Shifting the Shame: How A Preventing Violent Extremism Approach Addresses the Invisibility of Gender Based Violence

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is happening, worldwide—without exception. It is an emotionally laden topic, due to structural injustices and inequalities, often heightened by local sensitivities and cultural tolerance, taboos, fears of stigmatization, and reprisals. There is reluctance and discomfort in acknowledging these realities. Conversely, in fragile, conflict and violent (FCV) contexts, survival means coping with these realities and fearing that they *would be acknowledged*. While it can be *invisible* in homes, schools, or offices, the increased risks and vulnerabilities are *visible* in FCV contexts, where compounding risks of armed conflict, violent extremism or terrorism often result in forced migration and increased susceptibility to SGBV for refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs). There are emotional costs, health consequences, and global financial losses of USD $12 trillion associated to SGBV, and the *lifetime* trauma and re-traumatisation (it can cause) on the elderly, LGBTQIA+ individuals, girls, boys, persons with disabilities, women, men, and their families.

There is a common perception for *accepting* a gendered dimension between *visible*—majority male-executed and *invisible*—largely, female-recipient violence—*it is what gnaws at most of us, but we ignore*. Here, visible violence refers to FCV contexts and evokes images of perpetrators—homicide, bullying, violent extremism, terrorism, armed conflict, and warfare. Invisible violence is often seen in SGBV expressed as femicide, human trafficking, domestic violence, honor killings, forced and child marriage, and is linked to survivors and victims. This differentiation highlights a gender bias that normalizes male-perpetrators as visible and female-victims as invisible, accounting for the invisibility of SGBV.

Linking SGBV and Violent Extremism

There is a natural link between violent extremism and increased levels of SGBV. Analyzing social, political, and economic structures indicate that the common denominator connecting SGBV and extremism is *violence*—and the deviances that cause violence is a contributing factor to both SGBV and violent extremism. This is consistent with scholars establishing a connection between SGBV and violent extremism. By acknowledging that violence links SGBV to extremism and knowing conflict can legitimize violence, further intensifying SGBV in FCV contexts, we should examine violence as it relates to SGBV and extremism on the same spectrum, as laid out in Figure 1: *SGBV and the Violence Spectrum*. This visual representation provides a basis to explore the relationship between SGBV along the stages of conflict and provides windows of opportunities to identify areas of intervention. It offers an authentic read (if adapted to a particular context) with a real-time understanding by assessing the levels of SGBV in communities exposed to violence.
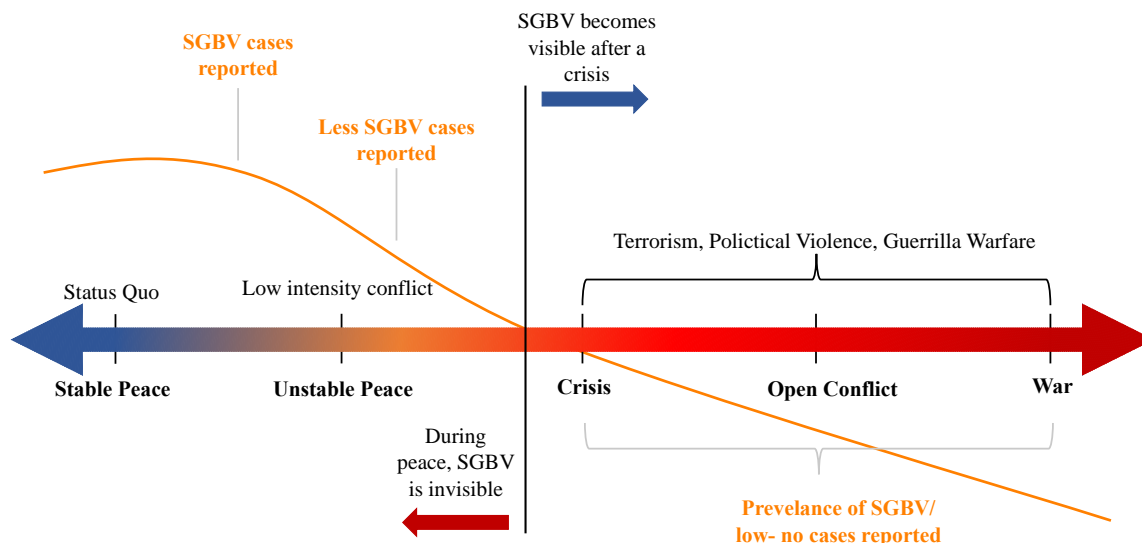
Figure 1: SGBV and the Violence Spectrum

