



United Nations Population Fund



REPORTING ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE SYRIA CRISIS

GOOD PRACTICES IN THE MEDIA



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The images used in this handbook portray a mixture of UNFPA activities at work.
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The global media provides a window into world affairs. The way the media frames key social issues influences the opinions of people who peer through this window, and the lives of those depicted.

With regard to gender-based violence, media portrayals can amplify women's voices, counteract myths, and stimulate dialogue and public action. When the media covers the stories of Syrian women, who have often been portrayed as passive victims and objectified as a silent, suffering group, a change in approach that focuses on their rights and dignity can open opportunities for these women to take an active role in forging their own futures. With this goal in mind, we have published a Handbook on Reporting on Gender-Based Violence.

By partnering with journalists, UNFPA aims to shine a brighter, dedicated light on Syrian women, highlighting human rights violations, inspiring increased support and services, and empowering the survivors to achieve positive change in their lives. For this to happen, the media must help to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. Moreover, journalists and broadcasters need to emphasise the illegitimacy of gender-based violence in all its forms, and help to clear a path for women and girls to regain their rightful roles in the wider community.



Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin,
UNFPA Executive Director





FOREWORD

“Women and children account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, both as refugees and internally displaced persons.”¹

Five years of conflict in Syria has left more than five million women and girls of reproductive age, both inside and outside of the country, caught at the centre of this expanding humanitarian crisis; vulnerable to many different forms of gender-based violence.

Major media outlets have dedicated columns and considerable airtime to capturing the predicament of Syrian women. These are often provided in the form of individual stories of Syrian women and girls, and with their corresponding images shared with the world. Some of these stories put gender-based violence on the international and national agenda, but many have failed to focus on the core, delicate issues that underpin gender-based violence.

Shortsighted, inconsistent or unethical reporting on gender-based violence has even served to worsen the plight of these women and girls. Single stories which focus on the survivor offer audiences an isolated episode, from which they might sympathize with the survivor, feel outrage at the perpetrators, but from which they cannot understand the larger, systematic themes which have led to their suffering.

In many countries beyond Syria, including Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, many Syrian women and girls lack shelter, protection or access to education and health services. Women from these societies also live in a world where gender-based violence can be common and seen as normal under certain circumstances. Reporting that focuses just on the situation of a single woman or girl, or a small group, can stigmatise and alienate survivors and their families and in some cases also result in their lives being put at risk, while failing to highlight the larger social, policy or service issues that allow gender-based violence to continue.

Gender-based violence survivors often express reluctance to talk about their experiences; many fear inaccurate articles which will expose them within their families or communities. In certain cases, media reports on underage marriage have divulged names and physical descriptions of survivors or perpetrators that have incited those affected to seek revenge on the girl, and induced fear in other survivors to speak out. Likewise, in some cases, parents or communities have limited women and girls freedoms because of their worries over their dignity or their own reputation.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is a key member in the UN's taskforce for implementing Resolution 1325 and Resolution 1820, as well as a major humanitarian partner in the regional response to the Syria crisis. Since the beginning of the crisis, UNFPA has supported a multi-partner approach with a view to responding to and preventing gender-based violence, as well as protecting gender-based violence survivors.

Partnering with the media has become an integral part of UNFPA's programme, based on a strong belief that the media can play a crucial role in changing the minds of decision makers by ensuring the stories of voiceless women and girls are heard while also exposing the larger and often more complex conditions that lead to their suffering.

Journalists are morally bound to cover the issue from angles that look wider than individual accounts, whilst being certain their stories cause no harm to survivors in their new communities. In this way, the media can change attitudes about women and gender-based stereotypes, and ultimately improve their lives.

Cordially,

Daniel Baker
UNFPA Syria regional coordinator





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the efforts and engagement of local and regional media in highlighting and denouncing gender-based violence against women and girls in the six countries affected by the Syrian crisis (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt), the bulk of coverage still - whether directly or indirectly - attributes stereotypical and predictable social images to women and girls. They are often represented as 'victims' of forced and early marriage, who are submissive to an oppressively patriarchal and conservative community. Reports often focus too much on the subjects rather than exposing the full extent of the human rights violations or the underlying root causes that allow these actions to emerge and maintain their prominence in the region.

All journalists are required to provide factual reports. But the media should seek opportunities to not only provide facts, but also change the situation of women and girls for the better. By promoting a survivor-centered approach, based on the nine ethical principles of reporting on gender-based violence in the Syria crisis², UNFPA aims to help journalists add depth to their articles, and provide their readers with relevant background information, such as social, political and economic context in which these conditions exist. Through this initiative, UNFPA hopes journalists will be better equipped to write or produce news articles and features that go beyond 'yet another profile' and create far-reaching stories based on insights of gender-based violence survivors and experts in a well-referenced, objective, thematic and factual context.

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