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REPORTING ON

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

A JOURNALIST'S HANDBOOK

SECOND EDITION

Journalism is among the most powerful tools for social justice, particularly in the global fight against gender-based violence. Journalists have the power to amplify the voices of women and girls, to shed light on the forms of violence that target them, and to help communities worldwide address the harmful social norms that underpin gender-inequality and gender-based violence.

— NATALIA KANEM, UNFPA Executive Director

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UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. Our mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

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Covering gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most difficult tasks a journalist is likely to face throughout their career.

INTRODUCTION

By not adhering to rigid standards of professionalism, journalists can unwittingly become part of the problem, causing further trauma to survivors and allowing perpetrators to evade prosecution.

"When I speak to journalists, many times it feels as though they don't understand what we go through as women in this camp," says Amal, a Syrian refugee from Qamishli who had gone out of her way to communicate with journalists on the issues impacting Syrian women and girls. "It is a daily struggle and we are powerless amidst the traditions, rules and laws that make it much easier for men to take advantage of us. We pour our hearts out, but we rarely see our issues being discussed."

For women and girls like Amal, many of whom grapple with various forms of gender-based violence on a daily basis, journalism constitutes one of the few available avenues for their stories to be heard. This function becomes even more critical during humanitarian crises, such as those currently taking place in numerous countries in the Arab region, including Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and others.

For a journalist, covering the topic of gender-based violence (GBV) is a challenging undertaking. Not only is the topic itself widely misunderstood, but it is also increasingly complex and has many contributing factors, making coverage all the more difficult. More importantly, journalists need to be aware that their coverage — if not conducted under strict, professional standards — can be harmful to survivors in a multitude of ways. Between insensitive interviewing techniques, inaccurate reporting, personal biases and perceptions about gender and sexuality, and a lack of understanding of the legalities of criminal cases, journalists can unwittingly become part of the problem, re-traumatising survivors and allowing perpetrators to escape prosecution.

These challenges can often drive journalists to avoid reporting on GBV altogether, further compounding the problem by perpetuating a culture of impunity in which perpetrators are seldom held accountable.

While effective journalism is often the result of years of experience and diligent practice, building upon internationally-accepted ethical principles and approaches minimises the potential for harm.

This handbook was developed to help journalists report on GBV with greater ease and awareness. It provides essential information on the definition and root causes of GBV, in addition to a simple set of guidelines and best practices that facilitate the process and help journalists deliver stronger, more impactful stories on this essential topic.

> Sexual violence is an epidemic that thrives in times of conflict and during emergencies, once the rule of law and criminal justice systems collapse and, far too often, rape is wielded as a weapon of war.
>
> — NATALIA KANEM, UNFPA Executive Director

GBV WORLDWIDE

*More than **one in three women worldwide** has experienced either physical and/or sexual violence.* [1]

*A total of **87,000 women were intentionally killed** in 2017. More than half of them (58 per cent) were killed by intimate partners or family members, meaning that 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day.* [2]

*Worldwide, **more than 700 million women alive today were married as children** (below 18 years of age), and of those, more than one in three were married before 15 years of age.* [3]

***More than 200 million girls and women have experienced some form of female genital mutilation** (FGM) in the 29 countries in Africa.* [4]

DEFINING GBV

Gender-based violence is a sensitive subject with numerous underlying factors and consequences. As such, understanding the subject is essential, particularly when reporting on it.

What is gender-based violence?

In many cultures, gender-based violence is seldom openly discussed, which drives the subject underground and further propagates many of the misconceptions surrounding it. As such, understanding GBV and its causal and contributing factors is of paramount importance when reporting on it.

Gender-based violence (or GBV) is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty.

Gender-based violence can be broadly defined into five categories: **sexual violence** (rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment), **physical violence** (hitting, slapping, beating), **emotional violence** (psychological and verbal abuse), **economic violence** (restriction of movement, denial of resources), and **harmful traditional practices** (child marriage, female genital mutilation, so-called "honour" killings).

