
WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)

Violence against women and girls is an umbrella term for any violence that is directed at women and girls *because* they are women and girls and/or any form of violence which disproportionately affects women and girls.

Violence directed at women explicitly linked to their womanhood is sex and gender-based. It is violence intended to establish or reinforce hierarchies and perpetuate inequalities between men and women. For this reason the UK government now adopts an understanding of violence against women as both a cause and consequence of gender inequality.

The United Nations Declaration (1993) on the elimination of violence against women, which the UK government has adopted, defines VAWG 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.’

The 8 strands of VAWG are:

1. Domestic Violence
2. Sexual violence
3. Stalking and Harassment
4. “Honour” based violence
5. Forced marriage
6. Female Genital Mutilation
7. Prostitution & trafficking
8. Sexual exploitation

Sexual Violence

There is no universally agreed definition of sexual violence. One way in which sexual violence can be defined is:

‘any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.’

Coercion can cover a whole spectrum of practices. Apart from physical force, it may involve psychological intimidation, emotional manipulation, blackmail or other threats – for instance, the threat of physical harm, of being dismissed from a job or of not obtaining a job that is sought.

Sexual violence includes a continuum of behaviours, which are perpetrated in a wide range of circumstances and settings and with a range of relationships to the perpetrator/s.

These can include, for example;

- rape within marriage or intimate relationships
- rape by strangers
- systematic rape during armed conflict
- childhood sexual abuse and exploitation
- trafficking and sexual exploitation of adults
- unwanted sexual advances or sexual harassment
- sexual assault and assault by penetration
- image based sexual abuse, aka. “Revenge Pornography” and “Up-skirting”
- violent acts against the sexual integrity of women, including female genital mutilation and obligatory inspections for virginity

Sexual violence occurs throughout the world. Available data suggests that one in three women globally may experience sexual violence, one in four by an intimate partner, up to one-third of adolescent girls report their first sexual experience as being forced, and one in ten women have experienced rape or attempted rape.

Sexual violence has a profound impact on someone’s life, including their physical, emotional and mental health. As well as causing physical injury, it is associated with an increased risk of a range of sexual and reproductive health problems, with both immediate and long-term consequences. Its impact on mental health can be as serious as its physical impact, and may be equally long lasting. Deaths following sexual violence may be as a result of suicide, HIV infection or murder – the latter occurring either during a sexual assault or subsequently, as a murder of “honour”. Sexual violence can also profoundly affect the social wellbeing of survivors; their ability to work and/or continue their education may be affected, along with being and feeling stigmatised and ostracized by their families and others as a consequence.

Sexual violence is a form of violence against women and girls in that it disproportionately is committed against women by men as well as the fact that women are targeted for sexual violence *because* they are women.

Sexual violence and all forms of VAWG are not inevitable. Working to end sexual violence means challenging all forms of violence against women and girls, drawing links between the different types of violence, abuse, discrimination and harassment women and girls experience both here in the UK and around the world. This means exploring and understanding all forms of violence against women and girls as existing on a continuum and being rooted in male entitlement, power and control and wider gender inequality.