



Feminist perspectives on addressing violence against women and girls: **Reframing the language of “gender-based violence” away from feminist underpinnings**

Executive Summary


Feminist analysis and activism have been instrumental in achieving gains in women’s rights, including action to address violence against women and girls (VAWG). Over the past two decades, strong local, national and international women’s movements have brought VAWG, including in armed conflict and natural disasters, into the public domain as a development, public health, international peace and security and women’s rights issue.

Although the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed positive developments regarding VAWG, many of these gains are now under threat. In many countries, we are witnessing the erosion of women’s human rights to live free from violence and exercise their full and equal rights in all domains; women’s movements and women’s rights organisations’ efforts to address VAWG face mounting challenges. Further evidence of this trend is the shrinking space for women’s movements and women’s rights work across local, national and global contexts. Addressing these challenges will enable us to regain the momentum and accelerate the transformation necessary for securing women and girls’ full and equal rights.

This paper outlines the way in which language that emerged as an expression of feminist theory and practice is increasingly being de-politicised with the effect of shifting attention away from, and undermining, the transformative agenda of VAWG and women’s rights work. Specifically, the paper examines how evolving definitions of gender-based violence (GBV) have shifted away from a specific focus on women and girls, and considers several problematic effects of this shift: lack of theoretical rigour; the struggle facing GBV actors to retain a focus on women and girls



The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), created in 2017 to reassert a feminist perspective in violence against women and girls (VAWG) work, is a collective of over 80 activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end VAWG. The *Feminist Perspectives on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls Series* is a collection of papers written by COFEM members to articulate concerns and aspirations for the shrinking space for feminist analysis in VAWG efforts in development and humanitarian settings.



in their work; and the failure of other actors to meet their responsibilities to address violence affecting males, LGBTI groups broadly, and others. The paper concludes with a call for support to GBV actors in their efforts to ensure that the discourse and practice of GBV maintains a feminist-informed focus on women and girls, and that resources continue to be allocated to address the specific and pandemic GBV problem.

Introduction

Feminist theory and practice affirm the fundamental understanding that addressing the problem of VAWG requires attending to the structural gender inequalities that reinforce and perpetuate this violence. Women's rights activists have sought to highlight this understanding by framing VAWG as "gender-based violence" (GBV). Now, however, interpretations of "GBV" are being de-coupled from feminist underpinnings. Emerging definitions of GBV fail largely to reflect feminist theory; instead, definitions of GBV tend increasingly to suggest that *any* violence related to gender identity and/or to maintaining or deviating from normative gender roles constitutes GBV.

It might be suggested that this shift in language is "progressive." In effect, however, refocusing GBV language to more broadly incorporate gender roles and/or gender identities transfers attention in both theory and practice away from the problems of male privilege and women's oppression within the prevailing patriarchy toward a more politically neutral frame that encompasses violence against everyone – that is, men, women, boys, girls and LGBTI groups broadly. Such a shift implies, misleadingly, that all these groups suffer similarly, and even equally, from the prevailing gender order and its related norms.

These attempts to redefine the language of GBV undermine attention to the rights and needs of women and girls affected by GBV and hampers efforts to change the social conditions that give rise to this problem. This approach also undermines efforts to address the needs of other groups, whose experiences of violence require specific and specialised attention.

Problem Analysis

VAWG as GBV. The term "gender-based violence" arose within the women's rights movement to articulate women's exposure to violence in the context of patriarchy. The term was first taken up in the UN *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* (DEVAW, 1993), an international agreement in which violence against women is defined as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or

suffering to women.”¹ In addition to emphasizing that GBV takes many forms, DEVAW makes the link between patriarchy and GBV clear by emphasizing that violence against women is “a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women.”²

Rights advocates introduced the language of GBV to articulate the problem of VAWG for many practical and strategic reasons. First and foremost, this language underscores the importance of dismantling the global gender hierarchy because it is the unifying foundation for multiple forms of violence women experience, often at the hands of people intimately known to them and typically multiple times over the course of their lifespan. Using the language of GBV to highlight inequality between men and women as central in the perpetration of myriad forms of VAWG is also important because it reinforces that States have the obligation to work to eliminate VAWG as part of their responsibilities to protect and promote universal human rights. In this way – and unlike the term VAWG (which does not make explicit the root causes of the violence) – GBV underscores State accountability for challenging patriarchal norms and values and dismantling deeply embedded structural forms of male dominance over women.

