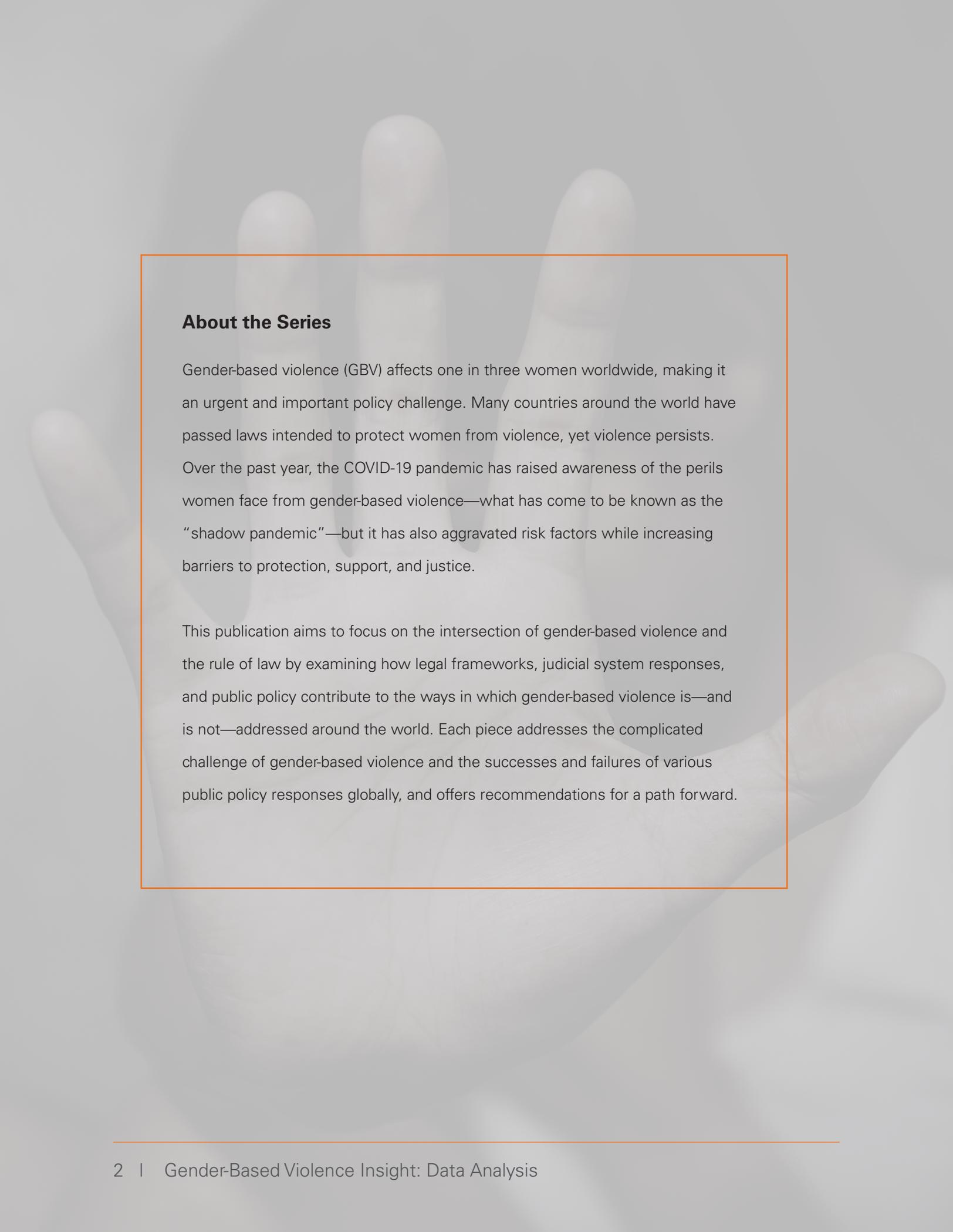




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The Information Gains of the 4IR and Closing the GBV Knowledge Gap

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About the Series

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects one in three women worldwide, making it an urgent and important policy challenge. Many countries around the world have passed laws intended to protect women from violence, yet violence persists. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the perils women face from gender-based violence—what has come to be known as the “shadow pandemic”—but it has also aggravated risk factors while increasing barriers to protection, support, and justice.

This publication aims to focus on the intersection of gender-based violence and the rule of law by examining how legal frameworks, judicial system responses, and public policy contribute to the ways in which gender-based violence is—and is not—addressed around the world. Each piece addresses the complicated challenge of gender-based violence and the successes and failures of various public policy responses globally, and offers recommendations for a path forward.

