

# Preventing sexual and gender-based violence: the role of security and justice sector reform

Briefing for the Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict Summit, London, June 2014

## Introduction

**Preventing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is inevitably complex, and actors at local, national and international levels can often feel daunted by the scale of the challenge and how to act effectively in preventing SGBV.**

Saferworld would emphasise that a large number of international agreements already exist which commit governments to taking specific measures to prevent SGBV, including the Beijing Platform for Action<sup>i</sup>, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence<sup>ii</sup>, the G8 Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict<sup>iii</sup>, and UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106 and 2122. National level plans, such as the UK Government's Theory of Change for tackling violence against women and girls<sup>iv</sup>, represent a strong starting point for taking a holistic, multisectoral approach to preventing and reducing SGBV.

Despite progressive policies and high level commitments, overall progress on implementation has been slow, owing to a lack of political will and inadequate accountability mechanisms. More must now be done to implement these policies, and civil society organisations must be seen as essential partners in translating international and national level policies into real change for the hundreds and thousands of people who have been affected by or are at risk of SGBV. The Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict Summit in London, UK in June 2014 is an important opportunity to turn global attention to implementation.

## Recommendations

- Prevention efforts must address the root causes of SGBV, including gender inequality and power imbalances between women and men; and by challenging patriarchal attitudes and harmful notions of masculinities
- In areas affected by conflict, ensure efforts to prevent SGBV are designed to be conflict-

sensitive: that is, they do not exacerbate conflict dynamics, but aim to build peace

- Integrate a gender perspective into security and justice provision to ensure that security and justice providers are effective in tackling SGBV
- Support the inclusion of targets to reduce violence against all social groups and to eliminate violence against women and girls in the post-2015 development framework

## Addressing the root causes of SGBV

SGBV – in conflict-affected countries and elsewhere - is primarily a result of gender inequality, the widespread prevalence of patriarchal attitudes and beliefs, power imbalances between women and men, and notions of masculinities that normalise these social inequalities. Sexual violence against women and girls in particular reinforces women's subordination and inequality in both the private and public spheres; while sexual violence against men and boys is used as a means of bringing shame and stigma which results directly from societal attitudes toward masculinity and gender roles. Therefore, any primary prevention strategy should seek to address these causes of SGBV by transforming harmful social norms and gender inequalities, securing women's rights and the empowerment of women, and by promoting understandings of non-violent masculinities. These transformative strategies must be employed in all contexts, regardless of whether there is an active conflict, in order to make progress on prevention.

Other factors, such as unaccountable and unresponsive security and justice sectors, can play a role in the prevalence of SGBV. Pursuing criminal prosecutions alone will not sufficiently prevent SGBV by changing its underlying causes, but can in the long-term, alongside primary prevention activities, help to create an environment in which such violence cannot be committed with impunity.

While there are some commonalities, the underlying causes and triggers of SGBV can vary

across different contexts, and it is therefore important that any strategies to prevent and eliminate SGBV are based on sound analysis of the societal context. In areas affected by conflict or fragility, this should include a conflict analysis, which should be used to ensure that all interventions are conflict-sensitive, such that they do not exacerbate conflict dynamics, and wherever possible they contribute to building peace.

Levels of SGBV tend to increase during times of conflict, and SGBV can be both a trigger for and a consequence of violent conflict. Therefore, preventing SGBV can in some contexts be key to stopping further violence from escalating. In addition, while addressing short-term triggers of conflict and protecting civilians from its worst effects are worthy goals, an emphasis on this issue must not come at the expense of increased efforts to prevent conflict upstream by addressing its long-term structural causes. Preventing SGBV can be important to promoting long-term peace, but preventing violent conflict from breaking out in the first place can also help prevent forms of SGBV which increase during conflict.

## Preventing SGBV through security and justice

Saferworld's expertise on security and justice system reform is based primarily on our work in 20 conflict-affected countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East to improve national and local security and justice systems. Effective and gender-sensitive security and justice sectors are imperative to the wider prevention effort, but Saferworld stresses that in order to fully eliminate SGBV, prevention must focus on addressing the roots causes of the violence.

