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# FEARLESS

Standing with women  
and girls to end  
violence

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(Front Cover Image)  
Manu, 28, lives in the village of Degedebe, Brong Ahafo, Ghana with her 6 year-old daughter, Naomi. Manu has been a member of an ActionAid-supported Community Based Anti-Violence Team, or 'COMBAT squad', for the last 6 years and says things are changing for the better.  
Photo: Nana Kofi Acquah/ActionAid

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Civil rights:** the rights of citizens to political and social freedom and equality and to be free from unfair treatment or discrimination.

**Civil liberties:** the rights to freedom of expression and belief, association and organisation; rule of law; personal autonomy and individual rights.

**Civil society:** the arena outside the family, the state, and the market in which individuals, groups, organisations and institutions engage in voluntary actions and forms of public participation to advance shared interests, purposes and values, including exercising their democratic right to participate in decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

**Civil society space:** the environment in which civil society operates, characterised by the form of relationships and opportunities for interaction among civil society actors, the state, private sector and the general public, as well as the laws, norms and frameworks that govern these.

**Fundamentalisms:** the strategic deployment of extreme ideology in order to secure political power and control over people and communities, often at the expense of human rights.<sup>2</sup>

**Gender Inequality Index (GII):** an index for measurement of gender disparity introduced in the UN Development Programme (UNDP) 2010 Human Development Report.

**Human rights defenders:** people who individually or collectively act to promote or protect human rights.

**Intimate partner violence / domestic violence:** used interchangeably in this report to refer to violence or threats of violence against women perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner, according to the definition of violence against women below.

**Patriarchy:** the unequal power relations between women and men that prevail in every country in the world, whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. It is manifest in almost every sphere of life and can be seen, for instance, in women’s under-representation in decision-making and their economic inequality.<sup>3</sup>

**Social norms:** the prevailing attitudes, beliefs and practices in a society that are often codified within both formal and informal laws.

**Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** the set of international development commitments to be globally agreed in September 2015, succeeding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

**Violence against women and girls (VAWG) / gender-based violence:** used interchangeably in this report to refer to any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.<sup>4</sup> VAWG also impacts negatively upon women’s opportunities to achieve legal, social, political and economic equality in society.<sup>5</sup>

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dancing during Beti Utsav celebration at Bhalswa, New Delhi. This event, organised by ActionAid India, sees community members celebrate the birth of girls, challenging the tendency to value boys more highly.

Photo: Poulomi Basu/ActionAid

After decades of international agreements and commitments, violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains a daily reality everywhere in the world. Women and girls face the possibility of violence in the home, on the street, at school and at work. For many, violence and poverty reinforce each other, undermining women's potential to realise economic opportunities. Courageous women and girls speak out and demand change, sometimes risking their lives in doing so. But their opportunities for resistance are constrained by shrinking civil society space, widening inequalities and rising religious fundamentalisms – alarming global threats that hit women and girls hardest and first.

Women's rights organisations are at the forefront of the fight-back, and their efforts are the critical factor in securing long-term sustainable change from governments and society as a whole. However, ActionAid's new findings show that the erosion of civil rights and shrinking civil society space are undermining their struggle. **Women and girls are almost twice as likely to experience violence in countries that have weaker civil rights than in countries with a stronger civil rights framework.**<sup>6</sup>

VAWG is a grave manifestation of gender inequality and a major impediment to development. VAWG is rooted in and reinforces the subordination of women and increases their vulnerability to poverty and other forms of discrimination. This report shines a light on the enduring global outrage of VAWG, which persists in spite of numerous global human rights commitments and growing political attention to its elimination.

Shockingly, VAWG is the most widespread human rights abuse, affecting one third of women globally. It has many forms. This report argues that all forms of gender-based violence – such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape in conflict or harmful practices – are used to reinforce male power and control over women and

their bodies. And all share gender inequality as a fundamental root cause. The report discusses the global prevalence of violence as well as the underlying causes and drivers of abuse.

VAWG is exacerbated by other multiple forms of oppression based on, for example, women's class, caste, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. And violence erodes many aspects of the lives of women and girls, impacting on their full range of human rights. The report points to some key sites where women face the risk of violence:

- as they pursue economic opportunities – whether at home, on the streets or in the workplace – violence and the threat of violence can lock women into cycles of poverty and exacerbate their wider economic inequality;
- in cities, where women and girls face sexual harassment and even assault committed in plain sight, with impunity;
- in and around schools, where the fundamental right to an education is undermined by violence;
- in communities, where harmful practices restrict the choices women and girls make about their sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- in conflict and humanitarian crises, when chaos and the breakdown of the rule of law intensifies women's vulnerability.

In each and every one of these contexts, women and girls are at the forefront of the fight to realise their right to a life free from violence. Indeed, this report shows how the women's movement has achieved significant victories in bringing the world's attention to VAWG alongside local activism to resist and respond to violence within their communities. But voices of women are being muted. The report highlights emerging threats that are putting the fulfilment of hard-won women's rights and their defenders at risk: these include shrinking civil society space, rising fundamentalist agendas and political and economic inequalities.



Meanwhile, states are not yet fulfilling their principal obligation to prevent, respond to and prosecute acts of VAWG. Notable shortfalls identified in this report include the failure to take a holistic, integrated, multi-sectoral approach to addressing VAWG; the relegation of women to the margins of public and political life; political will and accountability gaps; and chronic funding deficits.

Action is long overdue. The women's movement has waited for decades for the international community to translate rhetoric into action, and live up to its human rights obligations. In 2015,

a renewed opportunity will be afforded by the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to galvanise the necessary political will and resources to eliminate this scourge that locks women and girls into poverty. Most of all, for action to achieve sustainable change, women's rights organisations must be given the recognition and support they need to continue leading the charge.

We cannot afford to miss this moment. If we do, women and girls will pay with their bodies, their choices, their opportunities and their lives for generations to come.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**ActionAid calls for urgent action by governments, donors and the international community to ensure successful realisation of the anticipated violence against women and girls target in the SDGs, addressing the following:**

### 1) LEADERSHIP, IMPLEMENTATION, ACCOUNTABILITY

Show leadership in combatting violence against women and girls by championing the anticipated SDG target on VAWG, ensuring it has genuinely transformative indicators developed in consultation with women's organisations. Prioritise the full, effective and accountable implementation of this target and other global VAWG commitments by developing a clear fast-tracking process that catalyses government and donor action.

### 2) WOMEN'S VOICE AND PARTICIPATION

Recognise, champion and prioritise women's organisations as critical long-term partners and leaders in the fight against VAWG, including their unique role in implementing and holding governments accountable for VAWG commitments; protect civil society and democratic space for all, and promote women's right to participate in decision-making.

### 3) FINANCING

Ensure the necessary financing is available so that commitments to eradicate VAWG can be fully and rapidly realised in developing countries, including implementation of the SDG target on VAWG and national action plans, based upon the financing gaps identified by developing countries.



A girl takes part in, Jurrat, a campaign against gender-based violence in New Delhi, India. Women's collective action is a critical factor in ending VAWG.  
Photo: Florian Lang/ActionAid



# INTRODUCTION

*“It would be wonderful if I could feel safe on the bus and could go to school or any other place without a single hint of fear of anything in my eyes. But that’s not what life here is like.”*

*15 year old Juliana<sup>7</sup> from the municipality of Santo Agostinho, northeast Brazil<sup>8</sup>*

Every day, women and girls like Juliana face abuse, harassment and violence. It occurs everywhere in the world, from the home to busy city streets and workplaces, and from the richest enclaves to the poorest slums. This report highlights the many forms and consequences of violence and shows how women and girls are fighting back. It discusses emerging trends that create new challenges for this struggle. Finally it analyses the limitations of national and international action to date and proposes key priorities for 2015.

Globally, one in three women suffer violence in their lifetime.<sup>9</sup> Resisting this pervasive threat takes courage. But every day brave women’s rights defenders put their lives on the line to do exactly that. From the frontline service providers who offer refuge and counselling to survivors, to the activists who take to the streets demanding changes to the law, it is women who are calling time on gender-based violence. Their fight-back is strong, but so is the changing face of patriarchy, which combines with other forms of discrimination and rising economic inequalities. Thus, despite many gains at national and global level, a world where women can live free of violence is still a distant dream.

This has serious implications for the fulfilment of the rights of women and girls, particularly those living in poverty. Earning a decent living is a struggle when the daily uphill battle against exploitation is intensified by dependency on an abusive partner or violence at the hands of an employer. And the opportunities presented by urbanisation cannot be realised when women are

constrained by the threat of violence in public spaces, on public transport or in the home.

Having the freedom to make sexual and reproductive choices is a fundamental right of all women. But men often use violence to control women’s bodies and the choices they make about when and whether to have children. The health impacts can have irreversible consequences for women and their children, perpetuating the cycle of inequality for generations to come.

Even very young girls are at risk. Domestic violence, child marriages, rape resulting in early pregnancy or female genital mutilation can blight young lives forever. And, while many families aspire to improve the lives of their daughters through education, and girls long for the chance to learn, sadly they face risks on the journey to school and even in schools themselves from peers and teachers. For women and girls living in heightened, armed conflict or the shadow of humanitarian crisis, the risks multiply and justice is far from reach.

Yet everywhere, women are organising and resisting. Women like Lim Srey Mom in Cambodia, who in her role at the Workers’ Information Centre helps garment workers to resist bullying and exploitation. Women like Sara Garcia, activist with the Salvadoran Citizens’ Coalition for the Decriminalization of Abortion, campaigning for women unjustly imprisoned. Women like Rajaa al-Talli, founder of the Centre for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria, promoting women’s role in local peacebuilding. They and millions like them are making change and demanding that leaders do the same.

Encouragingly political momentum created by women’s collective action has indeed led to improvements in laws and national commitments (see *Timeline on Page 38*). Today, 76 out of 100 countries surveyed have laws on domestic violence as compared to only 13 out of 100 in 1995.<sup>10</sup> According to the UN, since 2010 countries

across all regions have started adopting national action plans and strategies to address VAWG.<sup>11</sup>

However, all too often laws and national action plans are not being implemented. Women’s organisations on the frontline find themselves challenged by an increasing squeeze on civil rights that affects civil society organisations of all kinds, in many contexts. A manifestation of the repression of dissent is tolerance of violence against women and girls (with impunity) and the increasing influence of fundamentalist agendas which are anti-women. Meanwhile, the public purse is increasingly squeezed by fiscal constraints, meaning women’s organisations are starved of funds, and the public services that women rely on are run-down and neglected.

The women’s movement is looking to 2015 as a year of change. It represents a strategic opportunity for women’s rights and for galvanising the global momentum and political will needed to eradicate VAWG for good. It signifies 20 years since the historic 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) – the global roadmap to advancing women’s rights – and 15 years since the ground-breaking UN Security Council Resolution 1325 recognising the disproportionate impacts of conflict on women. Looking forward, it is the year that the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will set out the development agenda for the next 15 years. **The SDGs are expected to include a global target on eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private sphere.**<sup>12</sup>

**ActionAid is calling for urgent action on the part of governments, donors and the international community to ensure successful realisation of the VAWG target in the SDGs, starting from September 2015.**

The success of this opportunity depends on confronting all forms of violence against all women and girls that prevail across homes and schools, streets and workplaces, war zones and

displacement camps. The creation of ‘hierarchies of violence’ that prioritise attention and funding for certain manifestations of VAWG<sup>13</sup> must be avoided. It is vital that we move beyond words towards action. Governments must realise the promises that women’s movements have fought for and secured. Frontline activists in women’s organisations, civil society groups and girls’ clubs are best placed to identify the cause and nature of the problem and the solutions, and hold governments to account. Governments and donors must rise to the opportunity, put their money where their mouth is, and cease to condone violence through inaction.

