

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND

TELLING THE **RIGHT STORY**

A JOURNALIST'S GUIDE TO COVERING
THE ISSUES OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND
KNOWLEDGE SERIES



“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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ABOUT UNFPA

UNFPA was established in 1969 and operates with the primary mission to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled. The agency focuses on three core areas: reproductive health and rights, reducing maternal mortality, and advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. UNFPA works closely with governments, other UN agencies, community groups, and NGOs to create effective strategies and programs that tackle these issues.

UNFPA in the Arab States

In the Arab States, UNFPA's work is particularly crucial given the region's unique demographic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical landscape. The region faces diverse challenges, including high rates of youth unemployment, political instability, humanitarian crises, and climate-related emergencies, all of which impact population dynamics and well-being.

One of the key areas of UNFPA's work in the Arab States is addressing the reproductive health and rights of the population. This includes providing access to high-quality reproductive health and maternal health care, family planning services, and information. In countries like Yemen and Syria, which are experiencing protracted conflicts, UNFPA's efforts in providing essential reproductive health services are critical in saving lives and improving the well-being of women and girls.

Another significant aspect of UNFPA's work in the region is its focus on gender-based violence (GBV). The Arab States have seen high rates of GBV, exacerbated by conflict and displacement. UNFPA works to provide support to survivors of GBV, including psychosocial support, medical care, and safe spaces. The agency also engages in advocacy and policy work to address the root causes of GBV and promote gender equality.

Youth empowerment is also a central theme in UNFPA's activities in the Arab States. With a large proportion of the region's population under the age of 30, empowering young people is crucial for the future. UNFPA invests in programs that provide young people with access to health education, employment opportunities, and platforms to engage in civic activities.

The Three Zeroes

A key aspect of UNFPA's mission, particularly resonant in the Arab States, is the pursuit of "The Three Zeroes" – zero unmet need for family planning, zero preventable maternal deaths, and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices. These ambitious goals are at the core of UNFPA's strategic direction in contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and represent the organisation's commitment to addressing some of the most pressing challenges in reproductive health and rights.

Zero unmet need for family planning: UNFPA advocates for comprehensive access to family planning services. In the Arab States, where cultural and other barriers often limit access to contraception, UNFPA's work is crucial. By ensuring that women and couples can choose when and how many children to have, UNFPA aims to empower individuals, reduce unintended pregnancies, and improve overall health outcomes.

Zero preventable maternal deaths: Maternal health is a critical area of focus, and UNFPA works tirelessly to ensure that every childbirth is safe. In the Arab States, where conflict and limited resources can impede access to quality maternal health care, UNFPA's efforts are vital. They provide training for health workers, support health systems, and ensure the availability of essential medicines and supplies to prevent maternal mortality.

Zero gender-based violence and harmful practices: UNFPA strives to eliminate GBV and harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). In the Arab States, these practices are deeply rooted in some societies and are often exacerbated by humanitarian crises and displacement. UNFPA's approach includes providing support to survivors, engaging communities in dialogue to change harmful norms, and working with governments to strengthen policies and legal frameworks.

Achieving these three zeroes is a complex task, requiring a multifaceted approach that addresses underlying social, economic, and cultural factors. In the Arab States, where each of these issues presents unique challenges, UNFPA's commitment to the three zeroes is a guiding light in its efforts to ensure health, equality, and empowerment for all, particularly women and girls.

INTRODUCTION

“Throughout this war,” explains Noura, a Syrian refugee living in Iraq, “many women like me completely lost faith in the media, including women who trusted journalists to tell the stories of the violence they experienced. We thought that journalism would help bring justice, but it soon became clear that the media doesn't understand what we go through and how unfairly we're treated.”

For women and girls like Noura, many of whom grapple with various forms of gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV) on a daily basis, journalism constitutes one of the few available avenues for their stories to be heard. It remains one of the most effective mediums for amplifying the voices of the vulnerable and speaking truth to power — a function that becomes even more critical during humanitarian crises.

For a journalist, covering the issues of women and girls, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), bodily autonomy, and GBV, can be a challenging undertaking. In addition to being widely underreported and misunderstood, discussions on these topics are often fraught with stigma, disinformation, politicisation, and other barriers that impede accurate, impactful coverage.

More importantly, journalists need to be aware that their coverage — if not conducted under strict, professional and ethical standards — can be harmful to women and girls in a multitude of ways, particularly when it comes to survivors of GBV. 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, causing further trauma to survivors and allowing perpetrators to escape prosecution.

