

Gender Equality Essentials #3



Trigger warning: this document contains mentions and descriptions of various forms of violence. Reader discretion is advised.

Key numbers



Globally, **1 in 5 (650 million)** girls and women alive today have been subjected to sexual violence as children. This includes more than **1 in 8 (370 million)** who have experienced rape or sexual assault in childhood.



In fragile situations, the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in childhood is **over two times higher** than the world average. **27% of women** from countries in fragile situations have experienced sexual violence **before the age of 18** compared to 12% in other countries.



Globally, **1 in 7 boys and men (530 million)** alive today have been subjected to sexual violence in childhood¹.



Currently, **no country is on track** to eliminate violence against women and girls by the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal target date².

Key terms

Gender-based violence is any act that is perpetrated against a person's will that is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It is a life-threatening human rights violation that inflicts harm on all people. Women and girls are disproportionately affected due to structural and systematic gender inequality and discrimination. Gender-based violence can be physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual in nature, or take the form of denial of resources or access to services³. Most gender-based violence is perpetrated against women and girls from men they know (relatives, intimate partner, neighbour, colleague, teacher).

Sexual violence against children is any form of sexual activity with a child (person under 18 years old), either completed or attempted by an adult or by another child who has power over the child⁴. Sexual violence against children can include: contact sexual violence (rape and sexual assault) and non-contact sexual violence (verbal or online abuse)⁵.

Typology of sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence can take place in the home, at school, within the community, or in the workplace. It may be tolerated by legal frameworks and governments and can be manifested in multiple forms:

Physical violence

The use of physical force against another. Examples include hitting, shoving, grabbing, biting, kicking, restraining, shaking, choking, burning, throwing acid, forcing drug/alcohol use, and assault with a weapon or object. Physical violence may or may not result in an injury that requires medical attention.

Gender-related killing

The **intentional killing of women or girls because of their gender**. It includes acts of honour killing, femicide, female infanticide and female feticide (sex-selective abortions).

Harmful practices

Practices primarily affecting women and girls that have been practiced for so long in some societies that they are viewed as normal. They include **child marriage, female genital mutilation, breast ironing or flattening, bride kidnapping**, and traditional marriage customs like **sororate** and **levirate**.⁶

Sexual violence

Any act that violates a person's body (like sexual assault), treats them in a sexually degrading way, or involves unwanted sexual behaviour, whether physical, verbal, or non-verbal. Examples of sexual violence include forced sexual contact, rape, sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, and sexual harassment, including by an intimate partner. For children, exposure to sexual images or acts and taking photos of them for sexual purposes are also forms of sexual violence. It can also include **actions that restrict reproductive rights**, such as preventing the use of contraception, forcing pregnancy, or forcing abortion.

Psychological violence

A form of abuse that involves undermining a person's mental well-being or stability through acts of intimidation, threats of harm, and isolation. Examples include instilling fear in a person through threatening behaviour, such as damaging property or abusing a person's relatives or pets, constant supervision, stalking, harassment or controlling what the victim does and who they talk to. **It leaves people feeling scared and threatened.**

Emotional violence

A form of abuse that targets a person's feelings and self-esteem. Examples of emotional abuse include constant criticism, name-calling, embarrassing, mocking, humiliating, and treating people in a degrading manner. **It leaves people feeling small and feeling like they have no value.**

Economic violence

A form of abuse where an individual controls or **restricts another person's access to financial resources, employment, or economic opportunities**. Examples of economic abuse include preventing or forbidding someone from working or gaining an education, controlling the financial resources, withholding access to economic resources, services and opportunities, denial of inheritance.



In humanitarian settings

Humanitarian crises such as conflicts or natural disasters exacerbate pre-existing risks of sexual and gender-based violence by disrupting protective social and legal structures, increasing economic vulnerabilities and overwhelming essential services. These crises also create new dangers, particularly in militarised environments forcing people into displacement camps or temporary shelters that lack adequate security, thus making women and girls particularly vulnerable to violence.

Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian settings due to the intersection of age and gender as well as increased risk factors in emergency situations. Often overlooked in humanitarian interventions, they remain unprotected and the violence they experience unaddressed⁷.

Boys are also affected by sexual and gender-based violence as it is often used in contexts of armed conflict or ethnic violence as a means to emasculate men and disempower their families and communities. Boys are also at risk of sexual abuse, usually perpetrated by family members or other men known to the child⁸.

In a humanitarian setting, power imbalances between aid providers and recipients can lead to coercion and exploitation, with individuals being forced into sexual acts in exchange for aid. This is identified as sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers. Mandatory reporting mechanisms that take into consideration children's needs are crucial to report and respond to any actual or suspected incident of abuse.



