

Addressing School Related Gender Based Violence: Learning from Practice

Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence

LEARNING BRIEF NO.10

This learning brief is based on research shared at a learning day on School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV), organised by the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence, at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin Castle, on December 18th 2012. The principal inputs were provided by Máiréad Dunne, Director of the Centre for International Education at the University of Sussex,¹ and Tanja Suvilaakso, Child Rights and Protection Advisor for Plan International.² It builds on discussions within Learning Brief 2: *Effective Responses for Gender Based Violence: Gender Based Violence in Schools*.

Introduction

School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) is a fundamental violation of human rights, particularly those of women and children, and represents a considerable barrier to participation in education, gender equity and to the achievement of Education for All and the Millennium Development goals (MDGs). SRGBV generally refers to violence inflicted on children in, around, or on their way to or from school, due to stereotypes and roles or norms attributed to or expected of them, on the basis of their sex or gendered identity.

The various forms of SRGBV include verbal, physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or symbolic violence and includes both bullying and cyber-bullying. SRGBV also refers to the ways in which experiences of, and vulnerabilities to, violence may be gendered.

SRGBV can include individual action as well as society's harmful traditional practices or gendered expectations that negatively impact children's rights to education. It can take place between students, between students and teachers, between teachers, and between family or community members and students³. SRGBV leads to an unsafe and unwelcoming learning environment, and can also prevent students from going to school at all.⁴

Examples of SRGBV:

- Teachers asking students for sex in exchange for better grades and/or punishing students with poor grades as retaliation for the rejection of sexual advances
- Corporal punishment
- Harassment and physical or sexual assault while walking to and from school
- Forced or early marriage
- Preference for sending boys to school over girls
- Textbooks communicating discriminatory messages about women and men

¹ The primary source for Máiréad's input was Leach, F., Slade, E. and Dunne, M. (2012) *Desk Review for Concern Worldwide: Promising Practice in School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) Prevention and Response Programming Globally*, University of Sussex. This was a desk review commissioned by Concern Worldwide.

² The primary source for Tanja's input was Greene, M., Robles, O., Stout, K., and Suvilaakso, T. (2012) *A Girl's Right to Learn Without Fear: Working to End Gender-Based Violence at School*, Toronto: Plan Canada. This document can be accessed at <http://plancanada.ca/publications>.

³ Concern Worldwide (2013) *School Related Gender Based Violence: A Barrier to Education for All*.

⁴ Ibid.

SRGBV is an enormous global problem and millions of children across the world experience fear and violence every time they go to school.⁵ For example, at present 77 countries allow teachers to punish children physically,⁶ and in some countries more than 80% of students suffer corporal punishment at school.⁷ A study in Liberia showed that 20% of students surveyed reported being threatened with a weapon to force them to have sex⁸. A similar study in Sierra Leone⁹ showed that 10% of primary school girls and 14% of secondary school girls cited sexual assault as a reason to be afraid to commute to school.¹⁰ A study conducted in Niger demonstrated that 88% of teachers confirmed the existence of sexual acts between students and teachers at their school.¹¹

Preventing and responding to SRGBV is critical to ensuring access to quality education for all and to the protection of children and vulnerable adults. In recognition of this a number of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), civil society groups, and other actors have developed various programmes and engaged in policy initiatives globally which incorporate prevention and response strategies to address SRGBV. While many of these programmes and initiatives are based on best practice prevention and response strategies to address GBV, there has been an inadequate focus on developing rigorous and systematic monitoring systems to measure the results of this work. This has undermined efforts to show what makes certain interventions and policies successful at comprehensively addressing SRGBV. The Irish Consortium on GBV recognises this gap, and a number of its member agencies have carried out and commissioned research to contribute to the best practice knowledge base on SRGBV.

A seminar was convened in December 2012 to share learning from such research, with the aim of identifying promising practices in relation to the prevention of, and response to, SRGBV. This brief is based on the learning that emerged during the event.

The Need for Solid Theoretical Grounding

In 2012, Concern Worldwide commissioned a study by the Centre for International Education at the University of Sussex (UK) to identify promising practices in addressing SRGBV¹². As a starting point, this study highlighted the importance of understanding the gender theories which underpin projects, programmes and policies. It is these theories that inform policy and practice, and subsequently influence the ways in which gendered identities are reinforced or challenged in the school environment.

