

AN OVERVIEW OF

ADVOCACY BRIEF / 2023

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SYRIA

More than 12 years since its onset, the Syria crisis remains one of the world's worst and longest humanitarian situations, one that is placing the lives, dignity, and futures of millions at risk. For women and girls, the impact has been severe. Ongoing conflicts, a spiralling economic crisis, unprecedented food and staple shortages, and the continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have converged to exacerbate gender-based violence, affecting their coping strategies and depleting their resilience, making humanitarian resources and programming both critical and life-saving.



“Beyond the physical and emotional abuse, there is the threat of sexual violence, such as harassment and rape in the street or at work, and of course, all these forms of violence have increased during the crisis. Every year is worse than the one before.

— A WOMAN FROM AS-SWEIDA

SNAPSHOT GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN 2022



GBV REPORTED MORE FREQUENTLY

In 2022, women and girls continue to face intimate partner violence and early and forced marriage, with GBV experts in Syria noting an increase of disclosures and reports of such incidents. Technology-facilitated forms of GBV, specifically sexual exploitation, harassment, and sextortion are increasing for adolescent girls and young women. Femicide continues and is a growing concern in some governorates in particular.



CONSISTENT GBV TRENDS

As in past years, women and girls are experiencing physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. Denial of opportunities, resources, and rights continues to affect women and girls through movement restrictions and denial of education, work, and inheritances. More often than not these acts are committed by males in the community, including male family members, husbands, fathers, uncles, in-laws, brothers, and sons, as men continue to hold power in society and act as the decision makers in the households. Killings, including so-called "honour killings" remain a concern for women and girls.



AFFECTED POPULATIONS

Women and adolescent girls, especially those displaced, disabled, widowed, divorced and unaccompanied/separated girls, continue to be the most affected. Older women also face discrimination and violence. Women and girls with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC) face GBV alongside other forms of discrimination and violence, while some men and boys experience forms of sexual violence, mostly in the context of detention.



ECONOMIC COLLAPSE AND FOOD INSECURITY

A combination of contributing factors has continued from previous years to exacerbate multiple forms of violence against women and girls. In addition to bearing the brunt of over a decade of conflict and displacement, women and girls are also suffering the worst impacts of the unrelenting economic crisis in the country, which has contributed significantly to unemployment, inflation, and a growing food shortage crisis. This has helped create an antagonistic context in which various forms of gender-based violence can thrive.

For instance, women and girls increasingly find themselves in situations where they face escalating rates of sexual exploitation and abuse by landlords, employers, or supervisors, while others may feel compelled to adopt negative coping mechanisms like survival sex and serial/temporary marriages. Meanwhile, the economic crisis is resulting in more women and girls seeking employment opportunities to provide for themselves and their families, which may be seen by men in the family and communities as an encroachment on their territory, which in turn elevates the risk of violence.



LOCATION OF VIOLENCE

GBV occurs everywhere: homes, schools, camps and shelters, streets and public spaces, markets, public transportation, workplaces, detention centres, distribution and service provision points, and online.



COPING MECHANISMS

With great social stigma associated with GBV, many women and girls often remain silent and do nothing in response to GBV incidents. Some choose to disclose to a family member or someone trusted, especially in the case of adolescent girls, or to humanitarian organisations, in the case of adult women, divorcees, and widows. Accessing GBV services in general, and Safe Spaces in particular, continues to be a life-line for women and girls.

In 2022, women and girls are telling us that often they can't find any more mechanisms to cope with the violence; suicides and attempts are increasing, especially amongst young women and adolescent girls.



GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

A CLOSER LOOK

“These Safe Spaces cover an urgent need in the region, especially in the absence of a fair judicial authority. Oppressed women and children have a place to feel important, where their opinion is heard and they feel comfortable.

— A WOMAN FROM ALEPPO



AFFECTED POPULATIONS

All women and girls in Syria are at risk of GBV; however, social factors such as age, displacement status, ability, and marital status create compounding forms of discrimination and risks of GBV and create further barriers to accessing services and resources. These factors are also affected by structural experiences of economic deterioration, the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing conflict, and food insecurity. Groups at greater risk of GBV include adolescent girls, widowed and divorced women and girls, women and girls with disabilities, older women, displaced women and girls (especially those located in camps), and persons with diverse SOGIESC. Men and boys are also at risk of sexual violence, especially in detention.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE IDENTIFIED

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, RAPE AND HARASSMENT

Sexual violence, including sexual assault, harassment, and rape, is a major concern and a frequently discussed daily fear of women and girls. Women and girls reported technology-facilitated sexual violence and rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation and abuse as main concerns regarding sexual violence. Many noted an increase in this type of violence, largely due to external contributing factors, including the crisis and deteriorating economic situation. With sexual violence comes social stigma, which can greatly impact women and girls, including risk of physical harm or even death by

suicide or homicide. As a result, many do not disclose or speak about sexual violence.