At Plan International, we work with children and girls in over 80 countries to help create a world where we are all equal. We have zero tolerance for corruption, sexual harassment, abuse, discrimination and other forms of unethical or illegal behaviour. We encourage anyone who witnesses or suspects such behaviour to [raise their concern](#) with us so we can take appropriate measures.

Drivers and root causes

There is no single factor that explains why a person perpetrates these types of violence, but strong evidence shows that sexual and gender-based violence is a learned and social behaviour⁹. In different parts of the world, perpetrators of sexual abuse may have different characteristics, although the majority of perpetrators of sexual abuse are men¹⁰. Addressing the root causes and drivers of violence is critical for ensuring children's protection against sexual and gender-based violence.

Gender inequality, social norms and cultural acceptance at the root cause of sexual and gender-based violence¹¹

Social norms are the shared beliefs that define what is **typical and appropriate behaviour** in a group of people. While social norms can shield children from violence, others may condone or even promote violence by adults and peers, especially against girls. In many contexts, age-related norms view children as property belonging to their parents or caregivers, rather than individuals with their own rights. This sense of ownership can manifest in different ways, from restricting children's freedom and rights to coercion and violence¹². Gender and age-related social norms often place a double burden on girls, who face discrimination at every stage of life.

Gender-based violence is grounded in unequal power between men and women. Restrictive or limiting gender norms are attitudes, beliefs and acts that undermine girls' value and their agency, ultimately justifying the violence they face. These norms often manifest in subtle, tacit expectations that go unquestioned within communities because they are deeply embedded in the culture and the habits.

How can restrictive gender norms and attitudes manifest?

- **Victim blaming.** It is an attitude that suggests a victim rather than the perpetrator bears responsibility for an assault. Beliefs like "boys will be boys" and "women say no but actually they mean yes" contribute to this harmful narrative. When discussing cases of sexual violence, a victim's sobriety, clothes, and sexuality are irrelevant.
- **Asserting power over girls.** In patriarchal societies, girls and women are expected to be submissive to men and are considered inferior to them. Violence perpetrated by men over women and girls is therefore considered a legitimate way to assert their authority and dominance.

- **Hegemonic, violent masculinities.** Across the world, boys are often raised and even encouraged to use violence as a way of asserting their masculinity. Evidence shows that men and boys who embrace rigid ideas about dominant masculinities are more likely to perpetrate violence against women and girls¹³. Engaging boys and their families from early childhood to challenge gender norms and question power and privileges, has a strong potential to promote healthy and protective masculinities and to break the cycle of violence.
- **Enforcing conformity to gender roles.** Violence can also be used as "punishment" for children and adolescents who defy gender roles. Girls may face violence for becoming "too assertive", for neglecting household chores, or for rejecting men's sexual advances. Boys may also experience violence if they do not conform to norms around hegemonic and dominant masculinities, including LGBTIQ+ young men or boys with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expectations and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Boys who adopt attitudes and behaviours that are not perceived as masculine, for example by displaying emotion, doing house work and avoiding aggression, can also face risks of violence.
- **Internalising female subordination.** In some contexts, restrictive gender norms are so deeply ingrained that women and girls internalise ideas of female subordination as part of their socialisation, leading them to accept beliefs that harm them. For instance, some women may believe that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife or partner for arguing with him, refusing to have sex, going out without telling him, etc.¹⁴
- **Controlling girls' sexuality:** Social norms and perceptions that female sexuality needs to be controlled and that girls and women should not experience sexual pleasure drive harmful practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation and cutting, as well as sexual violence.

Beyond gender and age, other factors intersect

Gender and age are not the only factors affecting the risks of sexual and gender-based violence. Other factors such as disability, social status, ethnicity intersect in a way that makes particular groups more vulnerable to violence than others.

Children with disabilities are nearly **four times more likely to face violence than their non-disabled peers** and are almost **three times as likely to experience sexual violence, with girls being at the highest risk.**¹⁵ Indeed, girls and boys with disabilities are often excluded from education and healthcare, face discrimination within their communities, and are trapped in

cycles of poverty and violence. They may also be targeted for their limited physical mobility or other vulnerabilities. Children who are deaf, blind, autistic, or living with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities are most vulnerable to violence.

Children with disabilities face various forms of violence from parents, peers, educators, service providers, and others. This violence can manifest in several ways, such as bullying at school, physical punishment from caregivers, forced sterilisation of girls, or harmful treatments¹⁶.



