

Original article

### **Spiritual Aspects of Gender-Based Violence**

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#### **Abstract**

The article points out various aspects of Gender-Based Violence. It may be implemented through spiritual, physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and socio-economic violence. The focus of the paper is on spiritual violence. Gender-based violence may target both religious and non-religious aspects of the targeted person's spirituality.

Mental health consequences may include cumulative stress, traumatic stress, depression, learned helplessness, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicidal behavior.

**Keywords:** Gender-Based Violence, spiritual needs, psychological counseling

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*UNICEF describes gender-based violence (GBV) as "the most pervasive yet least visible human rights violation in the world. It includes physical, sexual, mental, or economic harm inflicted on a person because of socially ascribed power imbalances between males and females. It also includes the threat of violence, coercion, and deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private".*

UN defines GBV as an umbrella term "for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between females and males".

Thus, GBV is related to psychological abuse, sexual harassment and violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and controlling behaviors.

The Council of Europe Istanbul Convention (2011) mentions the following types of violence:

- Psychological violence (Art. 33)
- Stalking (Art. 34)
- Physical violence (Art. 35)
- Forced marriages (Art. 37)
- Sexual violence, including rape (Art. 36)
- Female genital mutilation (Art. 38)
- Forced abortion and forced sterilization (Art. 39)
- Sexual harassment (Art. 40)
- Aiding or abetting and attempt (Art. 41)
- Unacceptable justifications for crimes, including crimes committed in the name of so-called honor (Art. 42).

Based on this, Council of Europe distinguishes five inter-related types of violence:

- Physical violence
- Verbal violence (including hate speech)
- Psychological violence
- Sexual violence
- Socio-economic violence.

The affected persons may be exposed to various types of violence, as demonstrated in the following case.

### **Case study: Gender-Based Violence**

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Liana, 28, a female staff member of an international organization in East Europe, repeatedly received threats to her life from her former husband. He was discontented that she was working and demanded that she leave the organization and stay home with their children. His reason was that she should not work, and he would pay her sufficient money for her living. Liana informed the local police, who, for some reason, did not take any protective measures. The staff member then shared the problem with her peers, as well as with the director. She requested that he organize transportation for her to and from work, at least temporarily. As a general rule, the organization provided security measures for their employees, especially females in various offices, when needed.

However, the director did not pay any attention to the employee's request in this situation, even when she showed him the text messages with threats, offensive words, and foul language. He did not take any steps to protect the employee. Liana's peers did not seem to be concerned either. Liana started to experience anxiety, fear, insomnia, sadness, and helplessness. She felt extremely vulnerable, confused, and inhibited. Her efficiency at work dropped, as she was sometimes unable to perform basic tasks and make decisions.

The situation went on for about two months when she was suddenly attacked near her apartment and was stabbed several times by her ex-husband. Luckily, Liana was discovered by a neighbor soon after being injured and was taken to the hospital in time to be saved. Police arrested Liana's ex-husband the next day. Soon after recovery, Liana was promoted to an international post in the same organization and left the country.

Thus, the present story illustrates a case of gender-based violence by a man to his former wife. His brutality included physical cruelty, verbal violence with hate speech, psychological violence, and potential socio-economic threats.

On the other hand, despite the apparent physical threats to one of the staff members, the director and coworkers remained oblivious and practically indifferent to her security needs. Rather than taking practical steps to protect the coworker as was the organization's practice, they continued the work as usual. A factor contributing to the increased obliviousness of the team is probably associated with the lack of empathy shown by her colleagues and director, who probably perceived this case as a domestic problem rather than an actual physical threat from an ex-husband. Luckily for the staff member, she survived the attack and later even managed to advance in her career in the organization.

According to WHO, "an estimated 37% of women living in the poorest countries have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their life, with some of these countries having a prevalence as high as 1 in 2" (WHO, 2021).

Women and girls exposed to gender-based violence suffer devastating short- and long-term consequences to their physical and mental health. They frequently experience severe physical injuries, unwanted pregnancies, high risk of HIV or other sexually transmitted infections.

Mental health consequences include:

- Cumulative stress,
- Traumatic stress,
- Depression,
- Learned helplessness,
- Anxiety,
- Post-traumatic stress disorder,
- Substance abuse,
- Self-harm,
- Suicidal thoughts and behavior.

Additionally, many survivors of gender-based violence are exposed to victim-blaming. Some of them are ostracized from their families, friends, peers, and communities due to social norms. Consequently, they are subjected to a high risk of poverty, isolation, and further violence. In the worst cases, gender-based violence may lead to "honor killings".

