

When a survivors goes back to the perpetrator

Women and adolescent girls who are abused by their male intimate partners experience personal, social, economic, spiritual and psychological deficits as a results of ongoing intimate partner perpetrated abuse. These consequences of intimate partner violence (IPV) for survivors combined with the social support, which in some contexts tolerates or supports male perpetration of IPV, the protracted nature of IPV as a pattern over time, and the particular constraints of some humanitarian contexts regarding mobility, livelihoods, registration systems, community networks, and legal systems, can all contribute to women staying with or returning to relationships where they experience harm perpetrated by their male partner.

Intimate partner violence is perpetrated by male spouses/partners against women and adolescent girls as a pattern of abusive behavior that maintains male power and control over the female partner. The pattern of control includes behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure or wound the female partner. Providing GBV case management support to a women being abused by her male partner is complex because of the ongoing exposure women and adolescent girl clients have to this intimate partner violence which diminishes their resources and resilience physically, economically, psychological and socially. Understanding how experiencing abuse at the hands of an intimate male partner and its consequences for women and adolescent girls can help you provide you with informed long term support to women survivors of IPV.

Key Knowledge

Women and adolescent girls commonly experience self-blame, distress and a lack of hope or trust in others: It is common for women and adolescent girls who are being abused by their male partners to feel a sense of shame, guilt and helplessness. Maintaining a separation can often be very challenging and survivors may struggle to trust the new people they are living with and may struggle to maintain hope for a better, safer future. The constant fear for their own lives and for their children may have left them with reduced decision making capacity due to being constantly in flight, fight or freeze mode. All these psychological and spiritual deficits can make it very challenging for women and adolescent girls to sustain their separation from their abusive male partner.

Members of the community and family may be pressuring women and adolescent girls to return: IPV is deeply rooted in patriarchal social norms and unequal systems and gender roles which subordinate women and girls. In many contexts, women and men may believe, and live within legal and social systems which underpin, men's decision making control over their wives and the wider household. In such communities there may be widespread patriarchal norms and beliefs which justify men's control, punishment, humiliation and beating of their wives. Women who internalize these patriarchal beliefs may encourage other women to return to an abusive partner, as they themselves or others within their family and community have done. A return to an abusive male spouse may be explicitly encouraged by other family members or faith and community leaders who are promoting the family to stay together and for women to tolerate abuse in the supposed "best interests" of the family.

Women and adolescent girls may fear the consequences of not returning: Male abusers who choose to be violent to their female partners find different ways—physical, emotional, psychological, reproductive, spiritual and economic—to control and dominate their wives and girlfriends to ensure they live in fear and reduce their capacity to get help. Women who leave their partners in humanitarian contexts rarely have a safe place to go where their abuser cannot further intimidate her or her children, and weak or unequal legal systems further limit the options women have. Women in a legal process may fear a negative outcome which will not punish her male partner and may also provide an opportunity for her to receive threats or coercion to return by her male spouse. Male abusers may find other ways to make threats, or use intimidation and coercion to pressurize their female partner to return. Fear for her safety and the safety of her children and lack of trust in the legal or security system to protect them, can therefore be a significant factor for women to return to their abusive male partners.

Men may apologize and women and adolescent girls may believe it was not their choice: There are many factors that contribute to or make it more likely for men to abuse. Abusers make calculated choices about with whom, when and where they are violent. It is important to remember: 1) these same men know how to control their aggression with other people; 2) there are many men who drink alcohol and who are under stress who **do not** abuse their partners. Abusers can control their behavior; they *choose* to be violent.

Women and adolescent girls may find living outside the home isolating and lonely: Part of the ongoing pattern of abuse will be the male abusers deliberate undermining of women and adolescent girls' social networks and internal resilience in order to maintain their control. Restricting their female partners' movement, activities outside the house, livelihood opportunities,

and time with friends and family, all contribute to women's isolation and when choosing to leave an abusive male partner, women may find themselves without any existing support systems.