Sexual harassment and sexual assault are often cited as the reason for restricting the movements of women and girls and removing adolescent girls from school. Working women are at particular risk as employers are abusing their power in the face of the economic crisis.

Reports of marital rape are rare given the stigma surrounding discussions of sexual violence and domestic violence, but experts note more and more women coming forward and disclosing their experiences with marital rape. Moreover, in many communities, marital rape has long since been normalized, which can discourage survivors from reporting.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)

Intimate-partner violence is one of the most common types of GBV experienced in Syria by women and girls, with a noted rise in reported cases by GBV experts. IPV includes sexual, physical, or psychological violence, or the denial of resources, opportunities, services, and rights. Over the past year, much of this trend is attributed to the ongoing economic crisis in Syria; however, despite potential rise in disclosure, it remains extremely difficult to track IPV given its sensitivity and the tendency to interpret it as a "family issue".

IPV is often normalised and accepted in society. Some of this normalisation can be attributed to a perceived lack of accountability of perpetrators through community-based or society judicial mechanisms.

FAMILY VIOLENCE

Women and girls face abuse and control from family members. This can take many forms, including the denial of education, work, or inheritance; movement restrictions; forced and early marriages; psychological violence; and physical violence. Often, these actions are justified as a means of mitigating the risks associated with gender-based social stigmas and legitimate concerns over sexual and physical violence. Such forms of violence are usually perpetrated by males in the household, including fathers, husbands and brothers, but also uncles, fathers-in-law, and sons.

FEMICIDE & HONOUR KILLINGS

Femicide continues to be a serious threat to both women and girls, most commonly perpetrated by male members of the family (including intimate partners) but also frequently committed outside of the household. Femicides have been reported in some camp settings, specifically in Al-Hol camp in Al-Hasakah Governorate. The complexity of tracking femicides cannot be overstated, as such crimes are rarely reported and may even be deliberately covered-up.

Sometimes, femicides fall under the misnomer of "honour crimes" or "honour killings", where women and girls are targeted for supposedly violating the honour

of the family or community, usually by not conforming to patriarchal norms, restrictions, or practices. For instance, a woman or girl could be targeted for refusing to be coerced into a marriage or to renounce her right to education or inheritance. Women and girls who are survivors of gender-based violence are also at a heightened risk of such crimes, which experts note have escalated over the past year.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) continues to pose a serious threat to women and girls. SEA is usually rooted in situations where power disparities between men and women are acutely present. For instance, as has been the case in years past, women and girls continue to report SEA by humanitarian workers who take advantage of the power disparity by demanding sex in exchange for aid. A similar dynamic exists when women and girls are exploited by landlords and employers, particularly through the threat of eviction or loss of job or wages.

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GBV

As is the case globally, Syria continues to experience a marked growth in the risks of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, primarily in the forms of online harassment and sextortion. This is becoming of particular concern as more women and girls use mobile phones and digital apps and platforms, where most of these violations are taking place.

The widespread conservative and patriarchal norms in Syria further exacerbate the risks caused by technology-facilitated GBV. For instance, personal photographs of women and girls in casual clothing or, in some families and communities, without a headscarf, can result in serious social stigma and judgement, and may be used by perpetrators for exploitation. In most reported cases, such personal media is accessed by perpetrators through the use of mobile apps and usually through some form of deception, such as phishing attacks (when perpetrators falsely assume the identity of a trusted contact or simply pretends to be female).

PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

Psychological violence is the most frequently noted type of violence by women and girls, also known as emotional or verbal violence. This takes place interpersonally in homes, schools, camps, and most other places as well as at a societal level. Most women and girls stress

that emotional violence is often perpetrated by known persons, including family members and intimate male partners.

EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

Early and forced marriage often accompany other types of violence, including sexual violence, physical violence, movement restrictions, denial of access to education, and psychological violence.

