

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES

## For Working with Gender-Based Violence Survivors

**Gender-based violence** is defined as violence directed at an individual based on the person's biological sex or gender identity. It is rooted in structural gender inequalities, patriarchy, and power imbalances. Gender-based violence is typically characterized by the use or threat of physical, psychological, sexual, economic, legal, political, social, and other forms of control and/or abuse. It affects individuals across the life course, and has direct and indirect costs to families, communities, economies, global public health, and development. In an effort to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, the key principles of *Do No Harm*, listed in the sidebar, should be kept in mind at all times.<sup>1</sup>

**A Survivor-Centered Approach** means recognizing and prioritizing the rights, needs, and wishes of the person who has experienced gender-based violence. A survivor-centered approach creates a supportive environment, ensures safety and dignity to promote a survivor's recovery, and reinforces the survivor's capacity to make decisions about possible interventions.

### Survivors' Fundamental Rights

Survivors have the right to:

- Give verbal or written consent before any action, referrals, or medical exams or support is provided
- Choose and decide whether, when, and which services they need
- Seek any support, free from coercion, and change their minds at any time
- Access chosen support in a safe and discreet way that is comfortable for them, and be accompanied by a trusted person, if requested
- Have a safe space to talk
- Choose the sex of the person providing the service
- Disclose or not disclose their story

### Guiding Questions

When a survivor is referred or comes to you, use these questions to guide your assessment of the person's immediate needs:

- Would you prefer talk to a male or a female?
- What are your immediate needs?
- Have you eaten something today or in the last 24 hours?
- When was the last time you slept or got a full night's sleep?
- Do you need any health services or a doctor's appointment?
- Have you felt in danger or unsafe in the last week or the last 30 days?
- Do you feel like anyone you live with is in danger or unsafe?
- Can you tell me who or what is making you feel unsafe?
- Can you tell me what makes you feel safe?
- How do you think I might be able to assist you?
- Would you be open to answering more questions or would you like to take a break?

<sup>1</sup> United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally, 2016 Update.  
Accessible at: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258703.pdf>



### DO NO HARM

#### SAFETY

It is essential to ensure the safety of the survivor and their family at all times, including their children and people who have assisted them.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Respect the confidentiality of survivors (and their families) at all times by not disclosing any information, at any time, to any party without the informed consent of the person concerned. Ensure the survivor's trust and empowerment.

#### RESPECT

All actions or decisions should be guided by respect for the survivor's choices, wishes, rights, and dignity.

#### NONDISCRIMINATION

Survivors should receive equal and fair treatment, regardless of their age, sex, race, marital status, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic.

#### HONESTY

Survivors should receive honest and complete information about possible referrals for service, be made aware of any risks or implications of sharing information about the situation, and have the right to limit the types of information shared and whom it is shared with.



## Do...

- ✓ **Be aware of your body language.** How you stand and hold your arms and head, your expression, and your tone of voice all send a clear message about how you perceive the situation.
- ✓ **Explain who you are,** your role and responsibilities, and that you are there to support the survivor.
- ✓ **Ask what would make the survivor feel safe right now** and whether they have any immediate needs they would like your help in fulfilling.
- ✓ **Use a survivor-centered approach** and seek permission from the survivor to ask questions about their experience. Remind the survivor that they do not have to answer a question if they choose not to. Explain why you are interested and how you will use the information to support them. Emphasize that nothing they say will be used against them, and that they can choose to participate in the conversation or not.
- ✓ **Reassure the survivor.** If they choose not to disclose, that is their right and they have full choice over their participation. Ask whether there is anything they would like to ask or tell you. This helps take the pressure off the survivor and empowers them to take the lead in the conversation.
- ✓ **Explain that all information will remain confidential** and inform the survivor about any limitations to confidentiality.
- ✓ **Tell the survivor they can take a break whenever they want** and can refuse to answer a question.
- ✓ **Use eye contact and focus all your attention on the individual.** If you must write something down, at the beginning, explain that you have to write notes from time to time, why this is important, and how written information will be used to ensure the survivor gets the best services possible. You can also remind them of this whenever you note something down.
- ✓ **Show a nonjudgmental and supportive attitude,** and validate what the survivor is saying.
- ✓ **Use an empathetic voice** to reassure the survivor.
- ✓ **Listen carefully** to the survivor's experience and assure them their feelings are justified.
- ✓ **Show the survivor you believe their story,** commend them for doing what they needed to do to survive, and recognize their courage and resiliency.
- ✓ **Be patient,** keeping in mind that the survivor is in a state of crisis and could have contradictory feelings. The survivor also might not be able to remember some things, such as an accurate timeline of events.
- ✓ **Emphasize that violence is not their fault** and that the perpetrator is responsible for their own behavior.
- ✓ **Use supportive statements,** such as "I'm sorry this happened to you" or "You have really been through a lot" or "We're going to try and get you some help."
- ✓ **Highlight that options and resources are available** to the survivor. Emphasize that they can choose which services they want to receive and can change their mind at any point.
- ✓ **Try to find adequate services together with the survivor.** Leave an "open door" for the survivor to come back to you.
- ✓ **Create a safety plan so the survivor can continue accessing services without jeopardizing their safety.** If the survivor lives with the perpetrator, you might need to help the survivor think through times they can access services. Ask whether it is safe to text or call, or you should wait for them to contact you. Do not give materials to take home unless you talk through the impact. For example, if the perpetrator could get upset, it might be best to create time in the office for the survivor to read through the materials.

To learn more about AIDSFree, visit <https://aidsfree.usaid.gov>.

## Don't...

- ✗ Use body language that conveys a message of irritation, judgment, accusation, boredom, shock, dislike, or anger toward the survivor.
- ✗ Judge a survivor's behavior based on their age, appearance, clothing, culture, religion, type of work, or relationship to the perpetrator. *There are no reasons for gender-based violence.*
- ✗ Pressure the survivor to disclose.
- ✗ Make any promises you cannot keep.
- ✗ Suggest or force couples counseling or mediation between a survivor and the perpetrator. *This can be traumatizing and is known to be an ineffective method.*
- ✗ Ask about violence in the presence of a partner, family member, friend, or anyone else unless the survivor suggests it. *The survivor's safety is the key.*
- ✗ Rely on passive listening and non-commenting. This could make the survivor think you do not believe them, or that they are wrong and the perpetrator is right.
- ✗ Interrupt the survivor (for any reason) when they are talking.
- ✗ Accuse the survivor of making contradictory statements. Trauma can make it difficult to remember all the facts or timelines, and they could feel one way about the experience one day and completely differently another day. Your job is to listen and try to piece together the puzzle; you might never know all the details. Gather only as much detail as you need to provide services or support. Only ask questions that will help you assess the services and support the survivor needs and deserves.
- ✗ Blame the survivor or ask questions like "Why do you stay with your partner?" (if the partner is the perpetrator) or "Did you have an argument before it happened?" or "What were you doing out alone?" or "What were you wearing?" Instead, reinforce that gender-based violence is a violation of their rights and is never acceptable.
- ✗ Ask the same question multiple times. If you do not get an answer, keep the conversation going. You can try to rephrase later, once you have built more rapport with the survivor.