Figure 1 below highlights the relationship between theory, policy and practice, showing how achievements in education and gender equality rely on appropriate gender theories to inform policy and practice.

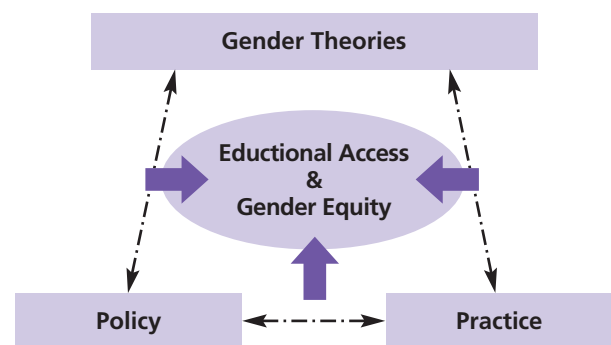


Figure 1: Interplay between Gender Theory, Policy, and Practice and its influence on educational access¹³

⁵ NGO Advisory Council for Follow-up to the UN Study on Violence against Children (2011) *Five Years On – A Global Update on Violence against Children*. http://www.crin.org/docs/Five_Years_On.pdf

⁶ Plan International Global Advocacy Team (2012) *Plan's Learn Without Fear Campaign: Third Progress Report*, Woking: Plan, p. 4.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Concern Worldwide (2013) *School Related Gender Based Violence: A Barrier to Education for All*.

⁹ Study carried out by Plan International, Concern Worldwide, IBIS and CRS.

¹⁰ Concern Worldwide (2013) *School Related Gender Based Violence: A Barrier to Education for All*.

¹¹ Cited in Jones, N. and Espey, L. (2008). *Increasing Visibility and Promoting Policy Action to Tackle Sexual Exploitation in and around Schools in Africa: Briefing Paper with focus on West Africa*. Overseas Development Institute for Plan's West Africa Regional Office, London.

¹² Key approaches highlighted in this study were from Action Aid, Plan International and USAID.

¹³ Leach, Slade, and Dunne (2012) *op. cit.*, p. 6.

An extreme example would be if policy makers or project implementers, in a programme aimed at universal educational access and gender equity, view pupils as two distinct categories: as boys, who are more inclined towards maths and science and who have to prepare for their future role as income generators to support their wives and families; and as girls, who excel in home economics and have to prepare for their future role of managing the family home. This particular understanding, or theory, of gender will greatly influence the policies and practices developed and will seriously impact on the achievement of the goals of gender equity and universal educational access. A different underlying understanding of gender would impact on the goals differently. Once these underlying theories are made clearly visible, policy makers, programme developers and field staff can ensure that gender equitable theories underpin policies and practices to deal with SRGBV.

The School as Constructing a Gendered Society and Normalising GBV

Schools are one such institution where gender is learned and where power structures can normalise explicit forms of GBV. It is in school where boys and girls often learn that they are different from one another and how they should enact their different gendered identities. This is reinforced by, for example, who gets to speak more in the classroom (boys or girls) or who cleans the classroom. These gender roles produce a gender hierarchy, which more often than not is one where the male hierarchy dominates.¹⁴

It is through this process that relations between boys and girls in school become gendered. Whereas boys tend to settle disputes with peers through physical violence, girls are more likely to engage in verbal and psychological forms of aggression.¹⁵

Furthermore space itself is gendered – in the classroom in many countries boys and girls are spatially separated, whereas in the playground boys dominate the physical space. Eventually these gendered characteristics within the school become normalised and naturalised, and the institutional structures shape relations in such a way that it is extremely difficult for any one teacher to step out of the 'natural' order to try to address them.

While these differences may seem insignificant in comparison to the sexual exploitation of young girls by their teachers, in reality they combine to construct an environment where the more acute and brutal forms of SRGBV are allowed to take place. So the school, as a social institution located within the wider context of the community, is a space that not only provides access to education, but also assists in the construction of a gendered society and the possible normalisation of GBV.