**“Together we must make 2015 the year that marks the beginning of the end of gender inequality. Now is the time for action. Now is the time to end violence against women and girls everywhere in the world.”**

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka  
Executive Director,  
UN Women, 2014<sup>14</sup>

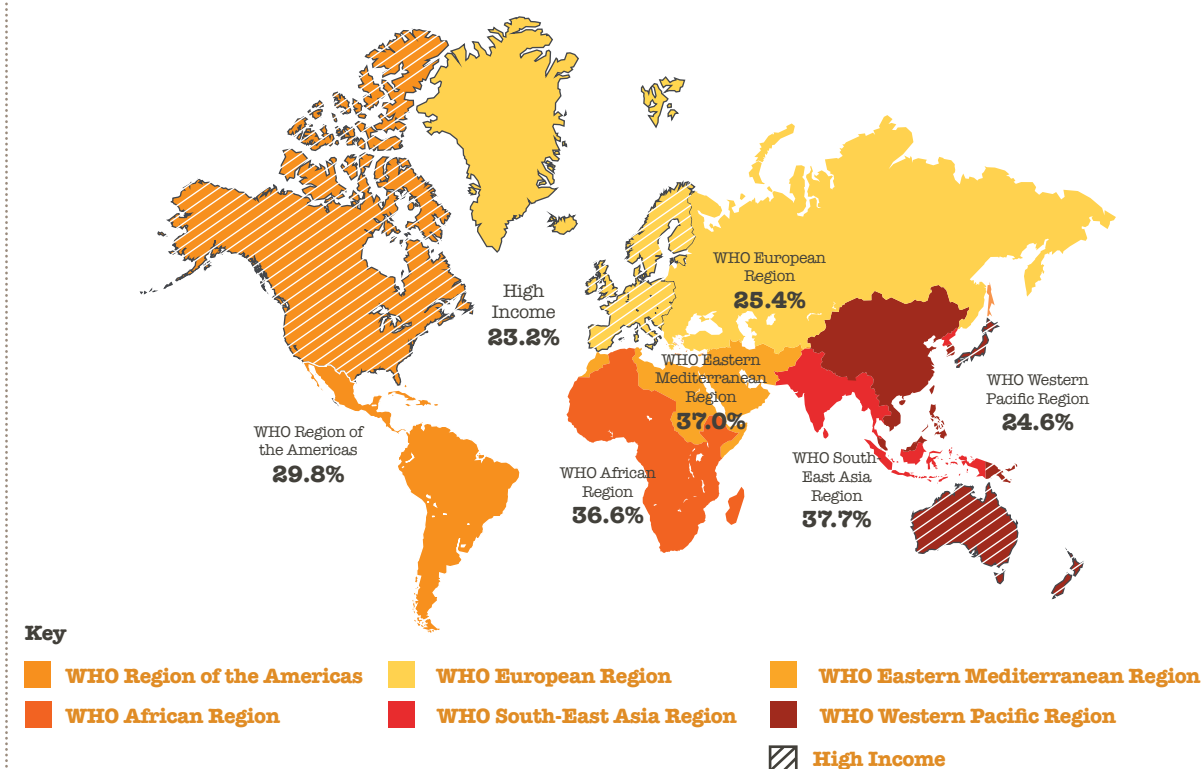
# BACKGROUND

## One in 3 women: Violence diminishing women's rights

Violence against women and girls is the most widespread human rights abuse worldwide. Globally, it is estimated that 35% of women have experienced either violence at the hands of a partner or ex-partner, or sexual violence committed by someone else in their lifetime.<sup>15</sup> As the map below shows<sup>16</sup>, no region of the world escapes violence against women and girls. A recent survey of 42,000 women across the EU's 28 member states found that 8% of women experienced physical and/or sexual violence in the 12 months before the survey interview, and one in three women had experienced some form of physical and/or sexual assault since the age of 15.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the violence suffered by women occurs in the home at the hands of a partner or an ex-

**Map:** Global VAWG prevalence rates



## BOX A

### DEFINING VIOLENCE

The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”<sup>18</sup> The UN General Assembly’s 1993 declaration on the elimination of violence also drew attention the detrimental impact of endemic violence on women’s opportunities to achieve legal, social, political and economic equality in society.<sup>19</sup>

partner (see BOX B). And there are many other forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls because of their gender. Between 100 and 140 million girls and women worldwide have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM) carried out by their families and communities, and more than 3 million girls are at risk of FGM every year in Africa alone. Nearly 70 million girls worldwide have been married before the age of 18 years – many of them against their will.<sup>20</sup>

Sadly, these staggering figures may be underestimates. Stigma and fear of being blamed for the crime often prevents girls and women from reporting to officials.<sup>21</sup> In fact state officials may be perpetrators themselves, or complicit in concealing the issue,<sup>22</sup> while a lack of awareness of rights and laws, as well as the entrenched notions of violence as normal and acceptable among women themselves, also means reporting levels are low.

Official authorities’ neglect of the problem means that many forms of violence against women are not captured by official statistics. For example, forms of lethal violence that almost exclusively target women, including so-called ‘honour’ or dowry-related killings, as well as witchcraft or sorcery-related killings, are difficult to estimate because the motive is often not recorded in official statistics.<sup>23</sup>

### Underlying causes, drivers of abuse

Violence against women is a reflection of deeply entrenched gender inequalities that prevail across all levels of society. Violence is used to maintain and reinforce male power and women’s subordination by controlling women’s bodies, freedoms and opportunities. In a new analysis of VAWG prevalence in 70 developing countries commissioned by ActionAid, we found that the more gender equal a country is, as defined by the Gender Inequality Index (GII), the lower the prevalence of violence against women (see Graph 1 overleaf).<sup>29, 30</sup>

Society’s prevailing attitudes and beliefs – also known as social norms – play a large part in igniting violence. For example, violence against women and girls and domestic violence in particular is condoned in many societies by men and women who have internalised strong notions of what is deemed appropriate behaviour for women and girls. Transgressions from these

## BOX B

### NO SANCTUARY: HOME IS THE RISKIEST PLACE

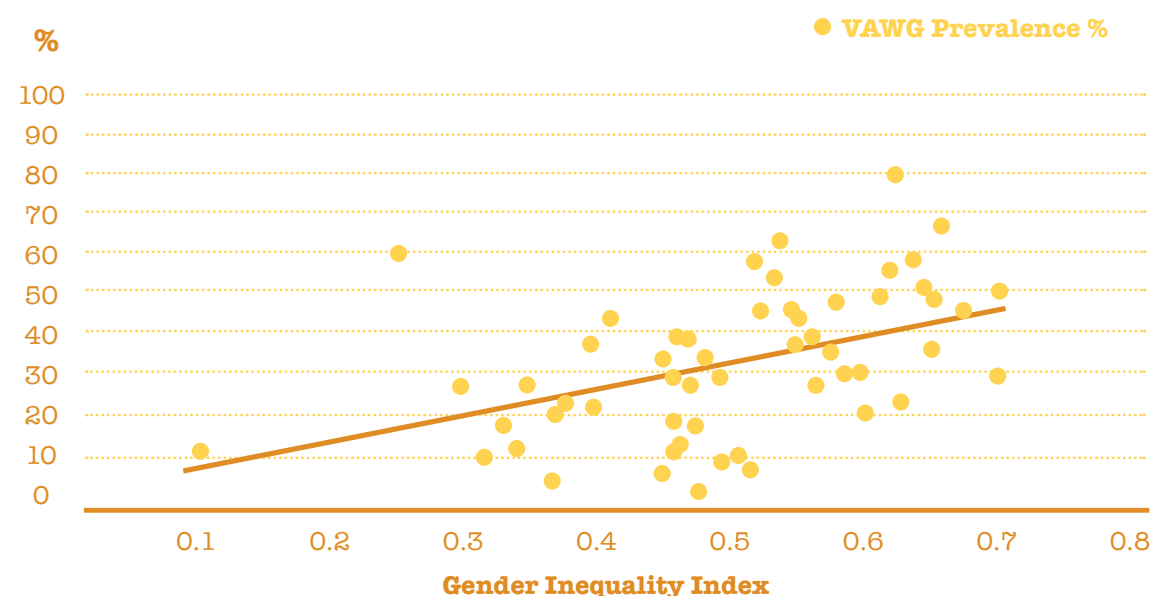
On average 30% of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their partner.<sup>24</sup> Women and girls suffering violence and abuse in their own homes are at increased risk of severe physical and mental health problems including depression, injury and in some regions, HIV.<sup>25</sup> Physical partner violence often goes hand in hand with psychological control and abuse. Male partners who impose controls over where women can go and who they can speak to also tend to limit women’s ability to control their sexual and reproductive decision-making, leading to severe consequences for women’s physical and mental health.<sup>26</sup>

Tragically, many women and girls lose their lives in the worst manifestations of violence against women. The UN estimates that a staggering 43,600 women were killed in 2012 alone by family members or intimate partners.<sup>27</sup> Analysis of data from 32 countries shows that more than two thirds of all victims of homicides committed by intimate partners or family members are women. The most recent data suggests that the rate of such homicides has remained constant. The fact that the total homicide rate declined by 15% between 2006 and 2011 suggests that intimate partner homicide is not receiving the political and criminal justice attention it requires.<sup>28</sup>

socially defined gender roles are, under certain circumstances, viewed as a justification for violence by both women and men. Examples include the beating of women seen to be failing in their ‘wifely’ role, and harassment, groping and rape of women and girls in public spaces.<sup>31</sup>



**Graph 1:** Relationship between VAWG prevalence in developing countries and Gender Inequality Index



Social norms around sexual activity also play a role; many men believe they have the right to sex regardless of consent. A recent study conducted across the Asia Pacific region found that the most common motivation men reported for rape was related to such beliefs in sexual entitlement. In most sites in the study this was reported as the justification by 70-80% of rapists.<sup>32</sup>

### Women’s movements challenging norms, demanding rights

To eradicate violence against women and girls all together, it is critical to challenge the social norms that drive it. And where violence persists, the state must support survivors through provision of high quality public services and ensure access to justice for them.

The women’s movement has been *the* pivotal player in building political will for action on violence against women and girls. Be that through campaigning for better services for survivors, pushing for laws against domestic violence or

influencing national action plans on eliminating violence. On the global stage, recognition of violence against women as an international human rights abuse was a victory for women’s rights activists. Globally agreed human rights frameworks provide a standard by which states can measure the fulfilment of its duties to prevent violence against women. It is also the benchmark against which women’s rights activists can hold their governments, institutions and employers to account.

As *Section 1* of this report shows, struggles take place in communities, school rooms, courts, parliaments, municipalities, conflict zones and health centres. And, as the case studies show, their success often relies on collective action and the mobilisation of women’s organisations and civil society.

There is strong evidence to demonstrate the catalysing effect of women’s organisations in fighting back to challenge and eliminate VAWG. In a study covering 70 countries across

four decades, the mobilisation of independent women’s rights organisations and movements was found to be the most important factor in ensuring global commitments to ending violence against women are translated into meaningful, enduring policies at the national level – more important than a country’s wealth, the presence of left-wing parties or the number of women in politics.<sup>33</sup>

However, as discussed in *Section 2* of this report, the civil society space that allows women’s organisations to flourish or founder is under threat. Women human rights defenders are targeted with violent attacks and abuse for challenging power relations subordinating women. Those who are brave enough to continue undeterred must overcome increasing obstacles to democratic freedoms including **rising fundamentalist influences and deepening political and economic inequalities**.

These emerging trends are compounded by limitations of global, national and donor responses. Lack of accountability and relegation

of women to the margins of decision-making are long-term trends that must be reversed. More recently, there has been a tendency towards donors prioritising certain forms of violence over others – creating ‘hierarchies of violence’<sup>34</sup> and neglecting the root causes.

### Shrinking civil liberties undermine the fight-back by women

The quashing of unions,<sup>35</sup> limits on public protest, harassment of activists and the use of militarised police against peaceful protestors are now regularly deployed by governments to quell challenges to prevailing social and economic injustices.<sup>36</sup> According to the monitoring body Freedom House, 2014 was the ninth consecutive year of an overall decline in levels of democracy worldwide.<sup>37</sup>

As discussed in *Section 2*, civil society organisations are increasingly under attack and women’s organisations are facing a backlash, being silenced and constrained. This combines

### “I SAID ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. I COULD NOT TAKE IT ANYMORE”

Tiwonge Gondwe, a 40 year-old farmer and women and girls’ rights activist from Rumphi district in northern Malawi, reflects on the moment she found the courage to stand up to years of abuse suffered at the hands of her husband. Tiwonge was constantly beaten by her husband, causing her physical harm and emotional distress. However, she felt trapped in the relationship because of her lack of economic independence.