Who is at risk?

The term "gender-based violence" is most commonly used to refer to violence perpetrated against women and girls.

While women, men, boys and girls can be at risk of gender-based violence, women and girls continue to be the overwhelming majority of survivors and victims due to the deeply-entrenched patriarchal beliefs, attitudes and social norms that prevail in numerous communities throughout the globe. This gives women and girls a perceived subordinate status, cultivating an environment that is conducive to deprivations of liberty and abuse. This is often reinforced through various socio-cultural institutions, such as educational, religious and legal institutions.

In the words of Avan, a 17-year-old Yazidi girl who is a survivor of sexual violence, "being a girl is like being born into a prison. No place is safe, not even your own home, and you are always at risk of being harassed, abducted, raped or forced into marriage even when you don't want to."

GBV is also used by some people to describe the "gendered dimensions of certain forms of violence against men and boys, particularly sexual violence committed with the purpose of reinforcing socially constructed ideas of what it means to be a man and male power." [5]

What are the consequences?

Gender-based violence has serious, immediate and long-term consequences on the sexual, physical and psychological health of survivors, in addition to having a wider impact on a societal level. In addition to causing a variety of psychological disorders among survivors, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), GBV can have a wide range of health consequences that include severe physical injuries, unwanted pregnancies, complications from unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections, and death from complications arising from these conditions.

Survivors of GBV may suffer even further because of the stigma associated with this type of violence. When ostracised by their family or community, survivors are affected both economically and socially. This stigmatisation not only places them at greater risk for exploitation and violence but can endanger their lives, particularly when male members of the family/community retaliate with physical violence or so-called "honour" killings.

Not only is GBV a violation of individual human rights, but the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators and the fear generated by their actions poses a serious and far-reaching risk to all women and girls and on the fabric of society as a whole. Gender inequality and GBV can also contribute to the disintegration of inherent protection mechanisms that safeguard civil liberties, freedom of expression, social justice, and social progress. Moreover, societies in which GBV is accepted tend to limit the contributions women and girls can make to development and peacebuilding, which can considerably compromise the countries' resilience to geopolitical, economic and humanitarian emergencies.

What are the causes of GBV?

The root causes of gender-based violence are simple. **Deeply-rooted beliefs of male supremacy place women and girls at particular risk of discrimination and marginalisation, making them more at risk of gender-based violence.** This risk is further exacerbated during humanitarian crises, when even the most basic protection mechanisms and social networks are disrupted or absent.

Gender discrimination often results in the unequal distribution of power between men and women, combined with socially prescribed gender roles and stereotypes that also play a part in causing, perpetuating and accepting gender-based violence.

1. World Health Organisation, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, South African Medical Research Council (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*, p.2. For individual country information, see UN Women Global Database on Violence against Women.

2. United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, *Global Study on Homocide: Gender-related Killing of Women and Girls*, 2018, accessed at https://bit.ly/2PmxYPM.

3. Unicef, *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*, 2013, accssed at https://uni.cf/3caeJTw.

4. World Health Organisation, *Female Genital Mutilation*, 2020, accessed at https://bit.ly/3c5dPYj.

5. Global Protection Cluster, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing Risk, Promoting Resilience, and Aiding Recovery*, 2012.

COMMON MYTHS

About Gender-Based Violence

In most cultures, GBV is not openly discussed. As a result, several myths about GBV remain in circulation. Inaccurate perpetrator profiles, and a focus on the behaviour of GBV survivors can also influence access to justice. The media has a role to play in counteracting these inaccuracies.

Myth: GBV only affects certain kinds of people

GBV can affect anyone. It cuts across class, race/ethnicity, religion, educational level, or personal history. Negative assumptions about GBV survivors make it difficult for them to reach out for help.

Myth: Sexual assault is usually committed by strangers

According to World Health Organisation estimates, almost a third of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner, and up to 70 percent of sexual assaults are committed by an intimate partner.

