



# Sexual Violence Research Agenda



Global Forum  
for Health Research  
HELPING CORRECT THE 10 | 90 GAP

Sexual Violence Research Initiative, an initiative of the Global Forum for Health Research, is hosted by the Medical Research Council, South Africa.

## SVRI aim

The SVRI aims to promote research on sexual violence and to generate empirical data to ensure that sexual violence is recognised as a legitimate public health problem.

## SVRI objectives

- Improve knowledge and understanding of sexual violence internationally
- Build capacity in sexual violence research
- Increase awareness of sexual violence as a legitimate public health problem through communication and information
- Strengthen the support base for research on sexual violence

## SVRI activities

- Interactive website on sexual violence research
- E-mail and web-based discussions to promote dialogue between researchers, programmers, funders and policy-makers
- Fundraising and support for research on sexual violence

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## Background

There is increasing recognition of the pervasiveness of sexual violence across the world, yet it remains a neglected area of research. Most of the published research on sexual violence has been undertaken in a very small number of countries. If we are to prevent and respond to sexual violence effectively, more research is needed. To drive this process forward, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) has facilitated the development of a research agenda for sexual violence. It is a first step in the process of identifying key research gaps and sharing them with researchers, funders of research, policy makers and other key stakeholders.

## What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is defined as:

*“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 to the survivors/victims, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.”*<sup>1</sup>

Sexual violence can take place in different circumstances and settings. These include coerced sex in marriage and dating relationships, rape by strangers, systematic rape during armed conflict, sexual harassment, sexual abuse of children, sexual abuse of people with mental and physical disabilities, forced prostitution and sexual trafficking, child marriage, denial of the right to use contraception, forced abortion and violent acts against the sexual integrity of women, including female genital cutting and obligatory inspections for virginity.

## Developing a research agenda

Developing a research agenda is a complex process. Many forces influence what can be defined as a research priority, and research needs will differ from country to country and even within countries. It is therefore not useful to try and provide a detailed list of research aims and objectives, but rather to provide an indication of where major gaps lie.

This document identifies focus areas for research, within which broad priority areas are outlined. Priority has been given to research that will:

- facilitate response to and prevention of sexual violence;
- address issues that particularly impact lower and middle income countries;
- provide a sound practical and empirical foundation for interventions, policy and advocacy programmes within countries, and at regional and global levels.

<sup>1</sup> Jewkes, R, Sen, P & Garcia-Moreno C, Chapter 6. Sexual Violence. In Krug EG et al., eds. *World report on violence and health*, Geneva, World Health Organisation (2002)

The agenda was informed by a review of published literature on sexual violence; a series of SVRI facilitated international expert meetings and discussions, as well as recommendations arising from the following chapters of the World Report on Violence and Health: sexual violence; child abuse and neglect by parents and other caregivers; and self-directed violence.

## Why develop a research agenda?

The aim of this sexual violence research agenda is to focus attention on and funnel limited resources to redress knowledge gaps. The research agenda serves to:

- assist researchers to identify study questions within the areas of highest need;
- assist donors in shaping funding programmes that are based on research gaps and priorities, and promote best use of limited research resources; and
- inform the development of responsive and effective sexual violence services, prevention and advocacy programmes.

## Who is the agenda for?

It is envisaged that the agenda will be an important resource for the following:

- researchers
- funders/donor agencies
- policy makers
- service planners
- gender and human rights advocates

## Key focus areas for sexual violence research

### Key focus area 1: Nature, prevalence, social context and risk factors associated with sexual violence

Our knowledge of the magnitude and the nature of the problem of sexual violence is limited. Data are available for few countries and for few forms of sexual violence. Very little research has been conducted on men's risk of perpetration of different forms of sexual violence as well as the social context in which it occurs. Questions include: what puts particular women and children at risk for sexual violence, how do ideals about gendered behaviours of men and women contribute to the creation of risk, and what role does the apportionment of blame play? The lack of visibility of the problem on agendas of policy makers and donors is undoubtedly influenced by the paucity of information, and the sensitivity of the subject matter. Effective interventions to prevent sexual violence cannot be developed without a better understanding of it. Priority areas for research include:

- assessment of the prevalence and patterns of sexual violence in a range of settings, using a standardised research tool for measuring sexual coercion;
- identification of the risk factors for perpetration of sexual violence;
- description of the mental and physical health and social consequences of sexual violence;
- evaluation of the social context in which different forms of sexual violence are located, and the aspects of societies that engender risk of, or provide space for, sexual violence including risk arising from ideals of gendered behaviour.

### Key focus area 2: Appropriateness and effectiveness of sexual violence services

Many survivors/victims of sexual violence receive assistance, care and support from family and friends and often a range of other agencies, including non-governmental organisations, social services, health workers, the police and legal systems. Globally, responses are very diverse, with differences influenced by the level of resources, status of women, and a range of other factors. Some agencies focus more on the apprehension and punishment of the perpetrator, whereas others aim more to promote healing of the survivor/victim, and sometimes her family or community. There is a need to build a greater understanding of priorities for services for survivors/victims of sexual violence, including survivors/victims, family members and communities, and of what interventions are effective in responding to sexual violence in different settings. Priority areas for research include:

- assessment of formal services that are available, the level of resources, and degree to which staff are specifically trained and prepared to respond to sexual violence;

- description of the pathways of informal and formal help-seeking by survivors/victims after sexual violence, the responses encountered and the barriers to meeting their needs;
- documentation of the factors that exacerbate distress as well as those that facilitate recovery of mental and physical health following a sexual assault;
- evaluation of the use and impact of medical forensic evidence on the legal resolution of sexual assault cases;
- description of the relative impact of different forms of response to sexual violence and models of care on recovery after sexual violence and secondary prevention, including legal outcomes.

### Key focus area 3: Sexual violence prevention

Prevention of sexual violence is ultimately the most important goal in the field of sexual violence and there are many different approaches to it. There is a need for interventions with men, families, communities and those operating at a societal level to prevent sexual violence and to enhance protection for women. Interventions need to be developed with a rigorous empirical base. There is a need to evaluate and describe the impact of specific interventions, and to understand what may account for changes in societies where the rate of sexual violence is changing. Priority areas for research include:

- development and testing of the effectiveness of theoretically-based interventions that seek to prevent the many forms of sexual violence;
- evaluation of existing programmes that seek to prevent sexual violence;
- adaptation and testing of successful programmes more widely in diverse settings;
- evaluation of settings where the rate of sexual violence is changing to determine the most important factors at play.

### Key focus area 4: Sexual violence and restorative justice

Across the world, only a tiny proportion of survivors/victims of sexual violence ever see their rapist punished. There is increasing awareness that the requirements of legal proceedings are often in conflict with the needs of sexual violence survivors/victims. Experiences of the adversarial court processes post-sexual violence are often traumatic, requiring the survivor/victim to confront their assailant, to defend their case and re-live the experience. Restorative justice aims to repair harm done to a survivor/victim of sexual violence, (and where appropriate to their families/communities) through offender acceptance of responsibility, reparations and rehabilitation, whether as a supplementary process, or an alternative, to conventional court proceedings. The extent to which alternative justice approaches are available, responsive to the needs of survivors/victims, perpetrators, families and their communities, and prevent further sexual violence requires investigation.

Priority areas for research include:

- identification of survivors /victims needs following sexual violence before and during restorative justice and security concerns afterwards, and the extent to which different programmes meet these needs;
- examination of public attitudes to inform how alternative justice is designed and presented to the community;
- evaluation of restorative processes introduced at various phases of the criminal process including pre- and post charging, in prison, upon release, and as a form of community monitoring and reintegration, and to determine the relative benefits of these models;
- development of standards and evaluation methods for restorative justice services and programmes.

