

Position Statement

The Role of Midwives in Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Violence against Children

REVISED 2026

Background

It is a fundamental human right to live free from violence (1). Gender-based violence (GBV) is defined as violence directed against a person because of their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, unequal power relations, and harmful gender norms. GBV is likely to result in physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering (1). Globally, almost one in three women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime (2). While GBV disproportionately affects women and girls, it can affect individuals of all genders and gender identities (3).

GBV can take many forms including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, femicide, harmful practices (such as female genital mutilation and child, early or forced marriage), obstetric violence, and online or technology facilitated violence (3,4,5). It occurs in every community, society, and country, transcending social, economic, and national boundaries (6). However, the risk of GBV for women living in fragile contexts is

increasing due to conflict and war, protracted humanitarian crises, and environmental or climate disasters (6,7,8). Displacement and the associated insecurity further increase the risk of women and girls being exposed to violence (6).

Violence against children is defined as all violence against people under 18 years old and includes GBV, maltreatment, neglect, exploitation, bullying, youth violence (among children and young adults), or emotional or psychological violence (9,11). Globally it is estimated that up to one billion children have experienced violence or neglect in the past year (9). Experiencing and witnessing violence are both damaging; it can erode trust between children and caregivers, often causing lifelong psychological and sometimes physical trauma (10).

There is growing global recognition of the intersections between violence against women through intimate partner violence and violence against children (11). Both GBV and violence against children are significant public health issues that cause serious short- and long-term physical, economic, and psychological consequences. These consequences can prevent survivors from fully taking part in society and impact families, communities, and nations (3,6).

Midwives play a vital role in responding to GBV and violence against children. As the first point of contact for women, they can recognise the signs, create safe opportunities for women to disclose experiences of violence, and provide compassionate, confidential support and clinical management of rape (12).

Position

The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) upholds the human rights of women, gender diverse people, and children everywhere, and insists that they must be safeguarded against all forms of violence.

States and health authorities must take all necessary measures to eliminate GBV and violence against children, while ensuring that those who experience violence have access to safe, timely and appropriate care and support. This includes equipping and protecting midwives so they can provide care for survivors.

Recommendations

ICM urges health authorities and policy makers to:

1. Accelerate progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5.2 on ending violence against women, and 16.2 on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children by framing violence prevention as a global development priority.
2. Strengthen laws and programmes that protect women and children and address inequitable gender norms.
3. Support the integration of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, together with prevention and response to GBV and violence against children, into health systems and humanitarian responses.
4. Position midwives as GBV responders and ensure their protection while providing essential care to survivors.
5. Include girls and women with lived experience of violence in programme development and ensure their rights and needs are prioritised in programme design and implementation.
6. Systematically collect, monitor and analyse reliable data on GBV and violence against children, in order to inform evidence-based policymaking and strategic planning of the health and social care system (13).

ICM urges midwives' associations to:

1. Commit to actively promoting the prevention of violence to protect the health and safety of women and children.
2. Demonstrate their anti-violence position to both their members and the general public.
3. Support campaigns and measures for prevention of violence, particularly abuse of women and children.
4. Collaborate with stakeholders, governmental and non-governmental organisations on prevention of violence.

5. Advocate for pre-service and in-service education that equips midwives with the knowledge, skills and professional behaviors required to care for girls and women who experience physical and sexual violence and abuse.

ICM urges midwives to:

1. Maintain competencies through lifelong learning on the knowledge, skills and professional behaviors required to care for girls and women who experience physical and sexual violence and abuse.
2. Create a safe environment where women and children can disclose violence without fear of judgement or retaliation and use evidence-based screening practice.
3. Ensure timely and safe referral to a specialist for necessary treatment, safe abortion care, or police, legal, and social services (14).
4. Care for girls and women who experience physical and sexual violence and abuse, promote prevention through education, empowerment and community engagement (12).

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Adopted at Glasgow International Council meeting, 2008

Reviewed and adopted at Prague Council meeting 2014.

Reviewed and adopted at Lisbon Council meeting, 2026.

Due for next review, 2029