These challenges can often drive journalists to avoid reporting on these topics altogether, further compounding the problem by perpetuating a culture of self-censorship that stifles the voices of women and girls, misinforms the public, and fails to hold both perpetrators of violence and authorities to account.

The media plays a vital role in shaping perceptions, influencing policy discussions, and breaking down societal taboos associated with women and girls. Media outlets have the capacity to disseminate accurate information about these issues, bridging the gap between myths and facts and offsetting the damage caused by disinformation and politicisation. More importantly, ethical journalism can — and should — act as a powerful catalyst to social progress by illuminating and challenging harmful norms and paving the road for more informed, evidence-based discourse on these issues.

This guide was developed after direct consultations with journalists throughout the Arab region, with the overarching objective of providing a general primer for journalists reporting on the issues of women and girls, with a focus on SRHR, gender, women's issues, GBV, and other related fields. In addition to providing a comprehensive overview of the topic, the guide outlines some of the challenges, needs, and best practices to encourage more frequent, impactful, and ethical coverage.

“Reporting on the issues of women and girls is not just journalism; it serves as a compass guiding societies toward healthier, more equitable futures. It has the power to transform taboos into dialogues, myths into facts, and ignorance into informed choices. The stories journalists tell can pave the way for better access to healthcare, gender equality, and human dignity.”

— Laila Baker, UNFPA Regional Director, Arab States

1. WHY COVER SRHR?

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) represents a comprehensive framework that embraces every facet of an individual's well-being, extending beyond physical aspects to encompass emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. At its core, SRHR is built upon the principles of empowerment, autonomy, and the right to lead a life free from discrimination and oppression.

Embracing holistic well-being

SRHR goes beyond the conventional notion of health that solely focuses on physical well-being. It recognises that an individual's sexual and reproductive health is intrinsically linked to their mental, emotional, and social states. When discussing SRHR, it is imperative to emphasise that true well-being encompasses various aspects that contribute to a person's quality of life.

Informed choices and autonomy

Central to SRHR is the recognition of an individual's agency and autonomy over their own body and reproductive choices. Women and girls have the inherent right to access accurate information, allowing them to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives. This extends to decisions regarding family planning, contraception, pregnancy, childbirth, and preventing sexually transmitted infections.

Eliminating discrimination and stigma

SRHR firmly upholds the principle of equal rights for all, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or identity. It aims to eradicate the deeply ingrained societal prejudices and stigma that surround matters related to sexuality and reproduction. By acknowledging and addressing discrimination, SRHR endeavours to create a more inclusive and accepting society where every individual's rights are upheld and respected.

Comprehensive services and care

The scope of SRHR is extensive, encompassing a myriad of critical issues. Access to comprehensive sexuality education is essential for imparting accurate information about sexual health, relationships, and consent. Family planning services allow individuals and couples to plan pregnancies according to their circumstances and preferences. Ensuring that safe abortion care is available to the full extent of the law, including life-saving services for miscarriage and intrauterine foetal demise, ensures that individuals have the right to make choices about their reproductive health without risking their lives. Maternal and child health care are integral components, safeguarding the well-being of both mothers and their offspring.

Preventing and treating sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is crucial for maintaining overall sexual health, while protection from and response to gender-based violence (e.g., referral to protection services or the clinical management of rape) is fundamental to ensuring the safety and dignity of all individuals.

Intrinsic link to gender equality

SRHR recognises that traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and power imbalances can have profound impacts on an individual's sexual and reproductive well-being. By advocating for gender equality, SRHR seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures that limit choices and perpetuate harmful practices.

In essence, SRHR transcends physical health concerns to embrace the totality of the human experience by considering the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of human sexuality and reproduction. The concept of SRHR places individuals at the centre, empowering them to make informed choices about their bodies, relationships, and reproductive lives. It challenges discriminatory norms, promotes gender equality, and envisions a world where every person's well-being is upheld, free from coercion, violence, and stigma. In this holistic framework, individuals are not merely recipients of care but active participants in shaping their own destinies and contributing to a more equitable and just society.

“Central to SRHR is the recognition of an individual's agency and autonomy over their own body and reproductive choices. Women and girls have the inherent right to access accurate information, allowing them to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives.”

1.1 DEFINING SRHR

Sexual and reproductive health encompasses a wide spectrum of intimate and personal aspects of individuals' lives, including sexual relations, pregnancies, and childbirth. These issues carry significant implications for the social and economic development of communities and nations.

