ALIGN BRIEFING

Is no space safe? Working to end gender-based violence in the public sphere

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Introduction

Pervasive gendered violence remains a shocking and unrelenting reality across the world, leaving no country untouched. After centuries of women's and feminist activism to demand political, social and physical freedoms, patriarchal norms of power, control and dominance still permeate women's and LGBTQI+ people's lives. From our homes to the streets, from schools to workplaces, from nightclubs to universities, women and people from the LGBTQI+ community are at risk of daily violence – in the form of verbal harassment, sexual and physical assault, and even murder.

All too many women and LGBTQI+ people directly face gender-based violence. But, it is also the *fear of violence* (Gqola, 2022) that affects many millions more, limiting mobility, physical autonomy, and opportunities for work, study and leisure. It is because gender-based violence (GBV; see Box 1) is so pervasive across such a range of spaces, and its consequences so harmful – potentially deadly - that so many feminist movements organise around demands to end GBV and challenge the norms that underpin it.

Box 1: What is gender-based violence?

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their perceived gender. As well as violence against women and girls, it includes violence perpetrated against LGBTQI+ and gender non-conforming people - including men and boys. Regardless of the type of harm inflicted, GBV tends to entail significant emotional costs for the victim/survivor.

The feminist movement has shown that GBV encompasses a wide range of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and economic harm, either separately or in combination, including:

- **verbal and online harassment or abuse**
- **sexist bullying and intimidation or humiliation**
- **unwanted touching and sexual advances**
- **predatory/sexualised staring and indecent exposure**
- **homophobic or transphobic attacks**
- **aggravated assault and stalking**
- **threats of rape, violence and/or destitution**
- **coercive control**
- **sexual assault and rape**
- **femicide or murder.**

These can be viewed as being on a spectrum, from one-off experiences of verbal harassment through to murder. GBV is most commonly perpetrated by men and boys, sometimes individually, sometimes collectively. Within institutions it can become systemic, whereby the institutional culture normalises abusive behaviour and abuse of power, as for example, in police cultures in many countries (HRW, 2013, 2020).

Why is gendered violence so pervasive?

Gender norms are commonly held attitudes and beliefs about male and female roles and positions in society, including relations between the sexes. They form the invisible supports that help maintain socially accepted hierarchies and gendered inequalities (Harper et al., 2020). Though they vary between cultural contexts and social groups, patriarchal norms often tolerate, or in some cases even condone or expect men to be violent, and see this as a core part of masculinity – what it means to be a man.

Acts of GBV can be understood as disciplining people who are perceived to transgress or challenge gender norms and/or patriarchal authority. These acts are intended to 'put women and gender non-conforming people in their place' and maintain male power and authority (Gqola, 2015). They are thus one way in which patriarchy is maintained and gender norms enforced and reproduced (hooks, 1984; Bates, 2021). This also helps explain why there are often strong taboos against reporting GBV or intervening to disrupt it, and why LGBTQI+ people have to tolerate abuse and women are expected to bear it – often to keep their families together.

Understanding gender norms from an intersectional perspective is key to understanding patterns of GBV, and to ending it. This means recognising how misogyny is entangled with and reinforces other structural forms of oppression and discrimination, such as those based on race, ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality and (dis)ability (Crenshaw, 1991).

Where is this violence taking place?

Gender-based violence is commonly associated with domestic or intimate partner violence. But GBV is pervasive throughout society and across multiple, and almost all, public spaces. This includes workplaces, educational institutions, healthcare settings, online platforms, and social, religious, sporting and activist spaces, among others. Hence we ask: is no space safe?

Common public space

Common public space includes: streets, public transport, parks, markets, public toilets, commercial and residential areas, to name a few. Forms of GBV range from harassment, sexual/physical assaults and acid attacks, to murder/femicide. Survey data shows the scale of the problem:

- **UK**: it is estimated that **two-thirds** of women have experienced sexual harassment in a public space – an estimate that rises to **86%** for women aged 18-34 (APPG, 2021).
- **India** (New Delhi): an estimated **92%** of women have experienced sexual harassment in public spaces.
- **Ecuador**: a survey found around **70%** of women had experienced sexual harassment and/or abuse in public spaces in the last year.
- **Rwanda**: a study showed **42%** of women were concerned about GBV when commuting during the day and **55%** when commuting at night (UN Women, 2014; SSH, 2022).[1]

People are also frequently targeted by homophobic and transphobic violence in public spaces. Research by Bachmann and Gooch (2017) in the UK shows that:

- **30% of LGBTQI+ people** do not feel safe on the streets, increasing to **44% of trans people**.[2]
- **36% of LGBTQI+ people** avoid certain paths or holding hands with their partners in public.

