

GBV AoR HELPDESK

Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies

Learning Brief: Finding Ways and Means to Deliver Gender-based Violence Programming in Hostile Environments

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Introduction

Evidence confirms the risk for gender-based violence (GBV) can increase in fragile and conflict-affected settings and reinforce pre-existing harmful social norms in relation to violence against women and girls (Murphy et. al, 2019; GWI and IRC, 2017). For example, rates of non-partner sexual violence in these settings are higher compared to non-conflict contexts. Intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetrated against women and girls is also more prevalent than non-partner sexual violence during times of conflict and humanitarian crises. (Ibid.) In these contexts, women and girls' basic rights and freedoms are often denied, laying the foundation for exposure to GBV. In addition, the breakdown in rule of law, militarization and the proliferation of small arms, and the normalization of violence can exacerbate risk of GBV. Competing forces may use GBV to destabilize communities and gain territory and resources (Nordås and Cohen 2021, USAID 2016, Futures Without Violence, 2017). Socio-economic inequalities also contribute to a less safe environment for women and girls.

Those seeking to defend women's and girls' rights - including those delivering GBV programming in emergencies— may also face high risk of violence. In environments where there are high levels of authoritarianism, religious extremism, ideological conservatism and entrenched patriarchal norms, hostility to GBV response and prevention activities can be fervent. Being visible or vocal about GBV and gender equality creates further risk of being exposed to GBV. And yet, it is necessary for GBV specialists to be equipped to program in these circumstances: to mitigate potential risks and in order to stay and deliver in line with the humanitarian imperative.

This paper discusses a range of strategies and methods humanitarian actors can use to support and sustain GBV response and prevention programming in hostile contexts. It outlines what 'hostile contexts' refers to in this paper, and why it is important for GBV program managers and service providers to be able to identify and adapt to rapid or incremental increases in hostility in humanitarian environments, which are likely to adversely impact the implementation of GBV prevention and response programming. The paper discusses some of the risks women and girls face in these high-risk environments and concludes with several key considerations for GBV specialists.

This paper intends to provide general information; it is not exhaustive, nor is it a substitute for locally relevant contextual analysis of GBV programming risks and risk mitigation measures. The findings and conclusions are informed by a scan of relevant literature and reflect the experiences of the author as well as other humanitarian practitioners

who have grappled with the challenge of programming for GBV in hostile environments.

What characterizes a hostile environment for GBV programming?

All GBV programming in humanitarian settings is likely to encounter some level of resistance, given that addressing GBV involves challenging widely accepted social norms around gender, power and violence. However, the focus of this paper is humanitarian situations in which GBV actors face a significantly elevated risk when delivering GBV programming due to widespread and politically tolerated and/or politically reinforced suppression of women's and girls' rights. This type of hostile operating environment is typically characterized by some or all of the following:

- An erosion of women and girl's rights through rollbacks / active repression of women and girls, such as women and girls facing punishment and violence for engaging in activities or practices which are normal human behaviors, eg. studying, working, singing, dancing.
- The absence of laws and other protections for women's and girls' rights, leading to impunity for acts of GBV.
- A lack of enforcement of existing laws and protections for women's and girls' rights, leading to impunity for acts of GBV.
- Retaliation (led or otherwise condoned by those in power) against women and girls who attempt to assert or defend their human rights.
- Repression and violence against I/NGOs and civil society delivering basic goods, services and programs that benefit women and girls.
- Repression and violence against programs and actors focused on LGBTQI+ populations, or sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- General normalization of violence.
- The presence of secret police or military junta(s) who are monitoring women's and girl's movements and behavior.
- The proliferation of small arms amongst the civilian population.

There is a link between authoritarian, totalitarian and non-democratic regimes and an increased likelihood of a hostile environment for women and girls and, in turn, for GBV programming. Hostile environments are usually driven or fuelled by anti-feminist or misogynistic ideologies, spread through orchestrated campaigns as well as ad-hoc public rhetoric and actions. Political, judicial, religious and social levers of power may be mobilized to assert and sustain gender inequality by fomenting fear and inciting hate and violence. With evidence of authoritarian leaders also "co-opting and distorting concepts such as equity and empowerment to their own ends". (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022. para. 21.). The purpose is usually to maintain a conservative, patriarchal status quo (Khan, 2023).

"Conservative patriarchal forces are always at work, but more recently they have coalesced to make progress in dismantling existing systems and institutions intended to protect women's rights, while actively constructing others in their place. This acts as a way to reinstate inequality both at home and internationally; a key strategy has been to co-opt and dilute UN and human rights language, in order to derail the collective progress made since the 1990s". (Goetz, 2019Khan, 2023. p.5).

In the type of hostile environments described in this paper, the principal groups leading resistance to and/or attacks on women's and girls' rights, women's human rights defenders, women's movements, and GBViE (gender-based violence in emergencies) and gender equality programming are:

Government (or government-linked actors/groups): This comprises armed/security forces of the government of the country, such as the army, air force, police, politically appointed judiciary, etc. This also includes special units of 'secret' police.

Organized Armed Groups (OAG): This comprises non-State armed groups operating with political, social or ideological objectives. They are usually fighting in opposition to the State or for their own vision of life in the territory. This includes groups like the Islamic State (who are/have been present in Syria and Iraq, for example), Al-Shabab (who are present in Somalia and other parts of Eastern Africa) and ex-Seleka (who are/have been active in the Central African Republic (CAR). (INSO, n.d.).

GBV can be used by these groups - and those who support these groups - to silence activists for human rights, gender equality and social and political change. With the rise of authoritarian regimes globally, GBV actors are increasingly exposed to hostile environments. This indicates a need to enhance capacity to navigate these settings. An introduction to some of the terms commonly associated with settings hostile to women’s and girls’ rights and gender equality is provided below.

Table 1. Key Terms Related to Features of Hostile Contexts	
Anti-gender Movement	<p>Refers to a relatively new global effort to roll-back sex-and gender-based rights. The anti-gender movement is an international and ‘transnational’ movement which opposes or seeks to undermine aspects of gender studies and what it refers to as gender ideology, gender theory, or genderism and ‘undermine the legitimacy of policies of gender equality’ (Kováts, Eszter, 2017.p. 34). It also seeks to ‘block inclusive [humanitarian] and development frameworks within multilateral governance arenas’. (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023. p. 3).</p> <p>Characteristics of the anti-gender movement include opposition to women’s rights; denial and minimization of violence against women and girls; opposition to women and girl’s bodily autonomy and their access to sexual and reproductive health services; opposition to LGBTQI+ rights. In hostile contexts the anti-gender movement can gain ground and traction with their narratives and agendas where they align to the patriarchal interests of authoritarian leaders/ regime. They thereby seek to dismantle legislative protection for women, girls, and minority groups rights and make it increasingly difficult for them to access sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and GBV specialized services. In turn, they also sow hostile counter-narratives about the breakdown in so-called family or traditional values and provide funding to activities and services which further promote patriarchal dominance and control.</p>
Authoritarianism	<p>Is an opaque style of governing characterized by a strong central government that allows only some of its people a limited degree of political freedom and usually relies on ‘unquestioning obedience.’ (Ogden C., 2022, Oxford Reference, n.d.) In other words, authoritarian states tend to be ruled by one leading party/group with a dominant leader, surrounded by a group of ‘elites’. (Newson A. et. al (2018) and Brownlee J.2007. p.10). The political process, as well as individual freedom, is controlled by the government without any constitutional accountability, meaning that authoritarian leaders exercise power arbitrarily.</p>
Backlash	<p>Describes the reactionary opposition to feminist gains and involves efforts to restore a patriarchal status quo in the face of progressive social change. (Faludi, 1991).</p>
Democratic Backsliding	<p>Is a process by which states gradually become less democratic over time. Backsliding can manifest through increasing concentration of power in the hands of the executive, and erosion of political and constitutional norms. It may slowly come about due to 1) a breakdown in the norms of political behavior and standards; 2) the disempowerment of the legislature, the courts or independent regulators; 3) a</p>

