Introduction to

COFEM

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change
We are COFEM...

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM) is a collective of activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end violence against women and girls (VAWG, also referred to as GBV).

Made up of 78 members representing every part of the world, COFEM members work in both humanitarian and development contexts.
Hosted by *Raising Voices* and *NoVo Foundation*, a group of academics, activists, and practitioners held a 2-day convening in New York in 2016 to analyze the declining feminist perspective in humanitarian and development VAWG efforts. It was decided that we should formalize a network in order to begin to address shared concerns.

**COFEM** was created in 2016 to reassert a feminist perspective in VAWG work.
Why is COFEM needed?

Thanks to critical work by women’s movements, significant progress has been made over the last three decades to address VAWG

yet...

Over the last decade space is shrinking for feminist-informed VAWG work. We are in danger of losing hard won gains.
Feminist perspectives to end VAWG

VAWG is about the effects of the gender hierarchy, not just the gender binary.

All violence may be said to be 'gendered', but not all violence is based on gender-based discrimination.

Patriarchy drives VAWG, this must be addressed.

What Is A Feminist Perspective To VAWG?

Photo credit: Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe
COFEM Works To Infuse A Feminist Perspective

- Strengthen and spread a feminist analysis of **how to better include men and boys** in VAWG efforts so they remain accountable to women and girls.

- **Reclaim space** for women-centred, women-led and rights-driven work on VAWG in humanitarian & development settings

- Promote **gendered language and programming** linking gender inequality and VAWG (GBV)

- Work with other specialists to ensure initiatives addressing the needs of other GBV groups don’t create **victimhood competition**

The Rise of Gender-Neutrality

Gender-neutral language that interprets ‘gender’ as way to talk about roles and identity of all people rather than the gender hierarchy between males and females contributes to the de-politicization of the problem of VAWG, particularly when using the its sister term, GBV.

Rather than remedy the power imbalances between men and women, gender-neutral arguments for addressing equally the needs of males and females in gender and GBV programming can risk reinforcing it by eclipsing women and girls’ differentiated experiences.

A feminist perspective focuses on gender inequality not gender inclusivity.
Arguments insisting that GBV programming which doesn’t address the needs of men and boys and/or LGBTI groups broadly is “discriminatory” not only misses the point of why “GBV” work is targeted to women and girls, it also sets up a competition in victimhood that is counter-productive.

GBV actors are ready to work with other specialists as they develop an evidence base and programming to meet the needs of males and LGBTI groups broadly, but not at the expense of emptying GBV theory and practice of its feminist-informed, woman-centered essence.
An emphasis on technocratic approaches to VAWG—that is, approaches that focus on technical issues in programming without attention to VAWG as a social problem—often lack a political analysis essential for long-term social change and VAWG prevention. They also don’t always center women and girls in designing and leading responses.

Funding paradigms, an apolitical perspective and increasing global fundamentalisms are undermining feminist movement-building.
Accountability in Male Engagement

Without a feminist analysis ‘male engagement’ to address VAWG risks reinforcing and reproducing patriarchy.

Leadership from women is essential to ensure that men and male-led initiatives remain accountable to women’s movements.
The Year Ahead

- Launch five brief ‘thought pieces’ on the state of feminist VAW efforts
- Develop and disseminate a Feminist Pocketbook
- Create an online COFEM Learning Platform and “Knowledge Summit”
- Build collaborations and opportunities to highlight a feminist perspective to VAWG/GBV in humanitarian and development settings
How You Can Get Involved

**Activists:**
Reach out to COFEM members to learn more about feminist perspectives and programming on VAWG/GBV.

**Programmers:**
Keep women and girls centered in VAWG/GBV efforts.

**Funders and policy makers:**
Recognize the importance of supporting female-centered VAWG/GBV.

**Male allies working on VAWG:**
Speak out against the marginalization of women & girls in policy & programs.

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Join COFEM!
Talk to an existing COFEM member about how to get involved.
Thank you
Feminist perspectives on addressing VAWG: What does accountability look like?
Accountability to women and girls at every level of male involvement efforts is critical to ethical and effective VAWG programming and to securing women and girls’ full and equal rights.
What does accountability mean?

