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Today culminates the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, a time when the world's attention turns towards the women, girls, men, and boys who experience sexual, physical, or emotional abuse and assault. For our colleagues who make up the Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR), this is more than a brief annual event; this is what we do every day.

The GBV AoR is an expert forum within the humanitarian cluster system that promotes comprehensive and coordinated responses to gender-based violence in crisis-affected countries. We represent 67 members around the world, including international and national non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies, academics, and other experts. Our mission is to achieve more predictable, accountable, and effective approaches to preventing and responding to gender-based violence in complex emergencies, including conflicts and natural disasters. To that end, the GBV AoR serves as a repository of tools and best practices, capturing for practitioners, policy makers and researchers the most reliable information on what works in keeping women and girls safe, which can be found on our [website](#).

Experience has shown that every single humanitarian crisis increases the risk of gender-based violence. During emergencies, systems of protection – from the police down to the family unit – are weakened and disrupted. Forced migration and displacement separate families and communities, which places women and girls at increased risk of multiple forms of abuse.

For example, in the last two and a half years, Syrian women and children have become increasingly exposed to a range of gender-based violations. The systematic use of rape as a weapon of war is a primary reason why more than two million Syrians have fled the country and another seven million are displaced inside Syria. Although GBV AoR members are scaling-up their interventions to prevent gender-based violence and assist survivors, there is an alarming lack of medical and counseling services to help Syrians recover. The international community – both civil society and governments – must provide more resources to prevent violence and give safe and confidential assistance to survivors.

The current escalation of hostilities in the Central African Republic (CAR) is also proving deadly for women and children. Fighting between the military and Seleka militants has forced large numbers of people out of their homes and into the bush, particularly women and children. Armed groups use sexual violence to target, terrify, and humiliate women and children, and survivors face trauma, unwanted pregnancy, disease, and even death. The conflict has rendered many parts of the country inaccessible, preventing GBV AoR members from providing medical and counseling services to survivors. As efforts to respond to the crisis are ramping up, we must also increase efforts to scale up gender-based violence programs that provide life-saving assistance to women and children.

In the Philippines, too, women and children are under threat following Typhoon Haiyan. In the chaos that follows a disaster of this scale, women and children are particularly vulnerable to rape and other forms of violence committed by strangers, aid workers, and family members. Women and children may also resort to sex trafficking or survival sex in order to provide the basic necessities for their families. Therefore, it is imperative that from the very start, humanitarian assistance is delivered in ways that ensure safe and equal access for women and girls as well as men and boys. GBV AoR members are already on the ground, endeavoring to do just that.



The scenes in Syria, CAR, and the Philippines are painfully familiar to most of us. Whenever a country faces a humanitarian crisis, the risks to women and children rise. Addressing those risks at the earliest stages of any emergency is a matter of life and death.

This year, there are reasons to be hopeful that the fight against gender-based violence will finally receive the international attention and funding that it deserves. Last month, the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) launched a worldwide Call to Action to End Violence Against Women and Girls in Emergencies, where donors and humanitarians made concrete pledges that will drive systemic and lasting change. It was thrilling to see DfID itself allocate more than £21 million to prevent violence against women and girls in crises. The United States government, for its part, launched the Safe from the Start initiative, which has thus far committed \$10 million towards addressing gender-based violence during the first phase of all new emergencies.

For its part, the GBV AoR has made a number of commitments towards the Call to Action to improve prevention and response to gender-based violence in emergencies. This includes providing sustained technical support to high-risk countries; strengthening the capacity of humanitarian professionals on gender-based violence programming; supporting more effective programs by revising the *Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on GBV Interventions*; and sharing new research and best practice.

Of course, it will take more than one-off pledges of funds, declarations of intent, and commemorative days to ensure that gender-based violence is truly prioritized. That's why these 16 days cannot be the only time we face up to the global pandemic of gender-based violence. Instead, let us commit ourselves to standing up for the dignity of every woman, every day. Relief for those who suffer cannot come eventually – it must be provided immediately. This is every humanitarian's responsibility and the GBV AoR is ready to provide guidance and leadership.