Myth: Perpetrators of violence are 'monsters' or 'sick outsiders'

Perpetrators come from all walks of life. As a result, when survivors report violence perpetrated by their partner, an influential figure in the community, or someone who does not conform to the stereotype of a perpetrator, they are often not believed.

Myth: A woman's choice of clothing and her behaviour puts her at risk

Abusers often blame their victims in order to make excuses for their behaviour. This is in itself abusive and shifts the focus away from the perpetrator. It is important that abusers take full responsibility for their actions, and that reporters challenge any attempt to blame those who are abused.

Myth: Poverty and conflict are the cause of attacks on women

There are many men living in conditions of poverty or conflict who are not violent towards women, just as there are many individuals in wealthy countries and in times of peace who are violent towards women. While some studies have found poverty and violent conflict to increase the likelihood of certain kinds of GBV, it is seen as a global problem.

Myth: A person who has been raped or abused will be visibly upset when discussing her ordeal

Each person reacts differently to GBV. It is important to be aware of the wide range of reactions to such traumatic events; some survivors choose to never speak about what happened to them or they may do so after several months or even years, while others will choose to disclose immediately. Expecting or compelling survivors to follow a shared behavioural pattern is not only potentially harmful to their recovery but can also shift the focus away from perpetrators, further compounding the problem.

Myth: False reporting is widespread or used by women in order to access services and resettlement

Overall, false reporting is rather rare, with under-reporting being a more widespread and serious problem. Research published in the American Journal of Epidemiology indicates that only around 7 percent of survivors in developing countries officially report incidents of GBV, and research suggests that the fear of losing out on housing and other services, or losing custody of children, prevents many GBV survivors from coming forward to report incidents. [2]

1. World Health Organisation, Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women, 2013, bit.ly/1oTfGVG
2. Tia Palermo, Jennifer Bleck, and Amber Peterman, Tip of the Iceberg: Reporting and Gender-Based Violence in Developing Countries, American Journal of Epidemiology, 2013.

GBV IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS — ARAB STATES

A humanitarian crisis, geopolitical conflict, or natural disaster inevitably increases the risk of gender-based violence. Covering GBV in these settings requires additional care to prevent harm.

SYRIA

In Syria, nearly a decade after the crisis erupted in 2011, **women and girls report that GBV continues to be a daily reality**. Additionally, online harassment, revenge pornography/sextortion, and sexual violence are all trends that were more frequently reported in 2019, while forced puberty, forced pregnancy and denial of economic opportunities emerged as new trends. [1]

YEMEN

In Yemen, which is arguably facing one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time, numerous forms of GBV have been reported since the onset of the crisis, including harrasment, child marriage, sexual violence and domestic abuse. Nearly 27 percent of women displaced from Yemen are below age 18, putting them at greater risk of exploitation or of negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage or survival sex.

IRAQ

In Iraq, GBV continues to be scourge on the lives of women and girls, with restriction of movement, sexual harassment, and forced marriage identified as common trends. UNFPA estimates that 10 percent of girls aged under 14 could have undergone female genital mutilation in 2018, with the average age of cutting being five years old.

LIBYA

Libya continues to reel from the consequences of a protracted humanitarian crisis. Sexual violence, including sexual torture, is still widespread in Libya. Sites of sexual violence include official detention centers, clandestine prisons, in the context of forced labor and enslavement, during random stops and at checkpoints by armed groups, in urban settings by gangs, and in private homes.

SOMALIA

In Somalia, severe climatic conditions, clan and communal conflicts, and widespread poverty continue to expose women and girls to a multitude of risks. Women and girls are harassed as they journey back and forth to do petty trading or to seek cash paying domestic chores. Girls in particular are persistently harassed in IDP camps and host communities as they attempt to cover their basic needs, such as fetching water from nearby sources. Child marriage, female genital mutilation, intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and emotional violence were all identified as trends over the past years.