#### **Some facts about gender-based violence:**

- Globally, 1 in 3 women have been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way — usually by someone they know.
- Around 641 million women worldwide have experienced at least one incidence of physical and sexual violence from a romantic partner.
- As many as 38% of murders of women globally are committed by their intimate partners.

#### **Gender-Based Spiritual Violence**

As per practical experience, spiritual hostility is another form of gender-based violence that could be added to the list mentioned above. The violence in these cases is directed against the targeted person's spiritual values that blocks any activities directed towards addressing such needs. In many cases, individuals attend to their spiritual needs through religious activities. On the other hand, even non-religious people have spiritual values, including belief systems, meaningfulness, altruism, and life purpose. The cases below demonstrate the importance of understanding spiritual aspects of gender-based violence.

#### **Case study: Gender-Based Spiritual Violence**

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Sabina and Alex studied at the same university in South Russia. They dated for several months before they decided to get married. Just like other members of her family, Sabina was a Muslim. She observed all practices except for hiding her hair. Alex also came from a family with an Islamic background. However, he did not follow any traditions. He also mentioned to Sabina repeatedly that he was an atheist.

After their marriage, he gradually and consistently pressured Sabina and insisted that she pray only in his absence. Later, he demanded that she remove Koran and other spiritual books from the shelf. When she tried to protest, Alex would initially sneer at her and make indecent jokes about the religion. But, before long, he started to shout at Sabina, using

blaspheme expressions and pressing her emotionally. This harassment by her husband had a negative impact on her well-being. She had sleep problems, lack of appetite, headaches, and dizzy spells. She became irritable, angry with the situation and herself, and at times indifferent and apathetic. Sabina noted she had difficulty making decisions, confused thinking, disillusionment with her marriage, and episodes of depressive mood with crying. She did not want to see anyone and stopped socializing with her friends and relatives. Nevertheless, Sabina hoped that the situation would improve.

However, during one of the heated discussions, Alex hit her on the face and called her names. This was repeated several times. A year after their marriage, Sabina separated from her husband and filed a divorce.

Thus, the presented case illustrates several types of violence, namely spiritual, psychological, verbal, and physical. The impact on the survivor's well-being of the gender-based violence was in the form of cumulative stress, as well as learned helplessness displayed through her delayed decision to separate. The baseline confrontation between the spouses focused on value differences and incompatibility. The parties were unable to address the underlining conflict, and the separation seemed inevitable.

The case below illustrates a non-religious form of Gender-Based Spiritual Violence.

### **Case study: Gender-Based Spiritual Violence**

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Leila, 28 years old, was a history teacher at a school in Kazakhstan. She was very much interested in music, philosophy, and arts. Whenever there was an opportunity, she attended exhibitions and concerts, usually with her female friends. She enjoyed her philosophy discussion with them.

One day, Hassan, a young teacher from the same school, unexpectedly proposed to marry him. Leila hesitated for a few days because she did not know him well, and then she accepted the proposal.

After the wedding, they moved to a separate apartment. For a couple of months, life seemed beautiful. However, soon Hassan's attitude has changed. He insisted that Leila stay at home most of the time and stop going to concerts and exhibitions. Similarly, he wanted her to reduce her communication with her friends. Another demand of his was that she focus on housework rather than discussing "metaphysical issues," as he put it. Whenever she tried to negotiate, he would raise his voice and even shout at her. At times, he would use strong language and offensive expressions.

Leila decided to comply. She stopped going out and reduced her workload at school to a minimum. However, the situation went worse. He laughed at Leila whenever she tried to listen to classical music at home and, in fact, forbade her to put the music on. She stopped attending art exhibitions. Even though Leila was not a practicing Muslim, she would regularly help others with financial and emotional support due to the Sadaka duty. She had to stop that activity as well, although it was not so easy to comply.

This continued for two years. Then, finally, when her friends told her that Hassan actively participated in discussions on non-materialistic issues at work with his colleagues, Leila received another blow. She felt betrayed, devastated, depressed, and miserable, unable to take any action.

She started to think about the divorce. However, Hassan initiated it himself when he fell in love with a girl from the neighborhood.

After the separation, Leila felt as if she had regained her liberty. She restored her social life and, most of all went back to helping others.