Aggravating factors associated with increased risks of violence

Restrictive gender norms interact with other risk factors to create an environment in which violence is normalised and occurs with impunity. **While none of these factors should be understood or used as a way to justify violence**, it is important to grasp the complexity of driving factors:

- **Unemployment and low socioeconomic status:** gender-based violence affects all socioeconomic groups but is more common among women and girls **living in poverty**. Economic hardship can create stress and tension within households, increasing the risks of violence. It can drive negative coping mechanisms, such as child marriage, school dropout, trafficking and sexual exploitation. The lack of resources can also make it harder for women and girls to leave abusive relationships or seek specialized support and services. Evidence shows that cash transfers help reduce intimate partner violence in various contexts, including when not designed to do so, suggesting that the safety nets curb gender-based violence.¹⁷
- **Armed conflicts and militarisation:** militarisation and armed groups exacerbate sexual and gender-based violence by using it as a weapon of war, breaking down law and order, increasing vulnerability through displacement and economic exploitation, manipulating power dynamics, normalising violence, targeting specific populations for sexual slavery and forced marriage, and

disrupting protective social structures. This creates an environment where violence is rampant, where survivors are left unprotected, and where impunity prevails.

- **Emergencies and disasters:** emergencies and disasters create environments where protective structures are weakened or destroyed, law enforcement and judicial systems are compromised, economic and social vulnerabilities are heightened, and essential services are disrupted. The resulting chaos and instability provide opportunities for perpetrators to take advantage of the lack of oversight and control, leading to an increase in violence.
- **Alcohol abuse:** alcohol use increases the occurrence and severity of violence. However, while there is a correlation between alcohol abuse and violence, this correlation cannot be considered a causality¹⁸, as evidence shows that most abusers are in control when they commit violence against their partner.
- **Weak law and policies enforcement:** weak legal sanctions and lack of access to the judicial system fuel a culture of impunity for sexual and gender-based violence and discourage survivors from reporting the abuse. Of 189 countries examined by the World Bank, 45 countries do not have laws on domestic violence. The majority of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹



Nigeria: Young women survivors of Boko Haram violence

What is the scope of sexual and gender-based violence against children?

Intimate partner violence

- Among adolescent girls who have been in a relationship, nearly **a quarter close to 19 million** – will have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence by the time they become 20 years old²⁰.
- Although the problem occurs everywhere, the **worse-affected regions** are Oceania (47%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (10%)²¹.
- Intimate partner violence against adolescent girls is most common in lower-incomes countries and regions and in places where there are fewer girls in secondary school²².

Harmful practices

- Over **230 million girls and women worldwide** have undergone female genital mutilation²³.
- **12 million girls** are married before the age of 18 each year in the world²⁴.
- Globally, girls who marry before the age of 15 are **50% more likely to face physical or sexual violence** from an intimate partner, and married girls are more likely to describe their first sexual experience as forced²⁵.

Trafficking & sexual exploitation

- In 2020, for every 10 victims, **4 were adult women and 2 were girls**²⁶.
- Sexual exploitation is the most reported form of trafficking of which **92% are women and girls**²⁷.
- Severe child sexual abuse material online has more than doubled since 2020, the age group 11-13 being the most common²⁸. Girls' images accounted for **96% of child sexual abuse URLs in 2022**²⁹.

An important note on the availability of statistics: Sexual and gender-based violence is widely acknowledged to occur far more frequently than reported, especially in emergencies like natural disasters, conflicts, and pandemics. Collecting data on SGBV is challenging and often underreported; any available statistics, such as police or health records, likely capture only a small fraction of incidents. Self-reported data is sensitive, potentially triggering, and must be collected with caution, ensuring that trained personnel, referral pathways, and psychosocial support are in place.

Bolivia: Nayeli uses puppet for role play exercise highlighting the dangers of child trafficking



Common misconceptions

Misconception 1:

“We need more data and testimonies to raise awareness on sexual and gender-based violence.”

Interviewing survivors to gather data on sexual and gender-based violence raises ethical concerns, including risks to survivors' safety, confidentiality breaches, potential stigmatisation, and re-traumatisation. Survivors may feel pressured due to power imbalances. Collecting such sensitive information requires trained personnel to prevent harm. In humanitarian contexts, the IASC GBV Guidelines³⁰ recommend prioritising secondary data collection from service providers, government agencies, and women-led organisations. Extensive evidence already confirms that SGBV is pervasive and worsens during crises, supporting the need for response programmes. Plan International minimises data collection on SGBV to the strictly necessary to avoid causing harm to the survivors.

