Turning Promises into Progress:

Gender equality and rights for women and girls - lessons learnt and actions needed

Introduction

2015 represents an important moment for gender equality and women's and girls' rights. It is twenty years since the landmark Beijing Conference on Women and fifteen years since the ground-breaking United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was adopted. In light of these key milestones and as the post-2015 development framework is agreed and implemented, three UK Networks – the Gender and Development Network (GADN), Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), and the Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights Network UK - have come together to assess progress and make recommendations for turning the promises made into progress.

Over the last two decades there have been many new commitments and increasing political rhetoric on gender equality and the realisation of rights for women and girls, but limited real progress in achieving either. In our report, *Turning Promises into Progress*, we conclude that this is, in part, because the underlying causes of gender equality have not been addressed and there was insufficient political will to make the changes needed on the ground.

Every woman and girl experiences discrimination differently, and resources should be particularly focused on those facing multiple discriminations such as on the basis of their income, sexuality, ethnic group or disability. But there are also shared realities, universal themes and common lessons. Most striking is the need to tackling the underlying barriers that perpetuate gender equality and prevent transformative change. Unequal power relations between genders are a fundamental way in which societies are organised; yet failure to recognise these social relationships has led women and girls to be labelled as a 'vulnerable group' to be protected. In this way, the status quo remains unchanged and discriminatory social norms and unjust social and economic structures continue to hinder progress.

Part two of the report looks at progress and challenges across eight areas relevant to gender equality: women, peace and security; violence against women and girls; sexual and reproductive health and rights; political participation and influence; education;

women's economic equality; unpaid care and social norms. While spotlighting specific issues, it is also important to underline the interconnectedness of gender inequality and recognise the underlying causes that impact across issue areas and span political, social, economic, cultural and environmental spheres. The recommendations throughout the report are therefore inter-linked and mutually reinforcing. While the actions are intended to be relevant for all women and girls, specific attention must be given those who are the most marginalised, and who face multiple discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability and marital status. Recommendations made are aimed at the broader international community with relevance primarily to official international institutions and governments but also to civil society organisations (CSOs) and the private sector. This document is an extract from the report – the issue section on 'Women, Peace and Security'. For the full report please visit www.gadnetwork.org/turning-promises-into-progress or www.gaps-uk.org.uk.

Part two: Section 2

2.   Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)

"Though many efforts have been made by both state and non-state agencies to eliminate violence against women, it still remains the dark side of society's life. Violence against women and girls is assuming alarming proportions across the world. It is occurring during times of conflict and during periods of peace. Violence continues to manifest itself in harmful cultural practices, abuse during pregnancy, spousal murder, psychological violence and physical violence among others. Violence is perpetrated by and against people of all social backgrounds."
Patricia Isabella Essel, WiLDAF Ghana[1]

2.1   The Issues

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) across the world is one of the most pervasive violations of human rights. Women and girls are subjected to different forms of violence just because they are female, including physical, sexual, psychological and economic forms of violence, both within and outside of the home. Violence cuts across every country, culture, socio-economic group, religion and age group - with 35 percent of women around the world experiencing violence in their lifetime and 30 percent experiencing intimate partner violence.[2] VAWG is both a manifestation and driver of gender inequality, affecting and affected by social constructs of what it is to be female and how women and girls are to be treated or valued. In addition, gender discrimination intersects with other forms of discrimination to make some women and girls more vulnerable to violence, including women and girls with disabilities, elderly women, lesbian and transgender women, and indigenous women. Multiple and intersecting discrimination also presents additional barriers to accessing services.[3]

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) defines **violence against women** as:

"Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private."[4]

VAWG is situated within a much wider discriminatory system of unequal power relations between women and men which impacts on women's ability to control their own lives and undermines women's potential to affect change in the world. [5] It is an intentional and systematic mechanism of social control which reinforces the subordinate status of women and girls and impedes women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms equally to men. Social change that redresses power imbalances and structural inequality between women and men is therefore vital for reducing and ultimately eliminating VAWG.[6]

The impact of violence constricts women's and girls' economic, social and political empowerment and severely limits freedom of movement and autonomy in decision making. In turn, these power imbalances underpin and give rise to VAWG. Women are also frequently blamed for the violence committed against them; survivors of sexual violence, rather than their attacker, often bear the stigma and other consequences of the crime. In this way, VAWG and the threat of such violence inhibits the rights of women and girls to live their lives with dignity, respect and freedom from fear.[7]

What does the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) Say?	• Take integrated measures to prevent and eliminate VAWG. • Study the causes and consequences of VAWG and the effectiveness of preventative measures. • Eliminate trafficking in women and assist victims of violence due to prostitution and trafficking.[8]

2.2   What's happened in the last 20 years?

Increased recognition

One of the crucial achievements of women's rights activists has been to successfully advocate for VAWG to be recognised as a human rights violation, changing perceptions of VAWG from a purely private matter to one which requires public attention and action by governments and public authorities. This is reflected in the introduction of the standard of due diligence, enshrined in international frameworks such as CEDAW Committee General Recommendation 19 and the BPfA, which situate the responsibility of preventing and responding to VAWG firmly with states.

