



# Focus Module 2

## Harmless communication



# Introduction to the module

Violence is an abuse of human rights regardless of the context where it happens – culture, tradition, religion and beliefs can never be an excuse for violence.

For organisations who work with women and girls - who might have been also victims of violence - it is important to know what we intend under the word 'violence' in order to be adequately prepared for analysing risks of violence.

Violence can have different effects on girls and women:

1. Physical effects: physical harm, injuries, poor health, disease, pain etc.
2. Psychological effects: low self-esteem, emotional instability, depression, post-traumatic stress, social isolation, mental health disorders etc.
3. Sexual and reproductive effects: unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, miscarriage or complications during pregnancy etc.
4. Educational effects: illiteracy, limited or no access to school, low grades etc.
5. Economic effects: unemployment, low income, low positions etc.
6. Political effects: no right to vote, no role in decision making processes etc.





Any kind of action resulting in the above mentioned effects is considered as violence. Perpetrators always have to be held accountable and never excused for violence.

Violence doesn't mean only physical or psychological abuse, but also actions that create inequality of girls and women and that can obstacle their autonomy. In case of children, being neglected is also a form of violence, given that they need support and attention for their full development.

Organisations should never increase the risks of violence with any of their actions; for this reason it is important to know how to create a strategy of communication that is harmless.

In this module we will cover:

- the possible reasons for violence
- the different types of violence
- inputs to analyse the risks of violence and how to prevent them

In this module we make reference to parts of the Handbook:

Voices Against Violence<sup>1</sup> developed by UN Women and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts.

<http://www.unwomen.org/~media/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2013/10/VoicesAgainstViolence-Handbook-en%20pdf.pdf>





# Possible reasons and different types of violence

Reasons for violence can be several – below we list some of them that are the main causes of harm against women and girls.

**Gender inequality and discrimination** – girls and women are not given equal power in their communities

**Power and control** – violence can be a form to prove power and control over girls and women

**Culture of acceptance** – a culture where violence is accepted (due to religion, traditions, and social arrangements) can justify the abuser and can increase the risk of violence

**Girls are invisible** – there is a culture of silence around violence against girls and women

**Weak laws** – lack of appropriate laws or lack of implementation of existing laws to stop violence against girls and women

**Lack of awareness** – lack of awareness about that violence against girls and women is a violation of human rights; lack of knowledge about existing support services

**Limited support** – difficult access to support services, absence of support or inadequate methods of support

**Sex sells** – objectification of women and girls through advertisements that use sexual images of women and girls





**Poverty** – limit of choices and access to means for protection

**Conflict and emergencies** – girls and women might be displaced or separated from their support networks in conflict and emergency cases

**Harmful practices** – harmful cultural or traditional practices such as child marriage or female genital mutation

Voices Against Violence Handbook – page 36.

For the above mentioned reasons existing national and international statistics about violence against girls and women are not representative, because most of the victims don't want to or can not make their voice heard.

Women and girls can be victims of<sup>1</sup>:

**Discrimination** – Girls and women can be victims of discrimination; they can become marginalised due to unjust and prejudicial treatment (e.g. being excluded from decision making, being prohibited to attend school or specific public spaces, not being hired for a job etc.).

**Domestic violence** – Girls and women can be victims of violence caused by their partner (also in same-sex couples). Girls can also be witnesses of domestic violence in their family.





**Sexual abuse and harassment** – Girls and women can be victims of forced sexual intercourse or being touched without their consent. Also unwanted flirting and stalking can result as harassment. “Sexual harassment can be verbal (remarks about figure/look, sexual jokes or advances), non-verbal (staring and whistling), physical (from unsolicited physical contact to assault/rape) and digital (sexting, on-line sexual advances and comments).”<sup>2</sup>

**Sexualisation** – Girls and women can be approached or perceived as an object for sexual use. “The sexualisation of children involves the imposition of the sexuality of adult persons on girls and boys, who are emotionally, psychologically and physically unprepared for this at their particular stage of development. This can result in children becoming sexually aware prematurely and identifying themselves as sexual objects.”<sup>3</sup>

**Sexual exploitation** – Girls and women can be victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

**Forced early marriage** – Girls under 18 can be victims of forced early marriage that also puts them at risk of maternal death from pregnancy of childbirth and of domestic violence and abuse.

