

Webinar: “Local and Regional Governments against sexual violence”

23 May 2023

Report

Introduction

According to the [United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#), the term “*violence against women*” refers to “*any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*”.

Violence against women includes **sexual violence**; [which violates the fundamental rights of victims](#), including their dignity and their physical and psychological integrity.

Sexual violence includes rape and all assaults that do not involve sexual penetration but equally affect the privacy and sexual integrity of the victims. There are different definitions of rape and sexual assault around the world, depending on national legislation. Generally speaking, rape is any act of sexual penetration, whether vaginal, anal or oral, that is performed without the victim's free consent.

If in the collective imagination sexual violence can be summed up in the image of a woman assaulted by a stranger in a dark alley, most sexual assaults follow an entirely different setting. The first places where sexual violence occurs are the family and the couple.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a form of sexual violence which refers to all procedures on the external female sexual organs that are performed without medical reason. It is a form of sexual violence that is often carried out very early in childhood: [at least 200 million women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 have undergone female genital mutilation](#) in the [31 countries](#) where the practice is concentrated. Of these victims, 44 million are girls under the age of 15.

Sexual violence is used as a weapon of war and has always been present in conflicts situations. Wartime sexual violence has several objectives: to terrorize the population; to take families apart; to destroy communities and in some cases to change the ethnic composition of a population.

Sexual violence has lasting and significant **physical and psychological health consequences**. Victims have a high risk of developing **chronic psychotraumatic disorders**, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly if the violence began during childhood.

Sexual violence is a violation of human rights, and Local and Regional Governments also have a duty and responsibility to take action and implement public policies to address it. This is why the Seine-Saint-Denis Department's Observatory on Violence against Women and UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights Committee have joined forces through the international program "[Territories caring Territories for women victims of violence](#)". The program aims at fostering international networking and advocacy on violence against women at local level, with a view to build *caring territories* for women victims of violence. In this context, this webinar aimed **at initiating a dialogue between Local and Regional Governments and civil society** in different regions in order to exchange ideas on the measures to be taken against sexual violence; as well as to make visible the different forms of sexual violence in different Cities and Territories worldwide, including FGM.

Key messages

On sexual violence:

Many Local and Regional Governments have committed to the fight sexual violence against women, notably by setting up initiatives focused on **awareness-raising and prevention**. This consists in information campaigns; trainings for professionals and schools, community events and collaboration with local associations.

Local public policies enable the adoption of **systematic and coordinated approaches between different departments to prevent, raise awareness of and eradicate sexual violence**. Several participants have highlighted the role of **Local and Regional Governments in implementing specific policies for the most marginalized groups**, such as women with disabilities, deaf and mute women, indigenous women and children. Cities are also becoming increasingly committed in the fight against **sexual violence in public spaces and on public transport**. All these actions contribute to change social norms and establish a culture of respect and safety for everyone, also thanks to the involvement of a number of local and community players.

Taking care of victims of sexual violence addressing both their health and psychological needs is essential. Local and Regional Governments have highlighted the need to guarantee access to appropriate health services, such as gynecology and obstetrics; as well as to ensure **specialized medical follow-up** to carry out the necessary examinations for unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape; STI screening; and to collect forensic material. It is essential to provide **psychological support** for victims of sexual violence, both in terms of psychotherapy and to address psychotrauma. The communities stressed the importance of **coordinating collaboration between health professionals, psychologists and specialized associations** to ensure holistic assistance tailored to victims' needs.

Sexual violence exists **in intimate relationships**, and Local and Regional Governments are already acting towards the recognition of this form of violence as part of their support and protection measures. **This includes access to emergency shelters, hotlines and helplines, or also legal advice**. Some Cities also stressed the importance of creating communication and coordination mechanisms to centralize information and ensure a smooth follow-up of all the victims.

Finally, the legal system plays a crucial role in the fight against sexual violence. Local and Regional Governments called for collaboration with national bodies to **strengthen laws and procedures and**

guarantee an effective, rapid and fair judicial response. This involves trainings for law enforcement and for the professionals in the justice; improving reporting and prosecution mechanisms; as well as raising victims' awareness of their rights and the legal remedies available.

On Female genital mutilation (FGM):

The two most common forms of female genital mutilation are **excision** (removal of part of the clitoris and labia minora) and **infibulation** (almost complete closure of the vulval orifice, with or without excision). Female genital mutilation constitutes an attack on the physical integrity of the women and girls who are its victims. These practices aim at absolute control of women's bodies, including symbolic and psychic control, and are mostly performed on children and young girls. Raising awareness on female genital mutilation and its consequences is essential to understand the link between genital mutilation and women's development (work, education, etc.).

Female genital mutilation is practised mainly in Africa, but also in parts of Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia...) and the Middle East (Egypt, Iraq, Yemen...), and also exists in Europe and at all levels of government.

As in the case of sexual assault and rape, the Local and Regional Governments recognized the importance of **transversal approaches** involving all the players involved in the fight against female genital mutilation, especially in territories where such violence is not prescribed by law. These approaches allow to mobilize a wide range of expertise, perspectives and resources to implement effective local public policies. Civil society, associations, political institutions, community and religious leaders have a role to play in raising awareness, preventing and protecting women from female genital mutilation. By working together, these actors can coordinate their efforts, share best practices and develop coherent territorial public policies adapted to local realities. This strengthens the protection of women, promotes sustainable change at a societal level and helps to reduce these harmful traditional practices.

