or around sanitation facilities affects the risk of gender-based violence in camps. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620605/gd-shining-light-sanitation-gender-211218-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

³ See for example, Shelter Cluster global guidance: <https://sheltercluster.org/gbv-shelter-programming-working-group/documents/site-planning-guidance-reduce-risk-gender-based>

⁴ IASC (n.d.) Accountability to Affected Populations: A brief overview.

https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2015-12/iasc_aap_psea_2_pager_for_hc.pdf

information sharing is undertaken in a way that benefits all members of the affected population, including women and girls.

- √ **Being held to account** means ensuring communities can assess and, where feasible, alter or sanction humanitarian actors' actions. GBV risk mitigation calls for attention to inequalities that not only drive GBV, but other forms of discrimination and exclusion experienced by women and girls, and seeks to transform power relations, giving women and girls greater voice and direct participation in decision-making processes. This includes inviting their inputs into humanitarian response strategies. It also means incorporating ongoing consultations with women and girls about safety concerns and potential unintended consequences into sector monitoring.

What are the specific links between GBV risk mitigation and localization?

Localization can be defined as “a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses.”⁵ Like AAP, localization has received an immense amount of attention within the humanitarian community and has drawn commitments from nearly all major humanitarian donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs.

GBV risk mitigation plays a crucial role in promoting the localization agenda in humanitarian response by **challenging power imbalances** and **centering the voices and agency of local actors, particularly women**. The GBV Guidelines emphasize the importance of “active involvement of all members of affected communities; this includes the leadership and meaningful participation of women and girls—alongside men and boys—in all preparedness, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation activities.”⁶

Some good practices related to leadership and involvement of women and women's rights organizations (WROs) in GBV risk mitigation include sector actors supporting WROs to lead safety audits; to advocate within humanitarian response systems for their needs and rights; to engage as co-partners in GBV risk mitigation programming efforts and monitoring; to facilitate and/or co-facilitate training and other capacity building linked to GBV risk mitigation. Some sectors have created guidance that emphasizes the importance of promoting the leadership and engagement of women and girls, in line with core principles of GBV risk mitigation.⁷

Should GBV risk mitigation responsibilities be streamlined into broader efforts at AAP and/or localization?

As mentioned in the introduction to this briefing note, humanitarian actors are asked to incorporate multiple cross-cutting issues into their work. Aside from GBV risk mitigation, some other responsibilities include, for example, age and disability mainstreaming, gender mainstreaming, and mental health and psychosocial services mainstreaming. To reduce duplication of work, a proposed solution has been to streamline cross-cutting issues—or merge these multiple issues under interventions associated with a broad thematic area of humanitarian action, such as AAP or localization. While this approach can create efficiencies in some mainstreaming responsibilities, there are important aspects of GBV risk mitigation that are not recognized or addressed in these broader thematic areas.

The GBV Guidelines highlight very specific actions that can be undertaken to improve sector programming.

⁵ Roepstorff, K. (2020) A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action, *Third World Quarterly*, 41(2), 284-301, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160).

⁶ IASC GBV Guidelines, p 4.

⁷ For example, the WASH cluster has articulated this in its Five Minimum Commitments and accompanying Safety and Accessibility Toolkit. See <https://gbvguidelines.org/document/wash-minimum-commitments-to-safety-and-dignity-framework-and-tools/>

They also note that failure to undertake these actions “can result in a failure by humanitarian actors to meet their most basic responsibilities for promoting and protecting the rights of affected populations.”⁸ As such, streamlining GBV risk mitigation so that explicit and targeted work on GBV risk mitigation is absorbed into more general approaches can create specific unintended consequences. Some of these are highlighted below.

Diagram 1: Potential Risks for Sectors When NOT Undertaking GBV Risk Mitigation⁹

Humanitarian Areas of Operation	Examples of Harm to Affected Populations by NOT Addressing GBV Issues
Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM)	When the rights and needs of single women and other at-risk groups are not addressed during site planning, these persons may be placed in isolated and/or unprotected areas, in turn exposing them to sexual harassment and violence.
Child Protection	Child-friendly spaces that are set up in isolated locations or do not have female staff can increase exposure of children, particularly girls, to violence. If staff have not received appropriate training they may not recognize the risks of GBV and other forms of violence against girls and boys, or take steps to ensure child survivors have access to care and support services. Children may face increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers if staff working in child-friendly spaces have not been properly vetted.
Education	Education programming that does not take into account the particular rights, needs and vulnerabilities of students can increase their risk of exploitation by teachers, school dropout and child and/or forced marriage. Schools that are located far from homes may prevent children, particularly girls, from attending, and/or increase their risk of sexual harassment or assault during long commutes.
Food Security and Agriculture	Where access to food is inadequate, women and girls—who are most often tasked with finding fuel and food—may venture to unprotected areas where they are at heightened risk of sexual abuse, including forced and/or coerced prostitution.
Health	Health-care providers who are not trained or prepared to receive child and adult survivors of GBV with non-judgmental attitudes create a barrier to life-saving services.
Housing, Land and Property (HLP)	Adhering to traditional norms and practices in HLP programming—such as widow inheritance, male-to-male inheritance, or land tenure being granted to males in the household—may increase women’s vulnerability to unsafe livelihoods activities (e.g. forced and/or coerced prostitution), as well as intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence.
Humanitarian Mine Action	Women and girls directly injured in a blast may be less likely than their male counterparts to receive support for their physical rehabilitation and socio-economic reintegration. Their disability may in turn increase their risk of intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence.
Livelihoods	Targeting women and adolescent girls in livelihoods programming without attention to the risks associated with shifting gender roles may increase their exposure to violence by intimate partners and/or males in the community.
Nutrition	Failure to incorporate GBV prevention into nutrition programmes can result in poor families trying to ensure the nutritional needs of their daughters are met through child and/or forced marriages, or sacrificing female children’s nutrition in order to meet the needs of male children. Mothers weakened by poor nutritional status might also be less able to protect their children from GBV and other forms of violence.
Protection	Protection monitoring activities that do not consider the key ethical considerations related to collecting data on GBV can put survivors at risk of stigmatization and retaliation if exposed.
Shelter, Settlement and Recovery (SS&R)	When programmes do not address the rights and needs of those who do not have the skills or the physical strength to collect building materials or undertake construction, these persons may be compelled to exchange sex or other favours for shelter materials and/or construction assistance. In addition, if SS&R actors—particularly in camp settings—lack protocols for developing new shelters for those needing to shift from existing shelters, women and girls may be prevented from leaving violent domestic situations.
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)	Failing to establish safe access to water points and accessible, sex-segregated latrines and bathing facilities may expose women, girls and other at-risk groups to sexual assault.