1. UNFPA, Overbiew of Gender-Based Violence in Syria, 2019.

"As a general best practice, journalists working in humanitarian settings are always encouraged to seek out the assistance of reputable organisations responding to GBV in humanitarian settings."

What makes humanitarian settings different?

As women and girls become separated from their families and protective communities, norms that govern social behaviour are disrupted. This presents an array of protection concerns that uniquely impact such settings.

Mass displacement leads to increased violence by causing further disruptions in community networks and creating environments where lawlessness can thrive. However, the underlying causes of GBV are associated with attitudes, beliefs, and structures in which there is gender discrimination and an inherent imbalance of power between genders.

In recent decades, efforts have been made to address sexual violence in emergencies. At the same time, there is growing recognition that populations affected by conflict and natural disaster experience different forms of GBV. Domestic violence, early marriage, and sexual exploitation are increasingly recognized as major concerns in such environments, particularly given the expected disruptions in basic services, livelihoods, and various protection mechanisms.

It is estimated that more than 37 percent of Arab women and girls have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime, with indicators showing that the percentage is likely higher due to underreporting as a result of fear, shame or social stigma. Moreover, given the cultural and contextual similarities between different countries in the region, gender-based violence appears to follow similar patterns, with restriction of movement, sexual harassment, sexual violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation being among the most common trends observed, according to UNFPA's programme data.

In humanitarian settings, reporting in general, and on gender-based violence issues in particular, becomes even more challenging. Not only do journalists assume risks to their personal safety, but the potential for harmful reporting increases. As a general best practice, journalists working in humanitarian settings are always encouraged to seek out the assistance of reputable organisations responding to GBV in humanitarian settings, such as UNFPA or its partner NGOs.

There are common areas of concern facing women and girls in humanitarian settings:

Access to support

In some places, services for GBV survivors either do not exist at all or are very limited, and survivors are reluctant to report GBV due to fear of stigma, social exclusion, so-called "honour killings," and other reprisals. This prevents many survivors from seeking life-saving support.

Harassment and Restriction of Movement

Humanitarian conflicts often see the movement of women and girls curbed significantly. Many women and girls have limited movement outside the home due to fear of sexual violence and harassment. In some cases, extremist armed groups may place additional restrictions on women and girls, including strict dress codes, denial of access to education and employment, and limitations on engagement in public life. While freedom of mobility was somewhat limited for many women and girls prior to displacement, increased fear of sexual assault and harassment has placed even further restrictions on displaced women and girls.

Domestic Violence

Women and girls in the Arab States region report that violence in the home has increased as a result of displacement and conflict. According to UNFPA's programme data, domestic violence continues to be one of the most frequently reported trends across several countries. It is also important to note that child and forced marriage have been observed to increase the risk of domestic violence.

Child Marriage

Child marriage of girls is a relatively common practice in the Arab states region, but humanitarian conflicts have contributed to girls getting married younger and under different conditions. For example, girls are increasingly being married to older men not known to the family of the bride, or are entered into serial marriages in order to generate income for the family. Economic insecurity, the perception that marriage will provide protection for girls in an unstable environment, and lack of alternative opportunities are all factors contributing to this issue.

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Accessing humanitarian aid can carry increased risks of sexual exploitation and abuse by individuals charged with delivering humanitarian aid, or by those in positions of relative economic or political power in their own communities. It is not uncommon to hear of women or girls being engaged in "special friendships" with leaders in camps, religious leaders, community leaders, employers, landlords, and others. These often include being asked for sex or an agreement to marry, and sometimes involve men working in community organisations and distributing goods. [1]

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence can be used a weapon of war. For instance, certain parties might commit sexual violence when performing house searches, as well as at checkpoints and in detention centres. For example, women may be detained, tortured and physically abused, with the actions perpetrated against having a clear gender component. Upon release from detention and after house raids, women who are believed to have been sexually assaulted can often be alienated from their families, putting them at further risk of abuse or neglect. Viewed as "unfit for marriage," some may have been divorced or killed. The fear of sexual violence and its consequences is also a trigger in the displacement of many families.