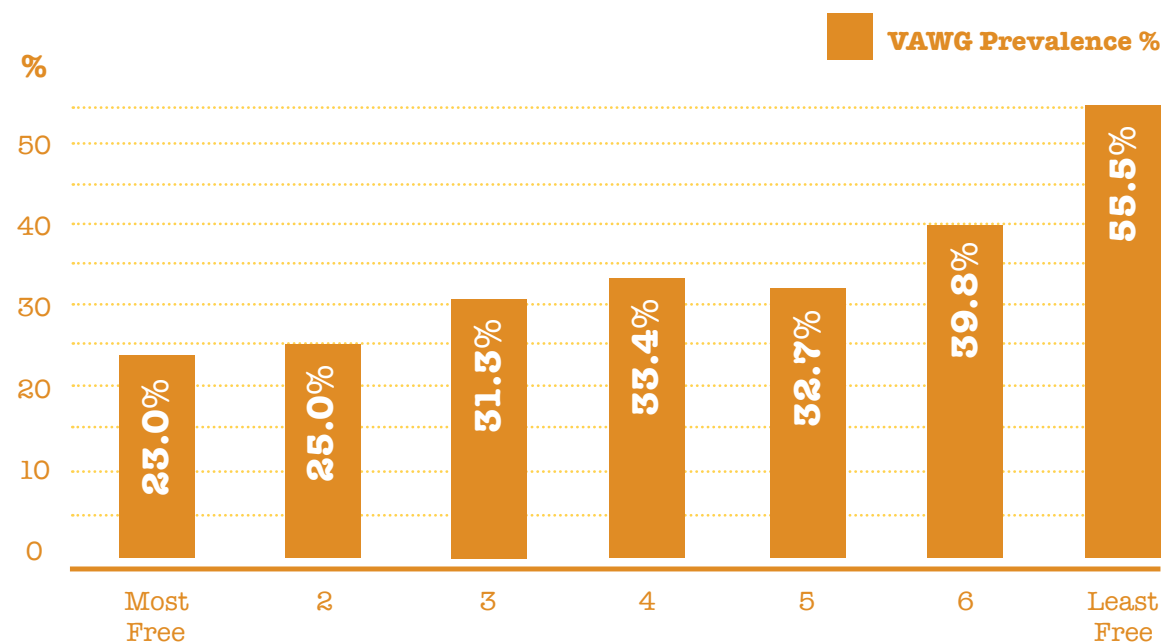
This turning point, back in 2006, ignited within her a wider passion for fighting for women’s rights and mobilising others for change. As a woman living with HIV/ AIDS, Tiwonge also understands what it takes to support fellow women and girls in her predicament, and actively supports those living with the condition.

Tiwonge has come together with other women to push for an end to VAWG from community, to district, to national level. This includes her work leading Chikulamayembe Women’s Forum, a partner of ActionAid International Malawi. This grassroots movement of women challenges laws and practices that expose women to gender-based violence and discrimination.

Thanks in large part to the unrelenting efforts of such women’s rights activists and organisations, in 2013 Malawi implemented its first Gender Equality Act. In 2014, the country passed a bill outlawing child marriage while the President launched a 3-year national campaign to end sexual violence.



**Graph 2:** Average VAWG prevalence in developing countries by Freedom House Civil Liberties Index Score



with the exclusion of women from political decision-making and violent attacks against individuals defending women's rights. Just one fifth of parliamentarians globally are women.<sup>38</sup> At current rates of progress, women won't comprise half the world's leaders for another 120 years.<sup>39</sup>

Women human rights defenders and women activists depend on civil liberties to operate. Freedom of expression, assembly, association, education, and religion are all vital for women's organisations and other civil society organisations challenging violence and gender inequality. Prevention and redress also rely on the rule of law and fair legal systems that ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. These characteristics are measured by the Freedom House Civil Liberties (CL) index – countries with the weakest civil liberties score 7 while those with the strongest score 1.

The vital importance of an environment in which women's organisations can operate effectively is illustrated in ActionAid's latest research that analysed the relationship between civil rights and VAWG. **We find that women are almost twice as likely to experience violence in countries that have weaker civil rights than in countries with a stronger civil rights framework.** In countries defined as 'Free' (with a CL score of 2 or lower), the average rate of VAWG is 24%, whereas in countries that are 'Not Free' (with a CL score of 6 or higher), 47.6% of women and girls have experienced violence<sup>40</sup> (see Graph 2 above).

This striking finding supports the long-held position of the global feminist movement – supported by ActionAid – that the eradication of VAWG relies on women's leadership, activism and the frontline efforts of women's organisations. Where women cannot organise to resist violence in all its forms, demand legislative and policy changes, and hold governments accountable for their implementation, violence persists.



Zahra Wafo, 28, is community facilitator for the women's association of Nawa village, Bamyan province, Afghanistan. As well as learning to read and write, and producing handicrafts to support their economic empowerment, the meetings provide an opportunity for the women to discuss women's rights issues.

Photo: Lorenzo Tugnoli/ActionAid



# SECTION 1

## SITES OF STRUGGLE:

### Where women face violence and how they are fighting back

**There are a vast number of contexts – ordinary and exceptional – where women face violence or its threat. Here we highlight five that powerfully demonstrate the devastating impacts of VAWG on the rights and lives of women and girls, as well as on wider development: women at work; rapid urbanisation; sexual and reproductive health and rights; education; and conflict and humanitarian situations. Domestic violence – the most prevalent form of abuse suffered by women – remains a prominent cross-cutting theme.**

#### 1.1 WORKING WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINE

*“...women’s economic empowerment...as well as their full and equal participation in public and political life, is essential for addressing the structural and underlying causes of violence against women and girls.”*

*CSW57 Agreed Conclusions<sup>41</sup>*

Violence both drives and is a consequence of the significant economic inequalities endured by women everywhere, but particularly poor women in the global South. On virtually every measure, women are economically worse off than men.<sup>42</sup> Research by ActionAid has found that the global gap between men and women’s earnings and labour market participation amounts to a staggering US\$17 trillion every year.<sup>43</sup> Norms, practices and policies that discriminate against women at every level mean that their cheap and unpaid labour essentially subsidises the global economy. Women are concentrated in poorly rewarded and precarious forms of work in the

informal sector, in agriculture, or in exploitative and hazardous global supply chains. Their work is undervalued and – in the case of women’s disproportionate share of caring for children, families and those who are elderly or unwell – largely invisible.

Such economic inequalities increase women’s risk of being subjected to violence, while VAWG itself increases women’s economic disadvantage, locking them into a cycle of poverty and abuse. Women’s financial precariousness further undermines their voice and bargaining power at home, work and in wider society, making it harder to challenge or leave abusive partners or work situations.<sup>44</sup> Particularly at risk are women who are poor or young, migrant, indigenous or from an ethnic minority, as well as domestic workers, sex workers, forced, bonded and girl child labourers, and women and girls who have been trafficked.<sup>45</sup> The destructive impacts of VAWG on women’s economic rights manifest themselves at many levels.

#### In the home

Violence and the threat of violence in the home is used as a means to control women and their bodies, to lock them into disempowering positions of economic dependency and fear of current or former intimate partners, as well as abusive family members. Women who suffer domestic violence have been found to have higher work absenteeism and lower productivity and earnings than women who are not experiencing violence.<sup>46</sup> For instance, women in formal wage work in Tanzania earn 60% less if they experience severe violence from their partners.<sup>47</sup>

#### Unsafe journeys

Outside the home, many women regularly endure sexual harassment as they travel to and from work. Women worldwide – whether in busy city avenues or dusty rural marketplaces – face lewd remarks, catcalling and groping. So normalised is this behaviour that it often goes unnoticed by the passing public.<sup>48</sup> At the more extreme end of the spectrum lies the possibility of rape, sexual assault and violent crime.

All of this understandably deters women from moving about freely, hampering their opportunities to earn an income. Women who are poor, living in informal settlements that may be many miles from their places of work in ill-lit, inadequately policed areas, without affordable, accessible and safe public transport, are especially at risk. Research by ActionAid Cambodia, for example, showed 38% of garment workers and 71% of sex workers reported avoiding going to work because of fears for their safety.<sup>49</sup>

#### Violence at work

Sadly, women’s experience of violence does not end ‘at the factory gates’. Among the reported abuses are sexual, physical and psychological harassment, bullying by managers and supervisors, body searches, forced pregnancy tests, dismissal of pregnant women, violations of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and threats and beatings when women dare to challenge oppressors.<sup>50</sup>

- According to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), up to half of women experience unwanted sexual advances and physical contact, or other forms of sexual harassment at work.<sup>51</sup>
- In Cambodia, one in 10 incidents of sexual harassment experienced by garment workers occur in factories.<sup>52</sup> In 2009, Mexico’s National Institute for Women (INMUJERES) reported that 46% of women (15 million) in the formal economy suffer sexual harassment. Around a quarter of these women were dismissed and 40% were forced to leave their jobs.<sup>53</sup>

Appalling neglect of workplace safety standards, along with pressure to work long hours in toxic conditions cause physical and psychological harm, injury and even death to many women. This includes, for example, exposure to harmful pesticides for women processing cashew nuts in India and picking flowers in Kenya for export to European supermarkets.<sup>54</sup> Another stark example was the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, in which over 1,100 women lost their lives and over 4,500 were injured.<sup>55</sup> As the Cambodia case study on Page 20 shows, women workers courageously seek ways to come together to challenge corporate violence and exploitation. However, they are frequently met with threats and further violence by employers, as well as state authorities acting in the interests of big business in flagrant disregard of international human rights obligations. According to the ITUC, unions are increasingly under attack.<sup>56</sup> The same trend is true for women human rights defenders, who are harassed because they are women and because they stand up for women’s rights and human rights (see Page 40-41).<sup>57</sup>

Such negligence and oppressive practices mean the companies involved – whether directly or further up the supply chain – are at worst direct perpetrators of VAWG and at best complicit in such acts. This is also a gross violation of global human rights standards, which clearly establish that companies have a responsibility to respect human rights and support access to justice.<sup>58</sup>



# “...I feel very scared cycling home in the dark”

Kunthea, Phnom Penh

## Violence against garment workers in Cambodia

**“I need to earn more money so I make myself work until eight or 10 at night. I feel very scared cycling home in the dark... [O]nce... a gang followed me on their motorbikes... Some other garment workers I know have... even been raped.”**

Kunthea<sup>59</sup> faces a constant fear and risk of violence as she travels home from the factory in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, where she sews clothes for major high-street brands. Kunthea’s job pays poverty wages and leaves her exposed to multiple forms of violence.

Lim Srey Mom is a facilitator for ActionAid partner organisation Workers Information Centre (WIC). WIC works to empower women garment workers by making them aware of their rights and Cambodia’s labour laws, so they can organise collectively and fight for change. She says:

“Most violence against women in the factory is not physical but mental because of the pressure from the supervisors... [A] worker told me... there was so much work for her to do she could not finish... so the supervisor asked her to meet with the Chinese owner... They shouted loudly at her and made her cry in front of the other workers.”

Cambodia’s rapid economic growth – significantly fuelled by its garment industry<sup>60</sup> – has, to a large extent, come at the expense of women’s rights. Women make up around 90% of garment workers, most of them young migrants from rural areas. Women are preferred by many factories because, in line with prevailing social norms, they are seen as more passive, submissive and obedient, while men are perceived as more likely to challenge exploitation by joining unions and participating in

protests and strikes.<sup>61</sup> Under pressure to support their families, these women face a choice between no job, or an exploitative job that exposes them to increased risk of violence. Low wages and insecure, short-term contracts compel women to work long hours in stifling conditions. Women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights are also being jeopardised. Rom Phari is a 29-year-old union leader and garment worker. “Miscarriages are common among garment workers... we have at least three or four miscarriages a month,” she says.

Meanwhile, pregnant women risk losing their job.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, abortions are reportedly in high demand. Women who are unable to pay may resort to unsafe abortions putting themselves at risk of serious complications, or even death.<sup>63</sup>

*“The Cambodian garment industry is now typified by exploitation, discrimination and violence... For too long now institutions that were created to protect Cambodian women and citizens have been manipulated by powerful business interests resulting in illegitimate brutality, shootings and deaths.”*

Community Legal Education Centre, Cambodia.<sup>64</sup>

In the face of threats from employers and violent clampdowns by the government, many women are standing up for their rights, such as by joining or leading a union. In early 2014, thousands of women garment workers took to the streets to demand an end to poverty wages. State security forces responded brutally. At least four male trade unionists were killed and 40 other demonstrators were injured.<sup>65</sup> Public gatherings were banned in an effort to instil further fear among the majority women garment workers. But the women, along with the wider labour movement, have continued their struggle, and recently secured a rise in the minimum wage.<sup>66</sup>



Kunthea, a 35 year-old garment worker in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, faces a daily threat of violence as she travels to and from work. Poor pay and working conditions trap women like Kunthea in poverty and exacerbate their risk of violence further.

Photo: Savann Oeurm/ActionAid





Sophia Abdi Noor campaigns through the Somali part of Kenya at the Tana River during the 2013 election in Kenya.  
Photo: Jakob Dall/ActionAid

**LIVING IN THE CITY:  
VIOLENCE RESTRICTS  
WOMEN’S FREEDOM TO  
THRIVE**

In December 2012, the violent gang rape and murder of ‘Nirbhaya’,<sup>68</sup> an Indian woman travelling on a Delhi bus, sparked public outrage and protests, not only on the streets and in the media of India, but globally. Nirbhaya’s untimely death and the upsurge of resistance that it provoked shone renewed light on violence against women and girls, and the urgent need to assert women’s right to the city.

