

Responding to Disclosure of Gender-Based Violence

This guidance document has been adapted from an internal tool managed by The Nature Conservancy's Safety Team. It has been edited and published to allow for public use as of March 2022. This document is designed for educational purposes and may undergo future updates.

What is Gender Based Violence (GBV)?

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to harmful threats or actions directed at an individual or group based on their gender. GBV can include physical, psychological, sexual, economic, legal, political, and social harm, as well as other forms of harm, abuse, and/or control. This type of violence is rooted in structural gender inequalities and power imbalances. It is both a symptom of gender inequality and a tool to reinforce this inequality.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent global human rights violations. It is everywhere: it knows no social, economic, or national boundaries ([UNFPA](#)). GBV also affects people of all gender identities, including men, and some people may face additional hardships and challenges due to stereotypes and cultural gender norms.

GBV is relevant to our work at The Nature Conservancy and across the conservation sector. Women are especially at risk of violence when their communities are under stress, such as when their natural resources are degraded or when climate impacts cause hardship, such as droughts and flooding. Women are also at greater risk when TNC and our partners challenge social norms, for example by increasing women's leadership and economic independence in communities where this is not common. When power dynamics change too quickly or without education on gender equality, it can create stress in communities and lead to violent backlash. Here are some anonymized examples of how GBV has presented in our work and workplaces:

- During COVID-19 lockdown, a staff member tries to work fulltime from home and meet demanding deadlines, while also managing online learning for their school-age children. Their spouse demands that the staff member work fewer hours to ensure the housework and children are prioritized. The disputes result in domestic or intimate partner violence as a way to enforce expected gender roles, financial dependency, and vulnerability.
- Through a conservation project, women are employed in a sustainable fisheries program. They receive income for this work, but their other daily commitments do not change. They have less time for household chores—such as gathering food for their families—and their health suffers from the additional work and stress. The women do not control finances in the household, so they are made to turn over income to their husbands who do not allow them to use it for important household expenses.

- **1 in 3 women** worldwide experience physical or sexual violence, mostly by an intimate partner. ([World Health Organization](#))
- **15 million adolescent girls** have experienced sexual assault—but **only 1% seek professional help.** ([UN Women](#))
- In the U.S. **80%** of incidents of sexual violence are perpetrated by **someone the victim knows**; in cases with minors, **93% of child victims knew the perpetrator.** ([RAINN](#))

- A conservation program supports women to manage their mangroves sustainably by providing training and business support. Women use these skills to develop high value mangrove products for sale in local markets. Some men and boys express anger that women are earning money and experiencing success. Some of the husbands prevent their wives participating, and others destroy the mangroves that women are depending on.

Responding to Disclosure of GBV

Across the conservation sector there is growing awareness of GBV and how environmental programs have the ability to exacerbate—or mitigate—risk of harm (see the [GBV-Environment Linkages Center](#)).

As more programs aim to minimize GBV risk and increase gender equity, conservation staff would benefit from understanding how to respond to disclosure of GBV in a survivor-centered, trauma-informed way.

It is important to remember to slow down, validate the survivor’s experience, and respond to their specific needs. This guidance is not about “fixing” the situation, but instead responding to an individual person’s disclosure of trauma.

What to do:

1. **Find a private and safe setting.** It is very important that no one else overhears your conversation, including partners or family members, unless the individual explicitly tells you it is safe.
2. **Listen to and validate the person’s experience.** This is a crucial step, and it can make all the difference in supporting a survivor to take further safety actions when they are ready. See below for tips on validating in a survivor-centered way.
3. **Avoid judgement.** It can be very difficult to disclose GBV, and there may be a lot of shame attached. Survivors may be afraid you will judge them or worry that you will ask them to take actions they aren’t ready for.
4. **Do not try to fix things.** It’s natural to want to help. But too often, “helping” means encouraging someone to take immediate action, like leaving an abusive partner. These kinds of “fixes” can risk alienating a survivor—or even put them at increased risk of harm. Safety planning should only be done in consultation with a safety professional and/or GBV specialist who is trained in this topic and can provide local resources for support.
5. **Ask for consent before sharing information.** Obtain permission from the survivor to connect with appropriate team members or local resources for more support. Commit to taking a survivor-centered approach, meaning that you consider the survivor's safety and wellbeing as the top priority. If they ask to remain anonymous, honor their request.

Ways to Validate a Survivor's Experience

Gender-based violence is a human rights violation—and it is also a very personal violation of a person's body and/or autonomy. When someone discloses GBV, it's natural to be curious or have additional questions, but these can wait. It's more important to slow down, validate what the person has shared with you, and redirect any indications of self-blame.