In Syria, early and forced marriages have become normalised and often serve as negative coping mechanisms in response to more than a decade of conflict and displacement, during which the risks of sexual violence against women and girls also experienced a marked increase. As such, many families and communities now regard child and forced marriage as means of safeguarding the health and dignity of the women and girls in their families. Meanwhile, these forms of violence can also be driven by economic factors, particularly given the escalating economic crisis that is propelling most families into poverty. Given the perceived subordinate status of women and girls, families are often inclined to marry their daughters to pass on their financial and caretaking responsibilities to the husband and his family. In a similar vein, divorced and widowed women are often forced or pressured into remarrying to mitigate their risks of experiencing gender-based violence.



“There are people in our communities who consider a girl to be a spinster if she is 16 years old and is not yet married.”

— A WOMAN FROM DARA'A



GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

RISKS IN OTHER SECTORS

“Women and girls continue to experience verbal, physical, and sexual violence. In my case, I was deprived of my education, especially after my family heard that one of the teachers was harassing female students, so they prevented me from going to school. Attending the Safe Space was an opportunity for me to live again, as I was thinking of committing suicide due to the pressure that my family put on me.

— ADOLESCENT GIRL, AREESHA CAMP



CHILD PROTECTION

Gender based violence affects the lives of unaccompanied, abandoned, and separated children. One of the common reasons for children being unaccompanied is the divorce and/or re-marriage of the mother, who is at times forced to abandon her children. Separated and unaccompanied girls are at risk of multiple forms of GBV: early marriage, child labour, physical and psychological violence, social stigma and discrimination, deprivation of rights and resources including education, and sexual violence and exploitation. The impacts of economic deterioration and increasing food insecurity have also contributed to an increase in child labour and early marriage for girls. Increased child labor exposes girls to heightened levels of sexual violence and exploitation from employers and boys and men in public and private spaces.



WASH

Women and girls continue to experience sexual violence, including harassment, rape, and kidnapping when traveling to and accessing shared bathrooms and washrooms. Many camps continue to lack a sufficient number of latrines, proper lighting, and segregated and locked toilets and washrooms. Women and girls also continue to suffer from water shortages and a lack of sufficient hygiene products, threatening their access to sexual and reproductive health, and exposing them to sexual violence and exploitation in order to access resources.



PROTECTION

Women and girls, especially those who are disabled, displaced, widowed, or divorced, face barriers to inheritance and access to housing, including stigma and discrimination, as well as sexual violence and exploitation. Widowed and divorced women and girls lack inheritance rights to their husband's property and also face stigma and exploitation when accessing housing. Older women are at risk of violence related to housing and property disputes. Displaced women and girls lack documentation required to access housing and services, making them also vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation.



SHELTER AND CAMP MANAGEMENT

Camps are particularly dangerous places for women and girls where the risks and rates of sexual violence are markedly higher. The reasons often cited by women and girls include overcrowding, lack of sufficient lighting, lack of privacy in tents, shared bathrooms that have no locks, and inherent risks at distribution centres. Widows, divorcees, and women and girls with disabilities face a heightened risk of sexual violence and harassment in camps.



HUMANITARIAN DISTRIBUTIONS

Women and girls continue to face sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse when receiving aid, both from humanitarian workers and others at distribution centers. Women and girls who are widowed and divorced are particularly more vulnerable to this type of abuse. Fear of disclosing abuses is common due to a desperation for aid and a lack of confidence in accountability systems. Women and girls with disabilities and older women face significant barriers when accessing distributions due to lack of transportation and movement restrictions. Mobile deliveries of aid and gender-segregated distributions substantially impact women and girls' ability to safely access aid.



FOOD SECURITY AND LIVELIHOOD

Conservative gender norms accompanied by an increase in food insecurity and poverty continue to influence and elevate rates of early marriage and child labor amongst girls, depriving them of an education. Girls experience GBV on their way to school, and during school, including harassment, psychological and physical violence from peers, and sexual violence from teachers and staff, which in turn further threatens their safety and access to education. Specific barriers continue to exist for adolescent girls with disability or those displaced due to social stigmas and accessibility issues.



“ Accessing services still poses plenty of risks for women and girls, especially if you don't have a male accompanying you to the distribution point. Shelter and registration at camps remain prominent risk factors. Barriers are increasing as well; when a woman is divorced, the ex husband often retains much of her documentation, including documents required for accessing services. Everything has to be done through the husband or male family member. Humanitarian assistance has a long way to go to mainstream GBV and to mitigate its risk.