Learning from Promising Practice

One of the most promising messages to emerge from gender theory is that those attitudes and behaviours which can contribute to gender inequality and GBV, and that are considered to be natural or normal, are in fact learned and can therefore be transformed.

Schools and education systems are fundamental in any programme for transformation, as schools are not just sources of socialisation but can also act as catalysts for tolerance, non-violence, and gender equality, as well as conduits for changing social norms. A number of promising interventions and programmes have been made to date by INGOs and other actors which have transformed schools into safer places.

¹⁴ Irish Joint Consortium on GBV: *Effective Responses for Gender Based Violence: Gender Based Violence in Schools. Learning Brief 2.*

¹⁵ Leach, F. and Humphreys, S. (2007) *Gender Violence in Schools, Taking the 'Girls as Victims' Discourse Forward.* Gender and Development, 15, 1, p. 5164.

At the Irish Consortium on GBV event held in December 2012, the key findings and lessons from two recently published reports were presented, including research recently commissioned by Concern Worldwide which aimed to identify promising practices in addressing SRGBV¹⁶, and an advocacy report published by Plan International that makes detailed policy recommendations based on the extensive experience of actors at all levels in relation to SRGBV¹⁷. This brief collates the common learnings and recommendations for both policy and practice that emerged during the event under nine key headings detailed below.

Nine key learning points:

1. Broad view of SRGBV and Theory of Gender as Socially Constructed
2. Partnership
3. Monitoring and Evaluation
4. Multi-level and multi-sectoral approaches
5. Advocacy and Communications
6. Staff training and commitment
7. Participation, Voice and Representation
8. Appropriate design and use of institutional resources
9. Inclusion of men and boys

1. A Broad View of SRGBV and the Theory of Gender as Socially Constructed

Organisations found to exhibit promising practice all hold a broad view of GBV, consistent with UN definitions. Furthermore they all adhere to the view that gender is a socially constructed concept and that therefore change is possible. Thus various programme modules, including advocacy, research, school and community activities, aim specifically at change in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

2. Partnership

To attain significant and sustainable change it is necessary that agencies adopt a participatory and inclusive approach to project design and implementation, involving a wide range of local and national stakeholders and partners. Partners should include law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, child protection authorities, the transportation sector, community leaders, health professionals, journalists as well as school boards and Ministries of Education and other state and civil society organisations.¹⁸ School staff and teachers' unions should be viewed as key partners and allies in tackling SRGBV, and promising practice demonstrates that engaging with teachers' unions and training of school staff can be very effective.¹⁹

Creating safer school environments also requires reaching beyond the teaching profession and partnering with the wider community. Parents and guardians should also be engaged with, and empowered to demand justice and quality education for their children. For example, school authorities terminated the contract of one abusive teacher in a school in Dhaka, Bangladesh, as a result of pressure from parents who had participated in training programmes on child protection and violence in schools.²⁰

Both organisations stressed the importance of working closely with governments, at all levels and across all sectors, as fundamental in tackling SRGBV. Concern Worldwide places a particular emphasis on partnering with, amongst others, Ministries of Education. This is done through providing training and technical assistance for district education staff interventions to prevent and respond to GBV. Facilitating a key role for relevant Ministries in the research design has been shown to foster government ownership.

¹⁶ Leach, Slade, and Dunne (2012) *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Greene, Robles, Stout, and Suvilaakso (2012) *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Plan International Global Advocacy Team (2012) *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Plan International Global Advocacy Team (2012) *op. cit.*

²⁰ Plan International Global Advocacy Team (2012) *op. cit.*, p. 8.

3. Monitoring & Evaluation

In order to share learning, and ascertain if our approaches are having the appropriate impact, organisations need to systematically gather and document data. Thus comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and local capacity building around M&E processes is essential. Best practice should include multiple sources of baseline, evaluation, quantitative and qualitative data.

Measuring SRGBV is difficult due to the sensitivity of the topic and ethical issues of collecting data from children. Training in M&E, data collection and data analysis as well as training in the ethics of data collection is therefore fundamental.

While sex-disaggregated quantitative data is useful and important, a mixed methodology approach using both quantitative and qualitative data is advised to understand why and how SRGBV is experienced by different people and reinforced by different power structures and institutions.