Access to sexual and reproductive health services is a universal human right. Women's sexual and reproductive health is intricately tied to numerous fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, freedom from torture, access to healthcare, privacy, education, and freedom from discrimination and violence. Both the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have unequivocally affirmed that women's right to health encompasses their sexual and reproductive health. Consequently, nations are bound by the duty to honour, protect, and fulfil these rights concerning women's sexual and reproductive health. According to the [UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health](#), women have a rightful claim to reproductive healthcare services, as well as access to relevant resources, in sufficient quantity, physical and economic accessibility, without discrimination, and with a focus on high quality.

Addressing SRHR can be particularly challenging in any context, however the complexity is compounded, especially in places where cultural sensitivities and taboos often shroud them in secrecy, or for those experiencing humanitarian and other emergencies that prevent access to quality services and information. For instance, in many Arab countries, discussions about sexual and reproductive health are often considered culturally sensitive and are rarely discussed openly. This cultural context can result in misinformation and misunderstanding among the public, hindering informed decision-making and access to necessary healthcare services.

In the Arab region, as in other parts of the world, women's health outcomes are profoundly affected by the state of SRH services. For example, when women in Arab countries face complications during childbirth or contract diseases like HIV, there may be a dire impact on health and social outcomes for the individual and family for example morbidity, mortality and social ostracization. In communities where access to quality SRH services is limited or non-existent, women and girls face higher risks of complications from childbirth including maternal mortality, the cost of which extends far beyond the immediate loss of a mother's life. Maternal mortality disrupts families, leaving children without mothers and partners without life companions. It hampers gender equality efforts, as it often forces girls to drop out of school to care for younger siblings. Economically, it imposes a heavy burden on healthcare systems, diverting resources from other critical areas. Moreover, it perpetuates a cycle of poverty, as surviving family members struggle to make ends meet without the mother's contributions.

In some cases, young girls may be forced to take on the role of caregivers for their siblings, which can disrupt their education. Without access to quality education, these girls often marry early and start families, impacting their own health and limiting their opportunities to contribute to their communities and nations.

The media plays a pivotal role in shedding light on these crucial issues. Journalists have the power to bridge the gap between cultural sensitivities and open dialogue by bringing these subjects into the spotlight. They act as catalysts for positive change by initiating public discourse, combating myths and misinformation, monitoring progress, and holding authorities accountable.

1.2 ICPD: SHAPING THE FUTURE OF SRHR

The concept of sexual and reproductive health as a fundamental human right has gained international recognition, with its roots tracing back to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). In the ICPD's groundbreaking Programme of Action, reproductive health was defined not merely as the absence of disease or infirmity but as a holistic state of well-being encompassing physical, mental, and social dimensions. It encompasses all aspects related to the reproductive system, its functions, and processes, throughout the life cycle. Crucially, reproductive health signifies that individuals have the freedom and capacity to lead satisfying and safe sexual lives and the autonomy to make choices regarding reproduction, including when, how often, and if they wish to have children.

The ICPD marked a paradigm shift by emphasising a people-centred approach, where couples and individuals have the liberty to make informed and responsible decisions about family planning, including the number and timing of their children. Central to this approach is the empowerment of women, recognizing their agency in reproductive choices. Beyond the confines of reproductive health, the ICPD agreement acknowledges the intricate web of connections between reproductive health and other aspects of people's lives. This includes economic circumstances, educational opportunities, employment prospects, family structures, as well as the broader sociopolitical, religious, and legal environment that shapes individuals' choices and experiences.

In the year 2000, nearly all the world's governments converged at a United Nations summit to establish a set of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These MDGs aimed to drive measurable reductions in poverty and improvements in global health by 2015. Notably, reproductive health was initially absent from the MDGs. However, five years later, world leaders embraced the indispensable role of reproductive health in enhancing maternal health.

Consequently, governments committed to achieving universal access to reproductive health by 2015 as part of MDG 5. This commitment included specific targets, such as reducing unmet needs for contraception, which were closely monitored across most countries. This shift in the global development agenda highlighted the critical significance of sexual and reproductive health as a cornerstone of overall well-being and human rights.

Journalists play a pivotal role in advancing the ICPD agenda by raising awareness about SRHR, advocating for policy implementation, and holding governments and health care institutions accountable. They can spotlight success stories, challenge stigma and misinformation, amplify the voices of marginalised groups, and foster constructive dialogues on SRHR issues. Journalists also stay vigilant about emerging SRHR challenges, advocate for comprehensive sexuality education, and promote gender equality. Their efforts contribute to realising the ICPD's vision of SRHR as fundamental human rights and key components of sustainable development.