There has been an increased global commitment to addressing VAWG in different settings and improved international coordination through campaigns such as the United Nations *UNiTE to End Violence against Women* and events such as the Call to Action to protect women and girls in emergencies (2013), the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (2014), the Girl Summit (2014) and the 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) (2013) which considered "*The elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls*"[9] as its priority theme.

Important international frameworks (see box below) have also been introduced such as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence which entered into force in 2014. In the countdown to the new post-2015 framework, the failure to address VAWG has also been widely acknowledged as a gap in the current Millennium Development Goals (MDG) framework.[10]

International Frameworks on VAWG

UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Committee General Recommendations 12 and 19 clarified that CEDAW includes VAWG and made detailed recommendations including requiring states to prevent VAWG and to provide comprehensive services to survivors of violence. The Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment 13 calls on governments to address all forms of gender discrimination, including addressing gender-based stereotypes and power imbalances as part of a violence prevention strategy (para 72(b)).

Other important frameworks include the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará) (1995), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2004) and the recent Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). Additionally, Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Council Resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) and 1960 (2010) focus on preventing and responding to sexual violence as a tactic of war (see Part two: Section 1 on WPS).

Emerging evidence base

Recent years have also seen the emergence of an evidence and practice base which makes the prevention of VAWG a measurable and tangible goal.[11] Research methods have been developed to enable sensitive and ethically-focussed data collection on VAWG and in many countries representative sample surveys have now been carried out on VAWG. The methods used by the WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence have gained acceptance[12] and research guidelines and ethical standards on collecting data on VAWG have been developed.[13] Work on the

development of indicators has also been undertaken by the UN.[14] In 1994, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women was appointed to seek and receive information on VAWG and its causes and consequences.

Gaps remain between commitments and implementation

However, while growing international attention has led to an increased focus on advocacy, research and campaigning on VAWG, a gap remains between policy commitments and implementation. No state in the world is currently fulfilling its obligations to prevent and respond to VAWG.[15] According to the World Bank, just over half of 143 states (53 percent) have domestic laws to protect women from violence.[16] Of these laws not all protect unmarried women in intimate relationships and only three-quarters have a specialised court or procedure for cases. Moreover, women's rights remain a highly politicised issue with 'traditional' or 'conservative' discriminatory social norms continuing to present significant challenges to progress (see Part two: Section 8 on Social Norms).

Even when international standards are reflected in domestic laws, there is a general lack of effective implementation as a result of inadequate resources and service provision, low levels of public awareness, ineffective enforcement within the security and justice sectors and a failure to take a multi-sector approach to ending violence. VAWG continues to be viewed as a private matter, which affects responses in the prevention, reporting and prosecution of violence. Contradictions between domestic legislation and religious or customary laws, such as the family code in the Democratic Republic of Congo[17] or 'moral crimes' in Afghanistan[18], also act as a barrier to effective implementation. Furthermore, funding for VAWG programming is frequently not reaching women's rights organisations, nor is sufficient long-term funding available to support transformative programme work such as programmes to challenge the social norms that underpin and condone VAWG.

In humanitarian settings; donors, multilaterals and NGOs continue to struggle to prioritise VAWG as a life-saving intervention in emergency response. GBV prevention is frequently not mainstreamed in humanitarian sectors such as health, water and sanitation, and shelter, and important frameworks such as the *Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings* have not been consistently implemented.[19] Specialised VAWG programmes are also not receiving the priority or resources needed to meet the scale of the needs in humanitarian emergencies today. For example, not a single VAWG programme has been funded in two rounds of the Common Humanitarian Fund for the Central African Republic.[20]

Continued violation of women's and girls' rights

The reported incidence of VAWG remains devastatingly high, and is likely to be only a small percentage of the actual violence inflicted on women. Further, all women are affected by the *possibility* of violence and threats to their emotional and physical well-

being. According to a 2013 global review of available evidence, 30 percent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.[21] It is estimated that almost half of all women killed in 2012 were killed by intimate partners or family members.[22] Over 125 million girls and women have been subjected to FGM and an additional 30 million girls are at risk over the next 10 years.[23] Women and girls also represent 98 percent of the estimated 4.5 million people worldwide forced into sexual exploitation.[24] Meanwhile, cases of VAWG continue to go unreported. For instance, interviews with 42,000 women across the European Union revealed that only 14 percent of women reported their most serious incident of intimate partner violence to the police.[25] The continuing sheer scale of VAWG illustrates the extent to which it is normalised due to social acceptance and impunity as well as the scale of resources and political commitment necessary to meet the needs of female survivors of violence.

