

Adopting a trauma-informed and responsive **policing framework** for TFGBV



Part A:

How does trauma present itself in police interactions¹?



Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) occurs across a continuum between online and offline violence. When responding to all reports of gender-based violence (GBV), always consider use of and access to technology by perpetrators or their allies.

Many survivors of TFGBV and GBV experience psychological or emotional trauma. They may also be at a high risk of physical and sexual violence. It is important to recognize that this can affect how they interact with you. Trauma looks different for each person, and it is useful to develop skills in understanding and recognizing the various signs of trauma. These include:

¹ This document originates from UNFPA's global TFGBV Training Package for Frontline Responders, which builds capacity of service providers to support survivors across the humanitarian-development nexus.

Trauma symptom

What signs to look for

Hypervigilance

(being in a constant state of alert, checking and monitoring for and fearful of further attacks or danger)

- ☐ Unsettled
- ☐ Alert
- ☐ Nervous
- ☐ Distrustful

Avoidance

(survivors may avoid anything that reminds them of trauma they have experienced)

- ☐ Reluctant to discuss matters with police
- ☐ Indifferent
- ☐ Uncooperative
- ☐ Avoiding eye contact

Recall and communication impacted

(memory and cognitive function)

- ☐ Difficulty communicating with police
- ☐ Difficulty recalling events
- ☐ “Jumping around” in chronology when recounting events

Emotional

(with heightened emotion or unemotional)

- ☐ Intense anger
- ☐ Intense distress
- ☐ Reserved
- ☐ Surprisingly unemotional
- ☐ Hypervigilant or anxious around devices

Physical

(Note: physical symptoms may be mistaken for signs of alcohol or drug intoxication.)

- ☐ Shaking
- ☐ Sweating
- ☐ Difficulty speaking



Identifying and understanding how trauma presents itself ensures that you can understand why a survivor might not present in a way that you might expect. You may need to reflect on your initial interpretation of a survivor as being deceptive, untrustworthy or uncooperative; instead, this may be evidence of trauma.

Part B:

Listening and validation



Active listening

- **Pay attention** to spoken and unspoken cues.
- Show understanding and **make survivors feel heard**.
- **Listen with empathy** and **without judgment**.
- Allow the survivor to recount their experience in their own words,
- **without interrupting** to ask questions. Follow-up questions can be posed as needed, after the survivor has given their first full account of their experience.

Validate

- Reflect their feelings in your responses, ask for clarification and **ensure you have understood their needs** correctly.
- **Validate feelings**, reactions and their choice whether or not to disclose.
- As permitted by law and procedure, **respect their wishes regarding whether or not to pursue accountability measures**, including through the criminal, civil or administrative processes.

Validating language

There are myths and misconceptions about TFGBV. Sometimes it is viewed as “less serious” than other forms of GBV, including physical violence. However, TFGBV has profound impacts on a survivor’s life, including upon their well-being, security, rights and freedoms. Show survivors that you recognize this by **using language that validates** their disclosure and signals that you believe them.

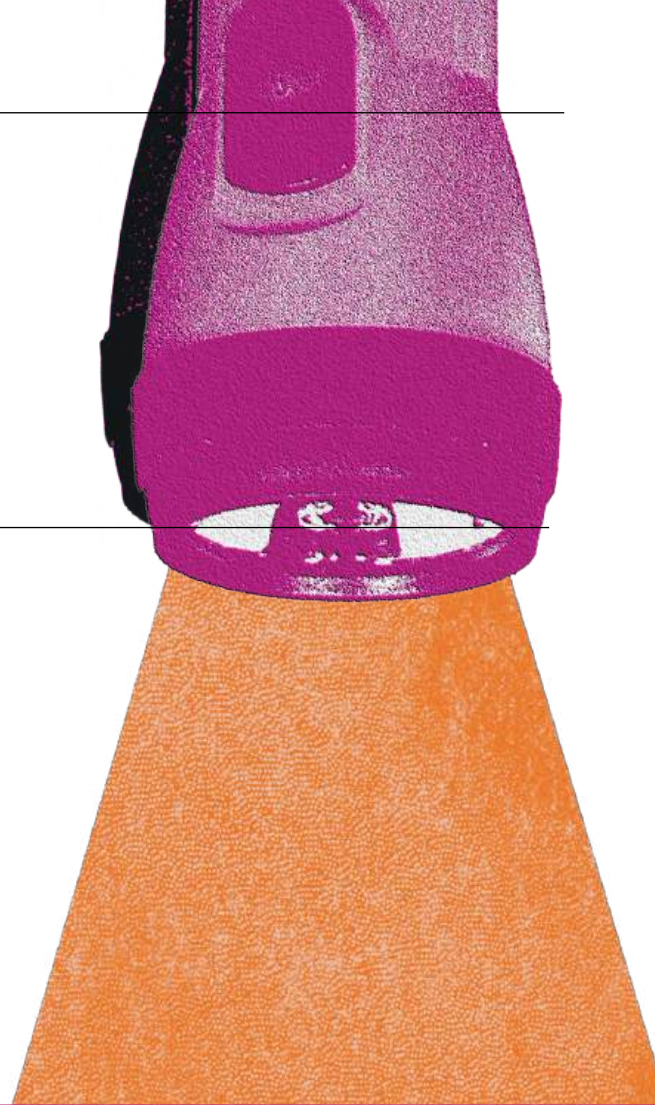
Avoid using language that minimizes TFGBV and its impact on survivors – for example:	Instead, use language that validates a survivor’s experience – for example:
“It’s not real violence.”	“I understand what you’re feeling is real.”
“It’s not that serious.”	“Behaviour like this may constitute a criminal offence.”