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1   Survey details are not available for either of these statistics.
2   Results based on a survey with more than 5,000 LGBTQI+ participants.

Educational institutions

GBV in educational settings is a real and persistent social harm. In the UK, estimates suggest that over a third of female students have experienced some form of sexual harassment in school (UK Feminista, 2017). Around the world, surveys show that an estimated 19% of girls in school have experienced sexual violence in Cote d'Ivoire (UNGEI, 2020a), 16% in Honduras (UNGEI, 2020b), 25% in Nigeria, 16% in Kenya (UNGEI, 2020d), and 35% in Uganda (UNGEI, 2020e). Whilst these studies are not all comparable (depending on survey questions and definitions of violence), they indicate widescale harassment (Box 2).

Box 2: GBV in educational institutions towards LGBTQI+ students

- In **Thailand** around **55%** of LGBTQI+ students reported being bullied.
- In the **UK** more than **90%** of secondary school students reported witnessing bullying against LGBTQI+ classmates in their schools.
- In **New Zealand**, LGBTQI+ students were **three times** more likely to report being bullied at school than their heterosexual classmates.

Source: UNESCO and UN Women (2016)

Boys also are at the receiving end of sexual violence in school (mostly from male peers or instructors), but at a lower rate than girls. In Nigeria for example, it is estimated that 11% of boys have experienced sexual violence in school, 6% in Kenya, and 10% in Honduras (UNGEI, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d).

GBV is also pervasive in higher-education institutions. For example, in the UK between 2010-2017, across 120 institutions students made at least 169 allegations of sexual harassment, violence, or misconduct against staff (Batty et al., 2017). In Nigeria in 2019, 80% of female students reported sexual harassment when studying (Rubiano-Matulevich, 2018).

Workplaces

Workplace GBV ranges from physical and sexual assault through to verbal abuse and psychological intimidation. Though it remains under-reported for fear of disbelief, blame, social, legal and/or professional retaliation, and in some cases loss of legal residency status (HRW, 2021), an estimated 40-50% of women worldwide have experienced workplace GBV at some point in their lives (ITUC, 2016).

A poll carried out in eight countries by CARE International (2018) shows that a significant proportion of men believe 'it is acceptable to sexually harass and abuse women at work':

- **25%** of men responded that 'it is acceptable for an employer to ask or expect an employee to have intimate interactions with them, a family member or a friend'.
- **39%** of men in **India** believed it was acceptable 'to cat-call colleagues'.
- **36%** of men in the **UK** between the ages of 25-34 believed 'it is acceptable to pinch a colleague's bottom in jest'.
- **44%** of men in the **United States**, between the ages of 18-34 responded that 'it is acceptable to tell a sexual joke to a colleague while at work'. (UN Women, 2019).

Feminist activism is calling attention to how actions that are framed as 'banter', 'jokes', and in some cases 'complimentary behaviour', make women uncomfortable, uneasy and are in fact a form of sexual harassment and violence.

Two types of work environments appear to be particularly risky: those with poor working conditions which have limited or no systems in place for reporting abuse (particularly informal employment), and those with a high public profile, such as politics (see Box 3) or the media.

Workers from racialised backgrounds are often particularly at risk. For example, a survey in the United States with female hotel workers, who are mostly immigrants and women of colour, revealed that more than 50% reported having experienced sexual harassment and/or assaults (UNITE HERE, 2016). A study in the UK also found that LGBTQI+ women were more than twice as likely to experience unwanted touching, sexual assault or rape than men (TUC, 2019).

Box 3: Violence in political life

A study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) across 39 countries found that many female parliamentarians considered sexual harassment a common practice in their working environment. The survey found that of women holding political office:

- **82%** had experienced psychological violence
- **26%** had experienced physical violence
- **22%** had experienced sexual violence.

Media reports in the UK have also highlighted deep-rooted misogyny in political spaces. Many female politicians recounted experiences of sexism at work:

> **Anne-Marie Trevelyan**, Conservative MP for Berwick-upon-Tweed, recounted that she had been 'pinned up against a wall by a male MP' who said she must 'want him because he was a powerful man' (Grierson, 2022).