Misconception 2:

“To reduce sexual and gender-based violence, we need to teach girls and women how to protect themselves.”

It is a harmful conception to consider that violence is the cause of girls' inability to protect themselves. Violence is never the

survivor's fault. Any type of sexual and gender-based violence is a crime and a violation of fundamental human rights. Highlighting a responsibility of girls to protect themselves shifts the responsibility of the abuse from the perpetrator to the survivor.

Survivors have a right to empathy and respect, to avoid stigmatisation and re-traumatisation, and to avoid reinforcing victim-blaming and impunity for perpetrators. When programmes aim at building, strengthening or amplifying survivors' agency, it is not for them to protect themselves, but for them to access the resources, information and networks that enables them to raise their voices and seek justice.

Misconception 3:

“Poverty is the main cause of GBV.”

Sexual and gender-based violence can occur in every family and every community, as it is rooted in unequal power dynamics. It affects all socioeconomic groups, regardless of how wealthy they are. Wealthy abusive partners can perpetrate all types of violence, including controlling access to family's resources. Poverty may be the indirect cause or the consequence of violence but should never be considered as a justification for violence.



Belgium: Youth participating in the European Week of Action for Girls 2019



Nepal: Gita Sharma, a counsellor from Plan International, speaks to girl about safe border crossing

Sharing stories and information around sexual and gender based violence³¹

Raising awareness through sharing stories of sexual and gender-based violence must be done in survivor-centred, respectful way; starting by questioning one’s own biases towards survivors of violence, even if one is well-informed and supportive of the fight against violence.

Due to the risks to survivor’s safety, security and psychological well-being, it is not recommended that NGOs hold or facilitate individual interviews between media professionals and survivors.

Safeguarding should always come first. Agencies and organisations who provide direct support to survivors are not responsible for “finding” survivors for media professionals to interview. Instead, aid workers can assess the environment and consider if and how survivors could be directly or indirectly engaged. When sharing stories and reporting on sexual and gender-based violence, it is essential not to mention any identifying details such as age, occupation, specific location, photographs and description of the steps involved in the crime. Mentioning these details in the report may contribute to victim shaming and endanger their safety.

Instead, reports should include information on local support services and organisations working on child protection and gender-based violence in the specific context. This should be done only with the consent of the service providers. This practice enables access to care for survivors, witnesses, their families and others who may have experienced or have been affected by sexual and gender-based violence.

Finally, there are ways of describing violence that are harmful and contribute to victim-blaming:

Do not use ❌	Use instead ✅
Transactional sex	Sexual exploitation in exchange for food, goods or protection
Sex, intercourse	Rape, sexual assault, sexual violence
She engaged in	She was forced to
The victim	The survivor
Child sex workers	Children who are sexually exploited

Plan International's response^{32, 33}

Plan International's programming and influencing prioritises vulnerable and marginalised girls, adolescents and young women. Our interventions draw on evidence-based strategies and on our experience in protection programming. We also recognise the importance of working across sectors to prevent and mitigate harm to children.

✓ **Our final beneficiaries: child survivors of sexual and gender-based violence**

Our sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) programmes specifically target children under 18, aligning with our global mission to advance children's rights and promote gender equality. Supporting children differs greatly from working with adult survivors. As such, addressing the needs of child survivors requires distinct skills, resources, and approaches tailored to children's vulnerabilities. Without specialised staffing and expertise, interventions risk harming survivors and their communities. This is why Plan International does not provide direct programming for adult survivors of SGBV.

In emergencies, sexual and gender-based violence has significant and long-lasting impact on children's well-being, their families and community resilience. Addressing the needs of child survivors is essential due to their unique vulnerabilities, legal and ethical considerations and the necessity to prevent double victimisation through specialised support.