Situation	Do Say	Don't Say
Survivor is at risk for increased or continued danger.	Thank you for telling me. I know this wasn't easy to share. I care about you a lot, and your safety is important to me.	You really need to leave now if you know what's best for you.
Survivor blames themselves for the abuse or tries explain "why" it happened. For example, "I made them mad by working long hours."	<p>What happened is not your fault. You are not responsible for someone's actions that hurt you.</p> <p>Nothing you did gives them an excuse to violate your body/boundaries.</p>	<p>I'm sure they didn't really mean it.</p> <p>I bet they won't do this again.</p> <p>They were really stressed—that's not who they really are.</p> <p>You shouldn't provoke them.</p> <p>Think about it from their perspective...</p>
<p>Survivor is worried you won't believe them.</p> <p>They approached you to disclose, but now they are hesitant to share.</p>	<p>I believe you. This is really tough, but please know that you're not alone.</p> <p>[If you are trained on GBV response/have access to support and additional resources] I am here for you if you ever wish to share something with me. If you ever feel like you need help, our teams are trained and prepared to listen and provide referrals to experts. Please know that no matter what, you are the decision maker.</p>	<p>If something bad happened, you should tell me right now.</p> <p>Are you sure that's what happened?</p>
Survivor disclosed to you once, but weeks have passed, and they haven't mentioned it again.	I wanted to let you know I have you in my thoughts. You are welcome to share how you are doing with me.	<i>Avoid the subject</i>

Reaffirm Their Strengths

You can build trust, confidence, and comfort with someone who has disclosed GBV by highlighting their strengths.

Some strengths are “internal” and describe the individual person, like being strong, brave, caring, or self-aware. You can also point to “external” strengths about the person’s environment, such as having a caring support network through friends, family, or colleagues.

Situation	Strength/Response
“I’m usually a really outgoing and assertive person. But I just froze. I should have said ‘no’ louder.”	“You’re telling me about this now – that’s what matters. Thank you for being so brave. ”
“I tried to tell my sister what happened, but she didn’t know what to say. She just hugged me and didn’t say anything.”	“I’m so glad you have people in your corner you could trust to talk to. I’m sorry her reaction wasn’t what you were hoping for, but I’m happy she still wanted to be there for you. ”
“I should be over this by now. It happened more than a year ago.”	“ You have survived a lot. That can take a toll on both your mind and body. You’re a survivor, and it’s understandable to feel tired/drained/angry.”
“Every time I think about it, I clam up. I can’t talk about it. I just go for a run until I feel better.”	“I can see how it would be frustrating to feel that way. I’m glad you know what activities help you to feel a little better. You sound very self-aware – that’s a really important strength.”
“I don’t want to tell anyone else what happened. It’s shameful.”	“You were really brave to tell me. I know that took a lot of strength. What happened is not your fault.”
“I know it’s not okay for them to touch me like that, but I don’t want anything bad to happen to them. They are still my spouse/family member/friend.”	“I can tell you care a lot about your family – you’re a really loving person. It’s a really hard situation when the person who violated your boundaries is someone you love and trust.” <i>*Do not disparage or demonize an abusive partner/loved one. This can risk alienating or isolating the survivor further.</i>
“I didn’t want to tell anyone about this, but my friends said I should talk to someone.”	“It sounds like you have really supportive friends. I’m glad you have such a caring support network that wants to keep you safe.”

Learn More About GBV, Conservation, and Environmental Impacts

As organizations and communities strive to urgently address the climate and biodiversity crises, there is a big opportunity to address gender inequality that can lead to and promote gender-based violence.

For example, climate change increases the frequency of emergencies and exacerbates conditions that lead to gender-based violence. Slow onset climate impacts and acute weather events can amplify preexisting risk factors for GBV such as poverty, strict gender roles, resource scarcity, and conflict. Consider that during a drought, women may need to travel longer distances or wait in longer queues for fresh water which may extend into the night, thereby increasing their exposure to GBV. Resource

scarcity combined with an influx of humanitarian aid workers can result in exploitation or coercion of sex acts. Displacement increases exposure to GBV in refugee camps and other resource centers. (More of these intersections are described by the [GBV AoR Helpdesk](#).)

Conservation projects should begin with a gender analysis to better understand existing risk factors for GBV—and to identify the potential impacts and risk of conservation plans. See [IUCN’s Gender Analysis tool](#) and [Conservation International’s GBV guidance document](#) for more support.

The [Gender-Based Violence and Environment Linkages Center](#) is a valuable, growing information hub dedicated to understanding the links between GBV and the environment. This collaboration between IUCN and USAID has resulted in research, tools, and curated resources to support environmental organizations around the world.

Acknowledgements

While we use the term “survivor” throughout this document, we recognize that not all people survive gender-based violence or have the ability to share their story. The authors of this document recognize and honor the people who have disclosed their experiences, shared their perspective, and informed the creation of this tool.

Thank you to the many staff members across functions at The Nature Conservancy who championed the creation of an internal tool to better support survivors of GBV in both our workplaces and conservation programs.

We extend our gratitude to experts in the field who informed this work, including talented staff from [IUCN](#) and [Jhpiego](#).

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