> **Charlotte Nichols**, Labour MP for Warrington North, spoke publicly about a 'Whisper list' of MPs who are well-known in the House of Commons for a history of 'bullying or sexual misconduct', saying: 'We all know and nothing is done and they continue to walk around and do their jobs – and there's that kind of culture of impunity on it... When I first came into parliament, there was a group of people who... gave me a list of MPs I should never accept a drink from, who I should never be alone with, who I should never get in a lift with, and who I should try to avoid as far as possible to keep myself safe' (BBC, 2022).

In Kenya's 2022 elections, female political candidates endured abuse and even physical attacks. **Mary Mugure**, a former sex worker, received threatening phone calls and text messages that she said 'was just to intimidate me, to make me step down'.

Source: Grierson, 2022; BBC, 2022; Mersie and Omondi, 2022.

Online platforms

Online spaces and digital technologies have super-charged new forms of GBV – such as threats, or acts of distribution of intimate content obtained with or without consent (also known as image abuse), online stalking, theft of private data, and creating non-consensual (deep) fake and often pornographic images or videos (Kee, 2005; O'Donnell and Sweetman, 2018; Thakur, 2018; UN, 2018).

They have also created a new space for longstanding forms of violence, such as death threats and other forms of bullying. Online and offline harassment are often related and reinforce one another, and are not neatly separated, with online GBV amplifying violence in other spaces, as well as forming a specific form of abuse. Rates are often higher among younger women and girls, those from marginalised social groups, as well as those in public life (George et al., 2021).

> **Box 4: Plan International 2020 survey into OGBV**
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> • Across 22 countries in five geographical regions, an average of **57%** of young women (aged 15–25) experienced online harassment on social media
> • **42%** of girls who identified as LGBTQI+ reported homophobic abuse
> • **37%** of those with a disability reported abuse related to their disability
> • **14%** of girls who identified as belonging to an ethnic minority reported abuse related to their ethnic identity.
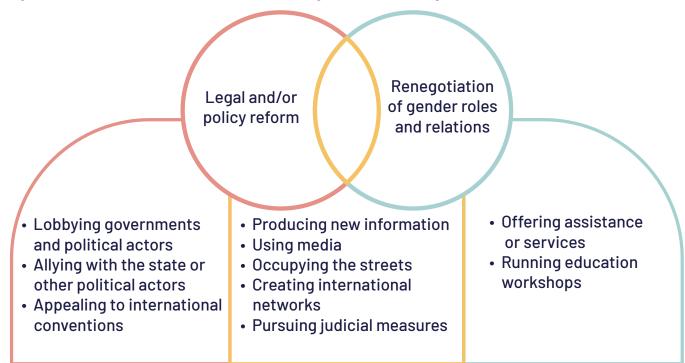>
> Source: Plan International, 2020

Online spaces have also enabled the growth of anti-feminist and men's rights activists, connected to misogynistic networks, with the aim of eroding women's and LGBTQI+ rights and restoring male authority. These groups often orchestrate violence against women – both online and offline (Marwick and Caplan, 2018).

How are feminist movements responding to GBV?

Worldwide, feminist movements have been and continue to be central to raising consciousness, voicing concerns and catalysing change on men's violence against women and the LGBTQI+ community. Though GBV takes different forms in different spaces, feminist movements recognise that its roots are the same: an assumption of male privilege, authority and control, taught (often unconsciously) from birth and reinforced by the institutions within which we all operate. In addition, norms discouraging intervening or reporting GBV contribute to its perpetuation.

There are several approaches to raising consciousness and shifting the norms on GBV (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Women's and feminist movement strategies for norm change

Legal and/or policy reform

Renegotiation of gender roles and relations

• Lobbying governments and political actors
• Allying with the state or other political actors
• Appealing to international conventions

• Producing new information
• Using media
• Occupying the streets
• Creating international networks
• Pursuing judicial measures

• Offering assistance or services
• Running education workshops

Source: Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021.

Mobilising for legal frameworks to change gender norms

Successful activism in this area has led to the creation of key international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Maputo Protocol, and the Convention of Belém do Pará.