Avoid victim-blaming language that implies a survivor is in some way responsible for the TFGBV or that they need to change their behaviour to prevent TFGBV. Refrain from suggesting that the survivor should stay offline for safety reasons. Use language that **holds perpetrators to account**.

Avoid using language that puts blame or responsibility for TFGBV on a survivor – for example:	Instead, use language that holds perpetrators to account – for example:
“You shouldn’t have sent a nude image.”	“Non-consensual image-sharing is a violation of...”
“You shouldn’t be on social media.”	“Everyone has the right to participate in digital spaces safely.”
“What do you expect when you behave like that online?”	“Everyone has a right to feel safe online.”

Part C:

Safety and security



Tailored risk assessments and safety plans

- Survivors are the **experts of their experience** – respect their wishes.
- Assess and ensure survivors' **online and offline safety** through an **individual safety assessment** and the implementation of a **tailored safety plan**.
- Provide information about relevant services that may address survivors' **physical, emotional, economic, legal and practical needs**.
- Provide **information about police and court responses as well as civil and administrative remedies, survivors' options and updates** about their case (with their consent and safe communication).
- Explain that the **violence often continues or escalates over time**, even when survivors hope it will stop.
- Evaluate if there is a **high risk of repeat, escalating or lethal violence, and implement tailored safety plans as appropriate**.
- **Refer** survivors to a shelter or other services as needed.

→ Survivors' tech concerns

Once technology has been used to harm or control, it is normal for survivors to be hypervigilant and highly concerned about what is happening on their devices as well as technology around them. Anxiety may manifest in hypervigilance around functions of devices or digital accounts, including around glitches or updates. This does not discredit the survivor as a witness.

Below are some examples of what survivors might say and how you can respond. Validating their concerns will help them to build trust in you, increase their cooperation, and improve their perception and experience of the police.

Ways survivors might communicate their fears	How you can validate their experience and build trust, cooperation and confidence in the police
"I'm probably crazy" or "I feel like I'm insane."	"It is completely understandable to feel worried, concerned or anxious when technology has been used to harm you."
"I'm paranoid" or "I feel like I'm paranoid."	"It might not be [the perpetrator] or an attack, but it is understandable and it is to be expected to be worried about technology."

Technological considerations must be part of all GBV risk assessments and safety plans, regardless of whether use of technology or TFGBV is being reported.

Assessing risk

We know from research and the experience of essential service providers that the most dangerous time for a survivor is when they are reporting GBV, or attempting to end contact or a relationship with a perpetrator. The presence of TFGBV is a key indicator of escalating violence as well as heightened risk of physical violence or femicide. This includes:

-  **Self-harm or death threats:** Digital threats of suicide or self-harm, lethal violence to survivor, new partner, children or others.
-  **Obsessive behaviour:** High volume of communications sent via technology, or communications over a long period of time. This could also include frequent viewing of a survivor's social media accounts or constantly monitoring their location.
-  **Technology-facilitated stalking or technology used for in-person stalking:** The use of technology to monitor someone's activities, movements or communications.
-  **Controlling behaviour:** A perpetrator may be coercing or attempting to coerce or control a survivor in many ways – for example, by making threats, restricting their access to technology, tracking or surveilling the survivor, or demanding they use certain technology.

Risk assessments are dynamic rather than static and need to be adaptable and frequently updated to assess evolving risks and technologies.