	<p>reduction of civil liberties and press freedoms; and/or 4) harm to the integrity of the electoral system. (Russell et. al. 2022).</p> <p>In relation to women and girl’s rights, backsliding can result, for example, in reduced protection or promotion of their sexual and reproductive health rights and access to health and GBV services, particularly when patriarchal and misogynistic decisions and rules are championed by those in power, and/or progressive feminist laws and procedures are repealed or amended.</p>
<p>Extremism / Violent Extremism</p>	<p>‘Violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition. It is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality, or system of belief’ (UNGA, 2015 A/70/674. p.1). Violent extremist groups tend to be characterized by spreading religious, cultural, and social intolerance and the UN affirms through its Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism that it ‘considers and addresses violent extremism as, and when, [it is] conducive to terrorism’. (Ibid. p.1).</p> <p>As recognized within a UN Human Rights Council Report from the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights (2017, A/HRC/34/56*):</p> <p>“Extremists tend to ... seek to ... (re-)establish what they consider the natural order in society — whether ... based on race, class, faith, ethnic superiority, or alleged tradition; are usually in possession of an ideological programme or action plan aimed at taking and holding communal or state power; ... reject universal human rights and show a lack of empathy and disregard for rights of other than their own people; ... reject diversity and pluralism in favor of their preferred mono-culture society; ... portray themselves as threatened ...” (Schmid, A.P. 2014. p. 21-22).</p>
<p>Fundamentalism</p>	<p>Fundamentalisms are: “political movements of the extreme right, which in a context of globalization ... manipulate religion, culture or ethnicity, in order to achieve their political aims”. (Hélie-Lucas, M. 2001). They articulate public governance projects, in keeping with their theocratic visions, and impose their interpretation of religious doctrine on others as law or public policy, to consolidate social, economic, and political power in a hegemonic and coercive manner”. (Horn J. (n.d.) p.1; UN HRC, 2017, A/HRC/34/56*. para. 4).</p> <p>The Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association defines fundamentalism,</p> <p>“Expansively to include any movements — not simply religious ones — that advocate strict and literal adherence to a set of basic beliefs or principles. [...] Fundamentalism is not simply about terrorism, extremism or even religion. It is, at bottom, a mindset based on intolerance of difference.” (UN, A/HRC/32/36, para. 90).</p>
<p>Totalitarianism</p>	<p>Where the state controls or strives to control virtually all aspects of public and private life, from political and financial matters to the attitudes, morals, and beliefs of the people. They are therefore characterized by systematic oppression and repression of rights and freedoms including women’s and girl’s rights. According to Friedrich C. and Brezinski Z.K. (1969) they identify six key features of totalitarianism as follows:</p> <p>“i) a totalist ideology; ii) a single party committed to this ideology and usually</p>

	led by one man, the dictator; iii) a fully developed secret police and three kinds of monopoly iv) a monopoly of mass communications; v) operational weapons; vi) all organizations including economic ones, thus involving a centrally planned economy.” (Ibid. p. 126).
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How do contexts hostile to women’s and girl’s rights exacerbate GBV in humanitarian settings?

There are many ways in which humanitarian environments that are hostile to women’s and girls’ rights can exacerbate GBV risks. Oppressive and repressive patriarchal policies and practices targeting women and girls serve to stigmatize, marginalize and exclude them. Not only does this harm individual women and girls but it also hinders progress on gender equality. The annex to this learning brief provides illustrative case study examples from countries across the globe of contexts indicating some of the ways in which life has become increasingly hostile to women and girls and led to increased GBV risk.

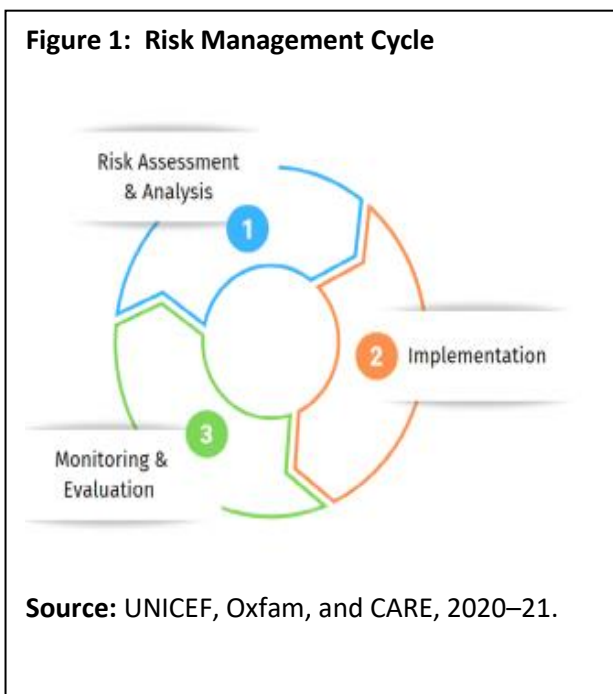
What are the key elements of a risk management framework for humanitarian organizations and actors who are implementing GBV programming in hostile contexts?

Being able to reduce risks for GBV actors in hostile contexts requires understanding what the risks are – not only to women and girls, but also to those who are working with them, and how to manage them. There are myriad ways in which women’s and girls’ lives can be thwarted and even endangered under hostile regimes. Incidents of GBV can be committed as part of a specific strategy of political groups to enforce control; as well, in settings where usual security protections have deteriorated and patriarchal norms are valorized, men’s use of violence against women and girls in the community and family can go unchecked. In these hostile contexts, there are also risks for humanitarian responders who work on gender equality and/or GBV.

Table 2 Examples of Risks to Women and Girls, including Women's and Girls' Rights Activists	Examples of Risks to GBViE Specialists and Responders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Threats - Harassment - Intimidation - All forms of gender-based violence including conflict-related sexual violence, technology-facilitated gender-based violence and femicide - Denial of freedom of movement - Denial of freedom of assembly - Denial of freedom of speech - Detention - Torture - Kidnapping - Forced disappearance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Threats - Harassment - Intimidation - Expulsion / Persona Non Grata (if non-national) - All forms of gender-based violence including conflict-related sexual violence, technology-facilitated gender-based violence and femicide. - Denial of freedom of movement - Denial of freedom of assembly - Denial of freedom of speech - Detention - Torture - Kidnapping - Forced disappearance

It is important GBV service providers, and the organizations for which they work, improve management of risks that threaten to adversely impact any GBViE program, its functions, objectives, operations, assets, staff, partners, and project participants. Broadly speaking, risk management consists of five steps as described below.

Figure 1: Risk Management Cycle



- **Identification and Assessment** – identifying and assessing risks and identifying critical assets.
- **Protect** – developing and implementing procedures to minimize risks to project participants, employees/volunteers and protect assets and reputation.
- **Treatment** – having resources and procedures in place to treat and respond to and recover from a risk, an incident or to learn from a near-miss incident.
- **Monitoring** – once risks have been identified and assessed regularly monitoring to understand if the identified mitigation strategy and approach is effective or requires adjustment including escalation where the risk level/impact score has become elevated.
- **Reporting** – ensuring that risks are registered once they have been identified with a clear plan of action to respond to the incident or learn from the near miss. Reporting channels should be clearly communicated to all relevant stakeholders. (FCDO 2022, p.3).

These steps should inform the development and implementation of organizational and program risk management and mitigation plans. There is always nuance to be considered; situations are not static or uniform so risks may change over time. Organizational risk appetites also vary, and this may influence the risk management measures they elect to adopt. When working in partnership GBV actors should discuss any variance in organizational risk appetite so that there is consensus on the general approach that will be taken and to the extent feasible a harmonization of risk management strategies. In the event of divergence of approaches these should be determined during a design phase rather than discovering this when incidents occur, to avoid the additional risk of confusion in relation to how incidents will be managed. Organizational profiles or perceived affiliations can impact freedom or restriction to deliver humanitarian assistance. In some contexts, local women’s rights organization may be at heightened risk of being targeted than an INGO or vice versa (i.e., risk levels will vary by context and actor). Also, what one organization may be equipped to deal with in a particular context may vary compared to another due to different factors e.g., level of resourcing.

Some of the key terms humanitarian organizations and actors should know in relation to facilitating risk management in hostile contexts are provided in Table 3 below. Please note this information is not intended to be exhaustive nor is it intended in any way as a substitute for attending key safety and security briefings and training.

Table 3: Key Terms in Relation to Assessing and Management Risks to Humanitarian Actors and Organizations Working to Support Women and Girls in Hostile Contexts	
Hazard	A situation that presents the potential for an incident, accident or near miss. It has the potential for danger and harm. It can be a dangerous phenomenon, substance, human activity or condition (IFRC, 2021).
Near miss	An unplanned event that did not result in injury, illness or damage but had the potential to do so. (Mulholland, G. 2019).
Risk	The effect of uncertainty on objectives, i.e., ‘a future event’ that may have an impact on project objectives. It may happen or it may not. Risk is the probability, and the potential impact, of encountering a threat. (Interaction, 2019, p.3). We can plan for risk based on its likelihood and potential impact – risks can be avoided completely, minimized, transferred to another party, or we can meet them head on with strategies to deal with

