WOMEN AND GIRLS HAVE A RIGHT TO LIVE FREE FROM VIOLENCE. But until that right is universally realized, a comprehensive package of essential services must be available to support those affected by violence, wherever it occurs. Towards that end, UN Women partners with four other UN entities – the World Health Organization (WHO), UNFPA, UNDP and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – on a global joint programme that helps countries extend the reach and quality of essential services.

The challenges are considerable. Laws lag behind commitments to women’s rights. There are shortages of funds. Still today, many women and girls facing violence will never find even the most basic services for safety, protection and recovery, such as timely healthcare, a police response, legal aid, safe accommodation and shelter, and psychosocial counselling. Fear and lack of knowledge limit the willingness to use services. Poor coordination across providers can fail to link survivors to all services required to recover and seek justice.

In 48 countries around the world, governments, civil society and the UN system now turn to a policy framework and set of quality standards developed by the joint programme on essential services. These help ensure that all women and girls receive the same quality of services, and that services are grounded in common understanding of the context of violence, the management of risk, and measures for ongoing safety and protection. Further, service providers should work together to minimize burdens on women and girls during reporting, response and recovery.

A number of countries are taking new measures in line with these standards. Standard operating protocols and a specialized case management unit in the SOLOMON ISLANDS have significantly improved service quality. In GUATEMALA, the national police have deployed a new protocol for the criminal investigation of cases of violence. TUNISIA has schooled 450 health-care workers on identifying and responding to violence, and incorporated training modules on investigating cases in the national police academy curriculum.

The essential services programme has generated significant national investment in adopting internationally-known ‘best practice’ strategies, such as specialized units in criminal justice systems and social services. In VIET NAM, the Domestic Violence Rapid Response Team provides comprehensive health, social, justice and security services to nearly 2 million people in Ben Tre province.