As urban populations grow,<sup>69</sup> women migrate to urban centres as either dependants or in pursuit of economic opportunities. So it is vital to make cities safe for women and girls.<sup>70</sup> Some have been coerced, forced or misled about the opportunities available, and suffered exploitative relocation.<sup>71</sup> Women living in slums and shacks are working hard to improve their lives but are subject to verbal abuse, sexual harassment and unwanted contact such as touching, groping or rape.<sup>72</sup>

Although cities are often described as the economic powerhouses of nations – with plentiful opportunities – rapid urbanisation has resulted in stark income inequalities, widespread poverty, poor living conditions, insecurity and violence. The fear and reality of violence experienced by women in urban public spaces – whether engaging in economic or leisure activities, travelling to school, or accessing public services – is an extension of the inequality women experience in their homes, communities and workplaces. Such threats and experiences constrain women’s freedom of movement, limit their potential, and hinder enjoyment of their economic, social and political rights. Poor women facing other forms of discrimination based on race, class, sexual orientation, age, occupation and geography are at greater risk. A recent ActionAid study shows how widespread gender-based violence continues to be in several cities (see *Table 1*).

**Table 1:** Types of violence reported, as experienced by women and girls in urban communities in the past months or year <sup>73</sup>

	Bangladesh	Cambodia	Nepal	South Africa	Zimbabwe
Verbal abuse or sexual remarks	84%	77%	44%	74%	42%
Physical abuse	*	25%	22%	25%	43%
Sexual harrassment/ eve teasing	56%	*	*	20%	22%
Sexual assualt, rape or fear of rape	22%	10%	*	*	*



# “...insults every day, beatings if we walk alone”

Phumla, Soweto, Johannesburg

## Violence against lesbian and bisexual women in townships in South Africa

“In South Africa there is no safe space for women, there is nowhere you can be safe from rape ... if you're a lesbian in Soweto, guys see you as a threat and something that should be wiped off the face of the earth. We get insults every day, beatings if we walk alone, you are constantly reminded that you are a bitch, that you deserve to be raped, they yell, 'if I rape you then you will go straight, that you will buy skirts and start to cook because you will have learned how to be a real woman'.

Then there are others who believe that we are all virgins and so if they have sex with us, we are free from diseases. They believe that it is their right to have sex with any woman out there, straight or lesbian.

I think the violence is getting worse. Just last December I knew of a lesbian couple in a bar near my home. They were out with boys who were their friends. At the end of the night her girlfriend was killed and she was raped. I believe this happens every day. The fact there is no justice means that people think they can get away with it because nobody cares.”<sup>74</sup>

Violence against women is widespread in South Africa. A recent study estimated that a woman is killed by an intimate partner every eight hours.<sup>75</sup> Two-thirds of South Africa's population now lives in urban areas, and for women living in poverty in townships, the threat of violence is intensified by inadequate housing, insecurity and impunity.<sup>76</sup> A recent survey conducted in nine townships mainly with lesbian and bisexual women and girls found that only 12% felt safe from verbal and physical abuse in their neighbourhoods while 27% never felt safe. The majority of these women also experienced economic hardship, with 90% reporting that they 'never' or only 'sometimes'

have access to work opportunities<sup>77</sup>, pointing to the multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination that increase the risk of violence.

As Thulisle Msiza, Director of Ekurhuleni LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) puts it, “It seems that as lesbians we cannot go anywhere. We cannot be ourselves. We have to hide ourselves, otherwise we get killed. We have to stay indoors – like caged animals. It's like we are living in an apartheid era again and homosexuals are the ones being oppressed.”<sup>78</sup>

Fear is compounded by police inaction and impunity, with few attacks brought to justice, including several homophobic attacks that have ended in brutal murders.<sup>79</sup> Following the recent brutal rape of Kim Shabalala,<sup>80</sup> an openly bisexual woman and an active member of Limpopo LGBTI Proudly OUT (LLPO),<sup>81</sup> the police, failed to act promptly and arrived a few days after the incident to collect evidence. South African LGBTI organisations documenting violence over the past two decades suggest that, for historical reasons, black lesbians and transgender men living in townships, peri-urban and rural areas, and informal settlements are among the most marginalised and vulnerable members of South Africa's LGBTI population.<sup>82</sup>

ActionAid South Africa is partnering with the Forum for the Empowerment of Women, an organisation of and for black lesbian women that identifies itself as both a LGBTI and a feminist collective. By building the leadership and confidence of lesbian and bisexual women, they aim to challenge the discriminatory attitudes and perceptions which fuel homophobic attacks and push for changes in government policy and the criminal justice system to prevent such crimes going unpunished.

Portrait of activist from the Rainbow Activist Alliance supported by ActionAid partner the Forum for the Empowerment of Women. The activists participate in a project to empower lesbian women to create safe communities. The activists meet bi-monthly in their communities with the objective of building feminist political consciousness for activism.

Photo: Mbuso Ngubane/ActionAid





## 1.3 MY BODY, MY CHOICES: WOMEN'S SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN THE BALANCE

Violence is used to control women's sexual activity and choices about whether and when they have children, with devastating consequences for their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Violence against women and girls is considered by the World Health Organization to be a "global public health problem of epidemic proportions",<sup>83</sup> increasing risk of physical and mental trauma, unintended pregnancies, vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and irreversible sexual and reproductive problems.

### Enshrined in international frameworks – rights to make informed choices

The fulfilment of sexual and reproductive health and rights is essential to both preventing violence and supporting women and girls who have experienced it. Sexual and reproductive health and rights can be understood as the right for all, regardless of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, HIV status or other aspects of identity, to make choices regarding their own sexuality and reproduction. It also includes the right to access the information and services needed to support these choices and optimise health.<sup>84</sup> These rights are captured in international frameworks, including the commitments made at the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and at other international events since.<sup>85</sup>

### Violating rights, restricting choices

Discriminatory social norms have, in some communities, fostered practices that can devastate lives, especially for young girls. Female genital mutilation (FGM) or cutting, a practice which involves partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, is a manifestation of social norms that control women's and girls' sexuality and consider their bodies, their sexuality and their future to be the property of others.<sup>86</sup> A survivor's sexuality

is physically controlled – she is denied sexual pleasure, she is prevented from having sex before marriage and her education and life choices are constrained.<sup>87</sup>

Marriage under the age of 18, or child marriage,<sup>88</sup> is disproportionately experienced by girls and puts them at particular risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence throughout their lives.<sup>89</sup> It is a violation of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights as, more often than not, women are married against their will, and are physically and emotionally unprepared for sexual activity, pregnancy and childbirth. Child brides often marry much older men and have limited power to choose whether they have sex and when to use protection and family planning methods, leaving them vulnerable to forced sex and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. Globally, it is most common in rural areas, and girls in the poorest quintile are 2.5 times more likely to marry in childhood than those in the richest quintile.<sup>90</sup>

The families of girls undergoing FGM or entering child marriages are often unaware of the devastating risks of these practices for their health.<sup>91</sup> These internationally recognised forms of gender-based violence are therefore a direct violation of the rights to informed choices about sexuality, reproduction and reproductive health.

### State and institutional violations of sexual and reproductive health and rights

Communities are not the only perpetrators of such violations. The state and other institutions play an important role in determining women's rights. As discussed in *Section 3*, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism (whether Christian, Islamic, Hindu or other) has led to the suppression or complete denial of women's access to sexual and reproductive health, including criminalising or restricting access to safe abortions and emergency contraception.<sup>92</sup> In 2008, an estimated 47,000 deaths were the result of unsafe abortion, accounting for almost 13% of all maternal deaths.<sup>93</sup>

## Witch hunt against poor women: jailing women for miscarriages and stillbirths<sup>94</sup>

Guadeloup Vasquez worked as a maid in El Salvador, and became pregnant at 17 after she was raped by her employer's neighbour. She planned to name the baby Gabriel. One day, during her pregnancy, she experienced intense pains and bleeding but her employer refused to let her leave the house to get medical care. Guadeloup gave birth to the baby unaided, heard his first cry, and then he died. The employer sent her to the hospital saying she did not want to "deal with two dead in my house". However, four days after arriving at the hospital, Guadeloup went on trial and was sentenced to 30 years in jail for having a miscarriage. She is amongst several women accused of causing the death of their foetus or infant.

El Salvador criminalises abortion on all grounds, including when the mother's life or health is in danger, and in cases of rape. Women and girls cannot access an abortion even if their lives are at risk, or if their foetuses will not survive. Yet the law is being taken to another extreme: imprisoning women who say the loss of their foetus or child was not their doing. Those who defy the law and seek unsafe abortions face horrifying consequences: The World Health Organization in 2008 reported that 9% of maternal deaths in Central America are the result of such procedures.<sup>95</sup>

The Salvadoran organisation Agrupación Ciudadana por la Despenalización del Aborto, (Salvadoran Citizens' Coalition for the Decriminalization of Abortion) successfully campaigned for the El Salvadoran Legislative Assembly to grant a pardon to Guadeloup and she was released after serving seven years and 3 months in overcrowded prisons, where

intimidation and harassment from inmates on the grounds of abortion charges are not uncommon.<sup>96</sup>

According to activist Sara Garcia, Salvadoran laws disproportionately harm women who are poor and uneducated, but also reflect a general "hatred of women".

**“We live in a misogynist, machista society ...with prejudices about how a woman should behave and the punishment she should receive for not fulfilling those expectations. There is no presumption of innocence.”<sup>97</sup>**

**Sara Garcia, El Salvador**



## 1.4 A SAFEHAVEN? SCHOOLGIRLS AT RISK

Schoolgirls are widely reported to be caught up in conflict settings as targets of violence. On 14 April 2014, armed members of the extremist group Boko Haram entered a school in Chibok, northern Nigeria, and abducted 276 girls from their classroom. Some miraculously escaped but, at the time of writing, 219 of the girls are still missing.<sup>98</sup> Malala Yousafzai was shot on the way to school in Pakistan in 2012 and survived to become a fearless defender of girls' right to education. Sadly, there are countless untold incidents of violence against schoolgirls.

Many families see education as the most important route out of poverty for future generations. But the World Health Organization estimates that 150 million girls are sexually assaulted each year, with many of these acts occurring at or on the way to school.<sup>99</sup> Violence as a barrier to education can take many forms, including sexual harassment, intimidation, teasing, abuse, assault and rape, corporal punishment, bullying, verbal and psychological abuse and the exploitation of students' labour. Trusted adults and peers such as students, teachers, other school employees, bus and taxi drivers and community members are among the perpetrators.<sup>100</sup>

### Consequences of violence targeting girls

An ActionAid study in Africa, Asia and Latin America found that violence and the fear of violence were among the key factors preventing girls from attending school and completing their education.<sup>101</sup> Violence targeting girls such as child marriage or female genital mutilation can prevent them from going to school because of potential damaging health effects or pregnancy. Girls are denied their right to education and their ambition, potential and opportunities are thwarted at an early age.

### Violence in the wider society reflected in school

Violence against schoolgirls is part of the gender discrimination in communities and the wider society which becomes embedded in schools' institutional policies. Therefore challenging prejudice and fundamentalist attitudes in the wider community is central to halting the threat and reality of violence in schools. Moreover, facilitating safe spaces and opportunities in which girls themselves can discuss their needs and develop strategies to confront and oppose injustice is essential to eradicating violence against schoolgirls. For example, the establishment of girls' and boys' clubs in schools and communities in Ghana helps empower children and young people with information about their rights. Club members are able to take concrete action to raise awareness of girls' rights to education and protection from violence, and support their out-of-school peers to return to their studies.<sup>102</sup>

“For me the best way to  
fight against terrorism and  
extremism is just simple  
thing: educate the next  
generation.”

Malala Yousafzai  
BBC interview, 2013<sup>103</sup>

Caroline, 13, lives at her primary school in East Pokot, Kenya. At 11, she had dropped out of school as she was unable to pay the fees, and was married against her wishes. She ran away soon after and an old neighbour helped her get back into school.

Photo: Jennifer Huxta/ActionAid





# “...I shouted and shouted but nobody heard me...”

Janet, 11, Brong Ahafo

## Violence against schoolgirls in Ghana

Janet lives with her family in Kwame Tenten, Brong Ahafo, Ghana. She was just 11 years old when she was brutally raped by a neighbour. She suffered such serious injuries that she missed months of school.

“It happened one evening. We often watch a movie at this neighbour’s house, as he was one of the few people who had a video. To start with some female relatives of his joined us to watch the movie, but then the man, Asanti, who was about in his mid-20s, asked me to go and buy some kenkey [a dish prepared from maize dough] for him.