A COMPLEX PROBLEM WITH BASIC INFORMATION

We live in the most dynamic age in human history. The increasing fusion of our physical and digital realities provides us with access to nearly infinite information at any given time. Many hoped the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) would effectively democratize information and thereby provide societies with the capability to identify problems and create evidence-based solutions. But the truth is, we still lack critical information about many of society's most persistent challenges. While artificial intelligence and machine learning provide unprecedented insight into human behavior, helping to drive consumption to new heights, the global community still fails to understand the scope and nature of many social ills. Gender-based violence (GBV) is one such problem.

“For all the technological and informational advances made in recent years, the information we are operating with in order to hold governments and institutions accountable for protecting all citizens is strikingly limited.”

GBV encompasses “physical, psychological, or sexual violence perpetrated against an individual or group on the basis of gender or gender norms”¹—although it is often interchangeably, and narrowly, used to describe violence against women. It is a global scourge. An estimated 35 percent of women around the world have experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner,² and cases are believed to be widely underreported. Only an estimated 7 percent of women who have experienced violence reported it to a formal source.³ GBV is a

“wicked problem ... systemic in nature, complexly interrelated, and materialize[s] at the interface between public-private and profit-nonprofit interests”⁴ in ways that the global community struggles to define, measure, and address. The complexity of GBV is ecological in nature, pervading all strata, including “factors operating at the individual, relationship, community and society levels.”⁵ To know whether or not society is addressing GBV, we need to be able to measure and benchmark progress (or lack thereof) in all its complexity—however, we rely on basic and limited data to complete this task.

International efforts such as the Convention of the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Belem do Para Convention highlight the need for norms and standards in addressing GBV, “including standards for domestic legislation, creating standards for global civil society to both advocate and monitor, and mobilizing domestic civil society around these new shared expectations of individual and state behavior.”⁶

Data are essential to holding governments to these standards. For all the technological and informational advances made in recent years, the information we are operating with in order to hold governments and institutions accountable for protecting all citizens is strikingly limited. We suffer from a knowledge gap regarding the extent to which GBV occurs, the forms it takes, the frequency at which it occurs, who is experiencing and perpetrating the violence, and critically, what works in reducing GBV. There are many reasons why this knowledge gap exists, and efforts such as the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are working at the global level to address shortfalls in data, but there is much progress to be made. We cannot achieve the SDG’s goal to “eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres”⁷ if we cannot monitor its prevalence.

This paper will discuss why this knowledge gap exists and what we need to do to close it.

WHY DON'T WE HAVE MORE DATA?

At its core, the reason the global community struggles to paint a complete picture of GBV is the ongoing debate over what, exactly, we mean by gender-based violence. There is a tension between adopting indicators with “a specialized focus on gender-based violence or the use of frameworks that facilitate the mainstreaming of violence against women.”⁸ Essentially, one side of the debate argues that data should capture gender-based violence perpetrated against any and all victims, regardless of their sex. This approach would require a deeper understanding of the dynamics that shape violent events when they are recorded, to ensure it can be properly classified as gender-based violence, so as not to capture all instances of interpersonal violence (such as assault motivated for non-gendered reasons) and lose its meaning. While on the other side of the debate, some argue that the purpose of collecting such data is to prioritize and mainstream notions of gender-based violence specifically targeting women (although whether this is defined as a matter of sex or gender identity is a further debate) into perspectives and policy decisions, and therefore measurements should be based on sex-disaggregation between male and female victims. The lack of agreement on the scope of purpose of these data sets inhibits our ability to measure and understand the deeper issues surrounding gender-based violence.

Beyond the fundamental debate, there are five points of disagreement that further complicate the definition and scope of GBV indicators and data. These points include defining (1) perpetrators, (2) types of violence, (3) severity of violence, (4) preva-

lence versus events, and (5) the time frame in which the violence occurred.⁹ The question of perpetrators has to do with the nature of the relationship with the victim. For example, should there be a narrower focus on intimate or former intimate partners who commit GBV? In that case, where do we include violence perpetrated by family members who are not an intimate partner, as in the extreme case of honor killings? How should we categorize the nature of the relationship between perpetrator and victim, and how can we know this?

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The question regarding the types of violence is similar in nature. What kinds of violence should be included in measurements, and what is the threshold of violence that should count? Standard definitions and measurements of physical and sexual violence already exist. However, with emotional violence, which evidence shows is more pervasive,¹⁰ “there has been little progress in reaching consensus on how to conceptualize and measure psychological violence,”¹¹ despite its inclusion in the SDGs. Similarly, how do we define and measure patrimonial violence such as property grabbing?¹² Moreover, there is a debate regarding the severity of violence that should be measured and how to differentiate severe violence. What is the threshold of violence that should be measured? How does that vary according to type of violence? Can we reasonably lump physical violence such as shoving together with femicide and expect accurate measurements?