	<p>their effects. Risk is rated by considering two characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likelihood (L) of occurrence: a qualitative description of probability or frequency. • And Impact (I) of occurrence: the outcome of an event, being a loss, injury, disadvantage, or gain. There may be a range of possible outcomes associated with an event. <p>This is expressed as $R(\text{risk}) = L(\text{likelihood}) \times I(\text{impact})$. (ISO 31000, 2018).</p>
Risk Analysis	Examines whether certain safety and ethical considerations are currently in place, or can be put in place, as part of program design and implementation in the setting where the program is being implemented. These safety and ethical considerations relate to ensuring all survivors, women and girls, employees/staff [and volunteers] who engage in the project will not be harmed. (GBV AoR Helpdesk,2022).
Risk Appetite	The “nature and extent of the risks that we are willing to take to achieve program objectives. It must be realistic, taking into account the delivery context and the type of program we’re delivering. Once set, it underpins all our decisions on risk management and delivery. When risks rise above appetite, this should indicate to us that action is needed – we must review our response to those risks and escalate.” (FCDO, 2022, p.2).
Risk Assessment	The process of evaluating and comparing the level of risk against predetermined acceptable levels of risk. Risk assessment steps can be summarized as a five-stage iterative process which involves identifying threats, evaluating threats, determining risk, mitigating risk and documenting the assessed risks. (GISF, 2019). The team conducting the risk assessment must have an in-depth understanding of the local context, i.e., political, social, cultural, and legal dynamics, and must be fully conversant with program details. A risk assessment is an inclusive process and must be carried out by a diverse team.
Risk Management/Mitigation	The application of a management system to risk includes identification, analysis, treatment, and monitoring. Organizational practices, procedures, and policies that reduce the probability of risks and limit the harmful consequences/impact (Stoddard, A. et. al, 2016). Risk throughout the life of a program or project must be managed in line with the agreed risk appetite using appropriate controls. (FCDO, 2022, p. 1). A multidisciplinary approach to risk management helps to assess risks holistically and prepare for the different events that may occur - working together and developing interventions that have been considered from a variety of perspectives and across boundaries. Risk management can be considered as consisting of four stages, identification and assessment; treatment; monitoring and reporting. (Ibid. p.3).
Risk owner	The person(s) responsible for managing risks and is usually the person directly responsible for the strategy, activity or function that relates to the risk. They should have the necessary authority and capability of managing the risk and be accountable for doing so. (ISO 31000, 2018)
Threat	A danger in the environment; a potential cause of harm. Threats can be direct or indirect. For example, a direct threat may be actions taken by a combatant - or armed actor- (usually to aid in a political or military effort) for which women and girls and/or NGOs are the intended target (such as attacking or bombing a women and girls safe space). Indirect threats are actions taken by a combatant- or armed actor - for which the local population or other combatant/armed actors are the intended target, but civilians and NGOs are unintentionally affected, such as civilians or NGOs hitting a landmine on a pathway or road. (Dworken J.T., 2014).

What are the key considerations for GBV responders in addressing elevated risks across all stages of the humanitarian programming cycle?¹

This section outlines some of the key considerations for GBV responders when seeking to address elevated risks during all stages of GBViE programming. Protecting the rights and freedom of women and girls to live free from the threat of GBV requires concerted and coordinated responses from a range of humanitarian and civil society actors throughout the programming cycle.

Preparedness and Contingency Planning²: Preparedness planning "is a process designed to establish a standing capacity (i.e., ready at short notice trained, capable staff plus supplies) to respond to a range of different situations that may affect a country or region by putting in place a broad set of preparedness measures" (IRC, 2018). Critical thinking and planning during the preparedness phase can support an effective response in all humanitarian environments, especially in hostile contexts if this standing capacity is put in place and ready to be mobilized as necessary. It is vital that all GBV actors are thoroughly trained in GBV emergency response and preparedness and apply their learning to their specific programming using the tools provided. Conducting multi-agency trainings with GBV implementing partners and other GBV actors in hostile contexts can be valuable to share experiences, widen the range of views on risks in the context, and build and strengthen connections valuable for solidarity in times of crisis. During the preparedness phase it is critical to develop a realistic risk management/mitigation plan which outlines how the specific risks identified will be managed, i.e., how they will be treated, who will be responsible for 'owning' them, and when risk management strategies will be escalated.

Contingency planning involves "developing strategies, arrangements and procedures to address the humanitarian needs of those adversely affected by specific crises" (IRC, 2018). Contingency plans that match the context with various risk scenarios should also be developed and should be based on a relevant and recent situation analysis which factor for risks to women and girls.

¹ For further information relating to the humanitarian program cycle see the IASC Reference Module for the Implementation of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (2015). <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-11/IASC%20Reference%20Module%20for%20the%20Implementation%20of%20the%20Humanitarian%20Programme%20Cycle%202015%20%28Version%20%29.pdf> and to access the 2024 Humanitarian Programme Cycle Facilitation Package please see here: https://kmp.hpc.tools/facilitation-package/?_gl=1*zffnsz*_ga*NDU2ODk1NTAwLjE2ODg1NDM5NTI.*_ga_E60ZNX2F68*MTY5NzE3ODgzNy4yOC4xLjE2OTcxNzkyMjEuNTkuMC4w

² For resources on integrating GBV in preparedness and contingency planning, see International Rescue Committee (2018) GBV Emergency Preparedness and Response Handbook. <https://gbvresponders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/GBV-Emergency-Preparedness-Response-Participant-Handbook.pdf>; ALERT Emergency Preparedness Platform <http://www.alertpreparedness.org/>; Contingency planning and humanitarian action: A review of practice, Humanitarian Practice Network (ODI), 2007 <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/93866/networkpaper059.pdf>

Figure 2: Example of a risk analysis matrix

IMPACT	NEGLECTIBLE	MINOR	MODERATE	SEVERE	CRITICAL
LIKELIHOOD					
VERY LIKELY	Low	Medium	High	Very High	Unacceptable
LIKELY	Low	Medium	High	High	Very High
MODERATELY LIKELY	Very Low	Low	Medium	High	High
UNLIKELY	Very Low	Very Low	Low	Medium	Medium
VERY UNLIKELY	Very Low	Very Low	Very Low	Low	Low

Source: UNDSS (n.d.)

The Risk Assessment and Analysis Phase is an opportunity to ensure that risks are thoroughly identified and analyzed so that there is an accurate understanding of the resources that are necessary to mitigate. The risk assessment phase must be based on reliable sources of information and center the needs of women and girls and other at-risk groups. Risks should be assessed on a 5x5 risk matrix based on their likelihood and impact (see Figure 2). This assigns each risk to one of four or five ratings: very low/low/insignificant (green), medium/minor (yellow), high/major (orange) or very high (red) or unacceptable/catastrophic (black). The name of these ratings, color and numbering of these ratings can slightly vary depending on the exact risk matrix model used.

“A programmatic risk analysis is useful as it considers some of the essential features that should already be in place, or planned for, when designing and implementing GBV response or prevention programming to ensure safety. In many cases, a programmatic risk analysis will be informed by existing GBV assessments and secondary data reviews (SDRs), as often there will be questions of accessibility, acceptability and quality of care included in GBV assessments and secondary data reviews that may be relevant to a programmatic risk analysis. Even so, a programmatic risk analysis should never replace a GBV assessment or SDR, nor should it replace participatory program design activities that are a critical component of co-designing program interventions with key stakeholders (particularly women and girls).” (GBV AoR Helpdesk, 2022).

In hostile environments, it is vital that GBV specialists and service providers are joining up all the dots on the available data relating to risks for survivors from existing GBV assessments, SDRs, their programmatic risk analysis as well as other relevant reports and analyses such as conflict analyses reports and safety and security briefings. By pooling together data from a range of relevant sources this can lead to a more comprehensive risk management plan when relevant mitigation measures are identified and documented for each risk. Risk management plans should be regularly reviewed and updated, especially given the fluidity that is often a feature of hostile contexts to women’s and girl’s rights.

It is also important to assess and analyze where backlash may be operating unseen: reveal the strategies, funding flows and critical spaces where it is occurring and map these and the narratives being used in order to consider plans for how to counter this collectively. (Khan, 2023). This analysis should also feed into risk management plans.

Implementation: Further detail on how we can address the elevated risks faced in hostile environments when we are implementing GBV programming in such contexts is outlined in the specific issues section below. In general, it is important to ensure that adaptive program management, since these contexts are volatile, and risks can escalate rapidly. Adaptive program management in relation to humanitarian response entails,

“An approach to humanitarian action which accepts that no amount of information during project design will ever be good enough, so we must rely on continuous analysis and adaptation. It is necessary to explore the purpose and practice of using MEAL data in supporting adaptive management.” (FIELD Adaptive Management, n.d. n/a.).

Box 1: Data protection resources

- Data Protection Checklist
<http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/DATA-PROTECTION-CHECKLIST.pdf>
- Data protection protocol
<http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/DATA-PROTECTION-PROTOCOL.pdf>
- Staff Data Protection Agreement
<http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/Staff-Data-Protection-Agreement.pdf>
- Data Protection Glossary
<http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/DATA-PROTECTION-GLOSSARY.pdf>

Monitoring and Evaluation: It is critical when designing a GBV program to consider the type and level of data it is safe and feasible to collect, analyze and store, as well as the corresponding systems and processes needed for data collection and management. In humanitarian emergencies characterized by hostility to women's and girls' protection, only the minimum level of data needed to provide essential information and services to women and girls should be collected and systems should be streamlined to ensure data security, including digital data security. Robust/enhanced data security measures may be required and there are a range of guidance resources available to humanitarian actors and women's human rights that can provide guidance on digital security measures.

Staff must undergo relevant GBV data management training (in addition to case management and other technical training) before having contact with survivors. If it is not safe to maintain paper or digital records without endangering project participants then

programs should adopt/revert to more basic methods, e.g., daily debriefs between case workers and supervisors, daily check-ins and out, etc. It is paramount to explain to women and girls what information is collected, stored and for what purpose and to seek their consent in these environments. This is in alignment with the security safeguards principle that, "Personal data should be protected by reasonable security safeguards against such risks as loss or unauthorized access, destruction, use, modification or disclosure of data." (OECD, 2013, p. 15, para. 11).

Data monitoring and learning/evaluation processes must also be sensitized to the level of risk women and girls experience in hostile environments. Mistakes in terms of how women and girls are communicated with as a part of GBV programming can result in harm. For example, if a woman requests not to be contacted or only to be contacted on a specific date/time, this must be respected otherwise she could be put at risk if she is under surveillance or facing a high level of threat. If an error does occur, it is essential there are protocols in place to manage the risk to women and girls, staff and volunteers and wider stakeholders and allies, reverting to the risk management/mitigation plan and revising this as necessary. It is also necessary to take stock learn lessons from errors and near-misses to avoid them recurring.