2.3   Challenges and ways forward

In recent years, a number of key trends are emerging in the debate surrounding VAWG, and new challenges are compounded by the persistence of social norms, which condone and perpetuate VAWG.

The root causes of VAWG

One of the key challenges is the failure to address institutional practices and broader social norms that reinforce and condone VAWG. There is a growing evidence base that demonstrates that social norms related to male authority, acceptance of wife beating and female subordination affect the overall level of VAWG in different settings.[26] For example, a recent study across South Asia, South-East Asia, East Asia and the Pacific found that the most common motivation that men reported for perpetrating both partner and non-partner rape was men's belief that they have the right to sex, regardless of consent (see Part two: Section 8 on Social Norms).[27]

However, interventions addressing VAWG still tend to prioritise responsive measures such as building the institutional capacity of formal security and justice sectors (such as the police and the court system) rather than addressing the drivers of violence, including discriminatory social norms and wider gender inequality. Although a focus on investigations and prosecutions as a response to violence[28] is important and may act as a deterrent, it needs to be combined with transformative interventions which target the discriminatory social norms which condone and perpetuate violence and the empowerment of women and girls.

Significantly, investing in women's rights organisations can impact VAWG at multiple levels due to their focus on women-led solutions that are firmly rooted in local communities, conditions, contexts and needs, including the needs of marginalised women.[29] Research in 70 countries across four decades found that the mobilisation of women's rights organisations and movements is more important for tackling VAWG

than a nation's income, left-wing political parties, or the representation of women in politics.[30]

It is critical that responses to VAWG address the power imbalances and structural inequality between women and men by adopting approaches which empower women and girls and challenge social norms which reinforce and condone VAWG, and by supporting women's rights organisations and movements including with adequate resources.

Addressing all forms of VAWG

Certain forms of VAWG, such as FGM, early and forced marriage and sexual violence in conflict, have been receiving increased attention. While this is welcome, a failure to acknowledge other forms of violence, such as psychological and economic violence, obscures the interconnected nature of VAWG and the continuum of violence that women and girls face throughout their lifetimes. Furthermore, specific forms of VAWG have often been narrowly defined. For example, sexual violence in conflict has tended to be recognised as combatant-perpetrated sexual violence whereas evidence suggests that conflict also increases levels of civilian-perpetrated sexual violence (see Part two: Section 1 on WPS).[31] In addition, there is frequently a failure to recognise the interconnectedness between VAWG and other violations of women's and girls' rights such as access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), education, economic empowerment and women's and girls' participation.

VAWG should be recognised as a continuum that affects women and girls in different ways throughout their lives. Further research is needed into economic and psychological forms of violence as well as the linkages between VAWG and access to SRHR, education, economic empowerment and women's and girls' participation.

Survivor-centred and multi-sectoral approach

Survivors of all forms of VAWG should have access to comprehensive and appropriate services including health, case management, legal and psycho-social support, livelihoods support, and protection from further violence and reprisals. Recently, there have been moves towards an approach to VAWG programming which attempts to place all forms of violence into a 'gender neutral' framework. Such approaches threaten female survivors' access to specialist women-only support services.[32] The Special Rapporteur on VAWG has stated that *"where possible, services should be run by independent and experienced women's non-governmental organizations providing gender-specific, empowering and comprehensive support to women survivors of violence, based on feminist principles."* [33]

States should support coordination and collaboration among sectors at national and local levels and ensure adequate resourcing to implement a multi-sectoral approach. Interventions should be survivor-centred and should be driven by women's and girls' own experiences and input within all initiatives and strategies to ensure that these are empowering. Women and girls should not be patronised as victims but respected, listened to and supported to make their own decisions. Survivor groups should also be included in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes intended to address VAWG.

Women should have access to a diverse range of support, across all forms of violence, which is women-only, survivor-centred and responsive to the different needs of women. It is vital that survivors' autonomy is respected and they are listened to and consulted throughout the development and implementation of policies, laws and programmes.