Measuring and monitoring work on SRGBV is something that needs to be improved upon. To address this gap, Concern Worldwide is embarking on a five year research project which will document best practice and lessons learned in order to contribute to the knowledge base on effective SRGBV programming that can be scaled up and replicated. Concern Worldwide will be working with a research institute to ensure the monitoring systems developed for this research take full consideration of ethical considerations and that appropriate support mechanisms are in place.

4. Multi-level and Multi-sectoral Approaches

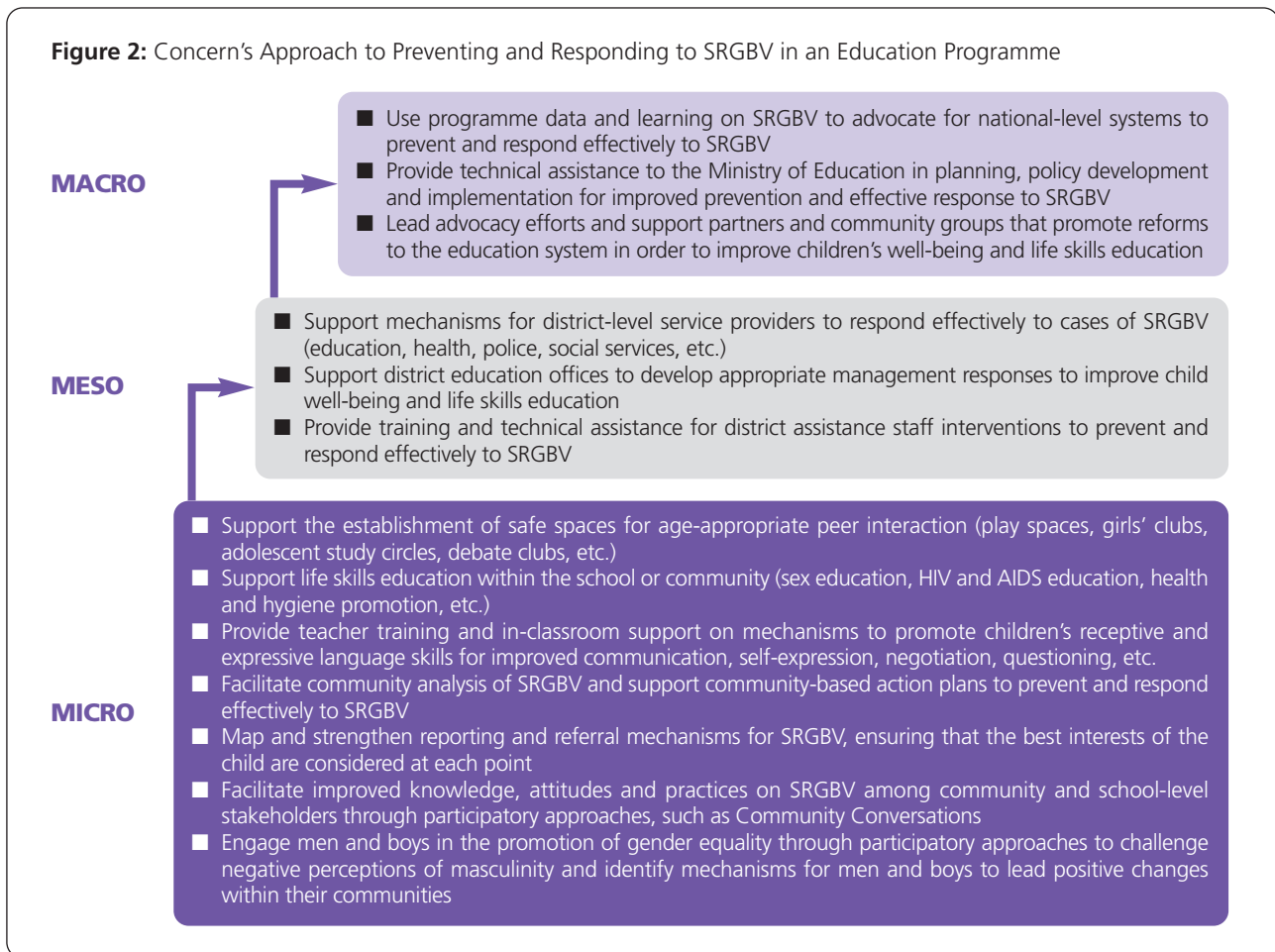
A multi-level and holistic approach will allow for coherent change. A programme that addresses not just the micro level of the individual and school, but also the meso level of the community, and the macro level of government policy and legislation, and addresses gaps in data collection and the evidence base, will maximise impact and sustainability. Within a multi-sectoral approach, creating an enabling environment through the provision of laws that explicitly protect children from violence, including SRGBV is crucial. Legislative frameworks should be supported by effective regulations and policies that include binding codes of conduct and appropriate proportionate sanctions²¹. At each level a range of activities should be implemented in an integrated approach to create outcomes that collectively impact on the complex factors which contribute to SRGBV.