1. IRC, Are We Listening? Acting on Our Commitments to Women and Girls Affected by the Syrian Conflict, 2014, bit.ly/1rZSkJO

THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Even for the most experienced journalist, filing a story about GBV is likely to be one of the most challenging assignments.

There are a number of ethical principles of which journalists need to be aware when attempting to adopt a survivor-centered approach and adhering to a "do no harm" strategy. These principles are based on the general ethics of journalism; however, in order to avoid harming survivors and successfully using journalism to effect positive change, additional care is required on behalf of any journalist reporting on this far-reaching form of violence.

Duty to Inform

When reporting on GBV, it is important to distinguish between what is "in the public interest" and what is "of interest to the public." Some GBV stories feature high-profile figures and contain lots of personal detail: this tends to treat the subject in a sensationalist way, with no useful information given for GBV survivors.

Accuracy

Getting the facts right should be at the core of all journalism, and this is especially true when covering gender-based violence. While journalists' interviews should be sensitive, they should also ensure that their reporting is factually correct. Journalists should be specific when mentioning gender-based violence and not attempt to report on criminal proceedings unless they understand the legal processes involved. Some reporters try and use euphemistic language (e.g. "had his way with her") rather than accurate language (e.g. "he raped her"). This approach often leads to misleading reports.

Fairness

Impartiality

When reporting on gender-based violence, it is of paramount importance that journalists remain aware of their own biases on the subject and the stereotypes we harbour about women, girls, sexuality and violence. It is crucial that the subject is approached from a completely objective and fact-based perspective.

It is not the job of a responsible journalist to judge or discriminate. It is particularly important to ensure that reporters do not mention details that can be interpreted as blame on the gender-based violence survivor. For example, if a journalist mentions the clothes worn at the time of an attack or other aspects of a survivor victim's appearance, it can be perceived by some audiences as an implication of judgement. This can be particularly true when writing features: some journalists may attempt to add unnecessary detail to colour their narratives, which can unintentionally shift the focus of blame away from the perpetrator.

Respecting Privacy

Principled and ethical journalism means respecting the privacy of both gender-based violence survivors and their bereaved families. Journalists should be wary of what is referred to as "jigsaw identification" when granting anonymity. This happens where audiences can piece together details, such as location, age, clothing or family members, even when journalists don't name the survivor or show their face.

Protecting Sources

Journalists should always protect their sources and ensure that they extend this

Never Paying for Interviews

Some journalists may be tempted to pay money or offer gifts in exchange for interviews. However, payment for this kind of interview is considered ethically inappropriate, as not only is it likely to influence the nature of the interview, it can also make it harder for other journalists to get an interview. Offers made in cash or kind can also put undue pressure on survivors to speak to the media.

It is recommended that journalists contact organisations working on GBV issues in the first instance before attempting to secure an interview. Officials at local and international NGOs may be able to talk more freely about GBV, and are likely to have a useful overview of the topic. Rather than paying an interviewee directly, reporters may feel that a discreet donation to an organisation working with GBV survivors is appropriate.

A Surivor-Centred Approach

A survivor-centred approach seeks to empower survivors by putting them at the centre of the reporting process. It recognizes that each survivor is unique, reacts differently to gender-based violence, and has different strengths, resources and coping mechanisms. It also recognizes that each survivor has the right to decide who should know their story and what should happen next.

Gender-based violence is a manifestation of inherent imbalances in power and gender equality. If people around survivors who are in a position of power (such as reporters and service providers) impose their perspective, they can unintentionally create another experience where the survivors feel

"Unfortunately, while we are certainly seeing an increase in the quantity of reports on gender-based violence, we still need to place greater emphasis on quality."

— JOUMANA HADDAD, Lebanese journalist, activist and writer.