- **Promoting** and **ensuring** women and girl's leadership
- **Listening** to the demands and advice of diverse women and girls
- **Recognising** the existing gender hierarchy, and striving to transform a system of inequality
- **Working** at both individual and structural levels
- **Ensuring** that male involvement efforts empower women and girls
- **Examining** funding decisions
Why is accountability to women and girls critical in male involvement efforts to end VAWG?

- Without it, the danger that men are in charge of women’s rights and well-being persists.
- Lack of accountability to basic feminist principles results in privileging men who already benefit from patriarchy rather than dismantling the very systems of power (including gender inequality) that produce VAWG.

A feminist frame is crucial in all organizational relationships, programs, policies and practices to challenge the gender hierarchy.
Four practices that reduce accountability to women and girls in male involvement efforts to prevent and respond to VAWG:

- Investment in male involvement programming without demand or evidence.
- Male-dominated efforts that do not support women’s leadership.
- Shifts toward men’s priorities and needs.
- Failure to transform patriarchy.

All of these result from a lack of feminist analysis.
Investment in male-involvement programming without demand or evidence.

- Male ‘allies’ disconnected from women’s movements; ‘stand alone’ programming without involvement of or demand from local women.
- Weak evidence base.

Male-dominated efforts that do not support women’s leadership.

- Men are responsible for ensuring that their institutional privilege does not thwart true partnership and accepting women’s leadership as foundational.
A shift to male priorities and needs.

- Reframing GBV toward an analysis of patriarchal masculinity.
- “Reinventing patriarchy”.
- Competing and comparing violence against men and boys with VAWG.

Failure to transform patriarchy.

- Male privilege at both the individual and societal levels.
- Transforming a system of inequality from which men & boys benefit.
- Asserting women’s rights as inalienable human rights regardless of their relationship with men.
Implications

De-centring of women and girls.

- Reproducing the **dynamics of patriarchy**.
- Failure to **transform the gender hierarchy**.

Investment in male involvement programming while women’s organisations doing this work are struggling and closing.

**Lack of collaboration and coordination.**

- There must be genuine concessions, reflective engagement, bridge-building overtures to **demonstrate good faith and accountability**.
Recommendations

Policy makers must promote female-centric and female-led framing of the issue, discourse, strategies and resources.

Funders should invest in women’s rights organizations and ensure their work is not being usurped.

Researchers should develop better indicators and monitoring systems to assess progress in male engagement work, and place more emphasis on supporting social and structural changes.

Male allies must demonstrate good faith and speak out. Accountability should not be a responsibility of WROS and women’s movements.

Feminist VAWG community needs to be clearer, vocal and united about what we want from the men and boys’ community.
Thank you
Feminist perspectives on addressing VAWG:
Reframing language of ‘GBV’ away from feminist underpinnings
Evolving Definitions of GBV

- Language with roots in feminist theory & practice is increasingly de-politicized
- Result shifts attention away from transformative agenda of VAWG & women’s rights

Evolving definitions of GBV: shifting from specific focus on women/girls & negative implications of this shift
Foundation

- *VAWG* requires addressing structural gender inequalities
- Underscore this understanding by framing *VAWG* as *GBV*

What does this mean?

- Politically-neutral frame – decoupled from feminist underpinnings
- Encompasses violence against everyone - implying that all groups suffer similarly
- Reduces attention to male privilege & women’s oppression within patriarchy
- Hampers efforts to change underlying social conditions
GBV as VAWG

- GBV articulates women & girls’ exposure to violence in context of patriarchy & importance of dismantling global gender hierarchy

- “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women.”