**Female infanticide** – Girls who would be expected to be alive go “missing”; deliberate killing of female newborn children happens especially in patriarchal societies where female children are not desired in a family because of their low status. Sex-selected abortion is also a type of female infanticide.

**Female genital mutation** – “All procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.” (Definition of the World Health Organization - WHO)

1 – Voices Against Violence Handbook – page 35

2 – Page 42

3 – Page 53





# Identifying risks of violence when communicating with women

For identifying risks, you have to analyse<sup>1</sup>:

## Local attitudes to violence

How your local community sees and understands violence? Are there norms, traditions, beliefs, or even laws that normalize violence against girls and women? How are women seen in the community, what status do they have? How women see inequality and violence?

Are there local movements against violence against girls and women? To what level the community is sensitized? Do people get involved or refuse to talk about the issue?

## Potential partners and sources of resistance

For identifying potential support or opposition, use the stakeholder analysis (Module 6 – How to create and evaluate a communication strategy). List all the people, social groups, organisations, authorities that in some way would take an interest in the activities of your organisation – either supporting or opposing them.

Analyse what influence these stakeholders can have on your projects in order to be prepared for eventual conflicts and obstacles or to find allies and resources.

An important group to identify is the people who might have interest in the issue but are resistant to change (e.g. women who justify their partners' violence; boys and men in a strong patriarchal society etc.).





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Besides, you also have to do a detailed analysis of the capacity of your organisation: which are the resources you have and the ones that you need? For example: do you have a competent staff? Do you have a safe space where you can implement your activities? Is your organisation easy to reach, or should you provide a mean of transportation? Do you have the financial resources or materials to implement your activities? And so on.

(For templates to analyse strengths and weaknesses of your organisation, see Module 6.)

In order to reduce the possibility of risks, organisations have to fulfil a set of requisites when working with girls and women. Based on the recommendation of the Council of Europe<sup>1</sup>, we provide you with a short checklist on the minimum standards your organisation should follow when working with girls and women who are (or might be) victims of violence. In this checklist under 'user' we mean people who benefit from the organisation's activities and services.

The checklist of course is not complete; we have listed the most important elements.



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# CHECKLIST – Minimum standards of support services for (potential) victims of violence

## STRUCTURE

- Safe, clean, and comfortable environment
- Space for private, confidential conversations

## STAFF

- Adequately trained staff on understanding of the gendered dynamics of violence, awareness of the different forms of violence against women, anti-discrimination and diversity, legal and welfare rights
- Members of staff with competencies in crisis intervention techniques; communication skills and intervention techniques; competencies to support coping with trauma, and knowledge of criminal and civil justice systems
- Ongoing training and verification of competencies (lifelong learning approach)
- Female staff (not exclusively)





## APPROACH

- Confidentiality policies
- Availability round the clock (each day, 24 hours/day)
- Inclusive approach – possibility to include users with disabilities, form ethnic groups, etc. in the activities
- Free of charge services
- Capacity to provide information, advice and referrals on other services that the user might need (if the organisation can not guarantee them) such as: Support and health services; Legal rights and remedies; Welfare rights, education, job training; Safe short-term, transitional and/or permanent housing; Child care services and parenting education; Child protection; Alcohol and drug services; Services for persons with disabilities; Translation services and/or immigration assistance; Asylum/immigration status.
- Possibility of child care while users participate in an activity
- Users participate in decision-making (e.g. through focus groups, feedback etc.) about the organisation's activities
- Coordinated work with other actors (non-profit organisations, public authorities, institutions etc.)

<sup>1</sup>- Combating violence against women: minimum standards for support services (CoE 2008) [https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/source/eg-vaw-conf\(2007\)study%20rev.en.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/source/eg-vaw-conf(2007)study%20rev.en.pdf)

For the full list of minimum standards consult page 36-58



# Harmless communication of organisations



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Upon gathering the necessary information, you can analyse the risk and come up with different strategies to prevent or to manage them. For risk analysis and management we provide you with different templates in Module 6 – How to create and evaluate a communication strategy.

In the following we list some of the risks to keep in consideration when working with girls and women who might be victims of violence. Organisations should take the necessary precautions to avoid these risks.