Humanitarian contexts present specific challenges: In humanitarian contexts, lack of ability to leave a specific area or camp, lack of access to basic needs without the male head of household ID card or slow processes to gain your own ID card, weaker community bonds and social networks, all contribute to increased prevalence of male perpetration of IPV against women and girlsⁱ and make it more difficult for women to leave and remain safely separated from their partner.

Adolescent girls need tailored and developmentally appropriate support: Adolescent girls in abusive relationships with boyfriends or with older male husbands need tailored support. This requires an assessment of her developmental capacity to make decisions and then balancing survivor-centered driven decision making with best interest determination. Child marriage is illegal in many countries and mandatory reporting and legal prosecution of this crime can be considered by the survivor and if a younger adolescent girl by the social worker tasked to determine her best interests if her parents are complicit in the marriage. In a situation where an adolescent girls is in an abusive relationship with a boyfriend, working with female and male caregivers to support adolescent girls' safety and wellbeing is an important part of a child protection approach that can beneficially engage the caregivers to support the girl to end an abusive relationship.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

First, support women and adolescent girls to complete ongoing safety planning and monitor for escalating patterns of violence as the survivor may be at increased risk after she returns to the perpetrator.

In line with the GBV case management approach, continue to provide non-judgmental, survivor-centered support to the survivor. Whatever your opinion about your client's decision to return, you must continue to implement a survivor-centered approach to case management and provide information, not advice, and not in any way pressure or try to influence the survivor's decisions. It is important to practice empathy for the survivor who may have mixed feelings about the abuser who she knows well and may still trust, love and hope for a change in his behavior. An understanding of the dynamics of IPV described above should also inform your empathy and understanding of women and adolescent girls who experience IPV perpetrated by their male partner and so may be experiencing overwhelming feelings of fear, self-blame, depression, anxiety and isolation. Ongoing non-judgmental and emphatic support to women and adolescent girls who have returned to abusive relationships can help to rebuild strength and hope for the future and help women and adolescent girls rebuild a more positive sense of self.

Returning to an abusive partner after a failed attempt to leave, may lead to increased hopelessness or depression. Support the survivor to reflect on her feelings and assess for increased suicidal ideation. Renew the agreement with your client regarding self-harm or suicide and support her agreement to reach out for help before implementing any self-harm action.

Continue to share information about services which can build up women and adolescent girls support networks, internal resilience and economic resources. Continue to support the survivor to think through how best to access those services to increase her choice and power in the longer term. Be aware that women and adolescent girls returning to a relationship of abuse will likely have decreased opportunities to access ongoing GBV case management or other support services. If possible, discuss this with the client in advance of her return to her partner. Support the client to think through the most feasible way for her to maintain access to psychosocial support from GBV case management, women and girl safe space activities, or from a safe person or ally within her family or network. Consider together what her male partner might find most acceptable as an activity when she returns to his control. Women and Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS) have many activities which are more socially acceptable to attend such as recreational, life skills, literacy and numeracy classes. If the WGSS is not likely to be accessible, then consider as a GBV case worker if there are other safe places within livelihood or health centers where you might confidentially meet the survivor. Never under any circumstances agree to meet the survivor at her home. Home visits place the survivor and the GBV case worker at risk.

In ongoing GBV case management with a survivor who has returned to an abusive relationship, continue to offer to share healing education information to help her challenge her internalized self-blame and other patriarchal norms which justify IPV.

Discussion Prompts

1. What are the factors sustaining the cycle of violence?
2. What influences does the perpetrator exercise with the survivor to coerce her/make her feel obliged to return at home?
3. What are the considerations to be taken during decision-making process with adolescent girls?
4. What are the principles to be respected by the social worker during the follow-up when the survivor decides to return to the perpetrator?



ⁱ <https://gbvresponders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/What-Works-South-Sudan-Full-Report.pdf>