The UNFPA Arab States Regional Office (ASRO) has hosted a series of media events focused on the ICPD30 to assess progress and address challenges facing journalists reporting on the topic. These events included consultations and roundtables that brought together prominent journalists in the Arab region. The primary objective was to establish an inclusive ICPD regional media coalition centred on universal principles of rights and choices, leading to the issuance of a media declaration supporting the ICPD Programme of Action.

Furthermore, the coalition aimed to craft a workplan for heightened public awareness of ICPD30 and identify passionate media allies within the coalition to advocate for accelerating the implementation of the Plan of Action at both country and regional levels.

1.3 IN THE ARAB REGION

The landscape of SRHR in the Arab region is a complex tapestry, marked by both notable progress and persistent challenges. According to a joint analysis by multiple UN agencies, countries throughout the region have reported consistent long-term reductions in maternal and infant mortality over the past two decades – the result of unwavering efforts by national, civil society, and donor organisations. The rate and breadth of progress varies significantly among countries, reflecting the influence of cultural norms, political contexts, and the shadows of ongoing conflicts.

However, data from the 2015-2020 period shows global stagnation as well as stagnation within the Arab region. It is critical to note that the latest estimates are based on data through 2020 and do not fully reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which had a devastating impact on health systems. For instance, countries like Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Tunisia have made commendable strides in maternal and infant health. They have invested in healthcare infrastructure, ensuring access to skilled birth attendants, and expanding prenatal and postnatal care services. These efforts have led to relatively low maternal and infant mortality rates, however there are still critical disparities between population groups.

In stark contrast, nations like Yemen and Syria, as reported by UNFPA, grapple with the consequences of conflict. Ongoing crises have disrupted healthcare services, leaving pregnant women with limited access to essential care. This has resulted in alarming increases in maternal and infant mortality rates, largely stemming from preventable causes.

Meanwhile, Tunisia serves as a strong example of progress in family planning and contraceptive access. Collaborative efforts between the government and organisations like UNFPA have widened access to a diverse range of contraceptive methods. This has translated into higher contraceptive prevalence rates and greater autonomy in family planning decisions. However, in more conservative communities, cultural norms and restricted access to healthcare for unmarried individuals may constrain the availability of contraception and reproductive health services.

1.3.1 Comprehensive sexuality education

The availability of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in the Arab region varies significantly depending on the country and local context. CSE is an essential component of SRHR education, equipping young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to make informed decisions about their bodies and their lives and realise their health, well-being and dignity.



“The results of the analysis of opinion poll data showed that [70 percent] of the participants claimed that the media in their country does not adequately and professionally cover issues on sexual and reproductive health and rights.”

— Analysis of SRHR coverage in the region, Maharat Foundation

In some Arab countries, efforts have been made to integrate CSE into school curricula. These programs often cover a wide range of topics, including sexual and reproductive health, the human body and development, gender equality, consent, and relationships. However, the extent and quality of CSE implementation can vary. In Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan and Lebanon, for instance, CSE programmes have been introduced in schools with a focus on providing accurate and age-appropriate information.

Conversely, in more conservative societies, the inclusion of CSE in school curricula can face resistance from various quarters, including religious and cultural groups and parents. In such cases, CSE programs may be limited or exclude certain topics, potentially leaving young people without access to vital information that they will, most probably, seek through sources that are not always reliable. Some NGOs and youth-focused organisations in the Arab region have taken the initiative to provide CSE through community-based and peer-to-peer programs and workshops, many of which have been directly supported by UNFPA and other international organisations. These initiatives aim to bridge the gap where formal education falls short and ensure that young people have access to accurate and comprehensive information about SRHR.

Overall, while progress has been made in some Arab countries regarding the availability of CSE, challenges remain in ensuring that all young people in the region have access to comprehensive and age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education. Advocacy, awareness campaigns, and partnerships between governments, civil society, and international organisations are essential in advancing CSE and promoting the rights and well-being of young people in the Arab region.

1.3.2 SRHR and GBV

Gender-based violence casts a long shadow over SRHR in the Arab region, deeply affecting the lives of women and girls, as highlighted by reports from UN agencies and NGOs. The persistence of child marriage and subsequent early pregnancies remains a significant concern in several Arab countries, as documented by UNFPA and other organisations responding to GBV. Young girls are frequently married off at a tender age,

subsequently facing early pregnancies and associated health risks, such as obstructed labour, premature delivery and having low birth weight infants.