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The final two debates are quite literally a matter of time. The debate of prevalence versus events or incidents centers on whether it is more useful to understand the proportion of the population that experiences gender-based violence (prevalence) or to count the number of events in which gender-based violence occurs (incidents). GBV is rarely a one-off occurrence, and experts recognize that there are cycles of violence that repeat.¹³ What do we miss when we do not understand the chronic nature of GBV? The other debate is whether the data should capture if victims have experienced violence in the course of their lifetime versus in the past 12 months. Crime surveys and other population-wide data collection efforts are expensive and time-consuming to conduct. With limited resources,

governments are not always able to collect data on a regular, annual basis, and therefore measuring if victims have experienced GBV in their lifetime gives a sense of prevalence and could be captured with lower frequency. At the same time, if the data measures prevalence over a lifetime, researchers are not able to effectively know if GBV prevalence is getting better or worse over time. To answer that question, measuring the prevalence of violence in the previous 12 months is more useful.

Regardless of what the scope of GBV means to a researcher or policymaker, the simple truth is we do not have the information necessary to test explanations or innovations. The problem is twofold: (1) There are issues with the data that we do collect, and (2) there are data we do not collect.

The data that we do have is limited by the definitional issues and lack of standards that prevent institutions from producing indicators we can compare over time and across countries. Often these data

are not disaggregated by age, not collected for women over the age of 49, do not differentiate between rural and urban settings, and do not capture where the violence occurred (workplace, school, home, etc.). Because of the lack of standards and definitions at the international level, national and subnational institutions are left to develop and implement data collection on their own accord. This puts tremendous pressure on national statistics offices (NSOs), which often lack the resources to create and publish these data.¹⁴ Within this context, NSOs rely on less than perfect sources to produce the indicators that we see in databases and cited in research.

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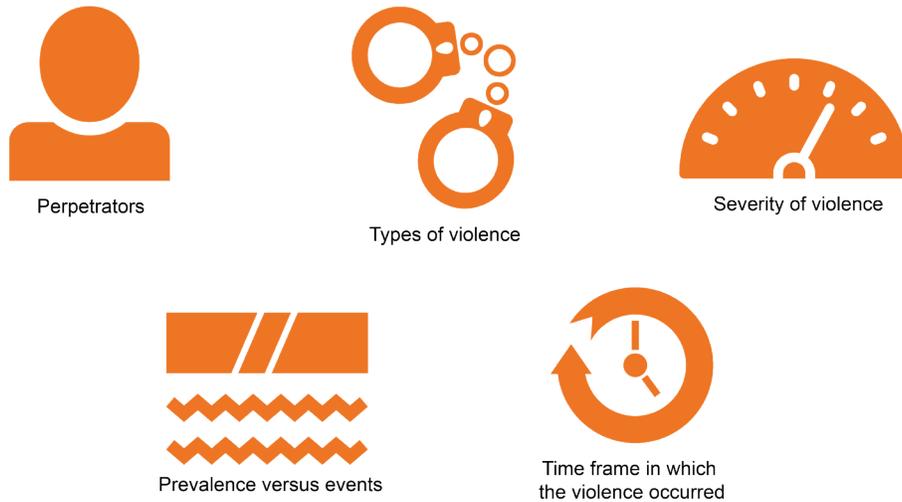
The two main sources of these data are surveys and administrative records. An advantage of surveys is that they can be designed to capture granularity that is often missing and include questions on the dynamics of the violence that can help researchers better differentiate gender-based violence from interpersonal violence. However, surveys are expensive to conduct on a regular basis, require specially trained enumerator staff to ensure the emotional well-being of participants, and draw from limited population samples that often exclude the most vulnerable, including the unhoused or those living in temporary shelters. Moreover, special care must be taken to preserve the confidentiality and rights of participants. Participants in the survey must also respond truthfully and choose to disclose the details of violent incidents to strangers, and some evidence

suggests that victims are more likely to report when surveys adopt a self-completion method rather than being conducted as in-person interviews.¹⁵

The second source of data are administrative records, most often reported from the justice system. These data draw from crime statistics collected by the police and convictions data collected by the courts, both of which are problematic. Statistics reported from police sources capture only a drop in the bucket of the actual number of GBV incidents because very few victims report to formal sources. Victims of GBV may be afraid of retribution from their abuser, may not trust the police or the justice system to protect them or investigate the case, may feel shame, or may not understand that they have experienced a crime. Statistics collected from convictions capture even fewer instances of GBV because they depend firstly on the incident being reported at all, and also that the incident is thoroughly investigated and the case judged, and that the perpetrator is convicted. Impunity for committing GBV is a persistent problem around the world. Completing this journey through the justice system may take years. In some contexts, intimate partner violence committed between a married couple is considered a private matter and is dismissed by the justice system, and therefore those cases are systematically excluded from these statistics. These barriers mean that high-quality, annual data on gender-based violence is rare, even as decision-makers rely on these imperfect data to make policy decisions.