Figure 1 demonstrates when SGBV becomes visible. The conflict cycle is laid out on a timeline from stable peace to war, illustrating that violent tensions continue to rise until full scale war. Meanwhile, prevalence of SGBV have an inverse relationship during stable peace to war. It highlights the moment SGBV goes from being invisible violence between stable and unstable peace to becoming visible—as direct violence from crisis to war. Using Figure 1 to understand SGBV in relation to violence could help identify patterns. For example, there are increased levels of SGBV in violent contexts while reporting tends to be low. This potentially suggests SGBV could be an early warning system from low intensity conflict to war and could be an indicator for violent extremism. Should this be the case, more research would be needed to endorse this finding. However, this is in line with findings from a UNDP report, "SGBV can actually serve as a predictive indicator for incidents of violent extremism and terrorism."

Shifting from Invisible to Visible Violence

Figure 1 also forces us to think about what causes this shift from invisible to glaringly visible violence. An explanation for lower reporting can be attributed to challenges state institutions face, as there are *no-to-low* reported cases when terrorist activities, warfare and acts of violent extremism become a part of everyday life and cases may go unaddressed or undetected. But this explanation still does not clarify *why* SGBV becomes visible during crisis. This inadequacy of information serves as a catalyst for two objectives. First, the search for more accurate and timely data, and second, the use of our collective and existing theories to address this sudden visibility in SGBV.

The search resulted in obtaining data from a UNHCR report on Ukraine, which documented cases of conflict related sexual violence (CRSV) with 24 victims of SGBV, 18 men, and 6 women, from February 2022 to 31 January 2023. While the data is limited and underreporting is typical, the report highlights that 75 percent of cases affected men. Generally, SGBV against men in FCV contexts is "largely hidden and ignored," due to harmful social norms and tainted cultural practices that historically impacted the way SGBV atrocities were

reported for men and boys during *crisis* to *war*. This increase in sexual violence perpetrated against men could be a plausible explanation for why SGBV becomes visible. Moreover, SGBV against men could also account for why [domestic violence increases and is more visible during and after war](#) disproportionately affecting women and children. This pattern of violence is being observed in Ukraine, as the [war continues so does domestic violence](#).

As Figure 1 illustrates, SGBV is invisible during *stable peace* and paradoxically cases are reported. As mentioned, there is an *accepted* gender dimension which may be conducive to normalizing *female-recipient violence*, thus its *invisibility*. However, SGBV becomes visible during *crisis*, where there is little to no reporting. This juxtaposed information, while it is surprising, may suggest that SGBV becomes direct and visible violence—when it is majority male-recipient violence, which consequently leads to increased female-recipient violence. Although more research is needed to fully understand the extent of SGBV in FCV contexts, we can safely conclude the prevalence of SGBV during peace, warfare, terrorism, and violent extremism can affect anyone. Therefore, there is an urgent need to prioritize SGBV prevention.

Two salient questions emerge: (1) is SGBV preventable? and (2) can preventing violent extremism (PVE) interventions contribute to the eradication of SGBV? Accepting SGBV and violent extremism contribute to and stem from *violence*, and provides a foundation to prevent both sexual and extremist violence, as part of the same spectrum. I do not intend to assess the whole SGBV sector but rather offer a potential contribution from PVE that, if applied, could lead to constructively changing how we interpret and respond to SGBV.

SGBV is Preventable

SGBV is preventable. Ignoring and turning a blind eye to its existence and other forms of conscious inaction is confirmation of complacency that allows SGBV to continue with rippling effects that pay lip service to "zero tolerance" policies, gives impunity to perpetrators, and creates acceptance for SGBV. This mindset around SGBV condones harmful social norms and supports local and cultural barriers at institutional and structural levels, making collective and corrective actions ineffective. Therefore, we must (re)shape our approach to SGBV and those that experienced it by respecting them and championing their resilience and coping mechanisms, while confronting it and advocating for its eradication.

Preventing SGBV using a PVE Approach

Preventing SGBV should be seen as a public good and tackling the issue would get us closer to gender equality and equity by eradicating and *de-stigmatizing* those that experienced it. Current approaches and systems only address symptoms or consequences of SGBV that reinforces it, but does not eliminate it, therefore perpetuating the default position of acceptance, whereas we need to strive towards complete eradication. Emphasising prevention does not preclude redressing past injuries caused by *consequences of inaction*, instead, it signifies a move from treatment to preventative measures for a SGBV-free future. Challenging harmful local, social, and cultural norms that support SGBV is the linchpin of preventing it. Therefore, focusing on preventing SGBV before it occurs, rather than tolerating unacceptable behaviors that perpetuate it, requires a new approach with the aim of improving existing practices.

