

Local governments fight against sexual violence

INTRODUCTION

The International Observatory of Violence against Women (↳[OIVF](#)) presents in this factsheet theoretical thematic elements to understand the impact of violence against women in the public space, while sharing practical examples of local governments to combat them, with the aim of encouraging other territories to adopt them and take measures against this kind of violence.

Sexual violence, understanding the scope and danger for girls and women

The ↳[Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#) defines violence against women as “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.”

Sexual violence takes different forms and includes a range of attacks such as **rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, prostitution, sexual slavery, domestic sexual violence, and sexual violence against minors**. These acts can occur in a variety of contexts, including within marriage, at work, in the public sphere and **during armed conflict**. Whatever form it takes, sexual violence aims to **exert control over and humiliate victims, undermining their dignity and physical and psychological integrity**.

Statistics on sexual violence highlight the magnitude of the problem:

- According to the ↳[World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), **around 1 in 3 women** worldwide have been victims of physical and/or sexual violence, most often perpetrated by an intimate partner; **that is, 736 million women worldwide**.
- According to UN Women, at world level, ↳[6% of women have reported that they have been subjected to sexual violence from someone other than their husband or partner](#). This figure is probably underestimated.
- **15 million adolescents in the world (15 to 19 years)** have been forced to have sexual relations.
- According to data from 30 countries, ↳[only 1% of them](#) used professional assistance services.

Sexual violence is condemned by several instruments of international law, including:

- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (→[CEDAW](#)) 1979.
- The →[UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#) 1993.

Why is there so much violence against women?

Throughout the history of societies, men have appropriated women's bodies to ensure that their offspring are truly theirs, in particular by controlling women's sexuality and reproduction. This is the meaning of infibulation in certain ethnic groups, of chastity belts in the Middle Ages and of confinement in all societies.

Sexual violence: what are the consequences for women and girls?

The consequences of this sexual violence are profound and long-lasting, affecting every aspect of the victims' lives.

Physically, the after-effects include chronic pain, genitourinary damage, sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies in cases of rape. These physical traumas persist long after the attack and affect the physical health of the victims.

Psychologically, victims often suffer from depression with a risk of suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, and eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia). Shame and guilt are also common and contribute to lowering self-esteem.

The social consequences are significant and affect various aspects of victims' daily lives. This violence can lead to academic, family, relationship, legal and professional difficulties. A →[WHO survey](#) found that women who are victims of intimate partner violence **have one and a half times the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections compared to those who were not victims.**

Local governments must measure the magnitude of the phenomenon in their own territory, highlight this violence and get involved in order to protect victims.

Measuring the scope of violence against women at the local level

In order to combat sexual violence, the extent of the phenomenon in one's own territory must be measured. Work can be done to make violence visible and improve local actors' understanding.



LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION

Studies by the Observatory of Violence against Women (OVF) – Seine-Saint-Denis Departmental Council, France

OVF conducts research covering various aspects of sexual violence. One of them focuses specifically on sexual violence against children, allowing for a better understanding of the scope of this violence and its consequences. These studies feature best practices for professionals, placing emphasis on identifying signs of

violence, protecting victims, and providing comprehensive care. The results of this research contribute to the establishment of more effective systems and public policies by offering concrete recommendations to improve prevention, intervention and support for victims of sexual violence.

Training professionals: a priority to end sexual violence

Given the multiple consequences of sexual violence, the needs of victims are diverse and cumulative. Specialised support in post-trauma treatment is needed.

During sexual violence, victims experience a very strong emotional and psychological shock. The brain enters a “dissociative state”; that is, an altered state of consciousness and the impression of being a spectator of oneself in order to survive the sensation of imminent death. Subsequently, the “↳traumatic memory” can erase the scenes of violence from their immediate and conscious memories.

Violence creates a state of stress and can cause memory disorders: amnesia and emotional traumatic memory. This emotional traumatic memory is uncontrollable and hypersensitive. It leads the victim to continually relive the traumatic scene, in thoughts or nightmares. Victims are often exposed to various forms of reminiscences (flashbacks, anxiety attacks, depressive states, suicidal thoughts, etc.) that will impact different aspects of their psychological, physical, social, professional and family life. Given these consequences, it is not unusual to see addictive behaviours or sleep disorders (nightmares, insomnia). This uncontrollable behaviour can be destabilising for the professionals who support the victim if they are not trained to allow them to explain the violence they have suffered as soon as possible.

It is therefore essential that professionals in the field know how to **help reveal violence as early as possible to prevent it from worsening and recurring**. Training in systematic questioning and active listening are effective methods to help victims prioritise their needs and guide them correctly: such as comprehensive, medical, legal and social support.