Another consideration in hostile environments is how challenging it can be to achieve fully the ambition or plans we may have in relation to generating learning (both practice-based and research). If the landscape has changed since the project was designed and the scope for generating learning has reduced it is important to regroup and update the monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) plan and to communicate the rationale and changes to donors and other key stakeholders (including women and girl participants) in a timely manner.

Examples of specific issues to consider for GBV response, prevention, advocacy and coordination in hostile environments

This section of the learning brief provides some examples of specific issues to consider for GBV programming elements in hostile environments. The points provided are not exhaustive but are intended to highlight some aspects which will likely require attention.

GBV Response Programming

A key issue in hostile environments is where and how to deliver GBV response services. It is vital to identify safe spaces through which women, girls and survivors can access emotional support, accurate information including about available services, and safe referrals to these, as applicable to their needs. The provision of individual and group psychosocial support interventions is particularly relevant in such contexts where risks of isolation, shame and stigmatization as well as woman/girl blaming are heightened.

Survivors may have higher levels of distress due to the compounding factors of violence at home and in their communities and this means that case workers and psychosocial support (PSS) workers need to be aware of increased risks to women and girl's mental health and increased potential for suicide and adopting other forms of self-harm as coping mechanisms. Both case workers and PSS workers should be trained on understanding suicide risk, how to assess it and how to work in woman and girl centered non-stigmatizing ways, which listen to what women and girls say their needs are and to develop supportive, suicide prevention case action plans which do not lead to further isolation or which focus solely on medicating them.

Whilst addressing survivors' safety, medical and psychosocial support can be feasible within hostile contexts, access to survivor-centered legal protection and access to justice through formal mechanisms is likely to be highly challenging. This is because if male-dominated legal justice and protection institutions in hostile contexts are charged with implementing laws which are discriminatory and which fail to protect women's and girl's rights and are, indeed, spearheading the roll-out of new repressive laws and policies then they are unlikely to have the best interests of girls and support the protection and empowerment of women who have experienced violence perpetrated by men. There is therefore a higher risk that women and girls will be further penalized if they attempt to seek justice through formal routes. They may, in fact, find themselves detained, at increased risk of exposure and risk of further violence (such as honor-killing). Indeed, informal justice mechanisms are also likely to be influenced by ruling repressive regimes and support the continuation of patriarchal social norms if the dominant power structures are hostile to women and girl's rights, since they are not operating in a vacuum. This can result, for example, in women and girls being forced into marriage with perpetrators of sexual violence if their male guardians/male 'caregivers' seek to uphold so-called family honor. This means that survivors must be able to access accurate information about the risks and benefits of legal/justice/'protection' referrals so that they can make informed decisions about whether to proceed. Mapping and tracking the legal mandates that apply to GBV laws in the country can assist in understanding the frameworks that apply and how these may be becoming more regressive in order to keep pace and update risk analyses accordingly. (Adapted from GBV AoR, 2019).

Dedicated women and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) are an important option and can be viable, but it is important to consider the level of visibility these can have and whether they could be or will be targeted and it is advised that organizations factor for the level and acceptance they have established in a given community – i.e. consider locations where there is a positive, relatively high level of pre-existing acceptance with the community before and even during a regime change. In some extremely challenging contexts, where women's movement is heavily limited, women's rights activists have adopted strategies of hosting limited activities within their homes for small groups of trusted women living in the vicinity. This can serve to maintain a level of connection and solidarity with lower risk--even if it does not entirely eliminate risk.

In some settings mobile service delivery that changes location frequently can allow some reach to women and girls, and the unpredictability of a mobile schedule can make it harder for activities to be targeted by bad actors. Even so, mobile services can present challenges if permissions and permits are required to operate, and it may be harder for women and girls to know when or where they can access response services. It is important to keep monitoring communities' perceptions of safe entry points for GBV services since these are likely to evolve as hardline ideologies and punishment of women and girls escalate. So, it is vital to keep pace and adapt programming modalities and locations should this change.

It is vital that case workers and psychosocial support providers receive regular, supportive supervision to help deliver quality services. It is also important that these front-line staff receive quality clinical supervision to mitigate against risk of vicarious trauma and cumulative stress, in any case, but especially given the level of hostility they and their clients encounter. Establishing peer-support networks for mutual and collective support can also be a key source of practical and emotional support for GBV responders.

Effective case coordination is a core component of GBV case management for both adult and child survivors. It enables survivor centered response services and support to fit within one interlinked system since a survivor's range of needs are unlikely to be met by a single agency in isolation. Therefore, service providers must integrate their case management work within the existing system and collaborate effectively. (UNICEF & IRC, 2013). This includes GBV and child protection actors working together collaboratively to offer survivor centered care according to the needs, wishes (and best interests of the child for girls) and engaging women and girls in the decision-making processes that impact them. (Ibid, 2013). When doing case coordination in hostile contexts it is especially vital that agencies have agreed information-sharing protocols and ways of working in place and that these are adhered to help maintain confidentiality for survivor's safety and protection. It is also recommended to have dedicated standard operating procedures (SoPs) for child survivors for GBV/CP actors which do factor for offering choice to survivors so that they have multiple entry points to case management and which account for the specific gendered-risks in the context e.g., risks of so-called honor-killings/violence or forced marriage to their rapist for girls who have experienced sexual abuse and harassment. Case conferencing, with the necessary precautionary measures and mechanisms mentioned in place, are likely to be important to support effective coordination and advocacy to meet survivors' needs. Information should be shared on a need-to-know basis, in confidential settings, with only relevant personnel present.

Integration of GBV service delivery within other sector programming (e.g., health and nutrition) can be a useful approach and may reduce visibility of regime-contested elements of GBV service delivery, but integration requires careful planning, preparation, and risk management. It also requires all sector actors to respect GBV guiding principles. In the event of a security incident or escalating threat level, it is also vital the wishes and safety of female staff are respected and prioritized. For example, if in the course of delivering integrated GBV/health mobile services a female GBV program staff or volunteer reports feeling at risk/under threat, this must be treated seriously and a rapid re-assessment be taken by the programs and safety and security leads on the ground (risk owners) as to whether to continue delivering services in that location on that specific day or take a decision to move out of area to a safer location. In any event, there should be immediate mitigation measures put in place to protect the safety of the specific individual female staff member concerned in consultation with her and she should not face any adverse reaction from supervisors or colleagues for sharing her safety concerns.

In terms of case management and psychosocial support program supplies for these activities with women and girls it is important to:

- Make additional efforts to consult with women and girls on their preferred activities given their agency and voice has been intentionally disempowered, often in multiple spheres of their lives.
- Make case management and PSS spaces as welcoming, respectful, and comfortable as possible. For girls specifically, there should be materials within the space that will appeal to girls of all ages and abilities to help provide comfort, support trust-building and aid communication. E.g., art materials, puppets, etc. These can be used for directive as well as non-directive communication. Giving both women and girls outlets for expression through a range of communication materials is of heightened importance in contexts where their ability to freely express themselves has been repressed, so investment in these materials should not be seen as an add-on but is rather integral to quality, effective service delivery.
- If supplies and materials are being stored in women from the communities' homes which are doubling as safe spaces, then it is important that such supplies and materials will not in any way lead to risk of further punishment or abuse from authorities. For example, if there are information booklets or flyers promoting women's and girl's rights and such material have become restricted or proscribed since they were published,

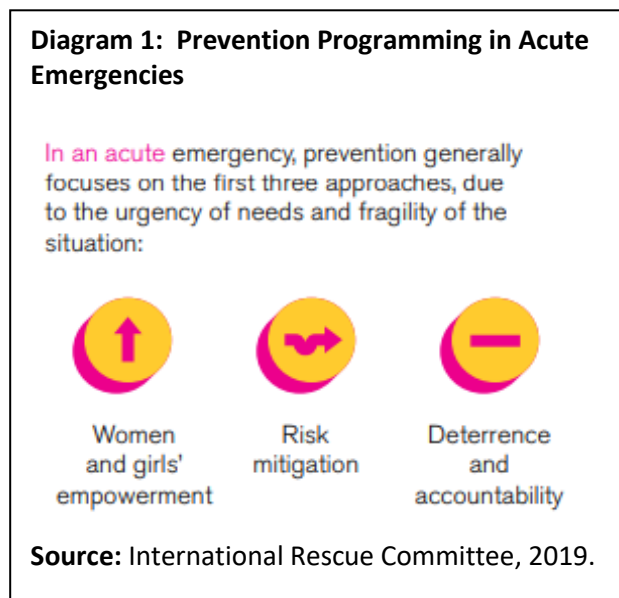
these should be removed.

For information relating to data protection and GBV case management and PSS please refer to the content in the monitoring and evaluation section above and to the specific information and guidance provided by the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System Steering Committee.³

GBV Prevention Programming

Undertaking GBV prevention activities in hostile environments can be extremely challenging, particularly if the situation is volatile, there are population movements, and there is a high level of scrutiny and surveillance of activities that do not align with prevailing patriarchal norms and standards.