⁸ IASC GBV Guidelines, p 15.

⁹ Excerpted from IASC GBV Guidelines, p. 15

In addition to these specific unintended consequences, there are further dangers to streamlining GBV risk mitigation into broader thematic areas such as AAP or localization. Some of these include:¹⁰

- **Obscuring rather than revealing the needs of women and girls.** Streamlining GBV creates risks that assessments and subsequent work will become gender blind. **(See Box 1.)**
- **Promoting gender neutrality.** While GBV risk mitigation (and GBV specialized programming) supports an intersectional approach to understanding the risks and vulnerabilities of diverse women and girls, evidence suggests that integrating GBV risk mitigation into broader thematic areas can result in a tendency to lump all forms of interpersonal violence under one umbrella, obscuring the particular gender and power dynamics that drive GBV.¹¹
- **Reducing already limited space and resources devoted to women.** Attention to GBV is underfunded in all humanitarian emergencies. Merging GBV risk mitigation into broader humanitarian agendas risks further shrinkage of GBV funding.¹²
- **Failing to support transformative change.** Streamlining GBV risk mitigation into AAP and/or localization can actually work *against* the change that both of these broader humanitarian agendas are seeking. Power imbalances that are specifically addressed in GBV risk mitigation can be overlooked. Women and girls can be sidelined as key agents of positive social change that is the foundation of sustainable recovery.

Box 1: Risks of GBV Streamlining into Protection

In one example from post-earthquake Nepal, the absence of accountability to, and dialogue with, women and girls in affected populations meant that even though women and girls requested repeatedly in multisectoral assessments that menstrual hygiene be prioritized, they did not receive sufficient sanitary supplies. In Nepal, women and girls are put at risk of sexual violence by the harmful practice of *chhaupadi*, where girls are forced to live outside of the house while menstruating. Girls who slept elsewhere while menstruating were more than twice as likely to report they had been raped since the earthquake than other girls. Discussions with the broader “community” did not highlight this issue because women and girls’ needs were not identified as priority by decision makers – both in the local community and the international humanitarian community.

¹⁰ The Nepal example in Box 1 and other key points are taken from a paper written by COFEM (2017), Eclipsed: When a broad protection agenda obscures the needs of women and girls. <https://cofemsocialchange.org/learning-advocacy-tools/cofem-svri-paper-video-series/>

¹¹ In GBV programming this has happened when, for example, broad protection approaches obscure the differential drivers and response needs for violence experienced by females as compared to violence experienced by males. It has led to scenarios in which men and boy survivors of violence are simply added to existing GBV policies, frameworks and programs originally developed to address women and girls’ rights and needs. One example is the request from donors in multiple humanitarian emergencies around the world that women and girls’ safe spaces include programming for male survivors of violence. For further discussion of this, see <https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Paper-2-Reframing-language-of-‘GBV’-away-from-feminist-underpinnings.pdf>

¹² A 2022 mid-year report from the global Protection Cluster highlighted that GBV is one of the most underfunded areas within the Protection Cluster. See https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/gpc_protection_funding_mid-year-review_2022.pdf

Key Takeaways for Humanitarian Actors

- GBV risk mitigation is central to good humanitarian programming.
- Efforts to streamline cross-cutting issues are understandable given the scope of cross-cutting issues and the potential for overlap in programming for these issues.
- However, subsuming GBV risk mitigation alongside other cross-cutting issues into broader humanitarian agendas such as AAP or localization risks undermining the success of sector programming. It also risks undermining and/or diluting the goals for which these broader humanitarian agendas strive.
- It is important to link GBV risk mitigation with other humanitarian priorities, but not to the extent that there is no longer specific and targeted work on GBV risk mitigation. Not only would a move to subsume it reduce effectiveness of sector work on GBV risk mitigation, but this approach risks also reversing sector successes in addressing women and girls' rights, safety and protection.
- Humanitarian priorities such as AAP and localization need to be supplemented with GBV risk mitigation to be most effective. Championing GBV risk mitigation aligns with and reinforces humanitarian commitments to meeting the rights and needs of women and girls in humanitarian response. This is especially critical in the current global environment of political and ideological extremism, which has accelerated backlash against women's rights.

The GBV AoR Help Desk

The GBV AoR Helpdesk is a unique research and technical advice service which aims to inspire and support humanitarian actors to help prevent, mitigate and respond to violence against women and girls in emergencies. Managed by Social Development Direct, the GBV AoR Helpdesk is staffed by a global roster of senior Gender and GBV Experts who are on standby to help guide frontline humanitarian actors on GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response measures in line with international standards, guidelines and best practice. Views or opinions expressed in GBV AoR Helpdesk Products do not necessarily reflect those of all members of the GBV AoR, nor of all the experts of SDDirect's Helpdesk roster.

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