Shifting definitions. Since DEVAW’s promulgation of VAW as GBV in 1993, numerous other definitions of GBV have emerged. With few exceptions, these definitions reflect a gradual but significant shift away from a specific emphasis on gender discrimination as it is manifested in VAWG. GBV is being (re)interpreted regularly to emphasise gender roles and identities as they affect *all* people, with these definitions often specifically calling attention to violence against males and violence against LGBTI and other groups broadly. Two recent examples by humanitarian and development donors are:

... the European Union (EU) defines gender based violence as violence directed against a person because of that person’s gender or as violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately.³

¹ United Nations, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, United Nations, New York, 20 December 1993. Available at: <<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>>. Some might argue that because DEVAW articulates VAW as GBV (rather than the reverse), it can be assumed that there may be “other types” of GBV that are not VAW. Such an interpretation rests on a certain logic or literalness that overlooks how “gender” was understood and used by many women’s rights activists at the time DEVAW was drafted (and up to the present), as a word to describe the socially imposed hierarchy between males and females. When taking this into account, there can be no confusion that GBV specifically delineates the problem of VAWG.

² *Ibid.*

³ See information on EU Call for Proposals: Preventing and combatting gender-based violence and violence against children: <<http://www.svri.org/news/eu-call-proposals-preventing-and-combating-gender-based-violence-and-violence-against-children>>.

. . . USAID defines Gender-based Violence as an umbrella term for any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived biological sex, gender identity and/or expression, sexual orientation, and/or lack of adherence to varying socially constructed norms around masculinity and femininity.⁴


Even in cursory inspection of both these definitions, it is clear that vast forms of violence might fall under them. When referring to “persons of a particular gender”, the EU definition uses gender as a demographic characteristic (rather than a feminist-informed frame for social analysis of hierarchy and discrimination between males and females), suggesting that “GBV” can happen because a person is male, female, or somewhere else along the “gender” spectrum. The USAID definition brings more explicit attention to concerns of “gender inequality, patriarchy and power”, but nevertheless encompasses all violence based on a person’s sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or exception from gender norms. Arguably, and whether intentional or not, these definitions could be viewed as covering almost all conceivable types of violence intentionally inflicted and/or experienced by human beings. The space that was once reserved for attention to and action on violence that women and girls face is now crowded with multiple forms of violence deemed to have any sort of gendered dimension, regardless of whether the violence is grounded in sexuality, gender identity, gender relations or gender norms, rather than inherent, fundamental or systematic gender discrimination and inequality.

Return to male-dominated discourse. Although the meaning of words is never assuredly permanent, this type of reinterpreting of GBV language illustrates a tendency within the global patriarchy to drift inexorably toward male points of view that insert the needs and concerns of males into women-specific spaces.⁵ If we reflect on the geneses of the above definitions, we can plainly see a shift away from a focus on women and girls and the gender hierarchy. The EU definition, for example, appears to have been adapted from the Council of Europe’s *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (Istanbul Convention, 2011), which states in Article 3(d) that “‘gender based violence against women’ shall mean violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.”⁶ In the more recent EU definition, “woman” has been

⁴ See US Department of State website: <<https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/gwi/priorities/gbv/258536.htm#DEFINITION>>. The USAID definition further states that GBV is rooted in “structural gender inequalities, patriarchy, and power imbalances. GBV is typically characterized by the use or threat of physical, psychological, sexual, economic, legal, political, social and other forms of control and/or abuse . . . Women and girls across the life course are most at-risk and disproportionately affected by GBV. It is experienced by individuals across the spectrum of gender identities and gender expression. Men and boys also experience GBV. . .”.