→ Assume the perpetrator has access



You can use the [Tech Safety Checklist](#) with the survivor to assess device and account safety and security.

When assessing risk where the perpetrator is a known person:



Assume the perpetrator has access to the survivor's or their children's devices, accounts, communications or locations. There may also be other close contacts of the survivor that are being monitored by the perpetrator.



Before contacting a survivor, assess whether their phone, email or accounts could be monitored – agree on safe words or methods of communication if needed.



Help survivors preserve evidence without tipping off perpetrators (e.g. screenshots, message backups).



Include digital safety assessment to determine how much access the perpetrator has to survivor activity or devices (e.g. account audits, two-factor authentication, reviewing app permissions).



Don't dismiss survivors' concerns about unusual digital activity. Even minor digital "glitches" or unusual activity may signal real threats. Believe and validate survivors' instincts.

Planning for safety

- **Survivors invest extensive time, energy and resources to try to manage, mitigate and prevent TFGBV.** They may contact multiple agencies (e.g. justice agencies; telecommunication companies and platforms; GBV support services) in doing so, as well as any other agencies (e.g. health, household, education, employment agencies) that require or manage technologies, digital accounts or profiles.
- **They may want to, or be pressured to, “disengage” from technology (stop using devices and digital media). However, a decision to refrain from all technology use can elevate rather than alleviate risk.** Survivors may need tailored support to help them retain use of technology that supports their connectivity and access to professional support, while locking down devices and platforms that are readily misused and abused. It is crucial that tech safety plans are part of survivors’ safety plans, and that risk assessments conducted by police incorporate and address TFGBV.
- **It is not uncommon for survivors to leave some digital channels** (such as a phone number, email address, social media account) **open to people perpetrating TFGBV, in efforts to manage their safety.** Survivors may use these channels to gauge the state of mind and attitude of people perpetrating violence to gain insight into the risk they pose; this is a risk management strategy.
- **Survivors who share a child or children with a perpetrator of TFGBV are commonly required to maintain channels of communication to enable shared parenting or visitation arrangements.** This heightens their own and their children’s exposure to TFGBV. Survivors may experience anxiety in relation to this and attempt to maintain and protect their children’s safety.
- **Develop a list of specialist digital safety specialists and support referral to these services** where appropriate or when requested by the survivor.

Tech safety recommendations

Caution: When going through the key recommendations below to enhance the survivor's tech safety, do not advise survivors to suddenly disconnect or adjust their technology without assessing and planning, as this may escalate risk. As far as possible, avoid placing undue burden on the survivor when addressing tech safety.

Key recommendations (non-exhaustive):

- **Survivors might log out** of accounts and apps but this can hinder digital evidence-gathering and **increase the risk** of increased, physical and fatal violence.
- Change existing passwords to **new strong passwords** (there are online guides to help in generating this) and **two-factor authentication** (when possible).
- **Review privacy settings** on devices, accounts and apps.
- **Limit information-sharing and location-sharing.**
- Check for and limit **linked or shared accounts.**
- Recommend that survivors use **private or incognito browsing** or browsers.
- If digital accounts or contacts are kept open for the purposes of maintaining communication and capturing evidence, survivors should use accounts specifically for the perpetrator only, so they can control when and how they see this content, while still capturing evidence.

Safety planning must be ongoing. It should be revisited frequently and adjusted to reflect new threats, survivor needs and changing technology or contexts. You can use the [Tech Safety Checklist](#) with the survivor to assess device and account safety and security.

Part D:

Preparation and prediction



Link to support

- Explain what **remedies and reparations** are available, including restitution and compensation.
- Explain what **criminal, civil and administrative processes** are available.
- Proactively engage with **GBV service providers**, including legal aid services, and **help survivors to identify support networks**.
- Provide survivors with **all available information** relating to access to justice and GBV services.

Supporting survivors

- **Survivors often do not know about police, legal or court processes.**

Provide information about this in plain language, in particular about what happens next. Remember: this can be confusing, and survivors may experience neurological or psychological trauma. It is helpful to provide summaries or information for them to refer to afterwards, through a safe communication channel.

- **It is vital that you provide communication and updates to survivors.**

Even if the investigation or charges of TFGBV are not pursued or are dropped, it is important to maintain communication with survivors regarding the status of their case. Clear and regular communication will also boost survivor satisfaction and confidence in the police. You must regularly consider what communication channels are safe to use with the survivor (note: communication channels and methods may differ depending on the case).

- **Provide safe referrals.**

Where possible, provide safe and appropriate referrals to information about tech safety, GBV services and other relevant support services.