- GBV language reinforces state obligation for action as part of universal human rights - to challenge patriarchy & dismantle structural forms of male dominance
Shifting Definitions

- Gradual shift away from emphasis on gender discrimination as manifested in VAWG

- GBV (re)interpreted to emphasize gender roles & identities as they affect all people & address all violence

- Space for VAWG crowded with violence with any sort of gendered dimension

- Ex: EU definition uses gender as demographic characteristic - suggesting that ‘GBV’ can happen because person is male, female, or elsewhere on ‘gender’ spectrum
Return to Male-dominated Discourse

- Reinterpreting GBV language illustrates patriarchal tendency to drift toward male view that inserts needs & concerns of males into women-specific spaces

- **Ex:** USAID definition - although derived from IASC GBV Guidelines - removed reference to gender differences between males & females - obscuring emphasis on reality of gender hierarchy for females
Lack of Theoretical Rigor

- No theoretical basis for describing foundations of violence against other groups as gender discrimination
- “Inclusive” GBV definitions flatten gender hierarchy in favor of problematizing gender identities & roles
- Some arguments of discrimination against men/boys
Compromised GBV Programming

● Definitions inform how funding is directed & accessed

● Developed with minimal input from GBV specialists who are then expected to assume responsibilities outside VAWG specialization

● “Inclusive” approach to GBV = diminished attention to rights, risks, needs of women/girls and compromised consideration of needs of men/boys & LGBTI populations & how best to address them

● Risks reinforcing imbalance by eclipsing specific needs of women/girls & equating them with specific needs of men/boys
Failure of Other Actors to Meet their Responsibilities

- Concerns about “female-centered” projects and safe spaces
- GBV actors focusing on VAWG also asked to address violence against men/boys
- Removes responsibility from other actors who are meant to address other forms of violence

What does this mean?

- Reduces space for women/girls
- May compromise quality of services
In Conclusion

- Need to support to GBV actors to maintain feminist-informed focus on women/girls in discourse & practice of GBV

- Continue to allocate resources to address specific & pandemic problem of GBV

- Other specialists should undertake more relevant & targeted efforts to evolve theory & practice to meet the needs other groups
Recommendations

- Claim language of GBV as articulation of problem of VAWG
- Donors/others should not replicate drift towards male-centered GBV discourse & practice - GBV with feminist framework is logical home to address VAWG
- Understand & address causes & contributing factors of violence affecting other groups - build evidence base for response
- Uphold value of specialized programs for different groups and come together to determine areas of intersection
Thank you
Finding the balance between Scientific and Social Change: Goals, Approaches and Methods
A problem is not the absence of a solution, it is an existing negative state

- Men’s violences are those violences that are done by men or are attributed to men. The range of men’s violences is immense. It spans the very particular and the global; the interpersonal and the institutional; the agentic and the structural. It includes violence to strangers and to known others. It includes violence against women, children, each other, animals, and men’s own selves. It varies in form and in process. It includes physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, emotional, linguistic, cognitive, social, spatial, financial, representational and visual violence. It includes violence done, threatened violence and potential violence. It includes enacted violence in the present and accumulated or consolidated violence in the past and present. It also includes the interrelation and overlap between all these kinds of violences.

- Men’s violence to known women can be understood as standing at the centre of patriarchy, or patriarchies, patriarchal relations, and patriarchal institutions.
Cages. Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. There is no physical property of any one wire, nothing that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. It seems sometimes that people take a deliberately myopic and fill their eyes with things seen microscopically in order not to see macroscopically.
The general depreciation of women as a sex is bad enough, but in the matter we are considering, the special depreciation of wives is more directly responsible for the outrages they endure. The notion that a man’s wife is his property ... is the fatal root of incalculable evil and misery. Every brutal-minded man, and many a man who in other relations of life is not brutal, entertains more or less vaguely the notion that his wife is his thing, and is ready to ask with indignation of anyone who interferes with his treatment of her “may I not do what I will with my own?”. It is sometimes pleaded on behalf of poor men, that they possess nothing else but their wives, and that, consequently, it seems doubly hard to meddle with the exercise of their power in that narrow sphere.

I think I may safely now ask the reader to draw breath and agree with me that they cannot, must not, be allowed to go on unchecked, without some effort to stop them ... is it to be borne that we should sit patiently by and allow their lives to be trampled out in agony?
Recommendations

- GBV practitioners must educate others regarding feminist and women-centred theorising and analysis regarding VAWG in humanitarian settings and its relationship to gender inequality

- International organisations working on GBV in humanitarian settings should make accountable efforts to seek out, be led by and support local women’s organisations already working for gender justice, equality and to address VAWG.