⁵ This can be done by females as well as males: everyone is shaped by patriarchal privilege, and it can sometimes protect – even if to limiting degree – women who shore it up. Also, some GBV actors acknowledge inadvertently abetting the shift towards a more neutralized interpretation of the term GBV because of not always being insistent that the term references VAWG. This softening can sometimes be an effort to build broad-based consensus so that various audiences — largely those representing patriarchal structures and male-dominated institutions and agencies—do not become defensive and create backlash against women-specific programming. This approach has not worked.

⁶ Council of Europe, *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, 12 April 2011: <<https://rm.coe.int/168046031c>>.




replaced with “gender”. The USAID definition seems to derive from the IASC *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Action* (2005, revised 2015) definition, in which GBV is described as “an umbrella term for any harmful act that is . . . based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females.”⁷ By comparison, the USAID definition has removed reference to *gender differences between males and females*, thereby obscuring the problem of the gender hierarchy for females.

Implications

Lack of theoretical rigour. Loosely formed definitions like these do not represent sound theory. Whereas feminist studies have empirically identified a link between gender discrimination and the multiple forms of violence against women that GBV seeks to describe, there is no theoretical basis for describing the foundations of violence against other groups (e.g. males and LGBTI groups broadly) as gender discrimination. (See COFEM Series Paper 3 for further discussion of this issue.) Instead, these “inclusive” GBV definitions often flatten the gender hierarchy between females and males in favor of problematising gender identities and roles. Although infrequent, arguments are merging that men and boys can be discriminated against because of their “gender”; i.e. that men and boys are harmed by gender discrimination and that female violence against males is GBV. These arguments wholly deconstruct conceptions of gender discrimination and gender inequality, which are meant to describe the power and privilege that all males experience *in comparison to all females*. This type of reframing not only empties the GBV language of its intent, there is also no evidence for how such broad categorisation clarifies the experience of different groups. Understanding how masculinity drives the problem of some forms of violence against males is different from understanding how homo- and trans-phobia drives some forms of violence against LGBTI groups generally, both of which are distinct from understanding how gender discrimination drives most forms of VAWG.

Compromised GBV programming. Particularly when definitions are determined by donors, like the ones cited above, the implications for GBV programmers are significant because these definitions inform how funding is directed and accessed. (See COFEM Series Paper 4 for further discussion of this issue.) These definitions are typically developed with minimal input from GBV specialists (often because there is an assumption that consultation with gender experts is equivalent to consultation with GBV experts), and even when GBV specialists are involved, their inputs can be over-shadowed by the inputs and perspectives of those looking at the broader gender spectrum and/or at broader protection concerns (See COFEM Series Paper 5 for further discussion of this issue).

⁷ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery*, IASC, 2015: <<http://gbvguidelines.org/>>.



Moreover, in practice, the insistence on an “inclusive” approach to GBV translates into diminished attention to the specific rights, risks and needs of women and girls, while simultaneously compromising consideration and reflection of the needs and experiences of men, boys, and LGBTI populations and how best to address them. Rather than helping to redress the power imbalance between men and women that drives GBV, an inclusive approach risks reinforcing this imbalance by eclipsing women and girls’ different and specific needs, and equating them with the different and specific needs of men and boys. In one example of many, safe spaces for women and girls that were developed in response to the Syrian refugee crisis are expected by some donors to serve men and boys (even if on a different floor or at different hours). This results in fewer safe spaces for women and girls, when in this context, safe spaces are their *only* spaces. (See COFEM Series Paper 5 for further discussion of this issue.)

In contrast to some donors’ expanded definitions of GBV, however, the definition used by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) humanitarian briefing paper focuses explicitly on women and girls, based on DEVAW’s feminist frame for GBV.⁸ DFID’s unambiguous focus on women and girls has resulted in increased UK funding to meet the specific needs of women and girls, including the prevention, response, and mitigation of GBV. In one example of how consequential this has been, DFID funding allowed the International Rescue Committee to establish a unit focused explicitly on the needs of women and girls in humanitarian crises, enabling IRC to lead the GBV field in advocating for humanitarian attention to the needs of women and girls, including provision of critical, life-saving services. This donor leadership is seen also with Sweden’s explicit focus on women and girls when addressing GBV, and has resulted in high-level compacts such as the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence and the Real Time Accountability Partnership.