Saferworld believes that improving security and justice systems is an important element of a holistic approach to tackling SGBV in conflict-affected countries. While the UK's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) has committed to building the capacity of national governments, police and prosecutors to prosecute perpetrators of SGBV, Saferworld would strongly emphasise that while lack of capacity is often a problem, the primary barrier in conflict-affected countries is a lack of political will (international, national and local) to understand and address communities' security needs. Indeed, in many countries, security and justice providers such as the police, armed forces, and non-state security and justice providers are actually perpetrators of SGBV. Even where they are not, they often do not consider tackling SGBV to be a priority. Women and girls often face discrimination, intimidation or stigma in their interactions with these institutions, compounding their trauma and suffering. It is therefore vital that measures are taken to ensure

that state and non-state security and justice providers are made meaningfully accountable to all of the communities they are intended to serve, including to women and other marginalised groups, providing a real incentive for them to be responsive to people's needs.

Saferworld believes that developing effective, accountable and gender-sensitive security and justice systems in conflict-affected and fragile countries can have a multiplier effect on preventing SGBV. Not only does it have the potential to aid prevention by giving survivors access to justice, tackling impunity and reducing the likelihood of security and justice providers themselves perpetrating SGBV, it is also an important contribution to preventing violent conflict. In Saferworld's experience, a lack of fair access to effective, responsive security and justice services is often a key driver of conflict. Where these institutions are weak and fragile, a lack of meaningful mechanisms for justice and reconciliation can further fuel conflict and instability.

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on the need for gender-sensitive security and justice systems. This means taking specific measures to promote gender equality and women's rights in all security institutions, making an effort to understand the different needs, experiences and perceptions of women, men, boys and girls and ensuring the impact of programmes and policies on each are considered at every stage of design and implementation. Integrating a gender perspective into security and justice provision is vital to ensuring that security and justice providers are effective in tackling SGBV. However despite the increased recognition of this point, and the availability of extensive guidance on how to do it, implementation has been weak.

## How can security and justice services be more effective in addressing SGBV?

When reforming security and justice services to better tackle SGBV, change must be oriented towards the perspectives of those affected by the violence, as they are best placed to define their security needs. Transparency and accountability are paramount to this process, and it is important that survivors of SGBV are treated as agents of change who play a central role in addressing SGBV and building peace. Security and justice programmes should:

- **Be context-specific:** Security and justice programmes should be informed by detailed analysis of the particular context, assessing the needs of all stakeholders as well as looking at the conflict dynamics that exist between different groups. If analysis focuses on elites

predominantly, it will often reflect male experience and tend to overlook women's needs and concerns.

- **Support the empowerment of women:** Recruiting women into positions where they are involved in making decisions on and delivering security and justice services can help to ensure these services meet women's needs; for example, having a female police officer to report to often makes women more likely to report a crime. Increasing the number of women in policy-making roles, such as within government and political parties, can also contribute to reducing SGBV as women may be more likely to prioritise the issue through legislation or resource allocation. But recruitment of women alone will not address discrimination and abuse; this requires specifically trained women and men. Men can also be 'gender champions'; indeed, enlisting men in senior, high profile positions to champion this issue is crucial to demonstrating that SGBV is not just a 'women's issue'.
- **Balance supply with demand:** As well as looking at the institutions which provide security and justice (the 'supply' side), encouraging and empowering civil society groups and communities to become involved in the decision-making and oversight of how locally-defined solutions to their problems are delivered (the 'demand' side) considerably improves effectiveness.
- **Tackle impunity:** It is important to deal effectively with officials from security and justice services who have themselves committed abuses, by strengthening complaint and disciplinary mechanisms and internal and external oversight. Improving professionalism and practice are vital to restoring and maintaining public trust in security and justice systems. In addition to increasing accountability, in some post-conflict contexts, developing truth and reconciliation processes can reduce impunity and promote both community and national level healing and integration.
- **Address SGBV through 'mainstream' security and justice:** Gender perspectives must be integrated throughout security and justice programming. Although there is a need for targeted initiatives to tackle SGBV, it is crucial to avoid treating gender as an issue separate from all others, thus potentially further marginalising survivors of SGBV.
- **Monitor impact:** All security and justice programmes should be monitored and evaluated throughout the programme cycle for how well they address SGBV, to ensure value for money and maximum impact.

