

Guidance note for gender-based violence communications

Purpose

As part of a gender-based violence (GBV) programme or initiative, organizations are often required to develop comprehensive, inclusive and high-quality communication plans that serve two functions. The first function is to leverage strategic communications for advocacy purposes, with the intention to increase visibility and support increased scale-up of the programme globally.¹ Where possible, this should be done with the support of a communications colleague familiar with the sensitivities surrounding GBV. The second function is to support community engagement activities that aim to increase access to GBV case management services. For this purpose, communication plans should target the public, and community stakeholders in particular, to achieve community sensitization on GBV as well as increased awareness of the pathways available for survivors, including those from marginalized groups.

It is vital to ensure that all communications related to GBV and harmful practices – whether for advocacy, reporting or community outreach – uphold survivor-centred, do no harm, human rights-based and gender-transformative principles. All messaging should be grounded in the empowerment of women and girls, affirming their right to make informed decisions about their bodies, lives and healing.

This guidance note summarizes crucial dos and don'ts to help programme personnel deliver ethical, inclusive, responsible and safe communications on issues relating to GBV in all contexts. It identifies forms of harmful messaging and promotes best practices that can guide meaningful and respectful communications for both strategic advocacy and community engagement. It also aims to empower GBV specialists to support communications teams in ethically raising awareness and generating programme support.

Guiding principles

This guidance note outlines three principles to guide communications and programming efforts when reporting, advocating or raising awareness on GBV and harmful practices in any capacity. The principles ensure communications are:

-  1. Survivor-centred
-  2. Human rights-based
-  3. Gender-transformative

¹ Increased visibility and scale-up may also be considered nationally and regionally.

Key terminology

● **GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV):**

Any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on socially ascribed differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.²

● **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (VAW):**

A manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women. Violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.³ Some groups of women, particularly those from marginalized groups, are especially vulnerable to violence. This includes Indigenous women, refugee women, migrant women, women living in rural or remote communities, pregnant women, women living with HIV, adolescent girls, women with disabilities, older women, women in situations of armed conflict, and women with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.⁴

● **PERPETRATOR:**

A person who deliberately uses violent and abusive behaviour to control the survivor, whether or not they have been charged, prosecuted or convicted.⁵

Statistics show that the majority of GBV is perpetrated by men against women and girls.

● **TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (TFGBV):**

An act of gender-based violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media against a person on the basis of their gender.⁶

● **REPRODUCTIVE VIOLENCE:**

A form of GBV against women and girls that compromises reproductive autonomy, agency and self-determination; that is, individuals' ability to decide whether, when, how and under what conditions to become pregnant, give birth and raise children, as defined at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). This includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, psychosocial, economic, normative and symbolic abuse, force, coercion or exploitation within relationships, communities, institutions and societies.⁷

2 United Nations, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women Proclaimed by General Assembly Resolution 48/104 (1993). Available at digitallibrary.un.org/record/179739?ln=en (accessed on 28 March 2025).

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 European Institute for Gender Equality, "Perpetrator", Glossary and Thesaurus (2016). Available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1463> (accessed on 28 March 2025).

6 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe (2021). Available at <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-making-all-spaces-safe>.

7 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Raising the Curtain on Reproductive Violence: A Contribution to Understanding All Forms of Gender-based Violence against Women and Girls (forthcoming).

1. Survivor-centred approach



A survivor-centred approach ensures that survivors can make informed decisions about what services they want and when, creating a supportive environment in which survivors' rights and wishes are respected, their safety is prioritized and they are treated with dignity and respect. It is based on the foundational GBV guiding principles of safety, confidentiality, self-determination, respect and non-discrimination. This approach in communications prioritizes the right of GBV survivors to be the decision makers about what they share and how and when they share their experience. It also places them, their safety and their well-being at the centre of all outreach and advocacy efforts. By honouring this principle, survivors can feel empowered by the exercise and in control of what, when and where information is shared.

DO NOT





- Conduct an interview, take a photograph or record anyone, particularly GBV survivors or other vulnerable groups, without their explicit informed consent.
- Provide false information or promises that raise the survivor's expectations from the interview.
- Make any comparisons with previous survivor interviews or attempt to change the incident scenario.
- Engage with survivors for media and communications, even with their explicit consent, if there is no direct healing activity or psychosocial support made available to them after engagement.