Failure of other actors to meet their responsibilities. The arguments that have been advanced about the need to expand the remit of GBV programmes to attend to a broader spectrum of people often come from, or are buttressed by, other protection sectors, such as child protection, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and, particularly in humanitarian settings, those supporting a general protection response. Their arguments are linked to their broader focus, typically reflecting concerns about a female-centred project with such questions as, “what about men?” and “what about LGBTI populations?”. GBV actors and activists who speak about VAWG in any space are asked increasingly to also speak about violence against men and boys. If they do not, what they say about VAWG is invalidated. Not only is this demoralizing for many of those who work in GBV, it also removes responsibility from other actors who are meant to address these specific forms of violence.

In fact, other actors do not generally take responsibility within their own areas of operation to improve response to the widespread problem of violence experienced *and* perpetrated by


⁸ UK Department for International Development, ‘Violence against Women and Girls in Humanitarian Emergencies’ CHASE Briefing Paper, 2013: <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271932/VAWG-humanitarian-emergencies.pdf>.

men and boys, including gay men and those who otherwise transgress heterosexual norms of masculinity, and/or LGBTI groups broadly. The push to have GBV services expanded to meet the needs of other groups not only presents a problem in terms of shrinking space for women and girls, but also may result in services of questionable quality or that do harm because they are not located within appropriate channels. (See Box 1.)

Box 1. In the current Syria crisis, it is well documented that programmes to meet the needs of women and girls are vastly under-resourced, yet there is an increasing push for this programming also to meet the needs of male survivors of violence. The entry point for services for men is often through MHPSS services, including programming designed for victims of torture. Yet in Syria and other humanitarian settings, these actors have not scaled up necessary specialisations for psychosocial support to male sexual violence survivors. Attempting to serve men through existing GBV programmes that focus on the needs of women and girls may not only discourage women and girls from accessing the services (particularly for girls whose parents do not allow them to participate in mixed-sex activities), but may also prevent males from reporting because they are unlikely to access services that are known to focus on women and girls predominantly.

Recommendations

- **GBV experts should confidently claim the language of “GBV”, as laid out in DEVAW, as a specific articulation of the VAWG problem.** GBV experts should be able to forefront the politically transformative meanings of gender and GBV without the need for assuaging concerns that males are “becoming marginalised.” Confidently claiming GBV as VAWG will help to reduce the confusion that is increasingly disrupting a focus on women and girls in GBV programmes.
- **Donors and others in positions of leadership should not perpetuate or replicate the drift towards male-centred GBV discourse and practice, but rather respect that the term “GBV” is grounded in strong feminist theory and evidence, and is the practical and logical home for addressing VAWG.** Specialised attention to women and girls is critical to ensuring their specific rights and needs are met, including through dedicated funding streams, because GBV programming is one of the few areas where that happens.

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- **Protection programmers should undertake more relevant and targeted efforts to better understand and address the causes and contributing factors of violence affecting other groups, including through building an evidence base that informs how to articulate and respond to the foundations of this violence.** For example, it is important to develop an evidence base for the drivers and impacts of different forms of violence against males that can inform good practice in prevention and social and psychological response.
 - **Specialised actors should convene to determine areas of intersection while upholding the value of targeted programmes to meet the needs of different groups.** There are untapped opportunities for synergies between work that aims to address male violence and work that aims to prevent VAWG. Even while holding the space for GBV programming to address VAWG, GBV colleagues can work with others to build capacity for addressing broader forms of violence. GBV colleagues can also play an important role in supporting advocacy for the necessary resources to meet these needs while ensuring funding and support for women and girls are bolstered. Engaging groups working on different forms of violence in a cross-sectoral (and feminist-informed) approach can catalyse change in a variety of directions.

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