✓ **Our target groups: the duty-bearers accountable for protecting children**

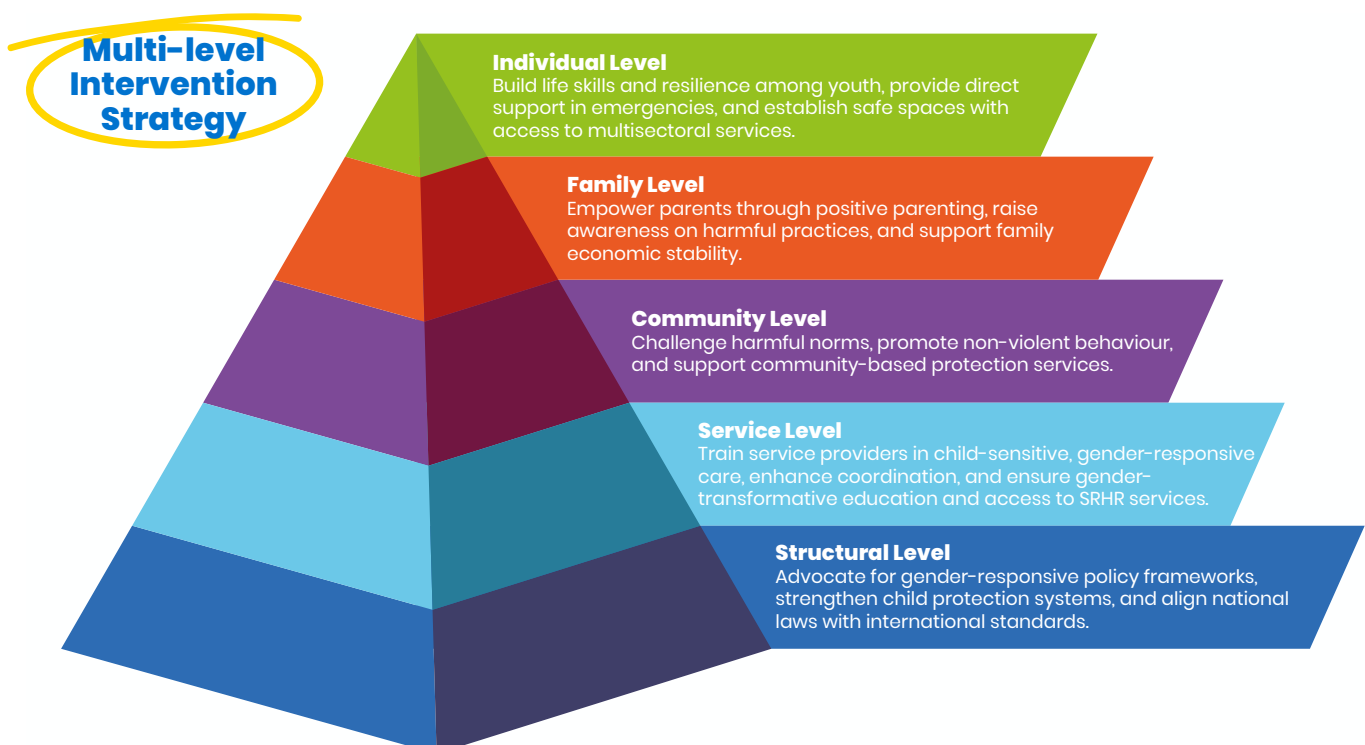
Plan International engages with parents, caregivers and extended families and communities through

programmes like "Parenting and Life Skills" to strengthen children's protective factors and resilience and minimise risk of violence against children. In humanitarian settings, we provide cash assistance to vulnerable families or caregivers with the aim to improve protection outcomes for children and adolescents, by supporting access to education and support services that reduce harmful practices such as child marriage or child labour. When adult survivors seek support, Plan International offers initial assistance and refers them to appropriate psychosocial, legal and health services.

Overall, successful projects to prevent and respond to child marriage should pay attention to norms, individual level skills and agency and legal frameworks.

✓ **Preventing and responding to violence**

Plan addresses the root causes of SGBV by promoting gender equality, shifting harmful norms through awareness campaigns, community dialogues, and engaging men and boys as allies. To respond effectively, Plan collaborates with service providers for case management and supports recovery, transitioning communities toward resilience through improved facilities and living conditions.



Vietnam: Plan International launched a project to protect children from cyberbullying and GBV



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- ²² ibid
- ²³ UNICEF data (2024). [Female genital mutilation](#)
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About Plan International Belgium

Plan International Belgium is an independent humanitarian and development organisation founded in 1983, which defends children's rights and the equality of girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child. But this potential is often stifled by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected. Working with children, young people, our supporters, and our partners, we strive to create a just world by tackling the root causes of the problems faced by girls and all vulnerable children. In more than 80 countries, we defend girls' rights from birth to adulthood. So that every girl can feel safe. So that she can tell the world who she is and what she wants. So that she can fulfil her dreams. So that every girl can be free.

About Gender Equality Essentials

Gender Equality Essentials are a collection of concise, informative guides designed to shed light on the critical issues impacting girls' rights and gender equality globally. Each guide provides an overview of a specific theme, ranging from girls' education and child marriage to girls' leadership and beyond. By providing these resources, we aim to empower peers, advocates, policymakers, and our broad community with the knowledge and tools necessary to drive meaningful change. Until every girl is free.

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