Resource guides exist that can support GBV prevention programming in acute emergencies, which may be relevant to programming for prevention in hostile contexts. The International Rescue Committee's EMPOWER framework for prevention of GBV /VAWG programming in emergencies sets out a plan for how actors can build a foundation for prevention in the first twelve weeks of an acute crisis. There are principles, actions and tools which can guide GBV specialists and prevention staff and volunteers.



As indicated in Diagram 1, there are three main approaches that are followed: empowerment, risk mitigation and deterrence and accountability. Engaging in long-term behavior and norm change is generally not recommended with communities in an acute emergency phase-- although the process can begin with staff from the outset of an emergency and opportunities be continuously monitored for being able to deliver further prevention activities if the situation stabilizes.

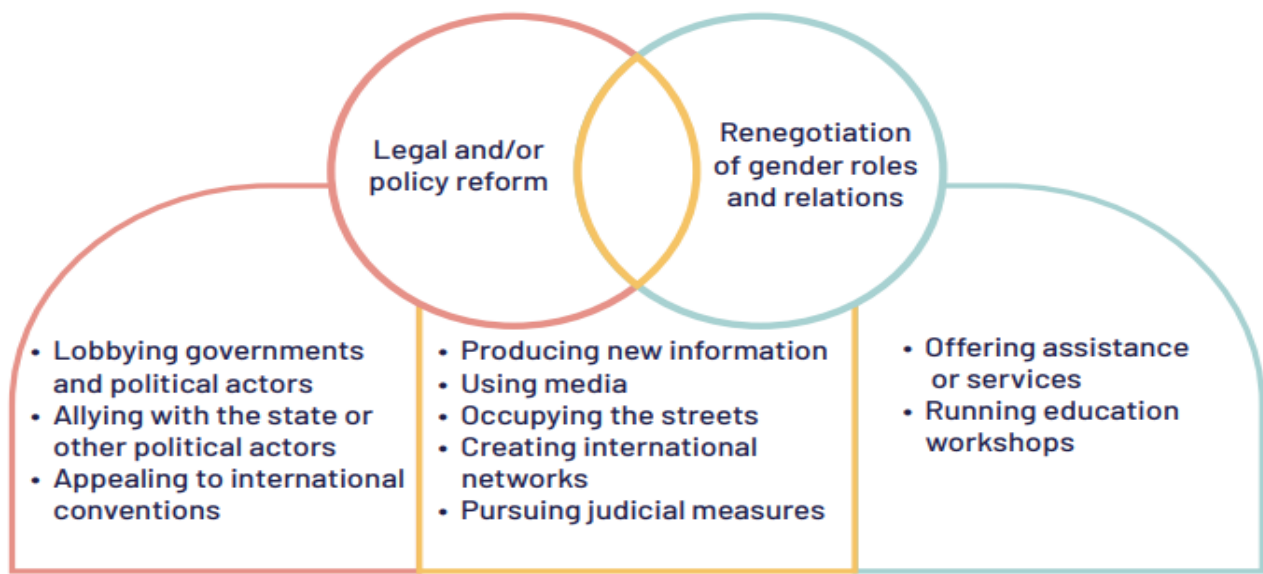
Community leaders do, of course, play important roles as custodians of traditions, customs, and norms, and often have a strong influence on the attitudes and behaviors of others. Therefore, to the extent feasible, GBV programmers should engage with them and seek to influence and support them positively, following careful risk analysis and risk management. Some may be allies and some may be actively hostile to GBV programming, so carefully planned engagement will be essential. During times of heightened crisis, especially during conflict and displacement, community leaders may have increased influence if formal systems are breaking down. (IMC, 2021). How engaging community leaders is approached exactly will also depend on the skills and capacities of relevant program staff, stakeholder risk analysis and careful consideration and monitoring of strategies and actions to engage them. The IMC's Traditions and Opportunities: Toolkit for GBV Programs to Engage Community Leaders in Humanitarian Settings (Ibid.) is an example of a resource which sets out guidance and tools for how this could be approached. The authors do indicate, specific examples where there is a need for caution when engaging with community leaders, such as when consulting with them on the contents of dignity kits in acute emergencies. This where GBV programmers should not rely solely on community leaders' perspectives since "they cannot speak on behalf of vulnerable women or adolescent girls who can better represent their own needs and preferences". (Ibid., 2021. p. 125).

Whenever possible, women's movements are using opportunities to inform and educate others on the importance of

³ For further information relating to the Gender-based violence information system and data protection please see <https://www.gbvims.com/>

gender equality and respect for women’s and girl’s rights and in so doing seeking to renegotiate a fairer social contract. Acts of resistance such as mass organized peaceful protest or symbolic actions (e.g., cutting hair) can also be helpful in drawing wider attention to repression of women and girls and highlight the harm caused by gender-based violence and oppression. Many women’s activists and movements also leverage opportunities to continue to engage in negotiations and lobbying, seeking to continue to influence decision-making processes and duty-bearers, and hold them to account. They also successfully raise awareness and draw attention to gender-based violence in hostile contexts at international events, in international media etc. The diagram below illustrates some further strategies women’s movements and activists may deploy to help prevent promote social norms change.

Diagram 2: Women’s Movement Strategies for Social Norm Change (cited in Harper, Marcus et. Al, 2022)



Source: Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021.

Having prior knowledge and a footprint in communities which has established positive relations, and some level of acceptance may be an advantage to effectively countering violence against women and girls if GBV actors have established trusted relationships that transcend beyond the transactional. If community outreach and prevention workers are trusted, valuable members of the community they may have influence in a range of spheres so that if messaging were adjusted it could seek to recalibrate some of the harshest and hardline thinking before it takes root or help to keep some men and boys as allies -whose thinking remains open and apart from the ideology -even it may be hard for them to be overt in showing this in practice. As Khan indicates it can be important to,

“Build-up movements that bring in more male allies. Patriarchy is bad for men too, subjecting them to oppressive hierarchical work and social lives, compounded by unjust class, race and caste systems. Building knowledge of this harm and how they can act for gender justice is essential to making transformative change.” (Adapted from Khan, 2023. p. 8).

So, what does men and boys true allyship and solidarity with women and girl’s movements look like? And what actions can GBV outreach and prevention workers seek to promote when engaging with them?

Box 2: True allyship and solidarity with women and girls movements adapted from Harper, Marcus et. al. (2022).

To ignore GBV is to be complicit in its perpetuation. Acting in solidarity and being an ally to end GBV means:

- **Creating opportunities/dialogues** for men and boys to be self-reflective and change their own behavior such as not commenting on women's bodies or making sexist jokes.
- **Calling out** abusive behavior and being active bystanders when witnessing GBV.
- **Role-modelling** to other men and boys how to be honest and vulnerable about their experiences and emotions.
- **Listening** to and believing the experiences of women and girls.
- **Challenging survivor-blaming**, or excuses and justifications provided for perpetrating GBV.
- **Refraining from reproducing patriarchal gender norms** by educating oneself and others and being open to feedback on own behavior from women and girls, without them fearing negative repercussions.
- **Taking an active role** in building peer cultures of action and accountability across different spaces.
- **Using civil, political, decision-making or cultural power** to raise gendered violence to the top of the agenda in order to prevent violence against women and girls and ensure survivors have access to specialized response services.
- **Supporting legislation** and policy change in favor of women and girl's rights and gender equality through advocacy and activism.
- **Funding social services** that support women and girls and persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities that experience violence and abuse.
- **Harnessing platforms** to model allyship and raise awareness of men's role in driving change.
- **Implementing strategies** to address GBV and institutional misogyny within one's own organization or network.

Prevention workers should be guided and informed by the program's risk analysis and management plan, as well as current situational analysis reports when seeking to promote the actions indicated in Box 2 above in hostile contexts to avoid doing harm; to be accountable to women and girls, and also factoring for their personal safety. Noting that some may not be feasible but that scanning/monitoring for opportunities to safely engage should continue.

The knowledge attitudes and beliefs of all prevention staff but, particularly male GBV prevention staff, must be actively monitored and assessed and reassessed on a regular basis given they are living and working in environments which are hostile to women and girls and as individuals can be influenced by the hostile and negative attitudes of others over time. Supervisors must take prompt action to address any behavior which indicates harmful attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards women and girls, so as to avoid harm, and putting survivor and staff safety in jeopardy.

GBV Advocacy

A key plank of GBV programming is to advocate that all humanitarian service delivery is safe for women and girls (The Interagency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming Steering Committee, 2019).

In a complex, hostile environment ensuring that safety audits and risk assessments to mitigate GBV risks are happening with regularity is crucial, so that advocacy can then be relevant and reflective of the current needs and situation. Incremental increases in hostility towards women and girls can be subtle, so it is important that GBV actors find ways they, or their allies, can move in the affected communities and report on changes that are impacting the safety of women and girls. This may in some cases necessitate the training /capacity-building of trusted male allies to offer additional/limited input to safety audits (e.g., if local women and girls are now confined largely to their homes) or to share key developments with GBV actors that might indicate a worsening in context for women and girls. (E.g., public floggings, hangings, targeted attacks, increased secret police patrols or vigilantism etc.) It may be necessary to use remote methods of communication or codified approaches to sharing these inputs if in-person meetings are too risky for them to attend. These measures should be used with considerable caution and the emphasis should always be to hear directly from women and girls and engage with them about what they see as their needs and issues of concern for their safety within the context so such measures as described above should never be prioritized in favor of this, but, rather used only in such circumstances where women and girl's movement is so heavily restricted that having additional information about what is happening in public spaces and in how men's views and behaviors are being shaped is relevant to improving the overall situation for women and girls.

