Gender-based violence is pervasive around the world, in all societies, contexts and sectors. The socio-economic stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on movement have significantly increased gender-based violence risks, particularly domestic violence.

This Information Note is prepared by the IUCN Global Programme on Governance and Rights. It provides overview information for promoting awareness among environmental organisations and will be updated regularly.

What are the links between gender-based violence and the environment?
Gender-based violence (GBV) is used to assert or maintain control over natural resources and can be exacerbated in the face of environmental stressors, such as climate change, extractives and environmental crimes, where the control over increasingly scarce or degraded resources and livelihood opportunities results in higher tension, increased negative coping strategies and reduced resilience for families and communities. Gender-based violence is used to negotiate or reinforce inequitable power in all contexts, including as a weapon against environmental defenders. Here are some examples of what GBV-environment linkages look like:

- Domestic violence to prevent women’s inheritance or land ownership;
- ‘Fish-for-sex’ extortion of women fish processors and sellers by fishermen;
- Sexual and physical violence when collecting water and firewood;
- Increased domestic violence and child marriage in the aftermath of disasters;
- Sexual exploitation and human trafficking associated to legal and illegal extractive industries and environmental crimes; and
- Rape threats and smear campaigns against women environmental human rights defenders.

Why is it important?
With emphasis on under-reporting, one in three women around the world experience violence. Gender-based violence is not only a violation of human rights, but a barrier to conservation and sustainable development. The immediate impacts of gender-based violence – from psychological and physical health and wellness consequences, to the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, to death – have long-term effects, including limited engagement in economic and educational opportunities and decision-making spheres. Gender-based violence can restrict women’s involvement or diminish their efforts to conserve and protect the environment, having negative impacts on environmental outcomes, among others.

How can COVID-19 impact gender-based violence and environment linkages?
As COVID-19 spreads, access to and benefits from natural resources may become increasingly scarce, worsening economic stress and food insecurity. Meanwhile, home quarantining

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1 See IUCN 2020 publication Gender-based violence and environment linkages: The Violence of Inequality (French and Spanish versions coming soon). Publication press release here [EN/SP/FR]. IUCN Issue Brief (in three languages) are also coming soon.
measures can enable the “common tools of abuse”\textsuperscript{2}, which include: isolation from friends and other support networks, family and employment; constant surveillance; strict, detailed rules for behaviour; and restrictions to basic necessities and resources such as food and sanitary facilities.

During the pandemic, physical proximity, courthouse closures and limited legal services impact the ability of victims to seek help. In addition, safe houses and shelters have reduced capacities due to social distancing measures, and supportive networks and social services may be limited in their ability to visit and/or work with people experiencing violence, as resources are diverted to deal with the health crisis. School closures may place girls at greater risk for sexual violence by neighbours or relatives.\textsuperscript{3} LGBTQI individuals and Indigenous people may also face increased risks of gender-based violence and increased barriers in accessing support services. Limited information, health care access and legal support services deepen the acute vulnerability of Indigenous and rural communities to COVID-19 impacts, which further deepen gender-based violence risks.

COVID-19 impacts on domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence are already being seen and risks are likely to intensify. Risks in environment-related contexts include, for example:

- Women and girls are disproportionately responsible for household duties, including water, food and fuel collection; food preparation; and taking care of children as well as elderly and ill relatives. Home quarantines, market impacts and food shortages may increase household tensions and result in domestic violence. These responsibilities can potentially increase exposure to COVID-19, which in turn can further increase stigmatisation, isolation and gender-based violence. This is particularly critical in refugee camps and temporary shelters, which are often overcrowded and where people may face greater scarcity of food and hygiene resources and services.
- Employment and livelihood losses can increase pressure on common resources, which can often result in men overtaking subsistence and income generating activities that are typically conducted by women (doing so not only limits women’s access to resources, but further diminishes women’s role in the home, reinforcing or increasing vulnerability). Furthermore, scarcity may increase exploitative transactional survival sex.
- As is often the case in natural disaster contexts, sexual exploitation and abuse may increase in relation to accessing and controlling pandemic response services and resources to cover basic needs – such as those related to water, fuel, agricultural inputs or food for households and/or livestock care – particularly as disaster profiteering and prices may increase.
- As seen in droughts, increased resource insecurity due to the pandemic may lead to a rise in child marriage to gain bride wealth or lessen food needs within a family.
- In some countries, nationwide lockdowns have led to mass exoduses of migrant workers from cities to their villages, where both the possibility of transmission and domestic violence can increase. These often more-remote areas are typically already burdened with strained health systems and irregular access to clean water or reliable energy services.
- Indigenous communities’ heightened vulnerabilities to COVID-19 and its impacts may have far-reaching effects, including resulting in opportunistic land grabs.\textsuperscript{4} It is well documented across contexts that gender-based violence is employed to facilitate land grabs.
- Quarantine poses a risk for women environmental human rights defenders, who can be targeted more easily by those seeking to curtail their work and may face greater difficulties to access protection services.
- As widespread school and senior care centre closures persist, disproportionate caregiving and household duties may limit women’s ability to do paid work and undo previous women’s empowerment and gender equality gains in environment-related sectors. Men employees

\textsuperscript{2} Complex PTSD: A syndrome in survivors of prolonged and repeated trauma
\textsuperscript{3} Cambodia Center for Human Rights
\textsuperscript{4} First possible COVID-19 indigenous cases detected near key Amazon reserve
may also be preferred as “essential”. Regressions in women’s empowerment, reduced income and greater workload may increase tensions and risks for violence.

These contexts continue to evolve, and this note will be updated accordingly.

**What can we do?**

*As gender-based violence is pervasive, assume it is happening.*³ be aware and understand the linkages between gender-based violence and environment. The first step is to understand these linkages in order to better identify risks and measures to prevent gender-based violence during the development and implementation of regular work such as conservation projects (and, indeed, in daily life). Understanding what the root causes are will help define preventive and responsive measures.⁶ Gender-based violence resources from other sectors, in particular from the humanitarian sector (see box below), can be useful to inform more gender-responsive, and specifically GBV-responsive, efforts at all levels.

**Facilitate information-sharing to prevent and respond to GBV and COVID-19, and to facilitate referral for affected individuals to appropriate services.** Identify and facilitate women’s access to information on government and non-governmental support to prevent and contain COVID-19 and on available services to respond to gender-based violence in the area or community of work, such as hotlines, women’s emergency shelters, crisis centres, health centres and psychological support. Contact a national or local GBV specialist or specialist organisation to help you identify existing services. Information sharing is especially important for Indigenous peoples and other highly vulnerable groups, as they may have limited access to communication channels. Information may not be readily available in local languages, nor geared to reach illiterate populations.

**Use a people-centred, and specifically survivor-centred, approach.**⁷ The rights, needs and wishes of affected individuals must be at the centre of any response. They have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, to privacy and confidentiality, to non-discrimination, to receive comprehensive information and to decide the course of action.

**Always ensure the participation of women’s groups and organisations in decision-making, particularly in pandemics.** Given the sociocultural and gender-differentiated impact of pandemics such as COVID-19, every effort should be made to ensure diverse perspectives, including those of women and women’s groups and organisations, are included in decision-making processes. Meetings on environmental responses to COVID-19 can improve gender-responsiveness and can contribute to gender-based violence prevention and response when diverse views are included. For example, ensure that increased unpaid work burden does not limit women’s voice and involvement in projects, or put them in harm’s way.

**Ensure that business continuity plans and projects do not exacerbate gender-based violence – and discuss impacts with donors.** As project priorities are adjusted to adapt to COVID-19 quarantine strategies that may be in place, it is essential to include gender-based violence in any risk assessment of COVID-19 impacts and ensure that gender-based violence risk mitigation activities are included in programming. Supporting resilience and food security can be a key action to help prevent gender-based violence, as stress over food and resource scarcity and job losses can trigger increased domestic violence and survival sex. Likewise, these activities can ease local communities’ increased pressure over biodiversity for survival. These are important conversations to have with project donors.

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³ Many lessons from humanitarian contexts are relevant to the current pandemic: For example, experts often say that “Rule 1” in emergency response is to assume GBV is happening everywhere and to prioritise support accordingly.

