

## Risk Factors of Gender-based Sexual Violence

**Summary of national risk factors:** *Civil conflict; Ethnic conflict; High unemployment rates; Unstable social conditions; High levels of poverty; Large population of young women; Large population of sex workers; Education level of women; Employment rate of women (economic empowerment)*

**Summary of subnational risk factors:** *Norms supporting gender-based sexual violence; Norms supporting gender inequality; Lack of institutional support; High crime levels/violence*

**Aim:** To assist analysts with the identification of risk factors for the production of risk terrain maps. Specifically, this brief provides an annotated review of the factors related to gender-based sexual violence and the settings and times for which some factors may be most relevant. This information should be especially useful to help choose a time period for creating risk terrain maps (i.e., Step<sup>i</sup> 3), to identify aggravating and mitigating risk factors to include in your risk terrain model (i.e., Steps 5 and 6), and to inform the operationalization of your risk factors to risk map layers (i.e., Step 7).

**By:** Ashlie Perry

Unfortunately, gender-based sexual violence is not a new phenomenon. Like any other form of violence, gender-based sexual violence affects the individual and the community at large.

While sexual violence can impact anyone, sexual violence is largely considered a gender-based violence, with women and girls made as primary targets. Gender-based sexual violence is largely rooted in societal norms that perpetuate power differentials between men and women (UN, 2007).

Research on sexual violence has found that 20% of women reported being victims of childhood sexual violence (WHO, 2010). Gender-based sexual violence was used as a tactic in 31 of the registered armed conflicts throughout 2009, with 14 cases found in Asia and 10 in Africa (University Autònoma Barcelona, 2010).

**Operational definition:** Sexual violence includes violence, either physical or psychological, that targets sexuality or is an act that is performed by sexual means. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual violence is defined as: 'any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic,

or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.' (Krug et al. 2002a)

Forms of sexual violence include rape, attempted rape, making someone strip in public, forcing two individuals to perform sexual acts on one another or attempting to harm one another in a sexual manner, genital mutilation, mutilation of a woman's breast and sexual slavery.

This research brief covers the risk factors of gender-based sexual violence.

### **Aggravating/Mitigating Risk Factors Based on a Review of Empirical Literature**

Research has proposed different indicators to measure gender-based sexual violence. For example, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific uses the prevalence of domestic violence and trafficking of women and girls as indicators of gender-based violence while the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia uses the number of honor crimes and percentage of women who experience genital mutilation (by age) as some of its indicators (UN, 2007). Selection of indicators is greatly

influenced by the different objectives of organizations or researchers.

Irrespective of the indicators used, risk factors for gender-based sexual violence generally include three categories; individual risk factors, social/environment factors and relationship factors (Krug et al, 2002b; CDC, 2009; UN, 2007). Individual factors are factors that influence the perpetrator and victim's likelihood of involvement in an incident of sexual violence. Social factors include norms supporting sexual violence of hierarchies in society. Relationship factors include family history of violence, family support, etc. (Caveat: Sexual violence against men has largely been understudied and data on the subject is equally as scarce.)

Scholarly research devoted to gender-based sexual violence largely entails the mental health and physical consequences of sexual violence, especially sexual violence against women. United Nations entities and the World Health Organization have had the most impact on research pertaining to identifying specific indicators of gender-based sexual violence. In its report dedicated on indicators to measure violence against women, several United Nation agencies collaborated to identify indicators used to measure violence across several organizations and regions (UN, 2007).

Gender-based sexual violence is used as a form of attack against the enemy; signifying conquest of women and degradation of men (Krug et al, 2002b). **Civil conflict/war, ethnic conflict and other forms of war** charges soldiers to exert "manliness", making sexual violence a plausible tactic. Women involved in, or surrounded by, other forms of violence are also more susceptible to being victims of sexual violence (Howard & Wang 2003). **Unstable Social Conditions**, like *famine, droughts and conflicts* displace civilians and women can suffer sexual abuse while in camps or in their communities. Krug et al. (2002b) note the interconnectivity of war, economic hardship and the conditions that place women at risk of sexual violence.

**Poverty** places women and girls at greater risk of sexual violence. Children born in poverty often have less parent supervision when they are not in school. Women in poverty are also more likely to experience sexual violence from a domestic or intimate partner. **High levels of unemployment** force women to take jobs that place them at greater risk; such as field work or as *sex workers* (Krug et al., 2002a). Employment in isolated fields, prostitution,

pornography and sex tourism are risk indicators of gender-based sexual violence (UNFPA, 2003). **Human trafficking** serves as an indicator of gender-based sexual violence in that women are often trafficked to become sex workers or domestic servants, both of which report high levels of physical and sexual abuse (UNFPA, 2003). According to the United Nations Population Fund (1999), **low levels of economic empowerment** (Employment rate of women) is considered a robust indicator of gender-based sexual violence.

**Age (population of young women)** is a marked indicator of gender-based sexual violence (UNFPA, 2003; Krugel et al., 2002a; Howard & Wang, 2003). Young women are at greater risk of sexual violence.

Krug et al. (2002a) found that **the education level of women** also serves as a risk indicator of gender-based sexual violence. Women with higher education levels were found to have increased risk of sexual violence by an intimate partner.

**Norms supporting gender-based sexual violence** include indicators like mercy/honor killings and child marriages (Krug et al., 2002a). In addition to identifying honor crimes as indicators of gender-based sexual violence, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia identified the percentage of women subjected to female genital mutilation and domestic violence as risk indicators.

Community sexualization of women and social tolerance of violence are also indicators of gender-based sexual violence (APA Task Force, 2007). Norms of male superiority support norms of sexual entitlement and gender inequality (CDC, 2009) **High levels of crime/violence** indicate tolerance level for crimes and other forms of violence, including sexual violence (CDC, 2009). High rates of domestic rape, spousal rape, robberies indicate a tolerance for violence (UN, 2007).

**Lack of institutional support** is another indicator of gender-based sexual violence in that weak laws do not deter sexual violence and perpetuates gender inequality. The presence of a legal definition of rape that includes domestic rape as a form of rape indicates less tolerance. The number of cases investigated for sexual violence, the number of police trainings on sexual violence and the number of heavy penalties for conviction of sexual violence also indicates stronger support (Krug et al., 2002a). Weak laws, lack of prosecutions, and women who are deterred

from filing suits are indicators of increased risk of gender-based sexual violence.

## References & Recommended (Publicly Available)

### Readings

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### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> For steps of risk terrain map production, download the RTM Manual at [www.riskterrainmodeling.com](http://www.riskterrainmodeling.com)