At the national level, where new laws are passed and implemented, they signal that GBV is unacceptable and they thereby contribute to shifts in norms. For example, Spain outlawed 'catcalling' in a draft of feminist measures to update the penal code in 2022, with a Guarantee of Sexual Freedom Law which requires proactive consent in rape cases (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2022). In Chile in 2019, street and sexual harassment (*acoso callejero*) was made illegal in public spaces following years of feminist activism (OCAC, 2019).

Protesting when anti-GBV laws and policies are flouted

In contexts as diverse as Costa Rica, the US, India, South Africa and Mexico, students have protested against sexual violence and/or a lack of action in their educational institutions, even where policies and procedures to respond are in place. These campaigns have often sought to shift behaviour norms and demand that protective policies and procedures are followed (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, *forthcoming*).

Challenging normalisation of GBV

Feminist activism against harassment in public spaces has increasingly challenged its framing as 'harmless romantic behaviour' and seeks to denormalise it. For example the *RopaSucia* (Dirty Clothes) movement in Mexico City has created art installations to challenge the idea of verbal harassment as compliments and/or jokes (Roldán and Malak, 2019). In Brazil the *Chega de Fiu Fiu* (Stop Catcalling) feminist initiative uses photographs and illustrations to the same effect (Desborough, 2018; Buarque de Almeida, 2019). Globally, feminists have also worked to **create a shared language to make violence visible**, helping identify experiences of harm and their political and structural causes, creating linguistic tools so women and others can respond.

Contesting victim-blaming

Feminist activism to end GBV strongly contests victim-blaming. For example, the #DontTellMe-HowToDress movement in Thailand emerged after local authorities issued recommendations for women 'not to dress sexily' during *Songkran* (Thailand's New Year water festival) to prevent sexual harassment.

Documenting and calling out GBV online

Feminists have provided information on how to identify, prevent and respond to online abuse, as well as given support to victims/survivors. Digital activism has been a key tool for feminists to protest GBV in the public sphere and to push for accountability, such as the #SexforGrades campaign in Nigeria (Daikpor, 2021). #SayHerName protests also call attention to femicides in public spaces, for example with #SarahEverard and #SabinaNessa in the UK.

What else needs to be done?

Feminist movements have been effective in challenging norms but, as the data shows, GBV continues to be pervasive. Furthermore, this activism itself can put women and other marginalised genders at risk. For example, in the #Hokkorolob protests against mishandling of allegations of sexual harassment at a university in Kolkata, India, demonstrators were physically assaulted, and female students were targets of sexual violence (Ghoshal, 2014). Other examples come from India and South Africa (ibid.; Pilane, 2016), pointing again to how those who are building movements for change tend to face the sharpest end of gender injustice.

It cannot be left solely to feminist movements and their activist allies to attempt to shift the norms that underpin this violence. Both the state and men themselves need to step up action, to support and amplify feminist movements' and to take complementary measures. Members of these movements have called for a range of changes in practice and policy, as outlined below.

Further legal and policy change

Many movements first demands are for legal and criminal justice measures. Calls range from recognising femicide in the penal code (such as in Cyprus, Brazil and Colombia) to criminalising sexist harassment in public space. However, to get to the root of patriarchal norms that drive gendered violence, new legislation must be accompanied by education and community-based services that work to prevent GBV in the first place. Recent examples include Mayoral strategies in Barcelona, Manchester and London which focus on perpetrator prevention by shifting attitudes and behaviours through trainings and public awareness campaigns (Barcelona City Council, n.d.; GMCA, 2021; Mayor of London, 2022).

In different contexts, many forms of GBV continue to be tolerated. However, GBV in public space can no longer be framed as an individual rather than structural problem, and so requires legislative interventions. In structurally unequal societies, there are risks that criminalisation can reinforce exclusions of groups already facing multiple inequalities, such as men from marginalised economic, racial and ethnic or religious backgrounds (Bernstein, 2007; Srinivasan, 2021).

Teaching respect

Education systems have a critical role to play in ensuring children are exposed to values of equality, respect for gender diversity, and empathy for everyone's rights from a young age. This helps lay a foundation of equitable gender norms. School-based initiatives with adolescents to tackle stereotypes and to help them recognise and challenge GBV have proved effective in contexts as diverse as India, Kenya and the UK (Keller et al., 2015; Horvath et al., 2019; Dhar et al., 2022; ICRW, n.d.).

