

Guidance on informed consent for gender-based violence communications

Gender-based violence (GBV) case management services aim to provide critical services to women and girls in a way that acknowledges their rights, respects their dignity, recognizes their self-determination and allows them to make their own choices. A survivor-centred approach is essential for the protection and empowerment of women and girls, as damaging social beliefs and gender-based discrimination often deprive them of autonomous decision-making power and the freedom to speak out.

Many women and girls who visit service points that provide GBV response services put themselves at risk due to stigma. The prevalence of intimate partner violence is high in UNFPA implementation areas, and women and girls may need permission from male relatives to leave the home. Men and boys often harass women and girls as they travel to service points. It is crucial that organizations make every effort to ensure that women and girls do not face further harm in accessing facilities or participating in programmes, including communications activities. This Guidance on informed consent for gender-based violence communications applies to everyone providing services or activities to survivors, including governments, UN agencies, national and international organizations, and civil society organizations.



Women at
the Center





Informed consent

Informed consent is when a person voluntarily agrees to an action based on a clear understanding of the facts, implications and future consequences of that action. Informed consent is the central tenet of women's empowerment, respecting their ownership of their recovery, and preventing violence.



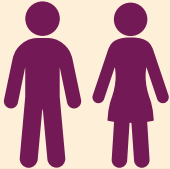
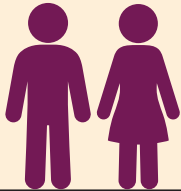
Informed consent that is fully understood and voluntary must be acquired for any individual to participate in an interview, photograph, video or story of any kind. Consent can be withdrawn at any time. The following conditions are required to secure informed and voluntary consent:

- While consent can be withdrawn at any time, it is clearly explained to the participant that it may not be possible to retract material already in circulation, i.e. in the media.
- The participant is aware of the purpose of the activity, how their image, voice or information will be used, and where it will be published and disseminated.
- The participant is mentally capable of understanding the information and deciding.
- The participant receives all information in their primary language to ensure full comprehension, including the benefits and consequences of engaging and that they can stop their involvement at any time during the activity.
- The participant is aged 18 years or older.
- All necessary information is provided free of coercion and threats.
- Efforts are made to establish an equitable power relationship between the individuals involved.

The identity of the person acquiring consent is crucial. They must be aware of the balance of power between themselves and the participant. Consent should be sought in a way that recognizes the power differential and encourages and allows the participant to express their thoughts, opinions, questions and concerns freely. The person should respect their self-determination and dignity throughout the process, including if they withdraw their consent to participate at any time.

Considerations for children

Informed consent and informed assent are similar, but not exactly the same. “Informed assent” is the expressed willingness to participate in activities. For younger children who are by definition too young to give informed consent, but old enough to understand and agree to participate in activities, seeking the child’s informed assent is recommended according to guidelines included in the table below:

Age group	Child	Caregiver	If no caregiver or not in the child’s best interest	Means
0–5 	–	Informed consent	Other trusted adult’s or case worker’s informed consent	Written consent
6–11 	Informed assent	Informed consent	Other trusted adult’s or case worker’s informed consent	Oral assent, Written consent
12–14 	Informed assent	Informed consent	Other trusted adult’s or child’s informed assent. Sufficient level of maturity (of the child) can take due weight	Written assent, Written consent
15–17 	Informed consent/ Informed assent	Obtain informed consent with child’s permission	Child’s view should take due weight according to maturity level	Written consent

Source: Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse Guidelines, 2nd edition (New York, United Nations Children’s Fund and International Rescue Committee, 2023).

Informed consent for engagement in gender-based violence communications

Anyone involved in engaging with programme participants for communication purposes needs to know the reason for the communication activity, the process of the interview or other activity, and the benefits and consequences of the activity, including any potential risks to discuss with participant(s), service providers and other relevant personnel, as well as others who would be affected by the visit. As project leads or focal points share this information and invite open and honest feedback, they must be aware of their position of power and how this could influence what participants share with them. Their uncensored input will help those responsible arrange an experience that feels safe and comfortable for all those involved.

Project leads must ensure that every participant is aware of how their personal well-being could be affected by sharing their story and voice, even where their name is not shared, as well as the impacts of sharing their picture, even where their face is not shown. When this type of engagement is requested, personnel must have a discussion with the participants about those potential risks based on our understanding and analysis of the context, including a few questions such as:

- How would you **feel** if you or your family members, especially the men or your children (now or in the future), saw your picture, heard your voice or heard your story in a publication, newspaper article, video, social media (Facebook, Instagram etc.) or on television?
- How might you or your family members **react**?
- How could your neighbours or other community members, including leaders, react?
- If there's a possibility that you could experience a negative reaction from people in your life, how can those risks be minimized? What can you do and what can we do?

It is also important for women to be aware that certain neighbours, friends and family members, including their children (now or in the future) could potentially identify them from their hands, clothing or other body parts that may appear in a picture or video. For displaced people, if someone publicly shares their story about violence perpetrated by a government, there is a risk that she or he may not be able to remain in or return to that country, which may have implications for family unification. If human rights investigations were to take place and they participated in those, their stories and photographs could be used against them by the defence during the legal process. Participants should know that they will not have any control over how the picture or interview is used and perceived once the information is released.

Once all information is shared and understood well in advance, participants in the photograph, interview or other related activity should sign the appropriate consent form. The form can be read out loud to participants if they are not able to read, and it can be signed by a witness if the participant cannot write. Conditions of participation must be clarified and agreed upon by all involved including high level visitors, media, translators, note takers, service providers and project leads. Organizations have a responsibility to ensure that communications activities take place in accordance with informed voluntary consent measures and input from participants or other relevant community members and service providers throughout the planning and implementation process.

Failing to get consent for your actions is violence.

By no means should organizations seek out or request stories about violence from survivors or generally. Requesting a woman to publicly share her story about violence could cause psychological or emotional harm, risk subjecting her to unwanted investigations, and impact her safety and security in the country as well as that of her family and community. At the same time, survivors who wish to share their stories must be enabled to do so, and their purpose for doing so – encouraging change, drawing attention to their needs, etc. – should be well understood. Organizations must be clear about their own limitations in achieving the survivor's desired results. Read the Guidance note for gender-based violence communications, found on the UNFPA website, before engaging with survivors.