



Introduction

Access to justice is a human right, and forms part of a holistic multisectoral response to GBV. Survivors should be able to access justice in a way that is meaningful for them. This tipsheet focuses on how to support GBV survivors who do not want to report their experience to the police. It uses the GBV guiding principles to unpack the importance of respecting survivors' decisions and explores why survivors may not want to report to the police. It explains the consequences of ignoring survivors' wishes, and offers examples of how to support survivors and improve access to justice without reporting to the police.

Police services have the responsibility to take reports of GBV incidents seriously, and are part of a legal justice system which should hold perpetrators to account.¹ The GBViE Minimum Standards acknowledge that holding perpetrators to account has "rule-of-law implications beyond the individual survivor and perpetrator".² Formal justice can go beyond a single case to play an important role in norms setting and social cohesion, and can contribute to GBV prevention.

However, it is not the responsibility of an individual survivor to place this potential for change above the reality of their own safety, well-being, and their right to self-determination. The responsibility for ending GBV rests with the perpetrator and the community, including the relevant State structures.

Police services are context-specific, and even within

MANDATORY REPORTING

This tipsheet focuses on contexts where there is no mandatory reporting of GBV.

Mandatory reporting is defined in the British Red Cross Paper as "laws, policies or practices that require individuals to report known or suspected criminal offences to designated authorities, without requiring the consent of the victim/survivor". In some cases mandatory reporting laws can prevent a survivor from receiving care.

Mandatory reporting is often misunderstood, and applied more widely than is envisioned in the law. It is not in line with survivor-centered approaches and can conflict with the GBV guiding principles.

For more information about mandatory reporting and survivor-centered approaches, see the "mandatory reporting" section at the end of this document.

one country or area they are not a homogenous group. Some services have specialized units that respond to reports of GBV, while others may lack knowledge and resources to appropriately engage.

When police have appropriate training and s, they can be a key part of the services on offer to survivors. This training should include support on recognizing gender bias and combatting myths about GBV.³ However, when there are gaps in provision, and GBV is not well-understood – or is even condoned – then

¹ This paper focuses on the police, and survivor engagement with formal justice systems. For more information about how to support survivors accessing community-based forms of justice, see the GBV AoR Helpdesk tipsheet on Community-Based Resolution Mechanisms: <https://sddirect.org.uk/resource/tip-sheet-what-are-community-based-resolution-mechanisms-how-are-they-used-relation-gender>

² GBV AoR (2019) GBViE Minimum Standards. P.76. <https://gbvaor.net/gbviems>

³ UNDOC and UN Women .(2021) Handbook on Gender-Responsive Policing for Women and Girls Subject to Violence. P.24 <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Handbook-on-gender-responsive-police-services-en.pdf>

police can contribute to the wider harms done to GBV survivors. These gaps can happen in any context, however they are exacerbated in humanitarian settings.⁴

GBV programming, including in humanitarian settings, is driven by survivor-centered principles.⁵ Feminist approaches form the foundation of support for survivors, which include that survivors are the experts in their own lives, and their decisions – including whether or not to report to the police – are paramount. Feminist approaches to GBV also highlight the importance of a trauma-informed approach to referrals and reporting. Recognizing that reporting GBV to the police may increase trauma is an important facet of a survivor-centered approach.

Attempts to persuade a survivor to report their experience to the police are not in line with these feminist and trauma-informed principles. This tipsheet sets out the reasons for this, explains the risks to the survivor, and provides examples of other ways to support access to justice in matters of GBV.

INFORMATION VS ADVICE

Everyone supporting survivors should be prepared to offer information to help them make an informed choice. This includes information on limitations, as well as benefits.

For example, survivors might need to know if there is a statute of limitations on reporting a crime; what the realistic outcome of reporting is likely to be; if there are time limits for gathering evidence. They may also want information about whether police are likely to be supportive, and how their privacy will be protected.

Providing this information is different from advocating for survivors to take a particular action. A supporter's role is to help a survivor to think through what the consequences of each choice might be, and provide useful, clear and unbiased information that they can use to make their own decision.