- International GBV actors should recognise that data and external technical experts and toolkits for addressing VAWG are important resources, but they are simply inputs and not the solution to the pervasive inequalities that create and maintain VAWG.
Recommendations (continued)

- The research community should recognise the long history of feminist research, theorising and scholarship, build from existing insights, and learn how to adapt and deploy these methodologies and approaches in their work.

- Researchers need to recognise and include women’s rights activists and GBV practitioners as expert ‘knowers’, even if they are not expert ‘researchers’.

- Donor organisations should ensure their research agendas, policy directives and funding decisions are grounded in feminist-informed analysis of the problem and responses to VAWG, and reflect a balance between short-term technical interventions, and longer-term social change approaches, informed by the knowledge and experience of women’s rights activists and movements.
Thank you
Feminist perspectives on addressing VAWG: Funding Priorities
Exploring concerns about GBV funding trends

- To what degree is GBV prioritized within protection funding? Within broader humanitarian response?

- Within GBV funding, what range of interventions constitute GBV prevention and response? Are expectations changing?

- Are women’s rights and needs prioritized within GBV funds?
Analyzing priorities through investments and language

- Analyzed allocations to protection/GBV
  - CERF 2014-2016
  - CBCF 2011-2016
  - Reports on bilateral and pooled funding

- Reviewed 100 calls for proposals from ECHO & PRM
  - ECHO: 2011 & 2016 HIPs

- Reviewed donor strategies and policy documents
  - USG, EU/ECHO, Australia/DFAT, Sweden/SIDA, Switzerland/SDC, UK/DFID, UNICEF, UNHCR, UN Women, UNFPA, ICRC, NoVo Foundation
GBV investments are limited and difficult to track

- Protection funds are often not disaggregated
- GBV is poorly funded relative to other areas of protection
- GBV interventions include coordination, mainstreaming, and a range of programming/services
Limited focus on women’s and girls’ rights in calls for proposals

- Very limited contextual analyses of women’s and girls’ experiences
- Descriptions of protection needs are apolitical and lack specificity
- Women’s utility emphasized in some calls
- Programs are not asked to address gender discrimination
Limited focus on women’s and girls’ needs in donor strategies and calls for proposals

- Emphasis on needs of male survivors as a neglected issue
- Expectations for programs to address all forms of GBV, including sexual violence against men and LGBTI populations
- Limited support for women and girl oriented services
- Limited emphasis on core services
Implications: Coverage without core services

- When protection funding is reported without any breakdown by sub-sector or type of intervention, needs may appear to be covered while serious gaps remain.

- Reports of GBV coverage can still mask critical service gaps because the sub-sector includes a wide range of interventions.

- Without emphasis on core services, organizations may opt for interventions that cover larger populations, such as mainstreaming or awareness-raising.
Implications: Compromised programming and services

- Different forms of violence require different prevention strategies
- Women-oriented services are proven to reach the largest numbers of survivors of GBV
- Organizations and program staff do not have capacity to cover all protection needs
- Some donor requests raise serious ethical and safety concerns
Implications: Limited space for women’s leadership and accountability to women and girls

- Expanded definitions of GBV may confuse and undermine national and grassroots efforts to combat violence against women and girls
- Without attention to the systemic factors that drive GBV, donors will not invest in- or encourage partnership with- civil society advocacy organizations

“Watering the leaves and starving the roots”  
AWID, 2013 report
Recommendations for GBV funding

- Feminist theory should guide GBV investments
- Funding streams should be more transparent
- Donors should invest in core, specialized services for women and girls and survivors of GBV from the onset of emergencies
- Calls for proposals should prioritize attention to evidence-based and focused GBV prevention and response programming that is accountable to women and girls
Thank you
Eclipsed:
When a broad protection agenda obscures the needs of women and girls
Exploring concerns about GBV funding trends

Humanitarian protection is defined as “all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the right of all individuals, without discrimination, in accordance with the relevant bodies of law.”