Moreover, women and girls seeking care may face discrimination, stigma, and even physical or emotional abuse, further exacerbating their vulnerability. For survivors of GBV, this fear and mistrust of healthcare providers can be particularly pronounced, deterring them from seeking essential care and support. This is precisely why the integration of SRH and GBV services is crucial; it not only ensures comprehensive care but also emphasises the need for respectful, trauma-informed healthcare that respects the autonomy and dignity of individuals.

SRH GBV-Integration

The integration of sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence is indispensable to safeguarding the health and well-being of women and girls. These interconnected issues require comprehensive attention to ensure people in need receive holistic support encompassing medical care, psychological counselling, contraception, and prevention services. Underscoring this integration empowers survivors, destigmatises discussions, and advocates for policy changes, shedding light on the urgent need for comprehensive support services and prevention programs.

Furthermore, integrated reporting of these issues highlights the inextricable link between SRH and GBV, fostering a more holistic understanding of the challenges women and girls face. By presenting both issues together, journalists play a pivotal role in promoting prevention, education, and awareness campaigns, empowering individuals to assert control over their sexual and reproductive lives while addressing gender-based violence. Ultimately, this approach contributes to the well-being and rights of women and girls, fostering empathy, understanding, and collective action toward a more equitable and safer society.

GBV and its coverage in the media is explored in greater detail in Chapter 2.



1.3.3 Female genital mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), also known as female circumcision or cutting, is a deeply rooted cultural practice that has persisted in some parts of the Arab region despite ongoing efforts to eradicate it. FGM involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons and is typically performed on girls and young women, often without their consent. It poses severe physical, emotional, and psychological risks and is considered a violation of human rights.

In the Arab region, FGM is most prevalent in certain countries, with prevalence rates varying widely. Countries such as Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia have historically reported higher rates of FGM, while other Arab countries have seen a decline due to increased awareness, advocacy, and legal measures. However, it's important to note that even in regions with lower reported prevalence, FGM may still occur in hidden or unreported cases.

Efforts to combat FGM in the Arab region have been multifaceted. Many governments have enacted laws and regulations prohibiting the practice, and religious leaders have been engaged in promoting awareness about its harmful effects. Additionally, local and international organizations, including UNFPA, have played pivotal roles in supporting community-based initiatives and providing education on the health and human rights aspects of FGM.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Cultural and social norms, as well as a lack of awareness and education, continue to perpetuate the practice in some communities. This makes FGM a clear example of the inevitable intersection between SRHR and GBV. In addition to being a serious health issue, it is also a form of gender-based violence that specifically targets women and girls, infringing on their fundamental rights and bodily autonomy. This is where journalism can play a vital role by helping the public form a solid understanding of the various issues impacting women and girls as well as the causal factors and connections underlying them.

1.3.4 In humanitarian settings

Arab countries grappling with humanitarian crises face a host of pressing SRHR challenges. These crises disrupt healthcare systems, limiting access to essential services and exacerbating vulnerabilities, especially among women and girls. The very nature of these crises, whether conflicts, natural disasters, or displacement, introduces immense and converging challenges to SRHR provision. These include disruptions to health infrastructure, referral pathways, transportation, human resources, and the availability of essential commodities and skilled birth attendants, all of which impede the availability and quality of medical services.

The consequences can be dire, with heightened risks of unplanned pregnancy, maternal and newborn mortality, unsafe abortions, gender-based violence, and compromised sexual health. Addressing these complex challenges is paramount, requiring a concerted effort from governments, humanitarian organisations, and the international community to ensure that even in the midst of crises, the SRHR needs of women and girls are met with urgency and compassion.

GBV, including sexual violence, surges during crises, with inadequate protection mechanisms further endangering those affected and, in some settings, requiring a robust clinical response for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. Early marriage of girls due to economic hardship or protection concerns is another concerning outcome, increasing the risks associated with early pregnancies and childbirth. There is also recent documentation of the impact of living in a humanitarian setting on FGM and differentiated programming to prevent and respond. Stigmatisation and discrimination, as well as inadequate legal protections, further hinder access to care, while limited

funding and prioritisation of SRHR within humanitarian aid efforts create gaps in essential services.

Meanwhile, displacement and overcrowded living conditions in refugee camps pose difficulties in accessing safe menstrual hygiene facilities. Additionally, disruptions in the supply chain and healthcare infrastructure can lead to shortages of contraceptives and family planning services, resulting in unintended pregnancies and a loss of reproductive autonomy.