Survivor-led feminist principles

The GBV guiding principles can be used to understand the intersections between survivor-centered approaches and reporting to the police, and demonstrate that any reporting should only happen with the full, informed consent of the survivor:

Safety

The survivor may not feel safe reporting to the police. They may fear reprisals, or not being taken seriously. Persuading them to report will undermine their right to safety.

Confidentiality

The survivor has the right to determine to whom they tell their story, and when. If they do not want to talk to the police, that is their decision.

Respect

The survivor is the expert in their own life. Their decisions are paramount and should be respected.

Non-discrimination

Survivors have the right to receive services and care whether or not they report to the police. Survivors may also fear discrimination from the police, especially if they are from a marginalized group.

Equally, these principles state that if a survivor *does* want to report to the police this must be supported and help given to access the justice which is their right, alongside useful information to help them make an informed decision.

However, what one survivor decides is right for them does not make it right for all survivors. Each individual's choice should be supported.

⁴ UNDOC and UN Women .(2021) Handbook on Gender-Responsive Policing for Women and Girls Subject to Violence. P.12.

⁵ O'Connor, Megan (2022) Tip Sheet: What does 'Survivor-Centered' mean in GBV programming. GBV AoR Helpdesk. <https://sddirect.org.uk/resource/tip-sheet-what-does-survivor-centered-mean-gbv-program-implementation>

Reasons why survivors might not want to report

Studies suggest that fewer than 10% of survivors of GBV report their experience to the police.⁶ There are many reasons that survivors may not wish to report to the police:⁷

- They may be scared of further violence or abuse from the police (especially if the survivor is from a marginalized group, such as diverse SOGIESC, a racial or religious minority, or have insecure immigration status)
- They may be worried that their reporting will not be confidential and could lead to further violence from the perpetrator and other community members
- They may be worried that if people find out that they have reported to the police that they will face stigma and discrimination.
- They may not understand the way that the justice system works and what is expected of them (especially if they are from a linguistic minority, have disabilities or are part of a group that has been denied access to education)
- They may understand the way the justice system works and not want to take part in it (for example a long delay in getting to court, not wanting to undergo potentially invasive evidence collection, knowing there is a low likelihood of a successful conviction)
- They may not have the financial or other resources to sustain a court case (even when there is free legal care, for example childcare costs, transportation costs, loss of wages)
- They may not feel psychologically safe to report, and prefer to focus on healing in other ways before thinking about engaging with the justice system

Survivors might not have any of these reasons, but still not want to report– and that is their right.



Figure 1: Spotlight Initiative table of reasons that survivors do not report to the police⁸

The risks of pressuring a survivor to report to the police

There are serious risks to persuading survivors to report to the police. These may include:

Retraumatization

Justice services can be traumatic for survivors even when they have willingly engaged in the process. Survivors may be asked intrusive questions, be subjected to invasive forensic evidence collection, and have to retell their experience over and over. They may face aggressive questioning in court – or not have their case taken forward if they are not believed or their evidence is deemed insufficient. Reporting to the police is no guarantee that the

⁶ Palermo T, Bleck J, Peterman A. (2014) 'Tip of the iceberg: reporting and gender-based violence in developing countries.' American Journal of Epidemiology. 179(5) <https://academic.oup.com/aje/article-abstract/179/5/602/143069?redirectedFrom=fulltext> https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259319975_Tip_of_the_Iceberg_Reporting_and_Gender-Based_Violence_in_Developing_Countries

⁷ This list is adapted from information in the GBViE Minimum Standards, the Handbook on Gender-Responsive Police Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, the BRC Report on Mandatory Reporting, which can be found in the resources section at the end of this report.

⁸ Spotlight Initiative (n.d.) Address Barriers Survivors Face in Accessing Services <https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/address-barriers-survivors-face-accessing-services>

survivor will receive an outcome that is meaningful to them. Even when evidence is available some prosecutors may deem a conviction unlikely and decline to take the case forward. If the perpetrator is not held accountable the survivor may experience further psychological and emotional distress.

These factors can lead to retraumatization of the survivor, affecting their mental and physical health and prolonging their healing process.

Risk of further violence

The survivor may face further violence from the perpetrator as a consequence of reporting the experience to the police. Especially in humanitarian settings there is often limited support to survivors to prevent this, including a lack of safe shelters. This can lead to a continuation of violence, and in some cases risk to the survivor's life.