Further, in relation to advocacy, joint/multi-agency advocacy briefings, notes or closed meetings may be necessary, held out of country if the risk is too high in country. Regional and global briefings can ensure the situation is visible to the outside world and can galvanize resources to support positive change. There is some safety in numbers through a joint approach, but backlash to any statement, briefing etc., must be anticipated in order to reduce risks to project participants, staff and even project assets (e.g., vehicles, communications and IT equipment).

It is also necessary for GBV actors to consider how donor Governments with feminist foreign policies may be able to support GBViE programming in a hostile context and the promotion of women and girl's rights and freedoms. Since it is by creating

“Space for alternative visions in public debate and multilateral for a [that change becomes possible]. Multiple overlapping crises call for imaginative alternatives to systemic problems. By bringing feminist understandings and transformative policies into international spaces, global efforts and solutions can more effectively tackle the material conditions that backlash taps into. This can also help achieve progress on urgent issues such as climate, democracy, equal rights and economic justice.” (Khan, 2023. p. 8).

GBV Coordination

In extremely challenging contexts the ability to coordinate effectively may fluctuate and it may become harder for the different levels of coordination (eg. local, regional e.g., province/county and national levels) to interconnect cohesively and routinely for a consistently joined-up response. Movement restrictions may make in-person meetings challenging, and surveillance of communication and IT systems may limit actors' ability to share relevant, timely information. Coupled with this it may not be possible to widely distribute service mapping and referral pathway information openly and there may be a need to be selective in relation to how this information is shared and with whom. Despite this, it is vital for agencies to resist the impulse to retreat to their own organizational bubbles or immediate spheres of influence. Streamlining how and when coordination will take place is essential given the many tasks demanding focus in these contexts, and to ensure the effective use of time when actors do come together. Consensus-building amongst GBV actors can build alliances and networks so that trust is deepened. This can have very positive outcomes for joint advocacy.

The GBV AoR Handbook for Coordinating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Emergencies states that,

‘Efforts to involve the government – when safe, appropriate, and feasible – are also crucial in the cluster

approach. The humanitarian reform effort, and especially the adoption of the cluster approach, was launched to better support governments to respond to emergencies. The principles and the methods of the cluster approach are designed to make that support more efficient by strengthening the government's sector coordination, not replacing it'. (GBV AoR, 2019. p.56).

Therefore, to the extent feasible channels or communication with governments, even hostile ones, need to be kept open with continuous multi-level efforts to advocate for improvements to women's and girl's human rights whilst avoiding collusion with human rights violators. In practice, this is easier said than done, and often requires skilful and continuous negotiation sometimes marked by periods of closed doors and blockage rather than advancement. The coordination handbook also provides some strategies to support consensus-building, negotiation and conflict resolution which can be considered as applicable and appropriate⁴. When there are multi-layered humanitarian crises occurring in a country e.g., a natural disaster over-layered with conflict, this can, on occasion, represent an opportunity for renewed dialogue and engagement with Governments vis-à-vis coordination and gaining greater access to women and girls in affected areas.

The GBV AoR Handbook for Coordinating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Emergencies also states that, 'Coordination leadership arrangements are guided by the principle – "as local as possible, as international as necessary". [...] This does not require all sub-clusters to have local leadership, but they should explore all the options for partnership with government or a local civil society member.' (GBV AoR, 2019. p. 62).

In contexts where Government officials at all levels are hostile to women's and girl's rights conceiving their direct involvement in coordination structures without risking and compromising the safety of survivors and humanitarian actors can seem impossible. In such situation engaging local women's organizations is likely to be an important act to progress localization whilst also indicating and demonstrating solidarity with local women's rights groups – provided this will not lead to them being targeted. It may still, however, be possible to support the capacity-building of Government officials on coordination and cooperation to facilitate improved dialogue, again provided that a careful risk analysis has been conducted to understand whether the benefits of such actions will outweigh the risks.

It is also vital that GBV Coordinators in such settings recognize the physical and psychological toll that is exacted on GBV Specialists in these settings, including themselves, and ensure that there is dedicated resource to support effective solidarity and collective care. This can include advocating and mobilizing resourcing for peer-support networks and fostering 'caring communities' amongst GBV service providers and researchers (Shulz P. et. al, 2022). Taking care of physical and emotional wellbeing is vital and is also an act of subversion and resistance for women working in contexts that are hostile to their needs and rights (Higson Smith et. al., 2016). GBV Coordinators can play a key role in supporting staff care and resilience by i) understanding the signs of trauma and stress that may impact sub-cluster members individually or as a group, ii) providing effective management of the GBV sub-cluster promoting the duty of care and resilience; and iii) having a good level of knowledge and understanding of how they can contribute to a positive environment and coping mechanisms to sustain their work and those of sub-cluster members and applying this knowledge consistently. (Adapted from GBV AoR, 2019. p. 189).

Protecting the rights and freedom of women and girls to live free from the threat of GBV requires concerted and coordinated responses from a range of humanitarian and civil society actors throughout the programming cycle. When the civic space shrinks it can necessitate that,

"Progressive actors [coordinate and] work together in coalition – with sufficient resourcing and vision- to tackle regressive social norms. Women's freedom and agency must be defended and expanded in all aspects of life. It is essential to pushback, fighting against patriarchy for collective human rights and democracy, guided by

⁴ See GBV AoR (2019) The GBV AoR Handbook for Coordinating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Emergencies pages 183-7. https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2019-07/Handbook%20for%20Coordinating%20GBV%20in%20Emergencies_fin.pdf

feminist principles.” (Khan, 2023, p 7).

One specific area where GBV actors should assess and consider whether collective action can be taken is in relation to monitoring and regulating the digital space against the proliferation of misogyny or perpetuation of harmful social norms and reduce online violence against women and girls. (Adapted from Khan, 2023). In some hostile contexts online violence against women and girls is stoked up on social media platforms with violence and vigilantism actions fomented. Factoring for disinformation and rumor during risk analysis, and when developing and monitoring risk management plans, is also a necessary part of the process when operating in hostile contexts which may use online and offline platforms to abuse women and girls and target those who defend their human rights. Building the capacity of staff and women and girl activists in relation to understanding digital safety and sharing relevant online resources with them- particularly if and when there are some designed and developed specifically to their context- is necessary and can be lifesaving. For example, providing information about how to prevent tracking of their movements by switching off location trackers and other types of surveillance, explaining use of virtual private networks (VPNs), logging out of social media, deleting web browsing histories etc.

In relation to resourcing, funding for GBV programming in emergencies that is inconsistent, short-term, and minimal in size tends to result in higher turnover of staff and affects the overall capacity of local women’s organisations to respond to GBV, as well as support the growth and transfer of technical knowledge and skills. In hostile environments this can be detrimental to consistent provision of lifesaving and sustaining services for survivors. Funding for GBV programming in emergencies is highly variable across different hostile contexts, with some protracted crises affected by funding reductions and significant shortfalls compared to levels of women and girls in need and these gaps are usually indicated within the humanitarian response plans. GBV Coordinators and sub-cluster members play a crucial role in resource mobilization when they lead/engage in resource mobilization planning and when Coordinators develop budgets for the GBV response, prevention and risk mitigation across the entire response and present this forward for inclusion within the HRP, - which is the main collective fundraising tool used for collective humanitarian fundraising. In hostile environments it is especially important to consider the specific resourcing needs of adolescent girls, disabled women and girls and minority groups of women and girls whose intersecting identities make them additionally at risk of abuse and to ensure these are put forward within these costed plans/strategies.

When GBV Coordinators are soliciting funds to meet the identified needs adhering to feminist principles is very essential so as to ensure that there is consultation, engagement, and consensus with the GBV sub-cluster membership on the funding priorities; that plans/strategies are representative of both local and international GBV actors’ interests and that collaborative projects between GBV partners are encouraged. Preparing for flash appeals in hostile contexts is an important aspect of effective contingency planning and Coordinators and sub-cluster members are then better prepared and able to put forward funding requests to meet needs when there are specific events which lead to a deterioration in the context which necessitates further resource mobilization.

Conclusion

Contexts hostile to women's and girls' safety, wellbeing and rights are growing and so consequently are the risks to women and girls and their human rights defenders (including GBV programmers) in these settings. Despite the complexities of operating in these hostile environments, GBV responders must stand in solidarity with women and girls to continue to deliver lifesaving and sustaining GBV response and prevention goods and services. And yet, how to do this is not straightforward. Multiple strategies should be deployed with continued vigilance to shifts and changes in the risk environment. Using the main framework outlined in this learning brief of first identifying and understanding the characteristics of the specific hostile context and how the hostility manifests – noting that this is likely to shift and change over time- ; secondly, analyzing the specific risks and threats and putting place risk monitoring plans which are socialized across the GBV programming team (i.e., all response and prevention staff are aware of the plan and the relevant mitigation measures in the event of a threat being actualized (incident) or a near-miss). Thirdly, taking into consideration some of the specific issues relating to implementation of response, prevention, advocacy, and coordination activities and taking the necessary actions to minimize risk to GBV survivors, additional program participants (e.g., women and girls participating in safe space activities) and associated staff, volunteers and allies.