Effectively addressing these SRHR challenges necessitates coordinated efforts from governments, humanitarian organisations, civil society, and the international community. It entails providing accessible, culturally sensitive, and gender-responsive SRHR services and support, integrating SRHR into humanitarian response efforts, advocating for legal and policy reforms, and raising awareness to ensure the well-being and rights of women and girls in crisis-affected Arab countries.

Journeys of Transformation

"When I visited the clinic to check up on my pregnancy more than a year and a half ago, something transformational happened to me," recalls Zahra, 34, who lives in Tal Majdal village in rural Al Hasakah in north-east Syria. "After participating in a few awareness sessions, my thoughts on procreation changed completely."

Since her marriage at age sixteen, Zahra has delivered six children. She received comprehensive healthcare services during her last pregnancy, offered via a UNFPA-supported SRH clinic in the city of Al Hasakah. The awareness sessions on family planning that she attended are offered at every UNFPA-supported facility, where participants are given vital information by health educators in order to make better decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. On any given month, the facility offers such sessions to more than 600 women and adolescent girls.

"The essential guidance offered at these sessions convinced me to use family planning methods for the sake of my well-being and that of my family," explains Zahra.

Zahra played the role of a health educator herself when she transferred what she's learned about family planning to her husband, highlighting the risks posed to her well-being if they continued reproducing without sufficient breaks. With the right information presented in the right manner, her husband was on board.

"I decided to have an intrauterine device (IUD) inserted seven months ago and have been visiting the clinic

regularly to check up on my health," added Zahra. She is among the approximately 170 women who make use of the various family planning methods offered at the clinic on a monthly basis.

Zahra is a housewife, while her husband is a day labourer and the sole breadwinner in the family. Like many families in rural Al Hasakah, they struggle to make ends meet, particularly in light of the dire economic situation plaguing communities throughout Syria. Fortunately, UNFPA supports several health facilities in the governorate, including the static SRH clinics where Zahra accessed services and a modern medical centre where Zahra's children are able to receive medical care should they need it.

"Both health facilities are our first destination in case we need medical support because of the quality of the services and medicines they provide," added Zahra.

In addition to sexual and reproductive health services and various gender-based violence interventions, the facility where Zahra received support offers women and adolescent girls with services to support the clinical detection of breast cancer, given to around 120 women and adolescent girls on a monthly basis. Suspected cases are then referred to the adjacent medical centre for mammograms. The facility also cooperates with other UNFPA-supported partners in Al Hasakah to refer pregnant women to cash and voucher assistance, offered throughout the pregnancy and up to six months after delivery.

1.3.5 The state of SRHR coverage

In the course of developing this guide, UNFPA held frequent consultations with journalists throughout the Arab region in order to gauge the state of SRHR reporting, understand persistent challenges, and create a viable strategy to address them in partnership with all relevant stakeholders. During these consultations, journalists were given the opportunity to share their experiences and identify areas where UNFPA and its partners can provide strategic support.

Generally, journalists throughout the region reported their dissatisfaction with the rate and quality of reporting on SRHR, citing a multitude of issues and challenges that include:

1.3.5.1 Sporadic and superficial reporting

One significant challenge in SRHR reporting in the Arab region is the inconsistent and often superficial nature of coverage. Many SRHR issues are complex and require in-depth analysis, but they often receive only brief or occasional attention from media outlets. Journalists may struggle to dedicate sufficient time and resources to thoroughly investigate these topics, resulting in superficial reporting that fails to address the nuances and underlying causes of SRHR challenges.

1.3.5.2 Censorship of SRHR topics

Censorship poses a significant barrier to SRHR reporting in the Arab region. Editorial teams, government authorities, and sometimes even readers may exert pressure to avoid or tone down coverage of SRHR issues. This censorship can be driven by cultural and religious sensitivities, conservative norms, or government policies that restrict discussions related to sexuality and reproductive health. Journalists may self-censor to avoid controversy, backlash, or retaliation that could place their lives or well-being at risk, limiting the depth and breadth of SRHR reporting. In some contexts, even rudimentary SRHR terminologies have become taboo in recent years, particularly in communities that have suffered setbacks in social development and human rights due to ongoing humanitarian crises.

1.3.5.3 Lack of readily available and accurate information in Arabic

Journalists often face difficulty in accessing readily available and accurate information on SRHR topics in Arabic. This scarcity of reliable resources can hinder their ability to research and report on these issues comprehensively. Additionally, language barriers may limit their access to international research and best practices, further impacting the quality of SRHR reporting.

