

Violence against women and girls is an urgent concern in times of conflict

The What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale Programme (What Works) has been at the forefront of building the evidence around violence against women and girls (VAWG) in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Since its first iteration, the What Works programme has been a leader in building evidence related to VAWG in conflict and post-conflict settings. This programme has documented alarming rates of VAWG in humanitarian contexts and has influenced policymakers to adopt a comprehensive view of VAWG, moving beyond a narrow definition that focuses solely on non-partner sexual violence.

Under What Works I, a landmark study on the prevalence of VAWG was conducted in conflict-affected South Sudan. It found that women exposed to armed conflict and displacement had increased odds of experiencing not only sexual violence but also intimate partner violence, demonstrating that, even during times of conflict, women and girls are most at risk in their own homes.

These critical findings were shared during high-level consultations, including UN meetings on the renewal of the [Peacekeeping Mission](#) in South Sudan's mandate and during peace negotiations. This advocacy compelled policymakers to consider the needs of women and girls in their efforts to bring peace to the region.

What Works is a global leader in preventing VAWG during times of conflict

Under the current iteration of the programme, What Works: Impact at Scale (What Works II), we continue to lead on the issue of VAWG in humanitarian settings. This includes:

- [Synthesising and analysing](#) available data to bolster evidence-based decision making on VAWG programming – such as conducting systematic reviews and meta-analysis to document the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-partner sexual violence (NPSV) during times of conflict.
- Supporting major international convenings, such as the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, by [identifying promising, evidence-based practices](#) that can prevent conflict-related VAWG.
- Publishing global commentaries in high-impact journals such as The Lancet to urge policymakers not to leave survivors of VAWG behind during times of conflict.
- Documenting 'what works' to prevent violence in conflict-affected settings – an often-overlooked context for VAWG prevention programming. Currently, a rigorous randomised control trial is underway in crisis-affected Somalia to evaluate the effectiveness of a violence prevention programme implemented in communities and schools ([Communities Care](#)).



Women's Rights Organisations and Women-led organisations are being disproportionately impacted by funding cuts in humanitarian settings

Recent analysis by [UN Women](#) found local women-led and women's rights organisations (WROs) are being disproportionately affected by global funding cuts in humanitarian settings. They found that 90% of surveyed organisations (N=411) across 44 humanitarian and crisis settings had been financially affected by these cuts, and almost half (47%) expected to close within the next six months if conditions do not improve. This highlights the incredible need for programming such as What Works II, which prioritises and empowers WROs through sustained funding and support.

Key Findings on VAWG in conflict settings from the What Works Programme:

Analysis from [South Sudan](#) under What Works I showed:

- Approximately 35% of respondents have experienced rape, attempted rape or other forms of sexual violence by a non-partner during their lifetime.
- Among ever-partnered women, the lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual partner violence ranged between 54% in the Juba Protection of Civilians (PoCs) and 73% in Rumbek.
- Restrictive marital practices and gender norms, and experiences of conflict were major drivers of both partner and non-partner violence.

Global synthesis and meta-analysis have shown:

- 39% of women in conflict settings have experienced physical or sexual IPV in their lifetime.
- 24% experienced IPV in the past 12 months alone.
- 21% of women and girls have experienced non-partner sexual violence.
- 11% experienced sexual violence during a conflict period.

This review highlights a hard truth: most gender-based violence in conflict is not by armed strangers—it's by partners at home.

These findings show that violence in conflict-affected settings is significantly higher than global averages, underlining the urgent need for tailored, evidence-based prevention and response strategies in humanitarian crises.



What This Means:

Conflict doesn't create gender inequality—it magnifies it. We must fund and scale interventions that work for both intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-partner sexual violence (NPSV) in humanitarian settings. This includes strengthening survivor services, prevention programming, and data systems that centre safety and ethics.

This review also calls for smarter funding: too often, programmes overlook IPV in favour of high-profile wartime sexual violence. Yet most survivors are harmed by someone they know. This must change.

Women's rights organisations in conflict and humanitarian settings are on the brink of collapse - without continued commitment to support their vital work, we risk backsliding on 20 years of global progress to prioritise prevention and response to VAWG during times of conflict.