GBV service provider organizations operating in hostile operating contexts will need a healthy risk appetite so as not to shut down opportunities to conduct activities (risk averse) but nor will they put program participants, staff and stakeholders at undue risk (for example, without due regard for duty of care to staff etc.). Risk appetites should be monitored as these can shift over time, so vigilance that risk aversion to maintaining an active presence does not creep in, or take over, in response to an incident is necessary with internal dialogue possible on this matter between programming and operational decision-makers. In reverse, clearly GBV programming organizations need to have due regard to risks and not risk becoming, for example, complacent about following safety measures if there have been no recently reported incidents of harm. This does not mean that a threat does not continue to be present in the environment. Creativity, flexibility and adaptivity will be necessary ingredients to maintain both a consistent presence and implementation as will coordination and networking, self and collective care to maintain the health and wellbeing of responders.

Another aspect which may vary from organization to organization and according to the level of safety and security for program participants and stakeholders will be the level of visibility that is appropriate for activities and services to be delivered but without undue risk. In some contexts there is a high likelihood of disruptions such as temporary or prolonged suspensions or, hopefully more rarely, there may be a catastrophic incident that forces the permanent closure of a GBVIE program. This is where effective preparedness and contingency planning can have a key role to play in minimizing harm and damage - to the extent feasible - provided staff and stakeholders have engaged in these processes and are aware of what actions to take in these circumstances.

GBV programming, feminist activists, movements and other related civil rights movements even when under severe threat and scrutiny from repressive forces have still persisted and will continue to do so. Even if these movements for gender equality are driven underground or individuals and their allies are sent into exile they have demonstrated before and will continue to do so that the struggle doesn't end until the violence against women and girls stops. If anything, the challenge which GBV actors and their allies in such humanitarian responses must center on in those challenging circumstances should remain focused on how to combine efforts and scale up the provision of life saving GBVIE programming for women and girls by women and girls to meet their needs.

Annex

How do contexts which are presently hostile to women’s and girl’s rights exacerbate GBV in humanitarian settings? Illustrative examples from contexts across the globe.

There are many ways in which humanitarian environments that are hostile to women’s and girls’ rights can exacerbate GBV risks. Oppressive and repressive patriarchal policies and practices targeting women and girls serve to stigmatize, marginalize, and exclude them. Not only does this harm individual women and girls but it also hinders progress on gender equality. Below are some case study examples from across the globe of contexts which illustrate some of the ways in which life has become increasingly hostile to women and girls and where this has led to increased risks of GBV.

Iran

The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report for 2023 – an annual index measuring indicators of discrimination against women in countries across the world - scored Iran among the lowest countries on the index, at 143 out of 146 (WEF, 2023). Data suggests that a woman is murdered at the hands of a husband or another male relative every four days in Iran. (NCRI Women Committee, 2023). Self-harm and acts of suicide are said to be frequent among young women and girls who are desperate to escape forced marriages or domestic violence (Ibid, 2023).

In this already highly patriarchal context where GBV is widespread, Iranian women and girls are experiencing increased violence, arbitrary arrests and heightened discrimination resulting from nationwide anti-state protests that began in September 2022. These most recent protests and the violent response by government forces were triggered by the killing in state custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was arrested by Iran’s Guidance Patrol (a government endorsed morality police with a history of harassing, assaulting and arresting women accused of defying the state’s mandatory dress codes), for allegedly not wearing the hijab in accordance with government policy.

Rights groups believe the 2022-23 government crackdown on these protests has resulted in the killing of hundreds of people and jailing of thousands. Iranian authorities have especially targeted actresses and others with large social media followings (Tanis, 2023). In one example, the women’s rights activist Narges Mohammadi was sentenced in June 2023 to a 10-year jail sentence in Tehran’s notorious Evin prison for allegedly “spreading anti-state propaganda.” (Fassihi, 2023).

At the time of Amini’s death, Iran’s Grand Ayatollah disparaged the Guidance Patrol. Campaigns from feminists from Iran and the diaspora resulted in the expulsion of Iran from its four-year elected term on the Commission on the Status of Women, making Iran the first UN member state to be ousted from the Commission (UN News, 2022). In late 2022, the Guidance Patrol was reportedly being disbanded. However, in July 2023 the Islamic Republic reportedly re-activated its forced-veiling police patrols, with several officials announcing that increased enforcement of forced veiling in Iran though “police actions” had resumed. (CIHR, 2023. para. 5).

The Iranian government then stated its intention to pass a law that would further persecute women for choosing what to wear in public by bringing a range of additional punishments, including monetary fines, restrictions on accessing bank accounts and denial of other essential services, confiscation of personal vehicles, travel limitations, bans on online activity, and imprisonment. Parliamentary Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf stated that the “Chastity and Hijab Law” would be ratified by mid-August, a month before the one-year anniversary of Amini’s killing (CHRI, 2023). In September 2023, Iran’s parliament approved the controversial bill which means women now face up to 10 years in prison if they defy the country’s mandatory hijab rules (OHCHR, 2023).

Organizations such as The Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) have stressed that the resumption of the police's forced-veiling patrols significantly raises the potential for a surge in violence against women, not only by the government, but also by vigilantes. Hadi Ghaemi, CHRI's executive director, has stated publicly that "the hijab should be a choice, not a tool of state repression," calling for "coordinated actions...pressuring the Iranian government to stop perpetuating violence against women." (CHRI, 2023. para. 19).

Afghanistan

With the Taliban regaining governing control of Afghanistan in 2021 there has been a steady and ever-increasing wave of repressive measures that have had devastating impacts on the lives of women and girls. (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This is despite initial promises from the Taliban upon their resumption of power that they would be more moderate than in their previous regime and allow women and minority rights to be respected.

The denial of women's and girls' human rights includes (but is not limited to) not being allowed to attend school or university; work at NGOs or even outside the home (with few exceptions); drive without a male companion; go out in public without head-to-toe clothing; travel long distances without men; own or go to beauty salons; go to restaurants without a male companion; or go to parks, gyms and public baths. (Women for Women International 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The curtailment of livelihoods and income-generating activities has further exacerbated poverty, putting women and girls at increased risk of violence and exploitation (for example, child marriage). This is concurrent with more aggressive and targeted forms of state-sanctioned violence. In November 2022, the Taliban's public lashing of three women and nine men in a provincial sports stadium for alleged adultery and theft signaled the religious extremist group's resumption of a brutal form of Sharia Law punishment that was a hallmark of their rule in the 1990s. The last two years have also brought increased harassment and violence against women's human rights activists, such as Tamana Zaryabi Paryani. Paryani, was detained for participating in a protest of the Taliban mandate requiring women to wear the hijab (Gannon, Associated Press, 2022).

Sima Bahous, UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Women Executive Director, has spoken out about the fact that "there are no women in the Taliban's cabinet, no Ministry of Women's Affairs, thereby effectively removing women's right to political participation." (Bahous, UN Women, 2022). Fereshta Abbasi of Human Rights Watch (HRW) emphasizes that this deepening crisis is disproportionately impacting women and girls:

"The Taliban's misogynist policies show a complete disregard for women's basic rights. Their policies and restrictions not only harm Afghan women who are activists and rights defenders but ordinary women seeking to live a normal life." (HRW, 2023. Para. 6)..

Ramiz Alakbarov, the UN Deputy Special Representative, Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan, echoed this concern, calling the Taliban's decision to bar women from working for the UN and NGOs an "unparalleled violation of human rights [which places] the lives of Afghanistan women at stake," adding, "It is not possible to reach women without women." (Roth, R. Gretener, J. Yeung, J. CNN, 2023. para. 3.).

In addition, the persecution of the Hazara religious and ethnic minority which has experienced long-term discrimination has experienced an increase in targeted attacks since the Taliban resumed control. The Hazara Inquiry which is examining and mapping the crimes perpetrated against the group; and attempting to identify the assistance available to the community and their shortfalls has concluded during its first phase that the Hazara,

"Are at serious risk of genocide at the hands of the Taliban and Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-K). This finding engages the responsibility of all states to protect the Hazara and prevent a possible genocide, under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide

Convention) and customary international law.” (The Hazara Inquiry, 2022, p.5).

Hazara women and girls have been targeted in specific attacks. This, for example, included an attack on a school on 8 May 2021 which resulted in the death of 90 children, the majority of whom were female Hazara students. (Genocide Watch, July 2021). The Inquiry report is also concerned about the potential of rape and sexual violence against women the Taliban detains, including Hazara women and girls and shares the following insights,

“Whenever there is detention of women, there is this very real concern that those women have experienced rape or sexual violence, but it's very rarely talked about or reported because the repercussions can be quite severe. This is also a place where honor killings are very common. [...] In fact one of the reports [...] eight of the women who did report that they were raped while in detention by the Taliban ... were then killed by their families. [...] given this historical past and given the fact that women are being detained in quite high numbers right now, that there is also going to be a link between sexual violence against women and sexual violence, specifically targeting Hazara women.’ The issue of rape and sexual violence requires further consideration.” (This content was based on the oral evidence provided by Dr Melissa Chiovenda, 4 May 2022). (The Hazara Inquiry, 2022, p.53).