DO



- If survivors or any other marginalized/vulnerable group willingly volunteer to be interviewed, photographed or recorded, attain informed consent in the survivor's primary language or a language in which they are fluent so that they are fully aware of all potential uses of their image or story, and risks of appearing in the media.
- Obtain informed assent from children under 18 years and consent from a child's guardian for any type of engagement. Be sure that responsible caregiver(s) are present throughout the interview, photograph or recording.
- Use a basic consent form.
- If informed consent or assent (for children under 18 years) is received, refer to the [responsible representation and reporting guidelines](#), the [journalist handbook](#) and [guidelines for media professionals](#) on conducting interviews with survivors, including guidance on use of photographs.
- Respect a survivor's wishes to stop the interview at any point.
- Provide access or referral to psychosocial support after the interview.
- Provide full details of where, when and in what capacity their story will be shared both before and after engagement.

DO NOT 	DO 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Publish any identifying information of a GBV survivor or of service providers and facilities that receive survivors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If informed consent is received, uphold confidentiality and avoid publishing survivors' faces, names or specific location details, and take every precaution possible to protect survivors' personal and identifying information, including but not limited to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name • Country or place of origin • Ethnic group • Place of work or study • Any other information that may lead to their identity being revealed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Publish incidence data, including numbers of GBV cases or rates of GBV reporting, to communicate the magnitude of the problem in a given area or context. Consent from survivors is needed even when sharing non-identifying information. Also, these figures are likely to be the 'tip of the iceberg' and will not adequately represent the issue at large. ● Ask staff or implementing partners to provide data/numbers of GBV cases to justify the allocation of funds for prevention and response interventions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If any data is being reported, share prevalence data from national level surveys.⁸ ● Focus on service coverage, percentage increase in reported cases, number of service points equipped with supplies to provide life-saving care, or the estimated number of displaced women and girls because they are all at an elevated risk of GBV. ● Acknowledge that GBV is happening, and that your organization is listening and responding.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create and disseminate campaigns without consulting communities, especially women, local actors and partners, as well as taking into account local contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Where possible, consult with women and girls, relevant community groups or GBV response service providers about messaging and preferred dissemination channels.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create and disseminate campaigns against GBV without a programme for helping survivors, a working referral system and sufficient safety measures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Keep in mind that the increased visibility of campaigning against GBV may lead more people to seek help, in which case GBV response services should be in place and readily available.



8 UNFPA's kNowVAWdata initiative aims to support and strengthen regional and national capacity to measure violence against women. Find out more at: <https://www.unfpa.org/updates/data-initiative-end-violence-against-women-goes-global-knowvawdata>.


DO NOT 	DO 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Seek out survivors to conduct interviews or ascertain survivor stories. Do not ask staff or implementing partners to ‘find’ survivors for communications or advocacy pieces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work with the media/journalist to find alternative ways to report on the story. Do try to showcase services that are available (and needed). Meet with GBV service providers and leaders of local women’s organizations, as well as government representatives, where appropriate.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encourage survivors to ‘speak out’ and ‘stand up’ against GBV and push them to report. Refrain from labeling women and girls who report GBV as ‘heroes’ or ‘brave,’ as this implies there is a ‘correct’ way to respond to violence. It can also place the burden of action on the survivor, and even put them at further risk of violence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promote messages that reinforce the help available for survivors, that they can choose their course of action and that they are not to blame for the violence they have experienced.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promote messages that overemphasize vulnerabilities or imply that women are vulnerable to GBV because they are weak. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Empower women and girls and show their inherent ability to thrive in an environment free of violence and discrimination. Vulnerability is not equal to weakness, but rather a result of systemic inequalities that prioritize men over women and other marginalized groups.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Publicize information on the specific referral pathway to an entire community (e.g. available shelters). This could entail security risks for survivors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advertise available services (e.g. GBV hotline) in a sensitive manner. Sometimes service points need to remain anonymous to ensure survivors feel safe to use them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Put project participants in contact with any media or outside party who will not adhere to these policies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Uphold the ‘do no harm’ approach and accountability to affected populations (AAP) so as not to put anyone at risk of further harm. The do no harm principle, which is crucial in addressing GBV, ensures interventions do not unintentionally exacerbate negative impacts for survivors or marginalized/vulnerable groups.

2. Human rights-based



A human rights-based approach in GBV communications and advocacy means recognizing that violence is the result of structural discrimination and a grave violation of human rights, which States and communities have an obligation to address. It is the understanding that GBV is a product of systematic gender inequality and deep-rooted power imbalances that privilege men over women. A human rights-based approach ensures that the human rights of survivors, including the most marginalized, are at the centre of all communication efforts and activities and that in no way will materials produced for awareness or advocacy violate their rights or cause harm. This approach also brings heightened attention and accountability to intersectionality through the 'leave no one behind' (LNOB) principle, which demands that quality (available, accessible, affordable, acceptable) services be delivered without discrimination for all groups, particularly those who face the most extreme forms of discrimination, inequality and poverty. This includes the LGBTQI+ community, people with disabilities, women from indigenous communities, and ethnic and religious minorities among many others.