So, can PVE work help to eradicate SGBV? The simple one-word answer is – yes, and here's how:

Drawing lessons from the PVE sector, which is by no means perfect, yet, well-equipped with transferable and sharable knowledge. As noted, SGBV overlaps in FCV settings and Figure 1 can be inputted with real-time data to analyze the level of visible or invisible violence. By seeing SGBV and violent extremism on the same spectrum allows us to find relevant solutions to prevent both extremist and sexual violence. The idea is to enhance already existing SGBV approaches—not to replace them, by using PVE mechanisms in tandem. The goal is to leverage established PVE bridge-building capacities to galvanize new attitudes, change perceptions, create counternarratives, and promote dialogue to empower and champion individuals and communities with viable options to make SGBV visible and prevent it.

PVE has a clearly defined purpose—to prevent violent extremism, with the aim to avoid other terrorist attacks, mainly following 9/11 global shock. To achieve this objective, we analyze root causes and social, political, and economic "push" and "pull" factors to understand levels of grievances and how to address them. Contrastingly, the title of the SGBV sector is not assertive, nor does it reveal its intentions. While I do not advocate for a name switch—the intention is however, to spur new attitudes, as the SGBV sector requires a fundamental shift and demands an answer to: why is SGBV addressed as *fait accompli*—in such a passive manner, when it is actively brutal, forceful and painful on many levels? For SGBV practitioners and policymakers, refocusing the sector will require both a transformational and integrative approach, as eradicating SGBV necessitates *empathic actions* and a jolt to overhaul a "well-meaning" and "good-intentions" system, that simply does not work.

PVE interventions are crucial to empower and champion individuals and communities. For example, in PVE works, the creation of online and offline counternarratives are used to avoid recruitment and radicalization by violent extremist organisations (VEOs). By introducing credible information that dismantles propaganda and disinformation, it undermines the appeal of violent extremism and prevents it. In some cases, former terrorists have been so well reintegrated they can actively offer advice on PVE policies and propose recommendations (to governments, international organizations, CSOs and NGOs), work on exit programs and share their deradicalization and disengagement stories—an asset on multiple levels. They are championed with the aim to reduce recruitment; and the stigma or any shame associated to formers are removed. In the PVE sector, we are cognizant that feelings of marginalization can exacerbate underlying grievances and lead to recidivism, therefore, we work through deradicalization programs to move groups or individuals further away from violent extremism and to disengage from terrorism. It promotes rehabilitation into society through multiple interventions including psychological counselling, restorative justice (i.e., creating empathy for victims), arranging jobs, vocational trainings, educating formers on nonviolent alternatives, providing family and social support, and helping formers create a fresh start to foster a new identity. The aim of these programs is to create inclusion and legitimacy within communities to gain acceptance and mitigate alienation.

Applying this concept to SGBV means incentivizing new attitudes to create both online and offline counternarratives by removing stigmas or any associated shame. Adapting this PVE approach should be a two-track program. The first track should be to reintegrate those that experienced SGBV; and a second track for perpetrators who may have been victims

themselves and therefore, corrective measures may require both rehabilitation and incarceration. While these tracks will vary depending on the categorization of participants, the primary objective should be to eradicate SGBV. This could include longer-term commitment to psychological and/or psychosocial counselling—and not dependent on financial or project cycles, restorative justice (i.e., asking what true justice means for each survivor/victim), establishing subsidized employment with private and public sectors companies by creating career paths, vocational trainings or apprenticeship programs, offer social (and if applicable, family) support, and create a fresh start for individuals to recover and thrive. For those individuals that experienced SGBV, this could be an empowering movement to change perceptions by sharing their personal struggles, while simultaneously providing support to others. This type of intervention could champion stories of resilience promoting the credible voices of individuals' experiences of SGBV, learning from their coping mechanisms, identifying healthy ways to manage trauma, and creating positive community dialogue around the harms of SGBV. Crafting interventions to eradicate SGBV requires commitment to individuals that experienced SGBV and from their communities (by formal decision makers and informal duty bears) to advocate for ownership in creating just policies and recommendations based on personalized inputs, to truly demolish associations of shame and stigma-making SGBV visible in order to eradicate it.

Using this PVE strategy could help eradicate SGBV and make it visible. As mentioned, SGBV is based on harmful social norms and tainted cultural practices that are deeply rooted in violence and the violence spectrum highlights *crisis* as the moment SGBV transitions from invisible to visible. The violence is a derivative causing SGBV, extremism, and terrorism. Therefore, tackling SGBV and violent extremism requires an enabling environment to understand the structural and cultural parameters in tandem. Taking this into account, we would need to disrupt and restructure the accepted male-executed violence and female-recipient violence notion, by making all violence visible.

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