“So I went for the kenkey and when I returned the relatives were gone, I handed him the kenkey and then he locked the door and turned the TV set up loudly. Then he started to rape me. I shouted and shouted but nobody heard me because the TV was so loud.

“He hurt me so badly. There was much blood running out. They did an operation but it spoiled. The wounds didn’t heal and got infected and I had to go back to hospital. It took three months before everything was healed. I missed a lot of school.”

ActionAid’s research with select communities in Ghana found that as many as 66% of girls had experienced some form of violence during the previous 12 months.<sup>104</sup> Early pregnancy and marriage are reported to be barriers to school, and the expectation that girls will carry out household chores, care for siblings or work on the farm also means there is little time left for education.

Communities and schoolgirls in Ghana are mobilising to resist violence and demand the rights of girls through collective action. ActionAid is working with Community Based Anti-Violence Teams – known as COMBAT squads – in Janet’s community and across northern Ghana. Thomas Obour is a primary school teacher and volunteers as a COMBAT squad member.

“There was a lot of FGM going on here when we started six years ago. But thanks to COMBAT it is no more. This is one of my biggest achievements – we have educated our community on the harmful effects of FGM on girls and it has stopped.”

Janet’s father learned about seeking support and justice for his daughter and urgently getting her to a hospital through the COMBAT squad’s community education.

“I heard of COMBAT educating the public last year in the information centre. I saw a video on domestic violence in the street at night. Through this education I learned what to do if something happens. It gave me courage to take my daughters to the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit at Wenchi Police Station. Before COMBAT stated working in this village there was a lot more violence. It is definitely reducing.”

“I’m glad to be at school,” says Janet. “I’m doing well; maths is my best subject. I’ve stayed in Class 5 – even though I missed a lot of school – because my performance was good.”



Thomas Obour, 36, formally a radio presenter, is now a primary school teacher. In his spare time Thomas volunteers as a COMBAT squad member and works tirelessly to reduce violence in his community, Kwame Tenten. His biggest achievement, he says, is eradicating Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in his village.

Photo: Nana Kofi Acquah/ActionAid



## 1.5 VIOLENCE INTENSIFIED BY CONFLICT AND DISASTER

Violent conflict and humanitarian crises can trigger an intensification of the ‘everyday’ violence that women face.<sup>105</sup> The mass displacement they cause and the destruction they wreak on infrastructure, access to services, water and sanitation, healthcare, shelter and livelihoods, and the fabric of society exacerbates women’s poverty and creates social stress, which can worsen women’s exposure to VAWG. Meanwhile, the breakdown of governance structures and law and order creates greater impunity for perpetrators.<sup>106</sup>

This intensification of VAWG is experienced in women’s homes, communities, displacement camps, at the hands of spouses or family, community members, soldiers, or even the very peacekeepers and humanitarian workers sent to support them.<sup>107</sup>

### Intensification of domestic violence

Domestic violence – already the most prevalent manifestation of VAWG globally – is aggravated further by the extreme social and economic stress of humanitarian situations.<sup>108</sup> In conflict settings, the militarisation of society can also lead to a culture of violence, further exacerbating violence in the home.<sup>109</sup>

*“Women in war zones ... told us how militarisation affected their sons, their husbands, their brothers – that it turned them into different people. They complained that their men were cold, cut off and then explosive and often violent...”*<sup>110</sup>

Indeed, an emerging body of evidence shows that domestic violence remains the most common form of VAWG faced by women in such settings, though it often remains under-reported and receives less attention than sexual

violence perpetrated by armed factions.<sup>111</sup> In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for instance, women reported high levels of sexual violence in provinces far removed from the main conflict zone, while over a fifth said they had been forced by partners to have sex or perform sexual acts.<sup>112</sup> Child marriage also rises steeply, in a desperate bid by parents to ‘protect’ their daughters.

### Targeted for abuse

Civilians – the majority women and children – constitute up to 90% of deaths in today’s protracted armed struggles over natural resources, land and political or religious ideology.<sup>113</sup> These bloody conflicts involve state armies, multiple rebel factions – often backed by foreign governments – and international allied forces such as NATO. The systematic use of VAWG, particularly sexual violence, is also widely seen as a defining characteristic of modern warfare.<sup>114</sup> Countless women are subjected to rape, forced abortion or sterilisation, deliberate infection with sexually transmitted infections including HIV, physical mutilation, and sexual and economic slavery.<sup>115</sup> Men and boys are also targeted.

Such egregious acts were first drawn starkly to the world’s attention following the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda in the 1990s<sup>116</sup> and have since been documented in the DRC, Somaliland, Uganda, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Burma, Colombia and Ukraine,<sup>117</sup> to name but a few. Needless to say, this brutality leads to life-changing injuries, psychological trauma and even death, affecting women long after armed hostilities have ended. Women survivors and children borne of rape often face stigma and rejection by their families and communities, which can force them into further destitution, displacement and exposure to violence.

### Women rebuilding their communities

*“Even during the war [women] were the ones that initiated peace. Even now, they are the ones holding the topic.”*

*Hannah Koroma, WAVES, Sierra Leone.*<sup>118</sup>

Nonetheless, the intensification of VAWG in conflict and humanitarian settings does not deter women from their critical efforts in rebuilding their societies, in challenging gender-based violence and forging a more inclusive peace within households and communities.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, preventing and responding to VAWG should be prioritised from the start of any humanitarian response, with programmes planned and implemented with women’s and girls’ active participation. In fact, processes of peacebuilding and reconstruction can offer opportunities to transform gender relations and forge more equal societies.

Indeed, in 2000, the historic UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 finally recognised women’s essential role in peacebuilding, their right to participate fully and equally in peacebuilding processes, and the disproportionate impacts of conflict on women.<sup>120</sup> However, the international community still tends to focus narrowly on ‘rape as a weapon of war’ requiring a military-security response.<sup>121,122</sup> As well as glossing over the VAWG continuum that endures across times of conflict and so-called peace,<sup>123</sup> and how all such violence is related to women’s wider social, political and economic marginalisation,<sup>124</sup> this approach reinforces notions of women as passive victims in need of protecting, rather than as political actors in their own right.<sup>125</sup>

So, despite UNSCR 1325 and six subsequent resolutions, women remain firmly sidelined in official peace negotiations, their work at household and community level largely unrecognised, their potential role in emerging new governments unrealised, and their fundamental right to participate in decision-making so that the root causes of gender inequality and VAWG can be tackled, denied.<sup>126</sup> Even so, as the following case study from Syria demonstrates, women continue to strive in their efforts to be heard.

*“Abuse can happen in a family’s home, on fields of armed conflict... or wherever girls are diminished and devalued simply because they are girls. It is unacceptable in any form. Countries simply cannot progress when half their populations are marginalised, mistreated, or subjected to discrimination.”*

*Hillary Clinton, 2011*<sup>127</sup>



**“God help these girls...  
They are getting beaten,  
they are getting married  
so young”** **Layla, 38, Syrian Refugee in Lebanon**

## **Devastation in Syria, but women’s strength endures**

Women and girls caught up in the conflict and humanitarian catastrophe that has engulfed Syria since 2011 face heightened levels of violence in their homes, on the streets and in displacement camps.<sup>128</sup>

Layla is a 38-year old Syrian refugee based in Lebanon: “Many girls are being beaten by their husbands. [One community member] is only 16 years old and is beaten every day.... God help these girls.... They are getting miscarriages, they are being beaten, they are getting married so young.”<sup>129</sup>

By March 2015, some 7.6 million Syrians had been internally displaced, with an additional four million having fled the country.<sup>130</sup> Four out of five of those fleeing are women and children,<sup>131</sup> many citing sexual violence as a primary reason.

“I could see the fear in my children’s eyes,” says 50 year-old Nassra Al-Harrir, describing the moment she decided to flee her family home in the Syrian town of Dara for the sprawl of Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, where ActionAid is working to empower and support Syrian refugee women. “It was not an easy decision, but we knew we had no option. It was leave, or die.”

Both government and opposition forces stand accused of committing sexual violence and rape, generating a climate of fear that further restricts women’s participation in public life.<sup>132</sup> Inside Syria, extremist Islamist factions have also

imposed severe restrictions on the movement of women.

Displaced women and girls inside and outside Syria face intensified levels of domestic violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as increased rates of child marriage – used as a desperate strategy by parents fearing for their daughters’ safety.<sup>133</sup>

Despite these horrific circumstances, Syrian women have shown courage and resilience in resisting violence. Nassra and other women in Zaatari camp were concerned about safety for women using poorly lit shared bathroom facilities after dark. They successfully lobbied the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to speed up the provision of electricity to their district to address their concerns.

Many Syrian women are coming together to demand gender equality and an active role in any post-conflict transition to democracy.<sup>134</sup> In January 2015, women from leading Syrian opposition groups founded the Syrian Women’s Network (SWN), committed to “advocating for women’s equal participation in all aspects of peace, security and future governance” of Syria.<sup>135</sup> Rajaa al-Talli, a founder of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria, has highlighted the significant role women are already playing in local peacebuilding.<sup>136</sup> She urges: “The pillars of extremism and radicalism are usually [used] to oppress women. Having more women empowered is hitting one of the pillars that support extremism.”<sup>137</sup>



Nassra Al Hariri, 50, left Syria in January 2013, heading for Zataari refugee camp in Jordan. Here she attended women's circles set up by ActionAid where she lobbied for lights and torches for women, and access to electricity for her district.

Photo: ActionAid



## SECTION 2 TURNING RHETORIC INTO REALITY:

Why global commitments  
remain unrealised

**“Paradoxically, the rhetoric of gender equality has been coupled with a rise in resistance to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and women’s human rights obligations, undermining the basic underlying principles of universality, interdependence and inalienability of human rights.”**

UN Women<sup>138</sup>

### 2.1 THE BEGINNING OF THE END: POLITICAL MOMENTUM AROUND VAWG

Thanks to decades of hard-fought campaigning by women around the world, drawing on their diverse lived experiences of discrimination and their struggles to live a life free from violence, political momentum to promote gender equality and address VAWG have been stepped up.

#### Global frameworks: Setting the scene

The year 1979 was an historic one for women’s rights, with the creation of the first, internationally legally binding treaty dedicated to the rights of women and non-discrimination: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW, along with other major human rights conventions and treaties, clearly establishes the obligation of governments to prevent and protect against all forms of VAWG, as well as to provide support services and ensure justice for survivors.<sup>139</sup>

Since then – due largely to ongoing efforts by feminist and women’s rights organisations globally – there have been numerous initiatives aimed at tackling the global scourge of VAWG (see *timeline overleaf*). International, regional and national protocols, declarations, conventions, resolutions, directives and campaigns have been launched by the UN, the African Union (the Maputo Protocol), the Organization of American States (the Belem do Para Convention), ASEAN, and the Council of Europe, among others.

These notable examples include the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women;<sup>140</sup> the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action;<sup>141</sup> the UN Secretary General’s 2008-2015 UNiTE to end VAWG campaign;<sup>142</sup> the G8 Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in 2013;<sup>143</sup> and no less than seven UN Security Council Resolutions since 2000 recognising how women are disproportionately affected by armed conflict, including by sexual violence, and stressing the need for their full and meaningful participation in peacebuilding.<sup>144</sup>

And in terms of addressing VAWG in the world of work, the 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights clarify corporate responsibilities to respect human rights by undertaking human rights due diligence throughout business activities and supply chains. Particular attention should be paid to marginalised groups, along with the differentiated impacts of business activities on the rights of women and men.<sup>145</sup> Meanwhile, the trade union movement is calling for a new International Labour Organization convention to specifically address gender-based violence in the workplace.<sup>146</sup>

#### Building up national action

Many of these global policy frameworks call upon governments to adopt national action plans for combatting VAWG, and countries are responding.<sup>147</sup> According to the UN, since 2010, countries in all regions have started adopting national action plans and strategies to address VAWG.<sup>148</sup> The more comprehensive of these cover multiple forms of VAWG and include prevention measures, such as public awareness campaigns; improved coordinated services for survivors, such as integrated referral mechanisms, shelters, healthcare, psychological support and legal aid; specialised courts and police services, and training of police, teachers and the judiciary; data collection; and timelines and mechanisms for implementation.<sup>149</sup> It is also important to ensure VAWG National Action Plans are aligned with other relevant strategies and plans, notably those implementing UNSCR 1325.