DO NOT 	DO 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote services for GBV survivors as 'charity'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the message that freedom from violence is a fundamental right and that States have an obligation, under various UN and international agreements, to uphold this right. Emphasize that communities also share a responsibility to take action and respond to the needs of GBV survivors.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote women's integration into the economy and workforce as a main incentive to end GBV. Messaging that focuses on 'economic losses' or ending GBV as 'smart economics' deprioritizes the well-being of survivors. More generally, this approach is harmful since it values women based on their economic productivity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centre the well-being of the survivor rather than their country's economic development. Messaging should focus on women's autonomy to make their own decisions about their lives and bodies, and their fundamental right to live a life free of violence.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include information on what the survivor wore, where they were or if they were intoxicated etc. when they experienced violence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make it clear that the circumstances are not the cause of violence, but rather the perpetrator and their intention to cause harm. Focusing on circumstantial details shifts the blame onto the survivor.

DO NOT	DO 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only develop materials in the most widely spoken language in a country. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create inclusive content that is culturally sensitive, age appropriate and in local languages to increase visibility and coverage, and to ensure women and girls in all their diversity can access information about GBV and available support services.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generalize the experiences of violence faced by groups of women based on their gender alone. Do not suggest all women experience violence in the same way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge the deep-rooted intersectional discrimination faced by women from marginalized groups, including the LGBTQI+ community, persons with disabilities, indigenous communities, ethnic and religious minorities etc. This discrimination can compound the prevalence of institutionalized, societal and interpersonal violence. For example, use global prevalence data that portrays the intersectional violence marginalized groups face, e.g. women with disabilities tend to experience violence 10 times more often than the general population.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on women's empowerment only. This approach ignores the responsibility of the State and community to ensure services are in place to prevent and respond to GBV and instead places responsibility on women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reinforce messages that living a life free of violence is a human right and that it is not the responsibility of women and girls to prevent GBV, but that of the State and community.

3. Gender-transformative approach



A gender-transformative approach aims to challenge the societal values and norms that have been engineered to perpetuate an imbalance of power based on gender, which privileges men and boys. This power imbalance ranges from the structural to the individual level, limiting the choices available to women and girls at every stage of their lives. Gender transformation must be intersectional and challenge social factors that compound the discrimination faced by women in marginalized groups, such as heteronormativity, ableism and racism. A gender-transformative approach in communications should therefore seek to acknowledge the harmful social norms, gender norms, unequal power relations and gender inequality that lie at the root of GBV. Communications activities, particularly in the context of community engagement, have the potential to reshape deep-rooted social and gender norms, which often normalize violence against women and girls. By identifying and challenging context-specific factors that perpetuate the power imbalance between men and women, in a creative and culturally sensitive way, communication activities can trigger a societal shift towards better prevention of and responses to GBV. Communication activities can also empower women and girls and marginalized groups to increase their agency and decision-making power.

DO NOT 	DO 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Present GBV as a problem that must be solved by survivors themselves or other individuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledge how GBV is a product of a deep-rooted patriarchal order that governs communities, institutions and societies across the world.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fixate on negative messaging, including visual representations that portray survivors as victims and men as villains. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use benefits-based communications that include positive messaging which promotes non-violent behaviour and empowers survivors of GBV.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Blame and shame men. Do not use language that could potentially deter men from becoming active allies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encourage men and boys to actively engage in the fight against GBV. Promote positive messaging and thought-provoking dialogue on how men can contribute to social and gender norm change, be active bystanders⁹ and adopt positive and non-violent behaviours.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Blame a particular religion, culture or community etc. as a risk factor, contributing factor or the root cause of GBV. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledge how social and gender norms are rooted in a patriarchal belief system that transcends borders and religion.

⁹ College of Policing, Bystanders Programmes: Evidence Briefing (March 2022). Available at: <https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2022-03/Bystander-programmes-evidence-briefing.pdf>.

Further resources

- GBV AoR Tip Sheet for Conducting GBV Awareness Campaigns ([AR](#), [ENG](#), [ESP](#), [FR](#))
- UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF's Guidelines on Responsible representation and reporting of violence against women and children ([ENG](#))
- CARE's Creating GBV Communications Materials ([ENG](#))
- Raising Voices' SASA! Activist Kit ([ENG](#)) and SASA! Together ([ENG](#))
- Gender-Based Violence AoR Global Protection Cluster's Preliminary Guidance on Developing Key Messages for Communities on GBV & COVID-19 ([ENG](#))
- GBV AoR Guidelines for Media Reporting on GBV ([ENG](#))
- WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies ([ENG](#), [AR](#))