



WAGGGS Position Statement on Violence Against Girls

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What is gender based violence?

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive and endemic forms of human rights violations in the world. The term gender based violence (GBV) encapsulates how the particular forms of violence experienced by girls are rooted in the political, cultural and social structures which perpetuate gender inequality and gender injustice. It recognises that gendered violence is systematic and intentional, resulting in the subordination of girls and women in the private and public spheres.

“Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of their full advancement, and that violence against women is one of the crucial mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position with men”ⁱ

Gender based violence affects girls and women at every stage of their lives. From the moment of conception the girl child is profoundly at risk of female foeticide and female infanticide due to the lower economic value and status afforded to girls by families and communities. Female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and child sexual abuse continue to be tolerated, resulting in severe impacts on the health and welfare of girls. International research and evidence consistently indicates that the majority of girls are subjected to psychological, physical and sexual abuse by known perpetrators within families and intimate relationships. These are not random acts of violence. They are pervasive, deliberate and intentional acts which involve the maintenance of power and control over the victim; ensure domestic and sexual compliance; deny sexual and reproductive autonomy; and prevent economic independence.

Within the public world, the human right to bodily and sexual integrity for girls continues to be profoundly undermined by high rates of sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and the sexualisation and commodification of the female body. On a global level, the vast numbers of girls and young women who are being subjected to commercial sexual exploitation within prostitution and who are being trafficked into the global sex trade is a major cause of international concern. The Beijing Platform for Action defines GBV 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 private life.”ⁱⁱ

Political, economic and cultural forces intersect with gender inequality in heightening the risk and prevalence of GBV. War and conflict zones are precarious environments for girls where rape, sexual assault and rape homicide are prolific and widespread. Impoverished regions of the world have become “fertile fields of exploitation” where vulnerable girls are easily targeted by traffickers to supply the global sex trade.ⁱⁱⁱ Differing forms of oppression and inequality based on race, class, sex preference, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and global location intersect with gender injustice increasing exposure and vulnerability to GBV and creating additional barriers to seeking protection. In many countries tradition and culture continue to be cited as justifications for practices, many of which are severely harmful, such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

Violence against girls results from the intersection of gender inequality with other forms of inequality. Sometimes when this is not understood, the victims can be blamed or made to take responsibility for the violence. Countering violence against girls requires empowerment of girls, education and awareness at family and community level leading to solidarity between boys and girls and men and women so that action can be taken to protect girls and prevent violence at the personal, familial institutional and cultural levels in society.

Why should WAGGGS empower young women and girls to work towards elimination of violence against girls?

“The challenge for all of us is: If we know GBV exists, and if we tolerate or ignore it, are we not being complicit, are we not turning a blind eye to human rights violation?” Mary Robinson^{iv}

As the largest organisation for girls in the world, with 10 million Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, WAGGGS has the potential to make a major impact on the issue of GBV. Addressing GBV is in line with the mission and vision of WAGGGS in seeking to empower girls and create a safe and supportive environment in which they are free to live their lives free from abuse. There has been a strong call from our member organisations who are witnessing both the widespread use of violence to maintain power and reinforce inequality and the deeply negative impacts of GBV on the lives of the girls they represent. WAGGGS can challenge harmful victim blaming messages which locate responsibility for GBV on the behaviour of girls. It is time for WAGGGS to address this critical issue because:

- **GBV is an obstacle to development and the goal of gender equality.** The prevalence and extent of GBV is a major barrier to girls’ full participation in every sphere of economic, political and social life. Until this issue is addressed, equality between women and men will never be achieved and the possibility for girls of reaching their full potential is seriously undermined. A society based on equality and respect is unattainable in the context of the continued failure by states and civil society to address this critical issue.
- **GBV undermines educational opportunity and denies girls the freedom to participate in their communities and societies in a safe supported manner.** Studies from around the world have documented that substantial proportions of girls report experiencing sexual harassment and abuse on the way to and from school, as well as on school and university premises, including in classrooms, lavatories and dormitories perpetrated by both peers and by teachers.^v Sexual harassment and sexual violence in public places are increasingly being recognised as limiting girls’ freedom of movement and their right to full civic participation. Public spaces including streets, public transport and parks, workplaces and night time locations continue to pose a serious risk to the safety and wellbeing of girls.^{vi} Addressing GBV is of critical importance if girls and young women are to exercise their human right to security and safety and realise their potential for full citizenship
- **GBV is a human rights violation affecting millions of girls and women.** The sheer numbers of girls and women who are subjected to GBV creates a moral imperative to act now. A multi country study by the World Health Organisation indicates that between 15% and 71% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence, or both, by an intimate partner in their lifetime, and, younger women, especially those aged 15 to 19 years, were at higher risk of current abuse. The combined prevalence of physical and sexual violence by a non-partner after the age of 15 years ranges from 5% to 65%, with between 1% and 21% of girls disclosing some form of sexual abuse before the age of 15.^{vii} 100–140 million girls and women worldwide are living with the consequences of FGM^{viii} and an estimated 4.5 million girls and women are victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation.^{ix}
- **GBV has devastating impacts on physical health and well-being.** GBV is a leading cause of physical illness, disability, serious injury, maternal mortality and homicide in every country of the world. The consequences of sexual violence for girls and women’s sexual and reproductive health are severe and long-term. Rape and being coerced or being persuaded to