Stop accessing other services

If the survivor has a negative experience with being pressured to report to the police when they do not want to, then they are more likely to lose trust in the caseworker or other helper. This means they will be less likely to seek help in the future, exacerbating the harm caused to them.

A survivor's right and ability to make their own decisions is eroded when they are pressured to make choices.

Tips for supporting survivors who do not want to report to the police

Instead of focusing on reporting to the police, GBV practitioners and managers can focus their services and programming on survivor-centered approaches.

- Listen to the survivor and understand what they want without assuming, or deciding what is best for them. Use information from resources such as the GBV Pocket Guide⁹ and the LIVES model¹⁰ to train staff and volunteers on how to listen attentively and provide support.

- Provide information, but not advice, about how to engage with the police if the survivor wants to, and let them know what support is available. Be sure to take their concerns seriously. Talk through the issues, and be honest about the challenges of reporting to the police and potential court cases, for example the length of time it may take to process and the potential for stigma if confidentiality is broken.
- Provide information about services that are not related to police reporting and justice. This includes health care, psychosocial services, women and girls' safe spaces, housing, childcare, financial support and others. Make sure that the survivor understands that services are available whether or not they report to the police.
- Reassure the survivor that they can take time to think about their decision and can come back for help if they want to report at a later date. Give information that is useful about the statute of limitations or the collection of forensic data (if relevant), without pressing for a decision.
- Reassure the survivor that there is no right or wrong decision, only what is best for them at this time, and you will support whatever decision they make,

How to advocate for survivors' justice needs without pressure to report to the police

While we should never pressure a survivor to report GBV to the police, GBV programs should engage with police and the wider justice system to improve access to justice for GBV survivors. The only ethical way to increase the number of survivors reporting to police is to improve the process and outcomes for survivors so that they feel safe and supported if they choose to do so.

In some cases pressure to report incidents to the police comes from a desire to have data that shows the severity of the problem of GBV. However, the

⁹ GBV AoR (n.d.) GBV Pocket Guide
<https://gbvguidelines.org/en/pocketguide/>

¹⁰ WHO (2021) Caring for women subjected to violence: a WHO curriculum for training health-care providers, revised

edition
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240039803>

Prevention	Creating awareness and sensitizing police personnel on various issues regarding VAW/G such as existing policies, laws and human rights	Women's Support Centre (Armenia), China Equality (China), Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz (El Salvador)
	Encourage reporting of violence through provision of information to the community on police commitment to EVAW/G	Palestine, Sindh Community Foundation (Pakistan), ECPAT France (Madagascar)
	Training other CSOs to do police vetting	ICTJ (Kenya, Nepal, Uganda, Cote d'Ivoire, Tunisia)
	Providing space for women's groups or youth groups and police to interact on ending VAW	Equality for Growth, (Tanzania), Africa Alliance of YMCA (Kenya, Zambia)
	Facilitating dialogue and knowledge sharing between police institutions across countries	Sur Corporacion (Colombia, Chile and El Salvador)

Figure 2: An extract from a table of actions undertaken by [UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls](#) grantee partners to strengthen police action on GBV.¹¹

prevalence of GBV is significantly higher than the number of police reports.¹² Police data is not a reliable estimate of the scale of a problem, and gathering data should never come at the expense of survivor safety or self-determination.¹³ Instead of using police reports as an indicator, consider other measures such as feedback from local communities. There are other data sources that do not rely on police reporting that may be useful, such as the kNoVAWdata initiative¹⁴ and the GBV Information Management System (GBVIMS).¹⁵

Where survivors do not want to report to the police because of lack of survivor-centered services or due to ineffective justice mechanisms that they do not feel will be meaningful for them, advocate for improvements, including training for police, revision and dissemination of SOPs. The UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women collated examples of good practice in engaging with the police from their civil

society and women-led organization partners.¹⁶ Figure 2 shows examples of actions on prevention – other work was also carried out relating to contact with survivors, investigation, internal structures, and coordination.