We focused on risks caused by a communication aspect and on situations where adequate communication can be a method of prevention.

the sound of silence



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**Risk:** Re-traumatization of survivors of violence

**Cause:** It can happen when someone who has been a victim of violence decides to share her story, and after that doesn't receive adequate support to process the trauma.

In case users haven't yet opened up and shared their stories, the choice of words and images during activities can also bring back traumatic experiences.

**Prevention:** In the first case frequent communication is essential; organisations have to provide space for listening and to help the user to elaborate her thoughts and feelings. If there is no professional in the staff who could accompany the user to overcome her trauma, it is important to involve a professional; however the organisation has to facilitate the establishment of a trust relationship with that professional, given that the user has given the organisation her trust. Organisations can implement activities with alternative, indirect communication tools to process the trauma (e.g. arts, theatre), but these activities always have to be supervised by someone with competencies in psychotherapy. In the second case, be aware of the signs and indicators<sup>1</sup> to identify someone who has been a victim of violence; reach out to that person, ask if something is wrong and offer help – make them aware of the other services you offer (e.g. listening centre).

Try to avoid words and images in your communication that can re-traumatize the users during your activities.





**Risk:** Failed expectations of users

**Cause:** If the organisation can not fully support the users when they request help, they can lose their trust and interest – not only in your organisation, but also in other services. Not communicating clearly the limits of your services can also result in failed expectations.

**Prevention:** Be clear in your communication when conveying your message to your beneficiaries: which are the exact services and activities you offer, and what results you expect from them? Which are the time limits of your organisation (opening hours, policy of interventions beyond opening hours) – is there a 24/7 service to respond to users? Communicate clearly the nature of relationship that the staff of the organisation can establish with the users – they are friendly, but not friends. Also communicate in which cases you can not intervene, and orientate the user towards the competent services. It is also important not to create false expectations through the promotional and marketing campaigns of your organisation (e.g. avoiding phrases like “we can resolve all your problems” and other extreme statements).





**Risk:** Increased risk of abuse and violence

**Cause:** Girls and women who are using your services or participating in your activities can be exploited to an increased risk of abuse and violence if you can not provide continuous and adequate support to them. The lack of instant answer to worrying signs can put your user at risk.

Also, if users are not clear about what abuse and violence means and that any form of them should not be accepted, they might not report cases of violence.

**Prevention:** Instant communication is a must when working with girls and women who might be at risk of abuse and violence. When asking for support, you have to answer instantly. If you don't know the answer to a question or a request, involve an expert, but don't wait too much with it, because in the meantime the level of risk can increase. Also, make sure that information about your services and about external services is always visible and accessible to your users.

It is also important to clarify during your activities what abuse and violence is and that any form of violence is against the rights of your beneficiaries. Respect cultural and religious norms and beliefs, but challenge harmful attitudes.





## Exercise:

Identify the risks in the following situation and describe possible prevention activities:

### Case study:

Samantha, 22 years old, was participating in the activities of the organisation and established a good relationship with the social workers. Initially she was very shy and it took her time to open up. She shared her story with one of the social workers about the violence she experiences in her relationship. Lately she comes to the activities with visible signs of physical harm. One day the social worker asks her to come to her office, where she is waiting for her with a psychologist and a policeman. Samantha refuses to talk to them and leaves. She doesn't come to the activities anymore, and she doesn't answer to the calls and messages of the social workers of the organisation.





## Possible solutions:

**Risk:** Withdraw of trust and collaboration

**Cause:** Users can withdraw their trust and stop collaborating when a third person gets to know some information that they didn't want to share. It can happen when the limits of confidentiality were not clearly explained to the user at the beginning of the service/activity. In some cases youth and social workers have to disclose information, for example when there is reason to believe that the user's life, health or freedom is at risk; or to protect the safety of others, when there is reason to believe that they may be at risk. Regarding to child protection policies, minors at risks should also be referred to the social services.

**Prevention:** Make sure that you provide transparent communication from the beginning, and that your user understood the limits of confidentiality. Use a user-friendly language (expressions that they are familiar with), repeat this principle from time to time. Always inform the user before you share any information about her! Clearly explain the reasons and what will happen after you share this information. Use empathic communication to connect with the user and to reduce their preoccupation; express concern, but don't judge or blame.