Encouragingly, some action plans recognise the importance of dialogue and coordination with women’s organisations. This includes, for example, Cambodia’s second five-year National Action Plan on Violence Against Women, which was launched in 2014 following nine months of consultations with women’s organisations and civil society, including ActionAid Cambodia and its local partners.<sup>150</sup>

Many governments have also enacted new legislation or have strengthened existing laws.<sup>151</sup> This includes the introduction of Sierra Leone’s 2007 Domestic Violence Act,<sup>152</sup> the 2009 Ending Violence Against Women Law in Afghanistan,<sup>153</sup> Nicaragua’s 2012 Violence Against Women Act,<sup>154</sup> and the overturning of a Moroccan Law in 2014 that allowed men who had raped underage girls to walk free by marrying them.<sup>155</sup>

**“Violence is a gross violation of human rights, but regrettably there is a general tolerance of gender-based violence, therefore the majority of people do not recognize its many forms as a crime... but rather consider it an integral part of the culture and the fate of women. When the state fails to prosecute the perpetrators of violence, it not only encourages further abuse, but government’s inaction gives the impression that male violence against females is acceptable.”**

Amna Ehsan,  
Women’s rights activist, 2014<sup>156</sup>



## TIMELINE<sup>157</sup>

Global and regional commitments to end violence against women and girls



Despite this impressive catalogue of agreements and summits, the translation of commitments into action remains unacceptably slow. The international community must act now to change this. In the following sections we outline key global trends and shortfalls that must be addressed if efforts to eradicate VAWG are to succeed.



Marie, who is around 60 years old, wasn't able to have her own children after being circumcised, this is one of the five children that she adopted from her brother and wife after they died from AIDS.

Photo: Kate Holt/ActionAid



## 2.2 EMERGING THREAT #1: CIVIL SOCIETY CLAMPDOWNS AND ATTEMPTS TO SILENCE WOMEN

*“In the face of contemporary waves of protest, many governments feel threatened and have stepped up their efforts to close down civic space, through a combination of dubious legislation, the demonisation of protest movements and direct harassment of civil society activists and their organisations.”* *Civicus*<sup>163</sup>

### Attacks on women claiming their rights

For generations, countless determined women and girls all over the world have been on the frontline in fighting for their rights and the rights of their communities. These women face a barrage of gender-based violence. Ridicule, threats, verbal abuse, physical and sexual assault, as well as attacks on their families are perpetrated by family and community members, religious groups, criminal gangs, armed factions, corporate actors – as well as the state – in an effort to undermine, silence, shame and punish women who speak out.<sup>164</sup>

As highlighted by the International Coalition on Women Human Rights Defenders (ICWHRD), women are targeted both because they seek to challenge the status quo, and because they are women.<sup>165</sup> Whether they are land rights activists, bloggers, journalists or MPs; whether they are raising concerns in their communities, voting in an election, or defying patriarchal norms by taking a job in public life as a teacher or policewoman, many risk their safety and their lives in doing so. Women activists from marginalised groups such as ethnic or indigenous minorities, sex workers, migrant and refugee women, or sexual minorities, face an additional layer of discriminatory backlash from both men and women for ‘stepping out of line’.

*“In a recent case, we helped a woman leave her abusive husband and he threatened to kill me. My family worry for my safety. But I am available 24 hours a day...”*

*Pabitra Bishwokarma, President, Feminist Dalit Organisation, Makhanpur District, Nepal*<sup>166</sup>

Attacks on women seeking to realise their rights are even greater in conflict-affected states (see *box on Afghanistan opposite*).<sup>167</sup> Indeed, the conflict and militarism that are spreading across many parts of the world, the rise of religious fundamentalisms and conservatism (see *Page 42*), and the crises in law and order and governance and democracy that these entail, are posing grave challenges to women human rights defenders.<sup>168</sup>

*‘Women and women human rights defenders need support to protect them from threats and attacks from both State and non-State actors. Protection cannot remain on paper. We need real, practical implementation. We are in a very sensitive time. We need everyone’s resolve and solidarity’.*

*Mary Akrami, Afghan Women’s Network*<sup>169</sup>

### Closing down civil society space

In Iran, in August 2014, 28-year-old artist Atena Farghadani was placed in solitary confinement for posting a cartoon on Facebook that criticised parliament’s consideration of a bill threatening access to contraception and family planning. As of March 2015, Atena remains behind bars.<sup>170</sup> In March 2015, Bangladeshi labour leader Kalpona Akter was arrested in New Jersey, USA, as she tried to deliver a letter to a company refusing to pay compensation to survivors and families of those killed – the vast majority women – in the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse.<sup>171</sup> And in Honduras, women human rights defender Gladys Lanza was convicted of defamation in March 2015 for speaking out in defence of a woman who had accused a government official of sexual harassment.<sup>172</sup>

Disturbingly, as these examples show, rather than protecting women’s rights – including meeting international obligations to protect women human rights defenders as set out in a groundbreaking 2013 UN Resolution<sup>173</sup> – many governments are directly perpetrating violence against women, while failing to address cultures of impunity. And rather than supporting women in their struggle, many states are closing down the civil society space which all civil society, including women’s organisations, need in order to be effective. The quashing of unions,<sup>174</sup> harassment and detention of activists, restrictive legislation, blocking of internet access, banning of publications, and the use of militarised police against peaceful protestors are regularly deployed by governments to quell escalating dissent around spiralling inequalities, governance failures and corporate abuse,<sup>175</sup> thereby denying citizens their right to participate in democratic process and decision-making. According to the monitoring body Freedom House, 2014 was the ninth consecutive year of an overall decline in levels of democracy worldwide.<sup>176</sup>

### Women’s voices, women’s rights

The alarming constraints being placed on civil society and democratic space gravely threaten the realisation of commitments to achieve gender equality and eradicate VAWG, as led by women’s organisations. In a recent global study, the mobilisation of independent feminist organisations and movements was found to be the most important factor in ensuring global commitments on women’s rights are translated into meaningful, enduring policies at the national level – more important than a country’s wealth, the presence of left-wing political parties, or the number of women in politics.<sup>177</sup>

This evidence is firmly supported by new research commissioned by ActionAid. As discussed in detail on *Page 16*, this finds that women are almost twice as likely to experience violence in countries with weaker civil liberties than they are

in countries that have stronger civil liberties. This striking finding supports the long-held position of the global feminist movement – supported by ActionAid – that the eradication of VAWG relies on women’s leadership, activism and the frontline efforts of women’s organisations. Where civil society space and liberties are constrained, so too are women’s abilities to organise, resist, and realise change. The finding powerfully highlights the importance of supporting and working with women’s organisations to establish policies and mechanisms to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and to hold their governments accountable on their commitments.

## MURDERED FOR DEFENDING WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS

Afghanistan is one of the most extreme examples of a society where violence is used to silence women’s voices, as shown by these recent examples.

- **March 2015:** Farkhunda, a 27-year-old religious studies teacher, was beaten to death, burned and thrown into a river by up to 200 men. She had been falsely accused of burning the Koran after telling a mullah that his selling of tawiz – scraps of paper with religious verses that are supposed to be powerful spells – was against Islam.<sup>178</sup>
- **February 2015:** Angiza Shinwari, a councillor for Nangarhar province and a determined women’s rights defender, was killed by a bomb attack on her vehicle.<sup>179</sup>
- **November 2014:** Outspoken parliamentarian and women’s rights activist, Shukria Barakzai narrowly escaped with her life when her vehicle was rammed by a suicide bomber.<sup>180</sup>
- **January 2014:** Yalda Waziri, a senior government official in Herat was murdered by unknown attackers who shot her from a motorbike.<sup>181</sup>



## 2.3 EMERGING THREAT #2: RISING FUNDAMENTALISMS

*“While resistance from extremist groups to women’s human rights is not a new phenomenon, over the past 20 years such forces have become increasingly connected with greater capacity and resources to influence political agendas.”*

*UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, 2015*<sup>182</sup>

A second emerging trend undermining women’s rights and efforts to eradicate VAWG is that of rising religious fundamentalisms and conservatism – often accompanied with heightened levels of nationalism – in countries across the world.<sup>183</sup> Such interests are increasingly infiltrating political agendas,<sup>184</sup> gaining traction in communities disillusioned by poverty and inequality, and are being used to drive conflict and unrest.<sup>185</sup> Religious fundamentalisms typically entail the re-enforcement of rigid traditional gender roles that place severe controls over women and their bodies.<sup>186</sup> Their rise is thus closely interlinked with attempts to silence women, as well as closing down civil society space.<sup>187</sup>

### WHAT ARE RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS?

Religious fundamentalisms can apply to many different religions and can be defined as the strategic deployment of extreme religious ideology in order to secure political power and control over people and communities, often at the expense of human rights. Fundamentalist ideologies seek to exclude, castigate, or violently punish those whose views fail to conform to their rigid categories.<sup>188</sup> While religious fundamentalisms differ across contexts and definitions vary, common characteristics identified by women’s rights activists from 18 countries consulted by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) include being anti-women and patriarchal, violent, absolutist, intolerant and anti-human rights.<sup>189</sup>

In no region of the world are women’s rights free from the rising threat of fundamentalisms. For instance, contrary to the aims of the recent ‘Arab Spring’ pro-democracy uprisings, many countries have ended up with extremely religiously conservative governments that have placed even greater restrictions on women’s rights.<sup>190</sup>

In India, Sakshi Majaraj, a member of the recently elected far-right Hindu nationalist government, is stoking communal violence and the oppression of women by calling for Hindu women to ‘counter a growing Muslim population’ by having at least four babies.<sup>191</sup>

In Chile,<sup>192</sup> El Salvador,<sup>193</sup> Ireland,<sup>194</sup> and the Philippines<sup>195</sup> among others, the powerful influence of the Catholic right has seen the criminalisation of abortions, even when women have been raped or their lives are in danger.

In March 2015, the state of Indiana, USA, sentenced 33-year-old Purvi Patel to 20 years in prison under new ‘foeticide’ laws after refusing to believe she had suffered a miscarriage.<sup>196</sup> The evangelical Christian right is also growing in influence in Africa and there is evidence that this has been a factor in influencing the introduction of regressive laws on LGBTI,<sup>197</sup> for example in Uganda.<sup>198</sup>

And in the UK, populist anti-immigration policies and a growing nationalist far right<sup>199</sup> have triggered a rise in Islamophobic attacks, with violence towards Muslim women accounting for almost 60% of such reported incidents.<sup>200</sup> In 2013, the UK incarcerated over 2,000 women asylum seekers, many of whom were fleeing violence overseas fuelled by Western intervention. Their imprisonment in privately run detention centres has led to further psychological damage, self-harm, attempted suicide, and alleged sexual assault by centre staff.<sup>201</sup>

## Fundamentalisms in the international arena

This backlash is also playing out in international arenas, further infringing on civil society space and threatening to roll-back progress on women’s rights. This includes at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) – the largest gathering of governments, international agencies and civil society in order to set commitments on women’s rights. Here, countries such as Iran, Syria, Russia and Egypt, the Holy See (which has observer status but cannot vote),<sup>202</sup> as well as Christian right-backed anti-abortion groups<sup>203</sup> have obstructed negotiations and fought to weaken the language of commitments agreed decades ago.<sup>204</sup>

The growing voice of the religious right at CSW makes it all the more alarming that, in an unprecedented move, women’s rights groups were virtually blocked from inputting to the official CSW outcome document<sup>205</sup> at the March 2015 session. This is despite it being a critical moment in the lead-up to the new Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>206</sup>

*“When we talk about religious fundamentalists being anti-women, we need to break this down a bit: they are not anti-women as such; they are anti women’s autonomy and control of their own sexuality and in favour of patriarchal heterosexuality.”*

*Ayesha Imam, Nigerian feminist academic and activist, 2011*<sup>207</sup>

## EMERGING THREAT #3: WIDER POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

*“[N]eoliberal economic policies have eroded social safety nets and deepened inequalities within most countries, increasing the economic vulnerability of marginalised groups, including many women, who predominate among the world’s poor.”*

*UN Women*<sup>208</sup>

A third critical trend hampering efforts to realise gender equality and eradicate VAWG is the soaring level of inequality within and between countries, along with the failed global development and economic policies that underpin them.