The current case presents several types of violence, namely:

- Spiritual, non-religious type (sneering comments about her interest in philosophy, arts, music, and altruism, as well as demands to end such activities)
- Psychological (putting emotional pressure and shouting)
- Verbal (using strong and offensive language), and
- Social (restricting her social life, communication with her friends, reducing the workload at school).

Different forms of violence resulted in the affected person's depression and learned helplessness exhibited through full compliance with the offender. The most challenging issue for the affected woman was her altruistic activity. The baseline problem's root was in the values clashes related to the vision of a woman's personal development and her role in society.

### **Strategic Interventions**

According to WHO (2021), countries should honor their commitments to increased and strong political will and leadership to tackle violence against women in all its forms, through:

- Sound gender transformative policies, from policies around childcare to equal pay, and laws that support gender equality,
- A strengthened health system response that ensures access to survivor-centered care and referral to other services as needed,
- School and educational interventions to challenge discriminatory attitudes and beliefs, including comprehensive sexuality education,
- Targeted investment in sustainable and effective evidence-based prevention strategies at local, national, regional, and global levels, and
- Strengthening data collection and investing in high-quality surveys on violence against women and improving measurement of the different forms of violence experienced by women, including those who are most marginalized.

UNICEF's strategic response includes the following:

*"UNICEF works worldwide to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in emergencies. We focus on the unique needs of girls and women — recognizing their systemic exposure to gender-based violence — while helping to ensure that support is available for all survivors of sexual violence, including boys.*

*In coordination with governments, civil society and United Nations partners, we provide survivors with clinical health services, dignity kits, psychosocial support and the safe spaces they need to access care and protection.*

*Safe spaces allow women and girls to participate in activities for empowerment and gain access to critical information on their risks, rights and needs. This includes information on how to access aid and where to report sexual exploitation and abuse. In many emergencies, safe spaces are the only way women and girls can access relevant and life-saving information.*

*UNICEF coordinates with other sectors — like water, sanitation and health (WASH), and nutrition — to help women and girls participate in safety audits and other forms of community planning that mitigate the risk of gender-based violence.*

*We also work to address the underlying social drivers and environmental conditions that lead to a higher incidence of GBV in emergencies, including through initiatives like the Communities Care: Transforming Lives and Preventing Violence programme. UNICEF and*

*partners work directly with communities to tackle harmful social norms that perpetuate gender-based violence.*

*What's more, we promote the economic and social empowerment of women and girls. Economic initiatives include tuition for basic literacy and numeracy skills, advice on income-generating activities, cash transfer programs, and schemes for credit and saving. Social empowerment activities may focus on women's leadership and participation in GBV programming, and the promotion of life skills through resources like our Adolescent Girls Toolkit.*

*Our extensive research on GBV in emergencies also builds evidence for the greater humanitarian community. We invest in strengthening protection systems that address gender-based violence — including through health and social services — and that help keep all women, girls and boys from harm's way."*

The Council of Europe recommends the following actions:

- Protecting the victims/survivors
- Prevention of gender-based violence
- Building a human rights culture
- Gender in youth work and youth organizations
- Developing an initiative or a strategy

### **Individual Interventions**

The scale and intensity of individual interventions depend on regional culture, women's role in society, the political will of the local governmental agencies, availability of services, activities of civil society organizations (e.g., women's associations), etc.

The most common interventions include:

- Provision of counseling services. The commonly used approaches include cognitive-behavioral interventions, problem-solving, client-centered interventions, and personal empowerment. Counseling is essential for those women who demonstrate signs of the negative impact in the form of disempowerment, learned helplessness, or who are used to the victim's role
- Collaboration with mental health services for timely referral to and management of psychiatric disorders and behavioral problems, especially suicidal behavior
- Establishment of peer groups and supervision of their activities is significant for timely identification of the affected women in remote areas
- Referral to other professional services (health facilities, police, lawyers, shelters)
- Promotion of gender equality through preparation and distribution of information, education, and communication materials
- Supporting zero tolerance policy to gender-based violence.

### **Summary:**

UN defines Gender-Based Violence (GBV) as an umbrella term "for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between females and males". GBV can be in the form of spiritual, physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and socio-economic violence. The gender-based violence may target both religious and non-religious aspects of spirituality.

Mental health consequences may include cumulative stress, traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicidal behavior.

UN Agencies and international organizations work worldwide to prevent and respond to GBV. Thus, UN organizations promote the economic and social empowerment of women and

girls. More specifically, in coordination with governments and civil society, UNICEF provides survivors with clinical health services, dignity kits, psychosocial support, and safe spaces, care, and protection.

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