- **Adopt a survivor-centred approach:** survivors of SGBV must feel empowered to decide the best course of action for themselves, for example choosing whether to report an incident to the police, or whether to renew contact with the perpetrator in the case of intimate partner violence. Security and justice sectors that adopt survivor-centred approaches should, amongst other things, respect the autonomy of the survivor.

### ***Recognising all survivors of SGBV***

Saferworld welcomes the growing global recognition that SGBV is committed against women, men, boys and girls. The available evidence tells us that women and girls make up the majority of victims and survivors, and existing research, programming and services focus almost exclusively on women and girls – although there are still considerable gaps in all of these areas. By comparison, very little data is available on the prevalence of SGBV against men and boys and so the extent of the problem is unknown. It is unhelpful that many international agreements on this issue appear to conflate SGBV with violence against women and girls. While violence against women and girls is a form of gender-based violence, by conflating the two (and in doing so, their causes) it is possible that any preventative activities may not address their specific underlying causes. Greater attention and resources are needed to document SGBV against men and boys and better understand how to meet the specific needs of male survivors. These resources should be additional to, and not at the expense of, resources for tackling SGBV against women and girls.

It is important to note that there is a tendency in security and justice sector reform programmes where donor states seek to replicate their own institutional structures, cultures and practices in recipient countries. However, many of these states have low conviction rates for SGBV, and in some cases SGBV is commonplace within their own security and justice systems. Exporting the same organisational cultures and practices that perpetuate SGBV has the potential to entrench the problem in host countries, whilst also conferring international legitimacy.

It is therefore vital that states which support security and justice sector reform take stock of their own records on SGBV, work to resolve problems and take steps to ensure they are not replicated in host countries' reformed institutions. This should involve openly acknowledging how difficult it has been to tackle SGBV in the donor country, and a willingness to share learning whilst

not assuming that what has worked in one context will work elsewhere.

## Preventing SGBV in the post-2015 development framework

There is strong evidence that SGBV undermines development as well as being an abuse of human rights in itself. Saferworld therefore supports the inclusion of a target on reducing the number of people from all social groups affected by all forms of violence under a goal on building peaceful and non-violent societies; and a target on eliminating violence against women and girls under a standalone gender goal in the post-2015 development framework.

It is crucial that the framework includes targets and indicators that address gender inequality and the attitudes underlying SGBV in order to make progress on prevention. Targets which aim to address other root causes of gender inequality, for example on women's economic empowerment and women's political participation, would also contribute toward preventing SGBV as well as advancing women's rights and gender equality more broadly.

## Conclusion

If the world's governments, civil society experts and practitioners wish to demonstrate their genuine commitment to preventing SGBV, this must be accompanied by action on the ground. Words alone – whether declarations, policies, action plans or protocols – will not achieve anything if they remain good intentions on paper. The momentum from this Summit should be used to take forward concrete action to provide support to those working to tackle sexual violence in their communities, to integrate preventative measures into security and justice programming, and to challenge the attitudes and behaviours that cause SGBV.

## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe.

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<sup>i</sup> Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing, 1995)  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul, 2011)  
<http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/convention-violence/convention/Convention%20210%20English.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> G8 Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict (London, 2013)  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/185008/G8\\_PSVI\\_Declaration\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/185008/G8_PSVI_Declaration_-_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> A Theory of Change for Tackling Violence against Women and Girls (Department for International Development, 2012)  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/67336/how-to-note-vawg-1.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67336/how-to-note-vawg-1.pdf)