Global Protection Cluster

Protection of all persons affected and at risk... must be central to our preparedness efforts.... In practical terms, this means identifying who is at risk... taking into account the specific vulnerabilities that underlie these risks, including those experienced by men, women, girls and boys....

IASC Principals statement on the Centrality of Protection

Source: 2015 IASC GBV Guidelines
Obscuring more than it reveals

- Current approaches:
  - **UNHCR AGDM**: “seeks to ensure that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on an equal footing and are able to participate fully in the decisions that affect their lives....”
  - **ICRC Protection Standards**: “Putting the affected population, communities and individuals at the centre of protection activities.”

- Need to balance individual rights and community priorities (including whose rights the community prioritizes).
- Perspectives & contributions of women and girls often most invisible & overlooked.

*Engaging women and girls directly often requires additional resources and always requires LISTENING.*
Eclipsed: Menstrual hygiene management in post-earthquake Nepal

Photo source: Time.com
Promoting gender neutrality

- Current approach: **Gender sensitivity**
  - Analyse + address different needs of women, girls, boys & men (WGBM)
  - “What one groups has, other must have too” –vs– thorough analysis of gender power imbalances

  ➡️ Dissociates “gender” from its articulation of patriarchal power relations.
  ➡️ Gender analysis & mainstreaming fail to address practical & strategic needs of women and girls.

**GBV AoR Core Competency Framework:** staff “believes in gender equality and applies, promotes and integrates gender analysis into humanitarian programming”

Must **dedicate space** to understand and address how gender-based discrimination affects women and girls’ safety, rights and welfare.
When ‘Inclusive’ means left out

- Current approach: Add men and boys to existing GBV policies and programs that were designed to address women’s and girls’ rights and needs

“Although there may be similarities between different forms of gendered & sexualised violence experienced by men & women, they are not the same. The causes, dynamics & outcomes of violence against women are different from those of violence against men.” Read-Hamilton (2014)

- VAWG is rooted in power imbalances & structural inequality between men & women (UNHCR 2003).
- GBViE services are open to male survivors, yet need remains for specialised protection actors to design & develop targeted programming to address the needs of men & boys in humanitarian response.

Growing body child protection research; similarly must understand specific causes, determinants and outcomes of violence directed at males without reducing or compromising space and resources for women and girls.
Eclipsed: Women and Girls’ Safe Spaces in Greece

Photo credit: Jodi Hilton/IRC, Rescue.org
Implications

- Broad protection approaches fail to meet the immediate needs of women and girls
- After a decade of hard-won progress, humanitarian response actors risk losing sight of women and girls’ priorities
- Failure to support transformative social change

When broad protection approaches support undifferentiated investigation of all people’s needs, i.e. using protection assessments to ascertain whether, instead of how, women and girls constitute an “at risk” group, these approaches can fail to identify and address women and girls’ limited access to resources, rights, and remedies.
Bringing back the light: Recommendations for Action

- **The international community should recognize how a broad protection agenda reduces the limited space and resources allocated to women and girls.** All actors should champion using targeted approaches to address the rights and needs of women and girls as aligned with relevant IASC gender policy and the broader UN mandate on Women, Peace and Security.

- **Protection practitioners should become familiar with and utilise field-tested tools to identify and meet the specific needs of women and girls.** Recognise that the identification of these risks and needs can also promote information gathering about and programming for other protection concerns specific to different populations.
Recommendations (continued)

- Protection practitioners should engage GBV experts in every phase and work with these experts on donor decisions, programme design and monitoring and evaluation. Ensure HR incorporates the GBV AoR Core Competency Framework to ensure understanding of gender dynamics & hierarchies, and commitment to listening to & ensuring the meaningful participation of women and girls.

- Protection actors should seek to solidify alliances, partnerships, and common objectives with those working to address VAWG in crisis settings. Analysing power and gender imbalances should happen on an on-going basis and is key to ensuring all efforts—whether from a donor, an NGO, a UN agency or State actor—avoid unintentionally maintaining or exacerbating gender inequality.
Thank you