Ensure that GBV services are available to all survivors whether or not they report to the police. If you work in a context where there are legal and policy frameworks that prevent survivors from accessing services, particularly medical care, without a police report, advocate to change this approach. You should also work with local authorities to develop and embed SOPs that help all service providers understand survivors' rights. WHO has published a guide to developing a protocol for Clinical Management of Rape that can be used to ensure that survivors can access medical care without needing to report to the police.¹⁷ Look at your own services to ensure that GBV survivors can access help from you without being pressured to report to the police. The tool on "Supporting victim survivors who do not see police as a safe option" from Safe + Equal is an

¹¹ UNTF (2020) Police as an Entry Point to End Violence Against Women and Girls. P11.
https://untf.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/police_brief_untf.pdf

¹² Palerno et al (2014).

¹³ The guidance is clear that the collection of GBV prevalence data is not a priority in humanitarian contexts, as it is well documented that it is a global need. See the GBV AoR Helpdesk learning brief on prevalence in humanitarian settings: <https://sddirect.org.uk/resource/importance->

[donor-support-gender-based-violence-programming-emergencies-even-absence](#)

¹⁴ For kNoVAWdata initiative see <https://knowvawdata.com/>

¹⁵ For GBV Information Management System (GBVIMS) see <https://www.gbvims.com/>

¹⁶ UNTF (2020) Police as an Entry Point to End Violence Against Women and Girls.

¹⁷ WHO (2020) Clinical management of rape and intimate partner violence survivors: Developing protocols for use in humanitarian settings.
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240001411>

example of how to think through survivor-centered approaches to support people who are marginalized.¹⁸

Summary

Access to justice needs to be meaningful to each individual GBV survivor. While some survivors want to report their experience to the police, others do not. Both decisions should be supported, in line with the GBV guiding principles. It is important to understand why survivors might not want to report to the police, and the consequences that they may face if they are persuaded to do so against their wishes. Understanding these potentially life-threatening consequences reinforces the need to respect survivors' decisions. Access to justice is a systematic need, and organizations can engage with police and other legal actors to improve systems that support all survivors who choose to engage with them.

Further reading

Aoun, Rana (2023) 'Improving Justice Systems for GBV Survivors Through Survivor-Based Processes' GBV AoR Helpdesk
<https://sddirect.org.uk/resource/improving-justice-systems-gbv-survivors-through-survivor-centered-processes>

GBV AoR (n.d.) The GBV Pocket Guide
<https://gbvguidelines.org/en/pocketguide/>

GBV AoR (2019) The Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming <https://gbvaor.net/gbviems>

IDLO and the Global Women's Institute (2022) Survivor-Centred Justice for Gender-Based Violence in Complex Situations.
<https://fln.dk/media/2j5bjaai/fili103.pdf>

Safe + Equal (n.d.) Supporting victim survivors who do not see police as a safe option.
<https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/tailored-inclusive-support/alternatives-to-police/>

Spotlight Initiative (n.d.) Address the Barriers that Survivors Face in Accessing Services
<https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/address-barriers-survivors-face-accessing-services>

UNODC and UN Women (2021) Handbook on Gender-Responsive Police Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/01/handbook-gender-responsive-police-services>

UNTF (2020) Police as an Entry Point to End Violence Against Women and Girls.
https://untf.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/police_brief_untf.pdf

WHO (2021) Caring for women subjected to violence: a WHO curriculum for training health-care providers, revised edition. Chapters 4, 6, 8
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240039803>

Mandatory reporting

British Red Cross (2019) Forced to report: The humanitarian impact of mandatory reporting on access to health care for victims/survivors of sexual violence in armed conflict and other emergencies.
<https://assets.redcross.org.uk/82b1e254-5524-0172-0612-9ce813c7824c/87ba9b1e-056f-42ed-8e86-639e87dcaa6d/Forced%20to%20report%20-%20the%20humanitarian%20impact%20of%20mandatory%20reporting%20on%20access%20to%20health%20care%202020.pdf>

Zhang, W., & Pasquero, L. (2023). Mandatory reporting of sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian settings: A qualitative analysis of international guidelines for humanitarian practitioners and scoping review of existing evidence. Global Journal of Medicine and Public Health. <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/mandatory-reporting-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-humanitarian-settings-a/>

<https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/tailored-inclusive-support/alternatives-to-police/>

¹⁸ Safe + Equal (n.d.) Supporting victim survivors who do not see police as a safe option.