Local governments are responsible for creating local networks of professionals in the field in order to organise the best possible care in their territory. This multidisciplinary support involves developing a culture of collaboration with the competent services, state actors or associations (justice, police, health, civil society, etc.).

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION

Preventing sexual violence in festive events – Minas Gerais, Brazil

The Sub-Secretariat for Policies on Women's Rights of the State of Minas Gerais in Brazil launched the «*Fale agora*» (Speak Now) protocol initiative to combat sexist and sexual violence during Carnival festivities. This initiative includes in-depth training sessions for samba schools, event

organisers, as well as other representatives of the leisure and tourism sector. The aim is to raise awareness among these actors on how to prevent sexual violence and protect victims during Carnival, a time when these incidents can be more frequent.

Training for professionals in the field by the Observatory of Violence against Women – Jenin, Palestine

In order to effectively support women victims of violence in Jenin, the Observatory organised training for the city's social worker teams, delivered by different professionals: local police officers, human rights lawyers, officials from the Social Action of the Governorate and female lawyers from the Family Court.

These professionals provide different modules corresponding to the different stages and needs of victims and help improve the skills of social workers in providing care. Multidisciplinary training is an approach that the Jenin Observatory prioritises through the complementarity of the members of its steering committee.



The impact of sexual violence: constructing a local response to provide reparation for the victims

The role of local governments is crucial in supporting and monitoring reparation for victims of sexual violence. By developing adapted tools, venues and systems, local governments can offer a full range of resources to meet the physical, psychological and legal needs of victims. They must also be able to ensure coordination between different local actors to enable an integrated, coherent and continuous approach to reparation. Finally, where possible, grouping different local responses in specific municipal centres or hospital services facilitates access and identification of resources for residents, while providing a safe environment for comprehensive care.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION

Psychotrauma clinics, Seine-Saint-Denis Departmental Council

The [↳psychotraumatology clinics](#), available in 13 towns in the region, enable traumas caused by sexual violence to be treated. These clinics offer support to victims,

particularly women and children, to overcome their traumas and regain emotional stability.

Comprehensive care centre for victims of sexist and sexual violence – Cocody, Abidjan, Ivory Coast

Cocody Town Council, in collaboration with the association [↳Akwaba Mousso](#), has opened a shelter and accommodation centre for women victims of violence, offering a range of reactive, preventive and reparation services, ranging from

counselling to medical care. The main objective is to ensure that women in the municipality know who to turn to in case of violence. It offers free comprehensive care to women victims of all types of violence.

Pichincha Humana, help centre – Pichincha, Ecuador

The province of Pichincha has invested in promoting women's sexual and reproductive health and rights through public policies and a specialised centre

within the framework of the [↳Pichincha Humana](#) programme, which also offers a free abortion service in cases of rape.

Prevention: reduction of sexual violence and transformation of societies from the local level for a culture of equality between women and men.

Sexual violence is a crime that is perpetrated continuously in different spheres of socialisation: private, public, professional and media. Prevention campaigns are the first tools to raise awareness about equality and build a common culture at local level that condemns sexual violence and aggressors. They are also essential vectors of information for victims who wish to seek help. The diversity of campaigns allows each local government to get involved according to its resources, local reality and priorities and to reduce violence within its territory.

Local governments can get involved in this task of prevention and of promotion of a culture of gender equality and fight against sexism in all the field of their territories.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION

Prevention and support for victims of sexual violence through empowerment and access to justice – Santiago, Chile

The city of Santiago has developed awareness campaigns on sexual violence, deployed in public places and schools. Santiago emphasises the prevention of violence by encouraging the participation of women and promoting independence through comprehensive health and economic programmes. Among these efforts are the self-care programmes *Me Quiero Me Cuido* (I Love Myself I Care

for Me) and the School of Technology for Social Care. In collaboration with the State, the municipality manages the Women's Centre to guarantee access to justice for isolated women, including those with disabilities. An emergency kit has also been created that provides clothing and basic necessities to women victims of sexual violence.

Sexual violence in situations of armed conflict

Sexual violence, particularly systematic rape, is deliberately used as a weapon of war in many conflicts. This violence serves to destroy communities, break family ties, humiliate, punish and take control of populations.

On 3 April 2023, the United Nations adopted the [Arms Trade Treaty](#), the first international instrument linking arms trade and sexual violence against women.

Local governments must also play a role in these contexts by becoming involved in collecting legal evidence of war crimes committed in their territory and in responding to the main health, social and legal needs of victims. Therefore, there is a key link between governments and comprehensive care centres for women victims of violence in armed conflict.



And you, what are you doing on a local level? Tell us about your experience!

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