The report presented by Plan International at the event offers concrete examples and lessons from government-led efforts to reduce SRGBV which serve to highlight the need to integrate strategies across multiple sectors and levels, and to engage communities in policy implementation.

Figure 2 (on the following page) outlines Concern Worldwide's multi-level approach to preventing and responding to SRGBV:

²¹ Greene, Robles, Stout, and Suvilaakso (2012) *op. cit.*

Figure 2: Concern's Approach to Preventing and Responding to SRGBV in an Education Programme



5 Advocacy and Communications

Advocacy and communications are key to addressing SRGBV. The report presented by Plan International at the Consortium event outlines eight key principles for effective government action to tackle SRGBV, based on their extensive experience and that of other actors working on both policy and practice.²² The report is a valuable tool for any agency engaging in advocacy initiatives, and many of the lessons have been incorporated across this brief. Policy interventions must be supported by sufficient and credible data on the nature and scope of SRGBV, which is severely lacking in many countries, and evidence from emerging promising practices.

Research in Liberia²³ emphasised the need for safer learning environments, improved awareness about gender inequality and gendered experiences, and better reporting mechanisms for survivors. On the basis of these results, organisations that were part of the research consortium have developed a comprehensive advocacy strategy to ensure that the research findings are used to influence changes in policy and practice.

The use of communication technologies is extremely important as it creates connectivity between people and is a good medium to get people talking about issues. Furthermore, programmes which incorporate resourceful and appropriate use of the media have yielded promising results.

²² Greene, Robles, Stout, and Suvilaakso (2012) *op. cit.*

²³ This research was conducted in 2010 by a research consortium comprised of Liberian Government Ministries with international NGOs including Concern Worldwide, IBIS, Norwegian Refugee Council, Save the Children. The research was conducted by Rutgers University (New Jersey, USA) and Cuttington University (Liberia).

Various forms of media can be effectively utilised to engage in relevant debates, publicise activities, raise public awareness, present gender equality and SRGBV as a discussion topic in the public forum, and motivate society to reconsider attitudes and behaviours that are taken for granted. Plan has successfully collaborated with media institutions in many countries in the production of sketches, jingles and spot messages, often developed and broadcast by children, to raise awareness on local and national radio.²⁴

However raising public awareness must be done in an extremely sensitive manner as children who speak out against SRGBV may become more vulnerable without the support of referral structures in schools and the wider community, and of legislative frameworks at the macro level. It is essential that legislative frameworks ensure the unequivocal protection of children who speak out, and thus that governments be included in advocacy programmes.

6. Staff Training and Commitment

In order to ascertain the underlying gender theories in operation in any given context, and to design and implement effective SRGBV programmes, it is essential that agency staff and partner organisations be trained in theories and practices related to gender and GBV, and be provided with the tools to analyse contexts and perform gender analyses. Such training can lead to a better understanding of how harmful gender norms and stereotypes are linked to child rights violations, including SRGBV, and can equip staff to apply this learning to programmes so that root causes are addressed, and sustainable, transformative results emerge. Organisations need to address contextual specificities, assumptions, silences, and cultural sensitivities and perceptions in such training modules.

Appropriate training helps clarify the link between gender norms, power relations and SRGBV, highlights key areas such as reporting procedures, and equips school staff with tools to help prevent and respond to SRGBV.

It is important to have ‘champions’ who can speak out and raise issues with school staff and others. Such champions can help to win over public opinion.