### Profits for the few spell inequality and violence for women

Free trade and the rapid globalisation of markets, entailing the expansion of corporate supply chains, power and wealth, have had major impacts on the rights of poor women in the global South. Many developing countries compete fiercely to attract investors with policies that bestow tax breaks to multi-billion dollar corporations<sup>209</sup> while depressing wages and labour standards, and driving communities off agricultural land. Such policies typically go hand in hand with the privatisation, de-prioritisation and cutting of public services. This relentless, market-led race to the bottom combines with prevailing discriminatory gender norms, leading to the crowding of women into exploitative export industries, where their back-breaking work generates vast profits for the wealthy, with little return for the women themselves. Global trade, investment and financial rules that are skewed in favour of the wealthy and powerful, and which erode national policy space for developing countries to fulfil their human rights obligations, are undermining governments’ accountability to citizens, allowing corporate abuse to go unchecked, and crippling countries’ domestic resource base.<sup>210</sup> These factors combine to drive the staggering recent growth in inequalities within and between countries, particularly since the 2008 global financial crash, with women particularly hard hit.<sup>211</sup>

## 2.4



## One step forward, two steps back

*“The long shadow of austerity continues to affect women heavily, cutting jobs where women have traditionally worked, slashing public services which women tend to rely on more than men and increasing their already disproportionate share of care responsibilities.” ITUC<sup>212</sup>*

As a result of the 2008 crash and the ensuing austerity measures imposed in many countries, progress towards gender equality has been hampered, and implementation of laws and commitments on VAWG has been held back. Meanwhile, women’s social and economic inequalities have worsened, placing them at increased risk of VAWG.<sup>213</sup> Social stress caused by the crisis has caused domestic violence levels to rise, as documented in the UK, Ireland and the USA.<sup>214</sup> Women who lose jobs can feel they have no choice but to take up riskier occupations, such as sex work, which heightens their exposure to VAWG.<sup>215</sup> However, searing cuts and privatisation of services have left many women struggling to access support precisely when they need it most.<sup>216</sup> For instance, in the UK, many frontline services, such as shelters, have endured cuts or closure. Others have been replaced with gender-neutral services that fail to adequately address VAWG survivors’ specific needs.<sup>217, 218</sup>

However, governments and donors are largely failing to connect the dots and see how these structural political and economic injustices in our global system have created today’s vast inequalities, which are fuelling conflict and civil unrest, while driving women further to the bottom of the pile and exacerbating their risk of violence.<sup>219</sup>

## THE ECONOMIC COSTS OF VAWG

As well as cementing women’s lesser economic status, violence against women bears a heavy economic cost for wider society. The World Bank puts the costs<sup>220</sup> of intimate partner violence from 2% of GDP in the UK to up to 3.7% of GDP in Peru.<sup>221</sup> In Australia, domestic and non-domestic partner violence against women and children was estimated to cost the economy AUS \$13.6 billion dollars for 2009 alone (equivalent to almost US \$11 million at today’s exchange rate).<sup>222</sup> In Fiji, domestic violence has been costing at US \$300 million a year, an astonishing 7% of GDP.<sup>223</sup>

Though these figures help illustrate the destructive impacts of VAWG, it should be remembered that countries with high economic growth may be achieving this growth through policies that exploit and exacerbate women’s economic inequality, and thereby their risk of violence.<sup>224</sup> Nor does high GDP necessarily mean diminished levels of violence, as demonstrated by the 45% VAWG rate for EU countries.<sup>225</sup> Finally, any considerations of costs to GDP should be weighed against government failures to invest in VAWG prevention and response services.<sup>226</sup>

“Policy strategies geared toward economic growth or increasing general education levels, although necessary, are generally insufficient to close gender gaps. Targeted gender-specific and multi-sectoral solutions are also needed to respond to country-specific constraints.”

World Bank, 2014<sup>227</sup>

Srey Chreb, 31, works in the entertainment sector in Phnom Penh. Many women working in this sector frequently don’t go to work out of fear of violence.  
Photo: Charles Fox/ActionAid



## SECTION 3 FALLING SHORT:

### What needs to change to end the violence

**Despite the growing global attention for gender equality and violence against women, no country in the world is fulfilling its obligations to prevent, respond to, and prosecute perpetrators. The disconnect between rhetoric and reality signifies a disappointing failure of political will, action and accountability.**

#### 3.1 FAILURE TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES AND ADOPT A HOLISTIC, TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH

*“Violence against women cannot be analysed on a case-by-case basis in isolation from the individual, institutional and structural factors that govern and shape the lives of women.” Rashida Manjoo, UN Special Rapporteur on VAWG*<sup>228</sup>

A major impediment to the eradication of VAWG is the failure by many governments and international bodies to apply a holistic, transformative approach. This would recognise how all forms of VAWG share a common root cause – entrenched power inequalities between women and men – which are embedded within, and exacerbated by, political and economic policies, processes and institutions that discriminate against women.<sup>229</sup> As shown in this report, such structural inequalities can lock women in to poverty, increasing their exposure to violence and undermining their opportunities to challenge abuse.

#### Hierarchies of violence

The lack of a holistic approach is also apparent in the tendency of donors and governments to create ‘hierarchies of violence’ that prioritise attention and funding for certain manifestations of VAWG<sup>230</sup> while inadequately addressing its root causes.<sup>231</sup>

For instance, recent global attention to sexual violence in conflict risks portraying it as somehow ‘exceptional’, thereby “ignoring... the low-level ‘warfare’ that women and girls experience in their homes and communities on a daily basis”.<sup>232</sup> It can also be seen in the way the UK government has prioritised efforts around FGM and child marriage. Clearly, particular forms of VAWG require context-specific strategies, and these dedicated efforts follow years of campaigning by women’s rights organisations. However, if not situated within a holistic framework, they risk isolating these manifestations of VAWG as somehow removed from the insidious continuum of gender-based violence faced by women globally.<sup>233</sup>

In fact, there is a worrying trend towards the de-politicisation of ‘gender inequality’, whereby the all-pervading dynamic of male privilege and female subordination is becoming obscured.<sup>234</sup> For instance, in 2011 many European countries’ VAWG action plans were found to be gender neutral because they omitted to define VAWG as a consequence of gender inequalities.<sup>235</sup>

Evidence shows that tackling VAWG holistically and transforming the entrenched attitudes and behaviours that underpin gender-based violence also requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach.<sup>236</sup> This means establishing the means and mechanisms whereby all relevant service providers and authorities – including shelters, healthcare providers, psycho-social support, the police, judiciary, and government ministries – act coherently to prevent and respond to VAWG at every level, over both the short- and long-term.<sup>237</sup> This ambitious goal may be a long way from being a reality in most contexts, but it should be the ambition that actors work towards in the coming years.

**“Space for gender equality on political agendas should be staunchly defended, the hard-won gains to date protected, and the safety of those defending women’s and girls’ rights secured.”**  
Gender and Development Network, 2014<sup>238</sup>

#### WOMEN RELEGATED TO THE MARGINS 3.2

For violence against women to end, and for a world where women can enjoy their human rights on an equal basis with men, their full, equal and meaningful participation in decision-making is essential. However, social norms denigrating women’s leadership abilities, their unpaid care responsibilities, a lack of funding to women’s organisations, as well as VAWG itself, hamper women’s participation in public life.<sup>239</sup> This denies women their right to hold governments accountable for their VAWG commitments and perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and policy failure. As a result, women’s political participation worldwide remains behind that of men. Just one fifth of parliamentarians globally are women,<sup>240</sup> while at current rates of progress, women won’t comprise half the world’s leaders for another 120 years.<sup>241</sup>

#### Staying strong and fighting on: The key role of women’s rights organisations

*“In a patriarchal society, it is extremely difficult for women to be heard, so it is important that women come together. Unless they come together, no one is going to hear them. They find security and strength in each other’s experiences.”*  
Bandana Rana, President, Saathi<sup>242</sup>

By defying the barriers to their participation and being heard, women’s rights organisations have survived, stayed strong, and fought on. But despite being critical catalysts for transformative change, they are not receiving the recognition and support they need. Women’s collective action has led the way in putting VAWG on the agenda and advocating for change based on the lived realities of diverse groups of women. They play an essential role in delivering frontline services to survivors and in addressing root causes of gender-based violence within their communities – including engaging men and boys to challenge discriminatory norms and practices. The value, role and power of women’s collective action in spearheading action to end VAWG<sup>243</sup> should be recognised, championed and prioritised by the international community as a central strategy for fulfilling its VAWG commitments.



### 3.3 BEYOND RHETORIC: POLITICAL WILL AND ACCOUNTABILITY GAPS

Numerous countries refuse to ratify legally binding conventions, or do so with reservations that limit their implementation. Some 75 countries have reservations with respect to CEDAW,<sup>244</sup> while the USA is yet to even ratify the convention.<sup>245</sup> As of March 2015, 30 out of the 47 Council of Europe member countries were still to ratify the Istanbul Convention,<sup>246</sup> the landmark European treaty on VAWG, including the UK<sup>247</sup> and Germany.

There are no global spaces for governments to be held seriously to account for their VAWG obligations.<sup>248</sup> CEDAW requires governments to report every four years, and VAWG is regularly discussed at CSW. While important, both spaces lack strong accountability mechanisms. And although the regional conventions are legally binding (see Page 38), the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has highlighted limitations in their scope, prompting her and some women's rights organisations to call for a universal legally binding instrument.<sup>249</sup> Similarly, sufficient global mechanisms for holding corporations to account for rights violations in their supply chains or linked to their activities are lacking.<sup>250</sup>

#### National policy deficits & data gaps

Although many countries have laws on violence against women, some regions of the world neglect legal protections. For example, 8 out of 10 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region have no laws on domestic violence.<sup>251</sup> Regressive policies abound, such as the failure to recognise marital rape in India,<sup>252</sup> or the 93 countries that legally allow girls to marry before the age of 18 with parental consent.<sup>253</sup> Reporting levels are also extremely low, particularly for domestic violence,<sup>254</sup> as women have little faith in the authorities. In order to give women the confidence to come forward, concerted action is needed by governments to challenge harmful

social norms that sanction VAWG and raise awareness of rights and laws among government agencies, including the police and judiciary, as well as the wider public.<sup>255</sup>

A lack of long-term, coordinated, multi-sectoral action among government agencies and service providers – such as healthcare, legal services, the police and the judiciary – also remains widespread.<sup>256, 257</sup> Meanwhile, there are huge knowledge and data gaps around the scale of VAWG, the effectiveness of interventions and how promising initiatives might be scaled up, particularly in developing countries.<sup>258</sup> Such information is vital to strengthening understanding of what works to prevent and respond to VAWG in different contexts, to developing effective policies in this regard, and monitoring and being accountable for progress.<sup>259</sup>

“Peace and development cannot happen without us women. We need the international community to support us with policies but also with sustainable funding. Policies and funding that are put in place in consultation with us. Because what is the purpose of political declarations if it doesn't match the realities on the ground.”  
Afghan Women's Network, 2015<sup>260</sup>

### FUNDING THE FIGHT-BACK: WHERE ARE THE RESOURCES TO ERADICATE VAWG?

*“Governments... have placed a high priority on achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls as a central ambition of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda... Ambitious financing will be needed to turn political aspirations into a reality.”<sup>261</sup>*

Ending a global scourge that affects one third of all women requires substantial funding. Yet governments and the international community are largely failing to put their money where their mouth is. The UN Secretary General's review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action found that lack of financing is holding back progress, with very few states providing information on resources dedicated to the implementation of national VAWG action plans.<sup>262</sup> Clearly, a game-changer is needed in financing for gender equality and the eradication of VAWG.

#### Donor financing for eradicating VAWG

Official estimates of dedicated aid to eradicate VAWG are low,<sup>263</sup> especially when compared to other funds addressing key global challenges.<sup>264</sup> The UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, for instance, is dedicated to addressing all forms of VAWG.<sup>265</sup> Since its launch in 1997, the Fund has awarded US\$103 million to 393 initiatives in 136 countries.<sup>266</sup> While a sure step in the right direction, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria raises and invests nearly US\$4 billion every year to support its vital programmes in a similar number of countries.<sup>267</sup> This makes its annual budget almost 40 times larger than the entire UN Trust Fund budget since it launched.

However, most donors don't track how much of their overseas aid goes to tackling VAWG, making it difficult to assess levels of support to poor

countries. Encouragingly, a new code to track aid addressing VAWG as a 'principal objective' is expected to be introduced in 2016 – just in time to capture donor action on implementation of the SDGs.<sup>268</sup>

### EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE BY DONORS

- Since 2008, the Dutch government has launched three gender equality funds worth 277 million Euros. This includes a fund focused on women's organisations, providing crucial resources for their work on VAWG.<sup>269</sup>
- The UK's Department for International Development (DFID), reports that the number of its VAWG programmes grew by 63% from 2012 to 2014, while the budget rose from £19.8 million to over £131 million.<sup>270</sup>
- Spain was the top bilateral donor to women's organisations in 2010 and second highest in 2011 – although the current economic situation has seen aid levels drop.<sup>271</sup>

#### Domestic resources for ending VAWG: A taxing issue

Although external financing has an important role to play, domestic revenue makes up by far the most important source of funds for essential public services that prevent and respond to VAWG, such as schools, clinics, shelters, and legal aid. It is the most sustainable and dependable form of finance for progressing gender equality and elimination of VAWG, as well as eradicating the wider poverty and inequality that helps drive such violence.<sup>272</sup> But governments are often constrained from mobilising sufficient domestic resources by a combination of externally advised fiscal 'consolidation' policies, illicit financial flows and tax avoidance.