Including all groups of women

Women and girls experience violence in different ways at different points in their lifetimes. However, the debate has largely overlooked multiple discriminations, including with regard to older women. For example, many studies fail to collect data on women over the age of 49 (DHS[34], WHO[35], UNAIDS[36]) and the focus on sexual and physical violence tends to exclude the forms of VAWG that older women face, including neglect and psychological abuse.[37] Similarly, disabled women and girls are largely invisible in current VAWG analysis and programmes, despite evidence that disabled women and girls are twice as likely to experience violence as non-disabled women and girls, and face greater obstacles in reporting violence and accessing support, justice and rehabilitation services.[38]

Measures must be incorporated into policy, programming and legislation which recognise the different ways in which gender inequality intersects with other inequalities to further increase the vulnerability of particular groups of women to violence and the barriers faced by these women and girls in accessing appropriate services.

The role of men and boys

There has been increasing attention to working with men and boys as a primary approach to addressing VAWG. For example, in 2009, MenEngage hosted the first Global Symposium on Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equality, culminating in the Rio Declaration – a call to action for men and boys including on GBV.[39] While much of this work is useful, it should not be seen as a standalone component; at times this focus on men's and boys' engagement in tackling VAWG has risked obscuring the comprehensive multi-level approach needed to end VAWG as well as the importance of working with women's rights organisations and prioritising women's empowerment.

This new focus on men and boys can also be problematic where it has seen a move away from men as allies and targets to leaders in GBV initiatives, which risks failing to challenge existing patriarchal structures that already keep women and girls silent in debates around violations of their rights. [40]

Engaging men and boys is important as part of broad, multi-level approaches which prioritise the empowerment of women and girls. Programmes working with men and boys should work in a way that does not reassert male power over women, that keeps women and girls at the centre, and that focuses on transforming gender inequality.

Faith organisations

Faith organisations and faith leaders can have a strong impact, both positive and negative, on how VAWG is perceived within local communities. While working with faith leaders has typically been overlooked in responses to preventing VAWG, civil society organisations are increasingly including and training faith leaders on addressing VAWG and non-faith staff on how to include people of faith effectively to end violence.[41]

This is particularly important in the current global context of the rise of religious fundamentalisms. Research by AWID has found that women's rights activists frequently mention an increase in VAWG as a negative impact of the rise of religious fundamentalisms.[42] Armed extremist groups, such as Boko Haram, ISIS or the Taliban, have consistently targeted women and girls as part of oppressive and terrorist tactics, which include trafficking, forced conversions, and targeting female students. In other contexts, religious fundamentalists campaign against provisions that might reduce VAWG or promote legal or structural inequalities that compromise women's choices as well as their safety, such as the protests outside abortion centres in the USA.

Donors should recognise the value of working with faith leaders to address VAWG and support this work across faiths. Such work should be carefully monitored to mitigate any negative impacts. Efforts to end VAWG should also address the rise in fundamentalisms, in particular, by enabling the voices of women operating in these contexts to be heard.

2.4 Recommendations
International institutions/governments should:

1. Prioritise and invest in preventing VAWG, including empowering women and girls, working with men and boys, challenging discriminatory social norms and working with local leaders including faith leaders.

2. Ensure resources and political will address all forms of VAWG and respond to multiple and intersecting discrimination.

3. Strengthen multi-sector (health, education, justice) and survivor-centred responses to violence; and ensure survivors have access to comprehensive and appropriate services.

4. Recognise and support the role of national and grassroots women's rights organisations in preventing and responding to violence, including by increasing financial support to women's rights organisations.

5. Integrate and prioritise violence against women and girls programming into all humanitarian and conflict responses, including prevention.

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This is a section of the report *Turning Promises to Progress Report,* the full version is available at: www.gadnetwork.org and www.gaps-uk.org

This report has been produced through a collaborative effort between GADN, GAPS and the UK SRHR network. A wide number of groups and organisations contributed, and the report does not necessarily reflect the full views of any one member organisation or network. The networks are very grateful to all who contributed.

March 2015

Gender and Development Network (GADN)

GADN brings together over 100 expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues.

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Gender Action for Peace and Security UK (GAPS)

GAPS is the UK's only Women, Peace and Security civil society network. We are an expert membership organisation with 17 members who encompass a range of development, human rights, women's rights, humanitarian and peacebuilding NGOs.

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The UK Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Network

The UK SRHR Network brings together over fifty NGOs and academic institutions and individuals from across the UK international development sector, in order to promote the centrality of SRHR in development policies and programmes.

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