1.3.5.4 Lack of capacity building opportunities

Journalists in the Arab region may lack SRHR capacity-building opportunities that are specifically tailored to the media. Comprehensive training and workshops on SRHR topics are essential to equip journalists with the necessary knowledge and skills to report professionally and ethically. Without such opportunities, reporters may struggle to understand the complexities of SRHR, leading to inaccurate or incomplete reporting.

Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from media organisations, governmental bodies, civil society, and international partners to promote an environment where SRHR reporting is not only encouraged and rewarded but also safeguarded against censorship and biases.

Chapter 3 offers a number of insights and strategies to address these challenges.

1.3.5.4 A vast, evolving context

While the previous examples offer glimpses into the intricate SRHR landscape in the region, it is crucial to take into account the uniqueness of each nation's circumstances. Progress is often a product of various factors, including governmental policies, cultural dynamics, and external support from international organisations. Addressing SRHR challenges effectively necessitates a multifaceted approach, encompassing advocacy for policy reforms, widespread awareness campaigns, and concerted efforts to extend healthcare access, especially in regions mired in conflict and instability, as outlined by multiple sources in the field.

It's also important to acknowledge that data on SRHR in the Arab region can be limited due to cultural sensitivities and political contexts. However, organisations such as UNFPA work to gather and disseminate data on key SRHR indicators. While progress has been made, continued advocacy and awareness efforts are crucial to addressing the challenges and disparities in SRHR that persist. This is where professional, impactful journalism can make a substantial contribution.

2. WHY COVER GBV?

“I want to be a journalist because my and many other stories need to be heard. I want to document everything: the violence against women and children and the courage of the people who continue to work hard for the future of the Syrian people, like the health workers and volunteers and the case managers who help girls like me find hope amid the chaos.”

— Nalin, a Syrian adolescent refugee living in Qushtapa Camp, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

2.1 DEFINING GBV

“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 — or the lack thereof — 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.”

Amal, who not only survived the war in Syria but also experienced years of sexual exploitation and abuse in the process, echoes the voices of countless survivors of violence whose faith in the media was shattered by sensationalism, violations of privacy, inaccurate reporting, and other common pitfalls of unprofessional journalism.

Journalists who report on GBV undertake a challenging and multifaceted task. The topic is not only broadly misunderstood but also exhibits profound depth and complexity, influenced by an array of factors. It is critical for journalists to maintain high professional standards in their reporting to prevent causing further harm to survivors. Practices such as insensitive interviewing techniques, biased reporting, and a lack of understanding of the legal nuances can inadvertently exacerbate the issue, potentially retraumatizing survivors and aiding perpetrators in evading justice.

The daunting complexity of reporting on these issues might deter journalists from covering these stories, inadvertently perpetuating a culture in which such acts remain unaddressed and unpunished. Nonetheless,

effective journalism, honed through years of experience and anchored in universally recognized ethical principles, can overcome these obstacles.

GBV often remains shrouded in silence within many cultures, driving the subject into obscurity and perpetuating numerous misconceptions. Thus, comprehending GBV, and crucially, understanding its causal and contributory factors, is essential for accurate and sensitive reporting.

GBV IS A PERVASIVE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE WITH GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS.

GBV is a broad term encompassing any harmful act committed against an individual’s will based on the socially constructed differences between males and females. It manifests in various forms, including physical, sexual, mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other infringements of personal freedom.

In most countries, GBV acts are in direct violation of national laws, yet the definitions and implementations of these laws and policies vary greatly worldwide. From a humanitarian perspective, recognizing GBV as a violation of human rights and a widespread social phenomenon is crucial. This understanding should be at the heart of journalists’ efforts to report on GBV, highlighting its severity and the urgent need for global attention and action.

The scope of GBV can be categorised into several categories, each encompassing various forms of violence.

2.1.2 Sexual violence

Sexual violence encompasses a range of actions that violate the sexual autonomy and integrity of an individual without their consent. The most severe form of sexual violence is rape, which involves non-consensual penetration of the vagina, anus, or mouth with a penis, other body parts, or objects. This type of violence is not only a profound violation of a person's bodily integrity but also has deep psychological impacts. Survivors¹ often suffer from trauma, which can lead to long-term psychological conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.

Sexual violence also has broader societal implications, as it perpetuates gender inequality and can contribute to a culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual assault. In many societies, victims of sexual violence often face significant barriers in seeking justice due to societal stigma, victim-blaming attitudes, and inadequacies in the legal system. Addressing sexual violence requires a multifaceted approach, including legal reforms, educational programs to change societal attitudes, and support systems for survivors.