⁶ See again IUCN’s publication *Gender-based violence and environment linkages: The violence of inequality* for more, including promising practices and recommendations.

⁷ Many tools exist, including in the [UN Women’s virtual training centre](https://www.unwomen.org/en).
Coordinate with gender and gender-based violence coordination bodies and agencies to address gender-based violence. The environment sector has a significant presence and role in many local communities' livelihoods that will come under pressure as COVID-19 impacts environment-related jobs. Ensure outreach to local and national gender and gender-based violence coordination bodies and agencies to identify and address possible risks of increased gender-based violence and gaps in the environment sector.

Identify and support additional mechanisms and approaches to address gender-based violence during COVID-19 pandemic. Given the increase in domestic violence during this pandemic, many countries have adopted additional mechanisms and approaches to aid those in need. For example, in some countries, designated “essential business”, such as pharmacies and supermarkets, are further designated as places to report violence. (This requires additional training for personnel on how to identify and respond to risk, support survivors, and/ or use local networks and communications channels to identify people at risk.) Existing networks (such as listservs, WhatsApp groups, etc.) within environment projects could be used to create awareness on reporting measures and available services. They may also help identify those at risk and provide support using a survivor-centred approach.

See men as partners, realise men and boys also suffer gender-based violence, and adopt male engagement strategies. While women and girls are the majority of victims of gender-based violence, they are not the sole targets. Support services can disproportionately focus on women and girls, leaving men and boys – as well as other more commonly marginalised people – at risk. At the same time, promising practice from around the world shows the powerful impact of engaging men as partners to end violence against women. Therefore, it is important to engage men to identify environmental pressures and to address toxic masculinity to avoid increases in domestic and other forms of violence during COVID-19. Gender-responsive communication tools, outreach and campaigns, for example, can promote stress management with positive masculinity, encourage sharing household work and parenting, share information on support services, and condemn gender-based violence as destructive for all. These activities can support and strengthen gender-responsive approaches.

Use and promote gender-responsive programming policies, as well as policies against sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. IUCN has a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, as well as a gender-responsive programming policy. All IUCN staff must sign the code of conduct and the Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment policy. In light of the impact of COVID-19 on gender-based violence, we must remind ourselves that ending gender-based violence is a shared global responsibility, and no one is exempt. IUCN staff use IUCN policies to set a standard, raise awareness and support peers and partners.

Collect data on gender and gender-based violence impacts of COVID-19 in environmental programming. In the event of learning about or witnessing a case of gender-based violence, provide support as appropriate and to the extent possible, and keep record of the incident by collecting relevant data in a manner that respects both data privacy policies (IUCN’s data privacy policy) and the survivor-centred approach.

Integrate activities to prevent and respond to gender-based violence within environment projects permanently. While this information note focuses on immediate response to gender-based violence spikes due to COVID-19, medium and longer term plans must be adopted to prevent gender-based violence throughout environmental programming and to ensure that protocols and processes are in place to respond to it. As identified in IUCN research, gender-based violence is present in environmental settings and is further exacerbated by environmental degradation and resource scarcity – not least but also not solely during crises.
Useful resources on GBV and COVID-19

COVID-19: Emerging gender data and why it matters (UN Women, 2020)

Gender Equality and Addressing Gender-based Violence (GBV) and Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Prevention, Protection and Response (UNFPA, 2020)

Gender implications of COVID-19 outbreaks in development and humanitarian settings (CARE, 2020)

COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (UN Women, 2020)

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence against Women and Girls (UK Aid, 2020)

How to support survivors of gender-based violence when a GBV actor is not available in your area: User Guide and A step-by-step pocket guide for humanitarian practitioners (IASC, 2018)

Identifying & Mitigating Gender-based Violence Risks within the COVID-19 Response (IASC, 2020)

A call to action: Preventing and responding to gender-based violence (GBV) in disasters (IFRC, 2015)

Pandemics and Violence Against Women and Children (Center for Global Development, 2020)

Contact:
gender@iucn.org
GBV-ENV@iucn.org

www.iucn.org
https://genderandenvironment.org/