Initiatives of Local and Regional Governments:

- The City of **Santiago in Chile** has set up campaigns on sexual violence in public places and schools to raise awareness on the diversity and particularities of women victims of violence. The city is based on the idea of preventing violence through the participation of women and the notion *auto-cuidado*¹, fostering an integral approach to health, and strengthening economic empowerment. In this sense, Santiago has set up the *Me Quiero Me Cuido* (I Love Myself, I Take Care of Myself) on auto-cuidado; as well as a school to equip women with technological skills. In collaboration with the national level, Santiago manages the Women's Center, which provides care and guarantees access to justice for the most marginalised women, such as those with disabilities. In addition, an Emergency Kit has been set up, containing clothing and basic necessities for women victims of sexual violence.

- **The City of Bogotá** has implemented an intersectoral strategy focusing on prevention and care for victims of sexual violence, with an emphasis on emergency health care, cooperation with the police, and the justice system. Women victims of violence can benefit from free legal

¹ Auto cuidado is a Spanish-speaking notion that refers to feminist practices of "taking care of oneself", i. women give themselves personal time for their well-being.

advice and consultations. In addition, the City provides technical and legal assistance to healthcare professionals on specific procedures to address sexual violence such as activating a code white, or ensuring that medical examinations are conducted by the doctor chosen by the victim. This assistance also aims at fostering the prescription of antiretrovirals; information on the right to abortion; as well as the collection of evidence for medical and legal reports. Two telephone hotlines are also available.

Through its forensic doctors, the City's Women's Bureau carries out forensic examinations to be used in criminal proceedings. These analyses reveal that over 50% of the aggressors belonged to the victim's family, or are the partner or ex-partner of the victim. These statistics have allowed to combine criminal and civil measures within the framework of family proceedings: child custody, alimony, divorce, etc.

Concerning violence in public space, the City has implemented a reporting protocol for victims of sexual violence on public transport. Public transport drivers can also take learning courses with a gender approach, and free courses on gender equality are available to all the inhabitants. The city has also focused on the rehabilitation of public spaces, by identifying and geolocating places where violence takes place.

- **The City of Koulikoro** is actively involved in the fight against female genital mutilation, alongside the Region, associations and civil society in Mali. Although excision is not criminalized in Mali, the city recognizes the importance of this issue. Together with the Regional Department for the Promotion of Women and the Family, the city provides institutional support to women by facilitating collaboration between the different stakeholders, including community and religious leaders. The Local and Regional Governments of the Region deeply rely on local and international associations to raise awareness on the issue among the inhabitants. This includes home-visits, public conferences; as well as and awareness-raising activities in health centers.
- **The City of Quito** has distributed the "violentometro" by printing it on electricity bills issued by the City, along with emergency numbers. The city has introduced measures to foster access to housing for women victims of violence and their children. Quito has also promoted actions to prevent and protect against harassment on public transport.
- **The Department of Seine-Saint-Denis** has emphasized the importance of "detecting" to prevent female genital mutilation. Identifying situations of FGM in medical environments allows women to change their view on it, and to be informed about its medical treatment and – eventually- have a surgery to repair the vulva. Through "detection" during women's pregnancy, doctors and nurses can prevent the perpetuation of such violence, particularly against children.
Since genital mutilation leads to gynecological and obstetrical problems; and it causes significant psychological and physiological issues; treatment must be multidisciplinary. In this sense, the Department of Seine-Saint-Denis is undertaking prevention initiatives aimed at young people in secondary schools; as well as raise-awareness activities on laws on the matter, including engaging with the local diasporas. Indeed, in France, laws are protective: genital mutilation is punishable even if performed abroad ("*extraterritoriality of the crime*").

Civil society initiatives:

- Mina Gaget (psychologist) reported on the work of **Panzi Hospital in the Democratic Republic of Congo**, run by Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr. Mukwege. The hospital offers a full range of medical and psychosocial services to women and girls who have undergone genital mutilation and rape. These services include reconstructive surgery, obstetric care, support for psychological trauma and social support. In addition, Panzi Hospital is also involved in awareness-raising, education and advocacy on female genital mutilation and sexual violence.

- **The WILDAF Association in Mali** is committed to awareness-raising and education initiatives; as well as community mobilization; in order to eliminate sexual violence, especially female genital mutilation. The organization works closely with local communities, women's organizations, government's institutions and other stakeholders. WILDAF also advocates the adoption of laws and public policies that protect women. In Koulikoro, the organization works with the Mayor's office, which funds actions to prevent female genital mutilation; as well as to address problems of housing for victims and to ensure childcare through a regional plan which is currently being drafted.

- **The Kullimaaroo - Holistic Center for Women's Care in Casamance**, provides care for women victims of sexual violence. Located in southern Senegal, Casamance is a region where armed conflict has been going on for 40 years, which has overexposed women to sexual violence. **The Plateforme des Femmes pour la Paix** aims to combat sexual violence in conflict zones and the socio-cultural factors that enable it. The Platform has identified and trained women leaders and religious leaders to raise awareness, refer victims and provide care. Awareness-raising activities have been carried out through radio broadcasts; as well as in schools. Through the Center – which represents a safe space - women can benefit from emergency shelter and from activities aimed at fostering their social and economic reintegration and empowerment. Women also have access to specialized psychological support and tailored health services including medical check-ups, reproductive and sexual health care, and screening for sexually transmitted diseases. The center also strives to promote the reintegration of girls and women who have been victims of sexual violence through access to schooling and physiological activities for the development of self-confidence. Specific educational programs on the issue are also set up. The center's major challenge is to ensure that its resources are sustained to guarantee continuity of care for victims.