The data that we do not collect tells a deeper story. Researchers and policymakers have some sense of the prevalence of physical and sexual violence committed against women, but the picture largely ends there. The acknowledgement that information gaps exist drives progress in creating new data and “since 2000, the effort involved in monitoring the

Five points of disagreement that complicate the definition and scope of GBV indicators and data.



Graphic Credit: Yunuen Bonaparte

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has spurred increased investment to improve data for monitoring and accountability.”¹⁶ The SDGs expanded the indicators from 60 under the MDG framework to 231 indicators to capture a more complete picture of human development. At the same time, the growth in the indicators the international community considers a priority presents a problem. The increase in indicators from initiatives like the SDGs “challenged the capacity of the international statistical community to innovate and find measurements methods for priorities which there are no agreed upon definitions and are difficult to measure.”¹⁷ Creating standards, methodologies, and data collection instruments that apply globally is a complicated process that requires consensus and takes time.

It is also a process that relies on people, which raises a crucial question: Who is at the table when these decisions are made? The UN SDGs employ a consultative process that convenes experts and consultants from around the world to develop indicators that lack a standard methodology. But these groups are limited in size, and participation largely

depends on having existing contact with the UN body that acts as custodian to a given indicator. The people most affected by these data are unlikely to be in the room.

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Global indicators give us a sense of the scale of the problem and whether it is improving or degrading. But these data are not sufficient for making decisions about how to address GBV. Researchers also need to collect data about whether the interventions designed to reduce GBV work in practice. Researchers and decision-makers do not have sufficient evidence to know what policies and programs effectively reduce GBV. To answer this question, researchers must conduct evaluations of

programs and policies, but “rigorous evaluations of GBV interventions are infrequent, and those that are conducted are often limited by shortcomings in their methodology and measurement, and their lack of detailed intervention description.”¹⁸ The gold standard of such evaluations employ randomized control trials (RCTs) to determine the impact of a given intervention, but these kinds of experiments are rarely conducted for GBV interventions. These evaluations are expensive to conduct, and because the results of the study are not available until years after the experiment is complete, there is little appetite to fund them. Moreover, ethical concerns limit what information can be gathered and how the experiment is designed, so as not to expose GBV victims to any harm. Finally, the results of any particular evaluation are specific to the location, program or policy, and context in which it occurred and cannot be easily extrapolated to other situations.

WHAT CAN WE DO BETTER?

The GBV knowledge gap persists, but the benefits of the technological advances of the 4IR, when applied with intention, can help close that gap. First, the international community needs to develop standard indicators to measure GBV beyond physical and sexual violence. Specifically, indicators for emotional or psychological violence and patrimonial violence need to be defined and standardized. We also need to improve the methodologies for existing GBV indicators to include age disaggregation; move beyond sex-disaggregation and the limited focus on female victims; differentiate rural and urban settings; collect information regarding the relationship to the perpetrator beyond intimate partner (i.e., family member, work colleague, stranger, etc.); differentiate between the severity levels of violence; and

capture the count of GBV incidents in addition to measuring prevalence. The seismic shift to online collaboration in the post-COVID-19 world means that international cooperation no longer requires the burden of in-person meetings to convene expert groups. International organizations should leverage these technologies to create expert groups for indicators without standard methods and to revisit existing indicators.

Second, we need to expand the capacity of NSOs to collect and publish GBV data on an annual basis and make data available on a user-friendly and accessible platform to encourage accountability. This means providing resources and expertise to implement annual surveys with expanded population samples and improved methodologies for existing indicators, as well as employing data collection tools for new indicators. Mobile technologies should be employed to reduce the burden of data collection and expand self-completion methodologies. Similarly, data privacy innovations should be used to protect the confidentiality of survey participants.

Third, if we are going to rely on administrative data such as crime statistics, we need to improve the rates of reporting GBV to formal sources. Police need to be trained to respond to GBV, and more women should be actively recruited to police forces. Police should also adopt online reporting mechanisms to expand access. These e-reporting platforms should adopt responsive design techniques to ensure the reporting platform is easily accessible on mobile devices, and they should include a mechanism for reporting via SMS in cases where smartphone access is limited.

And finally, we need to increase the research and evaluations of GBV interventions. The financial burden for this work cannot depend on university fund-

ing alone. If governments and donors demand that those programs and policies be evidence-based, then the funding for conducting rigorous evaluations needs to be made available.

At the end of the day, improved data and information will not solve the problem of gender-based violence, but it will help expose the problem and give advocates the fuel needed to fan the flames of urgency. Policymakers will not be motivated to act by statistics alone, but the citizenry can use those statistics to hold policymakers accountable for the safety of their constituencies. Data is not the “new oil” of the 4IR, because it is not a scarce commodity and should not be treated as such. Data has value only when we create it, share it, and harness it to solve the problems that stymie human development.

NOTES

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