



# Unseen, unheard: Gender-based violence in disasters

*Although it is increasingly recognized that gender-based violence (GBV) is a major feature of many conflicts, its occurrence during disasters is not as well understood. This study, commissioned by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), is designed to foster that discussion within both the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and the broader humanitarian community.*

*The research addresses three questions:*

- 1. What characterizes GBV in disasters?*
- 2. In what ways should legal and policy frameworks, including disaster risk management, be adapted to address GBV in disasters?*
- 3. How should National Societies and other local actors address GBV in disasters, and what support do they need to fulfil their roles?*

## Methodology

The study adopts the definition of GBV agreed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in its *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Action*.<sup>1</sup> It states that gender-based violence is:

An umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females...

The term 'gender-based violence' is most commonly used to underscore how systemic inequality between males and females—which exists in every society in the world—acts as a unifying and foundational characteristic of most forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls.<sup>2</sup>

This report is based on a review of academic literature and practitioner reports, and field-based research carried out between May and August 2015 in nine disaster-affected countries selected to provide a variety of regional perspectives. Studies were prepared in Bangladesh, Bosnia-



Herzegovina, El Salvador, Haiti, Malawi, Myanmar, Namibia, Romania, and Samoa.

It is inherently difficult to research GBV, particularly after disasters, because GBV is usually hidden and takes many forms (including domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, child/early marriage, and trafficking). Researchers have found significant increases in GBV after disasters in high income countries, including Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States; fewer academic studies have been undertaken in other parts of the world. Overall, it seems that disasters tend to increase the risk of GBV and that new forms of GBV can emerge in their aftermath. To address the problem, this research concludes that immediate action as well as further research are required.

## Research findings

The study finds that:

- In some settings, both domestic violence and sexual violence (assault, sexual abuse, and exploitation) increase following disasters. In other settings, notably where levels of GBV are

already high, it is difficult to determine whether violence increased as a result of disaster.

- Displacement can increase the incidence of GBV, both in initial temporary shelters and when displacement becomes protracted.
- Disasters cause impoverishment, which can induce some people to adopt negative coping strategies, including transactional sex.
- Previous studies and news reports detected an increase in child/early marriages and trafficking in disasters, but this was not a major finding of the country studies carried out for this report. Further research may be required, perhaps using different methodologies.
- Those responding to disasters are not aware that GBV may increase in disasters, and are neither looking nor preparing for it. Lack of data on the prevalence of GBV during disasters contributes to this lack of awareness.
- Given the stigma and shame associated with GBV, statistics on its incidence are always problematic. This seems to be true of disaster situations too.
- Reporting and law enforcement mechanisms as well as services for survivors of GBV are often disrupted by disasters. This also hampers the collection of data on GBV's prevalence in disasters.
- Several of the country studies noted that police records during disasters were poor or missing. This may indicate disruption of law-enforcement activity during emergencies.
- While all nine countries studied have national policies on disasters and national legislation on gender, and a few refer to gender in their national disaster policies, none of their disaster plans included arrangements for preventing and addressing GBV. This reflects and may contribute to low awareness of GBV in disasters.

- With respect to health emergencies, academic research indicates that GBV increases the incidence of HIV/AIDS and that HIV/AIDS can cause a rise in GBV. Anecdotal reports from practitioners and governments indicate that GBV increased during the Ebola crisis.
- Disasters and conflicts are usually treated as two separate types of humanitarian emergency. The fact that disasters often occur in areas of conflict suggests that the intersections between GBV, conflict and disasters should receive more attention.

During past disasters, GBV has been largely unseen and unheard. This study concludes that more should be done to determine GBV's frequency during disasters, the forms it takes, and what disaster responders can and should do to prevent GBV and respond effectively when it occurs. In particular, more research is needed to clarify the relationship between displacement and GBV in disaster settings, and the degree to which restoration of livelihoods reduces its incidence.

## Recommendations

For the humanitarian community, the overarching challenge is to prevent GBV, while standing ready to respond effectively when it occurs. This implies that responders need to make themselves aware of possible risk factors and become sensitive to GBV across their prevention, preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

The recommendations below are directed to the broader humanitarian community, including national and local authorities, National Societies, other local civil society organizations, and international organizations.



### To the humanitarian community

All who work to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters are encouraged to:

- Assume that GBV is taking place, even if no reliable data are available.
- Develop and incorporate strategies for preventing and addressing GBV in organizational responses and cultures, by raising awareness, taking measures to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by disaster responders, building local capacity, and working in partnership with other organizations.
- Ensure that GBV and the safety of women and children are considered in all disaster preparedness and planning.
- Recognize the role that livelihood support can play in preventing GBV, and prioritize livelihood projects for those most at risk from it.
- Research and gather evidence on GBV in disasters; use it to inform policy.
- Recognize the health risks that GBV poses in health emergencies and take appropriate preventive action.





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- Take steps to enable communities to participate in efforts to prevent and address GBV.
- Explore collaboratively the intersections between GBV, disasters and conflict.

### To public authorities

National and local authorities are encouraged to implement the recommendations above and in addition the three recommendations below:

- Develop locally appropriate processes to ensure that women, children and men can report GBV.
- Give attention to GBV risks in disaster management laws, policies and plans, as appropriate. Following disasters, take adequate steps to prohibit GBV by establishing effective law enforcement mechanisms and procedures, including relevant criminal laws.
- Put measures in place to ensure that people living in temporary shelters after disasters are safe.

The full report is available at [http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Documents/Secretariat/201511/1297700\\_GBV\\_in\\_Disasters\\_EN\\_LR2.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Documents/Secretariat/201511/1297700_GBV_in_Disasters_EN_LR2.pdf)

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1. A Red Cross Red Crescent Movement definition will be submitted for adoption by the Council of Delegates during the Red Cross Red Crescent Statutory Meeting in December 2015. It states that GBV is 'an umbrella term for any harmful act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to a woman, man, girl or boy on the basis of their gender. Gender-based violence is a result of gender inequality and abuse of power. Gender-based violence includes but is not limited to sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced or early marriage, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation and abuse.'
2. Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Action – Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery (2015), p. 5. At: [www.gbvguidelines.org](http://www.gbvguidelines.org).



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