— A GBV EXPERT IN SYRIA

THE WHOLE OF SYRIA GBV AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY

ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2022*

Indicator	2020	2021	*2022
People Targeted	1,582,200	1,611,670	1,694,100
People reached	1,252,515	1,152,477	777,208
Funding Appeal	US\$ 64.4 million	US\$79.2 million	US\$84.4 million
Funding Received	66%	71%	32%

JAN-SEP 2022

777,208

People reached with GBV programming/services

221,391

GBV beneficiaries accessing safe spaces

32,012

Dignity kits distributed

135,954

GBV response services provided to GBV survivors

8,472

GBV case management sessions provided to people with disabilities

182,848

GBV beneficiaries accessing other static facilities

9,587

People trained on GBV-related topics

372,969

GBV beneficiaries reached through outreach activities/mobile response

*All data as of September 2022

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR DONORS

- **Increase consistent and flexible funding for GBV programming and services for women and girls.** This will enable and assist actors to more effectively respond to continued displacement and increasing levels of domestic violence, early marriage, technology facilitated gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and severe mental health crisis such as suicide.
- **Continue supporting existing and build new Safe Spaces, which are lifesaving and vital for the wellbeing of women and girls** and enable a space in which they can access support, GBV case management, psychosocial support, and other GBV services.
- **Create economic and livelihood opportunities for women and girls,** including expanding cash assistance, humanitarian distributions, and livelihood support, funding education for girls, funding income-generating opportunities and vocational training opportunities for all women.
- **Invest in funding mental health support services for women and girls** to address the depletion of resilience and severe mental health impacts of GBV, including suicide.
- **Invest in GBV-SRH integrated and holistic approaches,** including efforts to bridge existing gaps within the clinical management of rape, to ensure support to survivors of sexual violence and rape.
- **Increase investments in long-term GBV prevention as well as efforts to change harmful social norms.** This includes further enhancing linkages between emergency and early recovery, and by further enhancing linkages funding collaborations with women-led organisations when designing programs for GBV prevention, mitigation, and response across all sectors.
- **Continue funding and supporting accountability mechanisms, dedicated human resources, and training for humanitarian staff** to eliminate sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in service provision and aid delivery.

FOR HUMANITARIANS

- **Recognize pre-existing and emerging GBV risk factors** in displacement, the economic crisis, the increasing food crisis, and COVID-19, and prioritise GBV risk mitigation across all levels of the Syria humanitarian response, including sectoral guidance and standard operating procedures (SOPs).
- **Ensure the retention of new or adapted distribution modalities that safeguard the wellbeing and dignity of women and girls continue** beyond the COVID-19 crisis to respond to the increasing economic crisis and food security crisis.
- **Support safe, dignified, and effective access by women and girls to all humanitarian sectors and services,** with a focus on women and girls who are divorced or widowed, are older, have a disability, live in camps, or have diverse SOGIESC.
- **Integrate GBV risk mitigation indicators into existing monitoring modalities** and consistently report against them.
- **Further strengthen SEA reporting, investigation, and accountability systems across all levels of service provision and aid distribution** to ensure women and girls can use them safely, without fear of retaliation or stigmatisation.
- **Continue investing in the collection and analysis of age, sex, and diversity disaggregated data** to improve the quality of the response and use a gender lens when designing and implementing programmes, explicitly looking at women and girls specific needs and impact of the crises.
- **Prioritise girls' access to education and women's economic independence** given the preventive effect this will have on both GBV and gender inequality.

FOR GBV ACTORS

- **Increase the number and reach of all types of GBV specialised services,** including Safe Spaces; case management and psychosocial support; cash assistance; mental health, legal and health services as well as safe shelters, where needed.
- **Develop and implement different modalities of delivery** that capitalise on lessons learned from working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, while maintaining essential face to face services for all women and girls and those without access to technology.
- **Expand and diversify outreach methods** to reach as many women and girls as possible, both online and offline.
- **Activate women and girls' peer support networks** by involving community groups, informal and formal networks, and organisations in GBV prevention at the community level.
- **Further reinforce the accessibility of GBV specialised services to marginalised groups of women and girls** through dedicated entry points and activities, transportation assistance, and by integrating them into existing services and Safe Spaces and actively engaging them during community consultations at all phases of the intervention.
- **Respond to the repeated calls by women and girls to address gender inequality as the root cause of GBV through structured, long-term prevention activities** that are inclusive of men and boys, while also challenging social norms which compound discrimination and violence against women and girls, such as those that marginalize people with disabilities, displaced people, widows, divorced women and girls and elderly women.
- **Deepen the understanding of and enhance capacities to address the intersectionality of violence** across the GBV response.

“These Safe Spaces cover an urgent need in the region, especially in the absence of a fair judicial authority. Oppressed women and children have a place to feel important, where their opinion is heard and they feel comfortable.

— A WOMAN FROM ALEPPO

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