7. Participation, Voice and Representation

Girls and boys must be recognised as key participants in any intervention. The school institution, however, is often organised in such a way that pupils do not have a voice. When people have no voice, their best tool not to comply with the power structure is silence, and thus participation and progress is impossible. A successful strategy implemented in schools to counteract this is the establishment of student clubs or committees. Such clubs create informal safe spaces where the pupils, rather than authority figures, can find their voices and set the agenda for discussion, which can be empowering. For example, a 15 year old girl in El Salvador states that the activities linked to her school committee demonstrate “that our opinion matters and we are an important part of our school.”²⁵

Other successful strategies that have been implemented by Plan International include child-led media, lobbying and awareness raising activities, as well as the training of peer-to-peer child educators. For example a theatre group consisting of girls and boys in Ecuador successfully developed and staged a production promoting the right to good treatment in local schools. The children’s group was subsequently invited to give interviews on local radio, television, and one of Ecuador’s largest daily newspapers.²⁶

8. Appropriate Design and Use of Institutional Resources

Facilities with weak institutional capacity and poor infrastructure can make boys and girls vulnerable to GBV. Hence school resources must be designed – and where necessary re-designed – appropriately, and utilised correctly. All spaces, especially toilet areas, need to be safe.

²⁴ Plan International Global Advocacy Team (2012) *op. cit.*, p 8.

²⁵ Plan International Global Advocacy Team (2012) *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁶ Plan International Global Advocacy Team (2012) *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Programmes and policies that offer support to victims and establish accountability for perpetrators must become a standard part of education systems and community-based child protection mechanisms. Effective safety and reporting mechanisms, and school staff codes of conduct, must be established and respected in schools. A child should never end up in a situation where there is only one designated person s/he can report to, as that person may be the abuser. Suggestion boxes, which give children the opportunity to report cases of bullying, sexual abuse or corporal punishment, have proven to be very successful in a number of countries. As one girl in Mwanza district, Malawi states: "Suggestion boxes have given us the opportunity to report abuse without fear."²⁷

Even the curriculum is a resource that needs to be scrutinised. There are both explicit and implicit gender messages in relation to what texts contain and do not contain, and in the composition of staff and the subjects they teach. The notion of 'curriculum watch' is becoming increasingly important. Both Concern Worldwide and Plan International have engaged in curriculum development and review processes in different countries, in order to identify and promote the revision of material that promotes inequitable gender norms and stereotypes, such as stories in textbooks, and to enhance the promotion of gender equality and non-violence through education materials.

9. Inclusion of Men and Boys

Whole communities, including men and boys, must be involved to change harmful attitudes and shift social norms. The question of masculinity is critical to the issue of GBV and, similar to girls, boys are negatively affected by the gender roles that they are expected to fulfil and are also vulnerable to violence.

Thus men and boys should be seen as part of the solution in any attempts to change harmful attitudes and shift social norms in relation to SRGBV. Interventions should aim to redefine deeply embedded norms and to change learned attitudes and behaviours that increase the risk of men and boys perpetuating SRGBV, and empower them to be integral partners in combating violence against girls and young women.

Conclusion

Numerous INGOs, civil society groups, and other actors are engaged in programmes and initiatives globally which attempt to address the issue of SRGBV. To date, however, insufficient research has been conducted concerning the impact of these programmes or even the criteria through which these elements might be assessed. Consequently those wishing to lobby to scale up promising initiatives, to influence government policy or to bring SRGBV to the attention of the post-2015 development agenda are lacking fundamental tools and data. Good practice needs to be based on a solid theoretical grounding of gender and GBV. Nine key learning points emerged from the learning session with Plan International and Concern Worldwide which point towards promising practice. Although further research is required before we can arrive at a definitive framework for best practice, these nine points will help to direct organisations regarding appropriate and successful planning, design and implementation of SRGBV programmes. It is also envisaged that they will assist agencies in equipping themselves with the tools and data required for SRGBV lobbying with regard to the post-2015 agenda.

²⁷ Plan International Global Advocacy Team (2012) *op. cit.*, p. 12.

The Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence comprises Irish Human Rights, humanitarian and development organisations together with Irish Aid a directorate of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Irish Defence Forces working together to tackle gender based violence.

For more information on the Consortium please go to www.gbv.ie