In 2012, total tax revenue collected in Africa was 10 times the volume of aid.<sup>273</sup> Yet global tax rules, along with tax avoidance by multinationals and wealthy individuals, are hampering developing

### 3.4



countries' efforts to raise such revenue. ActionAid estimates that developing countries lose an astonishing US \$138 billion every year by granting tax breaks to companies in a bid to attract investment.<sup>274</sup> This sum could be used to finance the implementation of VAWG national action plans many times over.

### Women's organisations severely under-resourced

*"If we consider that patriarchy and its institutions are at least 10,000 years old, then the kind of changes that women's rights organisations and movements create in a matter of five or ten years must be seen as occurring at lightning speed!"<sup>275</sup>*

We have seen in this report how women's organisations have been leading the charge in the centuries-old fight against VAWG and are critical for catalysing change. Yet they remain

severely under-resourced. In 2011, AWID found that the average annual income of women's organisations globally is just US\$ 20,000.<sup>276</sup> Those in sub-Saharan Africa receive even less – just over US\$ 12,000 a year. So while total aid for gender equality hit US\$ 28 billion in 2012-2013, overall funding for women's organisations was, on average, less than US\$ 400 million, or just 1.4%.

There are also challenges with the way aid is provided to women's organisations. Narrow donor-driven agendas often lead to fragmented, short-term 'results-based' funding.<sup>277</sup> This undermines priorities as defined by women's organisations and starves them of much-needed core funding.<sup>278</sup> Indeed, changing centuries of oppression takes time, is complex and non-linear, requiring donors to move towards longer-term strategies and approaches.<sup>279</sup>

**"...financing for gender equality is...one of the areas where we can blankly see sexism and gender inequality. For example in the way budgets are allocated in the UN...or in the size of the budgets of women's rights organisations around the world.."**

**Lydia Alpízar Durán,  
Executive Director,  
Association for Women's  
Rights in Development  
(AWID), 2015<sup>282</sup>**

### ENGAGING MEN & BOYS

Clearly, eradicating VAWG requires the engagement of men and boys as the main perpetrators of violence, as those who dominate positions of power and decision-making, and as important allies in the fight against it. Women's rights and feminist organisations have been doing this for decades as part of their ongoing struggles. However, there has been a recent shift in donor interest towards the 'men and boys' agenda. In some cases, this has seen the championing of male leadership and the diversion of precious funding to support a growing number of men's organisations and initiatives. Women's organisations have pointed out that this risks reinforcing the status quo of male domination and privilege at the expense of empowering women to lead the fight for their own liberation.<sup>280</sup> Furthermore, a recent independent review of interventions targeting men and boys concluded that the outcomes of these are uneven, and that further research is needed to understand which aspects actually lead to behavioural changes.<sup>281</sup>



ActionAid-supported garment workers in Savar, Bangladesh demand their rights under the country's labour laws  
Photo: Nicola Bailey/ActionAid



A woman in a red sari and green headscarf is smiling broadly while holding a baby. She is surrounded by other people, some of whom are also smiling. The background is slightly blurred, showing an outdoor setting with other people and structures.

# CONCLUSION

## Stepping up the fight – turning resolutions into reality

Jyoty Chauhan, 26, with her 5 month-old daughter, Tanya, at a Beti Utsav celebration in New Delhi. This event, organised by ActionAid India, sees community members celebrate the birth of girls, challenging the tendency to value boys more highly. Photo: Poulomi Basu/ActionAid

“Despite the expanded... commitments to women’s and girl’s human rights... there remains a stark gap between the global normative framework and its implementation on the ground, signalling a collective failure of leadership.”

UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, 2015<sup>283</sup>

There has never been so much global attention to the issue of violence against women and girls. Never has such a raft of policy commitments been in place, setting out the obligations and frameworks for governments to act urgently to prevent, protect and respond to VAWG, to counteract prevailing cultures of impunity, and halt this outrageous social injustice that has been wrought on women and their bodies for centuries.

For many reasons 2015 offers a critical opportunity for galvanising the global momentum and political will so urgently needed to eradicate violence against women: it marks 20 years since the celebrated Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,<sup>284</sup> and 15 years since UN Security Council Resolution 1325 – the first to recognise the disproportionate impacts of conflict on women and compel states to include them in conflict prevention and peace negotiations.<sup>285</sup> It is also the year in which the new Sustainable Development Goals set out international commitments and development priorities for the next 15 years. These are expected to include a specific target on eliminating all forms of VAWG in public and private spheres under a standalone goal on gender equality and women’s empowerment.<sup>286</sup>

### Enough words, time for action

Governments, donors and international development agencies must make 2015 the year when they transform their rhetoric into meaningful action to eliminate VAWG and the gender inequality that feeds it. Given the multi-dimensional and cross-cutting nature of VAWG and how it impacts on the full range of women’s human rights – their right to physical health and wellbeing, to sexual and reproductive health, to education, to earning a decent living, to freedom of movement, to participate in decision-making, even the right to life itself – addressing this blight on women’s lives should be a priority. VAWG can trap women in poverty, constrain their choices and opportunities, and deny them their potential as full members of society. It is the most abhorrent manifestation of gender inequality, and represents one of the most abhorrent collective failures by governments and the international community to end it.

But as this report shows, women are by no means helpless victims. Women all over the world put their lives on the line to fight VAWG and gender inequality. Women’s leadership and collective action have bravely led the way, and hold the key to achieving transformative change. As such, women’s organisations must be supported and championed, their right to participate fully and meaningfully upheld, and the civil society space that they need to flourish protected.

The challenges remain substantial. Progress to date along with future efforts at eradicating VAWG risk being thwarted by spiralling inequalities, rising fundamentalisms, and clampdowns on civil society space. To address these alarming global trends, governments must firmly re-ground themselves in human rights frameworks and principles, and prioritise policies that promote accountability, democracy, peace, equality, and social and economic justice for all.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Governments, donors and the international community should capitalise upon the historic opportunity afforded by the new SDGs to catalyse and recalibrate the effort to address VAWG to make it one that is truly holistic, transformational, accountable, and firmly grounded in human rights principles and frameworks.**

**Such an approach should tackle the root causes of VAWG, enabling it to address all forms of gender-based violence, and take account of how such violence both exacerbates, and is exacerbated by, women's economic inequality and other structural forms of discrimination. It must also take account of how gender inequality and risk of VAWG overlap with other forms of identity and status-based discrimination.**

**Specifically, such an approach will require the following actions:**

## 1) LEADERSHIP, IMPLEMENTATION, ACCOUNTABILITY

### NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS, DONORS AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

**Show leadership in combatting violence against women and girls by championing the anticipated VAWG SDG target, ensuring it has genuinely transformative indicators developed in consultation with women's organisations. Prioritise the full, effective and accountable implementation of this target and other global VAWG commitments by developing a clear, fast-tracking process that catalyses governments and donors to action.**

#### NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

- Develop and implement National Action Plans for addressing all forms of VAWG, including the discriminatory social norms that underpin it, creating a framework and timebound strategy for coordinated, multi-sectoral action to prevent, respond to and prosecute acts of VAWG. National Action Plans should:
  - » Be developed and implemented with the full and meaningful participation of women's rights organisations, including women from marginalised groups.
  - » Include robust indicators and transparent monitoring and accountability mechanisms, entailing proactive engagement of women's organisations.
  - » Ensure women's access to justice by ensuring strong legislative frameworks and laws are in place that guarantee the investigation, prosecution and punishment of all forms of VAWG, along

with sensitisation of the police, judiciary and other authorities.

- » Address knowledge and data gaps by including systematic data gathering on VAWG prevalence and effectiveness of interventions, and to monitor progress on National Action Plan and VAWG SDG target implementation.
- » Be fully and comprehensively costed, with financing gaps clearly calculated.
- » All government ministries, especially those covering health, justice, welfare and education, should be mandated with implementing National Action Plans, with the specific role of government agencies clearly defined.
- » Be fully aligned with National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325 where relevant.

- Where National Action Plans exist, governments should urgently review progress and take measures to accelerate their full implementation (in line with the recommendations above).

### DONORS AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Provide the necessary technical assistance to support developing countries in the formation of National Action Plans, along with dedicated standalone programmes and initiatives to tackle violence against women.
- Integrate and prioritise the eradication of violence against women and girls across all programming, including health, education, economic empowerment, and humanitarian and conflict response and prevention, ensuring VAWG outcomes are tracked and reported on.
- Support the eradication of VAWG in places of work, including global supply chains, by backing the proposed ILO Convention on gender-based violence.
- Commit to reviewing existing international development and human rights architecture and accountability mechanisms for eradicating VAWG to ensure gaps in implementation and accountability at international level can be addressed.



## 2) WOMEN'S VOICE AND PARTICIPATION

### GOVERNMENTS, DONORS AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Recognise, champion and prioritise women's organisations as critical long-term partners and leaders in the fight against VAWG, including their unique role in implementing and holding governments to account on VAWG commitments; protect civil society and democratic space for all, and promote women's right to participate in decision-making.

- Take proactive measures to protect and promote women's leadership and right to participate fully, equally and meaningfully in social, economic and political decision-making at all levels, including in peacebuilding and humanitarian settings

- Reverse the closing down of civil society space. Protect and uphold the right of all civil society to defend and claim their rights, including freedom of assembly, and the democratic right to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes from local to global level.
- Recognise the particular challenges and backlash faced by women's organisations and women human rights defenders, particularly in the context of rising religious fundamentalisms and clampdowns on civil society space, and implement coordinated mechanisms for their protection in line with the UN Resolution on women human rights defenders. Hold all perpetrators to account.

### CORPORATES

- » Uphold the corporate responsibility to respect human rights by undertaking rigorous gender-sensitive human rights due diligence throughout supply chains to ensure that rights to freedom of association and assembly are being upheld, and that women can work free from the threat and experience of violence; ensure access to remedy when rights violations occurs.

## 3) FINANCING

Ensure the necessary financing is available so that commitments to eradicate VAWG can be fully and rapidly realised in developing countries, including implementation of the SDGs' VAWG target and National Action Plans, based upon the financing gaps identified by developing countries.

### NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

- Mobilise, maximise and prioritise domestic resources to finance the implementation of VAWG National Action Plans and pay for accessible, gender-responsive public services.

### DONORS AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Provide the necessary funding to developing countries to support the full, effective and rapid implementation of the SDG target on VAWG and National Action Plans, along with dedicated programmes and initiatives to tackle gender-based violence.
- Increase dedicated, direct, long-term funding to women's rights organisations so that they can fully realise their potential as critical partners and leaders in eradicating VAWG and ending gender inequality; support their self-defined priorities and agendas, covering core costs, service delivery and advocacy efforts.
- Apply internationally recognised reporting mechanisms, such as the OECD Gender Marker and forthcoming OECD VAWG code, to all overseas aid in order to promote transparency and accountability, and address areas of underinvestment.



# APPENDIX

ActionAid has calculated the rate of violence against women and girls (VAWG) globally and also measured country- and individual-level variables that affect – both positively and negatively – rates of VAWG. In our analysis we used Demographic Health Survey (DHS) domestic violence module data to measure the global scale of VAWG. Specifically, we used the DHS variable for the “percent of women aged 15-49 who have experienced violence in their lifetime”. In cases where DHS data was unavailable, UNAIDS data was used. For these figures, a very similar survey question, which asked women aged 15-49 if they had ever experienced violence, was used so as to reliably match data across sources.

The percent of VAWG variable was used as our dependent variable for all regression analysis as this study was concerned with measuring VAWG and any factors that might affect it.

The independent variables below were chosen.

As with many assessments of violence against women and girls, availability of data was a challenge. Countries lacking VAWG data were not assigned a regional mean as a methodological and theoretical choice. VAWG varies greatly across individual contexts.

Regression analysis was used to measure the relationship between VAWG and independent variables, in all cases controlling for GDP per capita.

Variable	Decription	Source
GDP per capita	GDP per capita	World Bank Data 2010-2014
Civil Liberties Index	Index created using the Freedom House civil liberties questions are grouped into four subcategories: Freedom of Expression and Belief (4 questions), Associational and Organisational Rights (3), Rule of Law (4), and Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights (4). The highest score that can be awarded to the civil liberties checklist is 60 (or a total score of 4 for each of the 15 questions). Most recent data available used for each country of interest.	Freedom House <i>Freedom of the World annual reports</i>
Gender Inequality Index	Index measuring the gender inequality in each country of interest. (0-1; 1 = complete gender inequality/disparity)	HDI GII



'Aba' is 10 and lives in Degdege, Brong Ahafo, Ghana  
Photo: Nana Kofi Acquah/ActionAid



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