Myanmar

Myanmar’s current political instability has reportedly worsened gender inequality and GBV. Myanmar is ranked 123rd out of 146 countries assessed in the 2023 World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report. The 2023 Global Gender Gap Report scored political parity (i.e., women’s political participation and leadership compared to men’s) in Myanmar among the worst globally- 4.7% - with indications that recent progress is being reversed.

A military coup in February 2021 disputed the results of the General Election and ended a short period of civilian rule. The imprisonment of State Counsellor (the equivalent of Prime Minister) Aung San Suu Kyi precipitated protests and violence throughout the country (SIPRI, 2022). The ruling military forces, the Tatmadaw, are now locked in a violent struggle with resistance forces—comprised of a loose coalition of ethnic armed groups and civilian militias. Violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) include aerial bombardment, burning of homes, and other indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas, as well as the recruitment of minors by multiple armed actors (OCHA, 2023). Women and girls are caught in the crossfire.

Women’s rights organizations across many parts of Myanmar have also consistently identified the widespread nature of conflict-related sexual violence committed by all parties to the conflict and the lack of justice and accountability to survivors. The UN-backed Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar called for the country’s ruling military to stop using GBV to terrorize and punish ethnic minorities in Kachin, Shan and Rakhine State (OHCHR, 2019).

Even before the coup, a military purge forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from their homes in 2017, with many internally displaced or fleeing to neighboring Bangladesh. (HRW, 2022). Human Rights Watch has interviewed hundreds of Rohingya in Bangladesh who fled the Myanmar military’s atrocities. They described soldiers systematically killing and raping villagers before setting their homes on fire. From these reports it is indicated that security forces burned down nearly 400 villages leaving thousands of dead. (Ibid., 2022). Those who escaped to neighboring Bangladesh joined a few hundred thousand refugees who had fled earlier waves of violence and persecution. According to the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview Report there has been no significant progress to improve the conditions and welfare of people in the Rakhine - where more than 135,000 Rohingya and Kaman Muslims remain in the central Rakhine camps, detained arbitrarily and indefinitely -despite recommendations from the Advisory Commission on Rakhine (OCHA, 2023; Bauchner, n.d.). The then UN-backed Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, which reported in 2018, concluded that security forces had “deliberately

inflicted conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of Rohingya”—or “measures of slow death”—a genocidal act. (UN HRC, 2018. p.349, p. 354).

The same Mission also concluded that sexual violence perpetrated by the military was,

“Part of a deliberate, well-planned strategy to intimidate, terrorize and punish a civilian population. [With] widespread and systematic killing of women and girls, the systematic selection of women and girls of reproductive ages for rape, attacks on pregnant women and on babies, the mutilation and other injuries to their reproductive organs, the physical branding of their bodies by bite marks on their cheeks, neck, breast and thigh, and so severely injuring victims that they may be unable to have sexual intercourse with their husbands or to conceive and leaving them concerned that they would no longer be able to have children.”(UN HRC, 2019 p.19-20,23; UN OHCHR, 2019).

Myanmar’s complex humanitarian crisis is characterized by deepening economic recession, rising internal displacement, collapsing healthcare, and surging poverty and food insecurity. Most recently Cyclone Mocha – which resulted in an official death count of 145 (of whom 117 were members of the Rohingya minority), has compounded humanitarian needs. The UN has noted increasing reports of psychosocial distress among the affected population due to worsening living conditions and lack of access to basic services. (UNICEF, 2023; Root, 2023). In such circumstances women and girls are at increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Humanitarian access to affected people remains restricted in conflict areas. In June 2023 the military-led government, known as the State Administration Council (SAC), suspended aid groups’ access to affected areas in Rakhine state (OCHA, 2023). According to media reporting,

“At the end of 2022, the SAC passed a law making it harder for NGOs to operate in Myanmar and prohibiting the provision of aid to groups the junta considers the opposition. Earlier this year, the country’s exiled government, the National Unity Government, also ‘urged’ aid groups to seek authorization before operating in the areas of the country it controls.” (Root, 2023. para. 15).

Women, and especially Rohingya women, have been disproportionately affected by the political, pandemic and economic crises in large part because of discriminatory gender norms in the workplace, communities and households. Hundreds of thousands of women have lost their jobs with the garment and manufacturing industries, which have been particularly adversely hit. Unemployed women face limited options, increasing their engagement in informal work, and in turn heightening their risk of exploitation and trafficking. The worsening economic crisis has also seen more men facing unemployment. In some households, this results in women playing a dual role, both as caretakers and income earners. Economic stress is consequently driving Intimate partner violence (IPV). (OCHA, 2023).

Progress towards passing a Prevention of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) law, under development in Myanmar since 2013, is stalled. Under the current penal code, marital rape is not a crime. Homosexuality is also considered a crime. (OCHA, 2022). Women have restricted rights to divorce and the early marriage rate is reported to be approximately 13 percent (WEF, 2023). Sex work is illegal, and sex workers often face stigma and discrimination, including being denied access to services. Human rights violations such as violence, harassment and abuse have allegedly been perpetrated by the police against sex workers as a form of repression. (Viswanathan, R., 2021).

Sudan

In April 2023, violence erupted on the streets of Khartoum, Sudan, with soldiers from Sudan's national army and soldiers from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group, beginning a series of armed skirmishes and battles. The RSF was created by Sudan's ousted president, Omar Al-Bashir, as a rapid response force able to mobilize quickly against rebel groups in Southern and Western Sudan. The conflict has since spread, with reports of sexual violence and a high civilian death toll.

Sudanese women played a crucial role in the revolution of 2019 which led to the overthrow of former military leader and President Al-Bashir, and yet prevailing conservative social norms and authoritarian political parties have continued to exclude them from political participation and leadership roles. Adding to this, women's and girls' homes have been occupied by combatants on both sides as street fighting continues, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Those who flee their homes face further violence and abuse whilst in transit, in temporary shelters and awaiting visas at border crossings. Even when women and girls manage to make it across a border, they are still not safe. There are media reports of Sudanese women, who arrive in South Sudan with almost nothing, having to sell their clothes and belongings to buy food, or being forced into precarious income-generating activities such as firewood collection. This puts them at further risk of sexual violence and abuse. Even women selling tea at the market and working in restaurants are in danger, with reports of traders exploiting them and coercing them into sex. Most women and children are sleeping outside as there are no formal shelters, which further increases their risk of exposure to violence and abuse (AllAfrica, UNFPA, 2023).

The UN estimates that 4.2 million people in Sudan (including refugees) are at risk of GBV. Whilst GBV responses services continue to function in most states, there remain shortages in essential supplies and in the most conflict-affected locations access to services is severely constricted, with 80% of Sudan's hospitals damaged, lacking staff or having reduced functionality due to the conflict (UNFPA, 2023). The lack of protection and capacity to meet basic needs (such as medicine, food, and water) has meant that many GBV survivors are not receiving care and support.

Yemen

Yemen is in the grip of a protracted political and humanitarian crisis. Houthi rebels have been in control of much of the country since 2015. The UN estimates that more than 14 million people are in acute need and over 3 million people have been displaced from their homes since 2015 (UN, n.d.). This crisis has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities and increased risks for women and girls of GBV. Women's participation in public life has dropped sharply since the onset of the conflict, while sexual violence, forced marriage, and denial of resources such as education and livelihood opportunities have risen. (Al-Sakkaf, 2023).

In areas under Houthi control, there is strict gender segregation in public places, and women and girls are subject to restrictions on their dress, behavior, and mobility. Women are not permitted to move from one region to another without a "mahram," or male escort. Any perceived failure to comply results in harassment, threats, violence, and in some cases has led to imprisonment and death (Al-Sakkaf, 2023; Wilson Center, 2021). In addition, women have been banned from working with organizations; using the phone; going to restaurants (except after presenting a marriage contract); and are not permitted in public parks in some areas of the country. Ideological propaganda is spread through the media and state institutions, e.g., education centers, that women should be controlled and isolated to the home for their reproductive function, in order not to divert men from their purpose of jihad.

Specific examples of abuse include the cases of activists Hanan Al-Shahithi, Altaf Al-Matari, and Zafran Zayed, head of the Tamkeen Organization, who have been sentenced to death by firing squad on charges of communicating and cooperating with the government. Asmaa Mater Al-Omeisy was kidnapped from a checkpoint and detained on October 7, 2016. A death sentence was issued against her, which was commuted to a prison sentence when her health deteriorated due to threats and torture in detention.

It is believed that since 2014 thousands of Yemenis women and girls have been abducted from their homes, workplaces, public streets, and checkpoints and taken to detention centers and secret prisons where they may be subject to torture, extortion, intimidation and sexual violence for participating in political, media or human rights activities. The UN Security Council issued Resolution 2564 that formally sanctions the leader of the Houthi militia, Sultan Zabin, for playing a prominent role in “a policy of systematic arrest, detention, torture, sexual violence and rape against politically active women” (Wilson Center, 2021; UN Security Council, 2021a., p.5).

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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.

The GBV AoR Helpdesk

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The Helpdesk is available 09.00 to 17.30 GMT Monday to Friday.

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