perform sex acts without condoms are a primary source of infection; gynaecological complications have been consistently found to be related to forced sex; there is an increased risk of unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortion; and experiencing violence has been shown to be a risk factor in being HIV positive. Girls who are subjected to violence also suffer severe mental health impacts including immediate and long-term emotional distress, psychological trauma and increased risk of suicidal behaviour and suicide. ^x

What can WAGGGS do?

“The wide variations in prevalence and patterns of violence from country to country, and, even more important, from setting to setting within countries, indicate that there is nothing “natural” or inevitable about violence against women[...and girls...]. Attitudes can and must change; the status of women can and must be improved” WHO (v)

As an organisation committed to the empowerment of girls, WAGGGS has a **responsibility** to address this gross violation of human rights. As a global movement WAGGGS has the **power** to break the shroud of silence and give voice to girls and young women to articulate the rights of young women to live lives free from violation and abuse. WAGGGS has the **infrastructure** to integrate GBV work into its wider programmes to increase safety and sustainability. WAGGGS can be a force for **transformation** at a number of levels:

Individual

As the largest organisation for girls in the world, WAGGGS and our Member Organizations have vast experience of individual empowerment which creates the opportunity for our Member Organizations to: **Provide** safe and supportive environments where girls can speak out with confidence and become leaders on the issue of GBV; **Create** opportunities for safe disclosure and protection for girls already subjected to abuse; **Build** peer-led supports with girls and young women for reducing the risk of violence; **Engage** with boys and young men in building relationships with girls and young women based on respect, empathy and solidarity; **Foster** understanding on how GBV affects both boys and girls and is an obstacle to healthy, equal relationships.

Family and community

As an organisation which has a long history of working in local communities in a culturally and contextually sensitive way, WAGGGS has the **credibility** to: **Challenge** discriminatory views and practices which lead to or condone violence against girls; **Develop** appropriate local supports and interventions for girls who have experienced abuse; **Engage** communities in creating safe environments for girls and women; **Highlight** the importance for survivors of removing the shame and stigma of being sexually abused; **Involve** boys and men in making their communities respectful, equal, safe places for girls and women.

Culture and education

As experts in education, community action, public awareness and advocacy, WAGGGS has the **experience** to: **Call** for an end to gender inequality and injustice demonstrating how these are the root causes of GBV; **Develop** innovative and creative education and awareness programmes which challenge the myths about violence against girls; **Devise** and deliver peer-led educational programmes and work with educational institutions at every level to ensure safe environments in which girls can reach their full potential; **Challenge** the media representation of girls and women

especially the commodification and objectification of the female body; Promote healthy, liberating models of masculinity and femininity.

Institutional

As effective actors for social and institutional change, with a history of working in partnership with other agencies, WAGGGS has the **international standing** to: **Advocate** for the implementation of laws to stop violence against girls and women; **Build** inter-sectoral alliances across the health, education and social services agencies to implement programmes and procedures to prevent and support victims of GBV; **Strengthen** the research and evidence base on GBV; **Demand** increased resources, commitments and action from governments to end discrimination and GBV; **Hold** governments accountable for implementing national laws and policies which end impunity for crimes of violence against girls and women; **Ensure** States fulfil their obligation under International Treaties and Human Rights Instruments to address GBV.

ⁱ UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women adopted by the General Assembly in 1993.

ⁱⁱ The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, United Nations, 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kelly, L. (2005a). *Fertile fields: Trafficking in persons in Central Asia*. Vienna: International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

^{iv} Mary Robinson (2005). *Foreword to Gender based violence: A failure to protect*. Joint Consortium of Irish Human Rights Agencies and Irish Aid.

^v WHO Sexual Violence Fact Sheet No. 237, 2008.

^{vi} UN Women: Creating safe public spaces. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/creating-safe-public-spaces>

^{vii} Garcia-Moreno, C. et al. (2005). *WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women: initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women's responses*. Geneva: World Health Organization..

^{viii} WHO Female Genital Mutilation Fact Sheet No. 241, 2008.

^{ix} International Labour Organization, (ILO) (2010). *Global estimate of forced labour: Results and methodology*. Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL). ILO: Geneva

^x Heise L. and Garcia Moreno C. Violence by intimate partners. In: Krug EG. et al., eds. *World report on violence and health*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2002:87–121.

Expert consultants:

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