## Key focus area 5: Sexual violence in conflict and emergency settings

There is a need to better understand the vulnerabilities of women and children in conflict and emergency situations. Further research, documentation and analysis is required in order to try and determine the magnitude of sexual violence in conflict and emergency settings, to prevent sexual violence during and after emergency/conflict situations, and to respond effectively to the needs of survivors/victims of sexual violence. Priority areas for research include:

- development of methods and tools for describing the nature and extent of sexual violence among emergency-affected populations, with particular emphasis on the context of risk and ways to prevent sexual violence in conflict emergency settings;
- investigation of the needs of women and children in emergency settings and what they require from the health care sector and the extent to which this sector is equipped to respond;
- evaluation and documentation of good practice with regard to providing effective services which meet women's needs and minimise risks for women and children during and after emergencies.

## Key focus area 6: Child sexual abuse

Lack of good data on the nature and extent of child sexual abuse hampers the development of effective prevention programmes and services for survivors/victims of child sexual abuse. Prevention efforts and policies must directly address children, their caregivers and the environments in which they live in order to prevent abuse from occurring and to deal effectively with cases of abuse and neglect that have taken place. The concerted and coordinated efforts of a range of sectors are required here, and public health researchers and practitioners can play a key role by leading and facilitating the process.

Priority areas for research include:

- investigation of the nature, extent and social context of child sexual abuse in different cultural settings, using standardised instruments and methodologies;
- exploration of barriers and facilitators of disclosure of child sexual abuse and how responses to disclosure determine whether the abuse continues and if and when the child is able to receive protection, support and appropriate services;
- an understanding of the short and long-term health, developmental and social consequences of child sexual abuse in a range of settings;
- investigation of the availability and quality of services for children who have been, are being or are at risk of being sexually abused;
- identification of alternative, more sensitive justice approaches to child sexual abuse;
- exploration of risk and protective factors for child sexual abuse;
- development and testing of theoretically-based prevention programmes for child sexual abuse;
- development and testing interventions to improve the response of services to child survivors/victims.

## Key focus area 7: Human trafficking for sexual exploitation

The numerous challenges of researching a sensitive and hidden issue like trafficking are acknowledged, however, a sound understanding of trafficking and its implications is essential for policy, services and legislation. Trafficking research is greatly hampered by lack of a shared definition of trafficking and standardised methodologies. Studies that advance our understanding of human trafficking for sexual exploitation are needed in order to develop and strengthen programmes to respond to and prevent human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Priority areas for research include:

- investigation of the nature, extent and social context of human trafficking for sexual exploitation in different cultural settings, using standardised instruments and methodologies;
- description of the medical, social, psychological and economic impact of human trafficking for sexual exploitation;
- investigation of the factors that exacerbate or diminish the extent of trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation;
- investigation of the availability and quality of services for women and children who have been, are being, or are at risk of being trafficked for sexual exploitation;
- development and testing of interventions to improve the response of services to survivors/victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation;
- development and evaluation of empirically based programmes for the prevention of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

## Key focus area 8: Female genital cutting

Internationally, female genital cutting is a recognised form of violence against women and a human rights violation. The elimination of female genital cutting is a key priority. A better understanding of the nature and extent, and implications of female genital cutting is essential to enable communities, service providers, policy makers and other key role-players to more effectively respond to and prevent it. Research that promotes a better understanding of female genital cutting, the sharing of best practices for effective community-based approaches, and informs advocacy and training programmes can assist in achieving the elimination of female genital cutting.

Priority areas for research include:

- investigation of the nature, extent and social context of female genital cutting in different cultural settings, using standardised instruments and methodologies;
- description of the medical, social, psychological and economic impact of female genital cutting;
- development and evaluation of empirically based programmes which aim to eradicate female genital cutting in different cultural settings.

Sexual violence  
is a global issue  
that requires coordinated  
evidence-based  
responses

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