Accountability for misogyny and GBV in public institutions

Institutional biases often hinder the enforcement of new legal mechanisms, or policies to end GBV. Employees and service users fear reporting harassment, rape, sexual misconduct, or bullying, or assume that it will not lead to change. This culture of silence and impunity works to maintain patriarchal power within these public institutions, and in part explains pervasive violence and continuing inaction. Change will require zero tolerance of abuse, greater efforts to ensure all staff are free from violence, and concerted action to dismantle institutional misogyny.

Digital regulation

Increasing evidence links online radicalisation of incels[3] to a willingness to commit terrorist acts (Beale et al., 2018; Washington and Marcus, 2021). As online environments can easily amplify discourses of male victimhood (e.g. by men's rights activists), increased patriarchal backlash against successful feminist activism may be expected. Therefore governments must create strong regulatory and policy environments to challenge misogyny online and hold technology companies accountable to prevent its spread (Diepeveen, 2022).

Digital activists are calling for less bias in content moderation so misogyny and (sexually) violent content can be identified, taken down and responded to, alongside tiered escalation systems for repeat offenders (Washington and Marcus, 2022). Existing legal frameworks, such as the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 in New Zealand, establish specific agencies to enforce protections and are bolstered by injunction-like orders so perpetrators cannot act with impunity (Aziz, 2017).

A challenge to underlying norms and structural inequalities

A range of misogynistic norms contribute to sustaining structural inequalities. Norms that restrict women's voice, economic autonomy and reproductive freedoms all restrict women's agency and make it harder to challenge GBV. For example, women in precarious work often face abusive conditions; women on lower wages may have no other option but to use public transport when it may be unsafe to do so; those without union representation have limited voice on multiple issues that contribute to dangerous conditions. Actions to pay women fairly, provide affordable/accessible childcare and equal parental leave, while ensuring women and the LGBTQI+ community have a platform to make their voices heard both in work and politics will help contribute to ending GBV.

Greater funding for feminist movements

Research has highlighted the central role that feminist movements play in challenging norms and pushing legislation to advance gender justice (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021). Despite this, feminist movements remain chronically under resourced, reportedly receiving less than 1% of gender equality funding (AWID, 2021), which is in part because they are still considered 'too political' (Tant and Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, 2022). Yet, to do this vital work, feminist movements need access to flexible resources and other types of long-term support, especially because they also often work across intersectional GBV issues.

ALIGN's report (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, *forthcoming*) further evidences the importance of social movements in breaking the silence on violence, raising awareness, inspiring action and galvanising change around GBV. Activists have also shown the value of reclaiming and occupying public spaces, using art as activism, sharing self-defence tools and visbilising misogynistic institutional cultures. But they cannot do it alone and it is unjust to expect women and others to self-fund, with their own time, money and energy to end GBV (Leon-Himmelstine et al., 2022).

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3 'incel' (involuntarily celibate) is an extremist worldview and ideology that has emerged from a loose ecosystem of anti-woman online communities known as the 'manosphere' (Brace, 2021). Incels have been broadly linked to anti-feminism, male supremacy and the Men's Rights Movement and even white supremacy (Cook, 2020), although the 'manosphere isn't just white' (Onuoha, 2022; Kaur, 2022).

True allyship and solidarity

To ignore GBV is to be complicit in its perpetuation. Acting in solidarity and being an ally to end GBV means:

- **Creating spaces** for men and boys to be self-reflective and change their own behaviour such as not commenting on women's bodies or making sexist jokes
- **Calling out** abusive behaviour and being active bystanders when witnessing GBV
- **Role-modelling** to other men how to be honest and vulnerable about their experiences and emotions
- **Listening** to and believing the experiences of women
- **Challenging victim-blaming** or justifications for GBV
- **Refraining from reproducing patriarchal gender norms** by educating oneself and others, and being open to feedback
- **Taking an active role** in building peer cultures of action and accountability across different spaces
- **Using civil, political, decision-making or cultural power** to raise gendered violence to the top of the agenda
- **Supporting legislation** and policy change through advocacy and activism
- **Funding social services** that support women and LGBTQI+ people who are survivors of GBV
- **Harnessing platforms** to model allyship and raise awareness of men's role in driving change
- **Implementing strategies** to address GBV and institutional misogyny within one's own organisation.

Recommended resources

ALIGN | Men, boys and masculinities. Webpage (www.alignplatform.org/men-boys-and-masculinities).

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

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