2.1.3 Sexual assault

Sexual assault is a form of sexual violence that includes non-consensual sexual contact without penetration, such as attempted rape, unwanted kissing, fondling, or touching of genitalia and buttocks. It can lead to a range of psychological and emotional issues, including feelings of shame, guilt, and post-traumatic stress. The impacts can be long-lasting, affecting relationships, sexual health, and overall well-being. Tackling sexual assault requires culturally sensitive approaches, education, and robust legal frameworks to protect individuals and ensure accountability for perpetrators.

2.1.4 Physical assault

Physical assault encompasses acts of violence that inflict physical pain, discomfort, or injury but are not sexual in nature. This includes hitting, slapping, choking, cutting, shoving, burning, shooting, acid attacks, and the use of weapons. Physical assault can result in both immediate physical harm and long-term health problems, including chronic pain and disability.

The psychological impact of physical assault can be just as severe, leading to fear, anxiety, and a sense of vulnerability. In many cases, physical assault occurs within the context of domestic violence, where the perpetrator is often an intimate partner or family member. Addressing physical assault involves a combination of legal, social, and healthcare interventions to protect victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and provide support and rehabilitation for those affected.

2.1.5 Child and forced marriage

Gender-based violence experts define child marriage as a formal marriage or informal union where one or both parties are under 18 years of age. Despite being illegal in many countries, this practice remains widespread. Globally, one in every five girls is married or in an informal union before reaching 18 years of age. Child marriage severely endangers the lives and health of young girls, limiting their future opportunities. Girls who are coerced into child marriage often become pregnant while still adolescents, which significantly increases the risk of complications in pregnancy or childbirth, the leading cause of death among older adolescent girls.

Similarly, forced marriage, where a woman or girl is married against her will, often results from and contributes to broader patterns of gender-based violence. It is commonly linked with other forms of abuse, such as family violence and sexual exploitation. Forced marriage deprives individuals of their autonomy and can have severe implications for their health and well-being.

2.1.6 Denial of resources, opportunities, or services

This form of gender-based violence involves denying individuals access to economic resources, education, health, and other social services. Examples include a widow being denied inheritance, earnings forcibly taken by a partner, preventing contraceptive use, or barring a girl from attending school. This denial not only infringes on the basic rights of individuals but also perpetuates gender inequality and hinders social and economic development. Addressing this requires systemic change, including legal reforms to ensure equal rights and access, social programs to support marginalised groups, and educational initiatives to change societal attitudes.

2.1.7 Psychological violence

This form of violence involves the infliction of mental or emotional pain or injury, including threats of physical or sexual violence, intimidation, humiliation, forced isolation, stalking, harassment, and destruction of personal items. Psychological abuse can be just as damaging as physical violence, leading to long-term emotional and mental health issues. It can diminish self-esteem, lead to feelings of helplessness, and result in anxiety and depression. Addressing psychological abuse involves recognizing its seriousness, providing support and counselling services to survivors, and implementing legal frameworks to protect individuals and hold abusers accountable.

¹ It is preferable to use the term 'survivor' rather than 'victim' in most contexts, because this implies resilience and empowerment.



2.1.8 Technology-facilitated GBV

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is a significant and growing concern worldwide. This form of violence uses digital tools or technologies to cause harm, often exacerbating offline forms of violence such as sexual harassment, stalking, intimate partner violence, trafficking, and sexual exploitation. It includes a range of acts such as intimate image abuse, doxing, sharing of “deepfake” images, and online harassment.

A [UN Women study](#) in the Arab States region found that 60 percent of women internet users had been exposed to online violence, which the study concluded represents a serious threat to women's physical safety and mental wellbeing. For 1 in 3 women, the violence did not remain limited to the digital space. UNFPA programme data shows that certain groups are at particular risk of TFGBV, including adolescent girls and young women, women in public life like human rights defenders and journalists, and individuals facing multiple forms of discrimination like women with disabilities, women of colour, migrant women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

For those targeted by TFGBV, the consequences can be far-reaching, including stigmatisation, loss of livelihoods, and so-called “honour” killings.

Additional guidance on TFGBV can be found in [this document](#). Definitions for other GBV-related terms can be found in Annex I of this guide or in the [UN glossary on sexual exploitation and abuse](#).

2.1.9 Who is at risk?

GBV is a profound and widespread issue that predominantly affects women and girls, deeply rooted in patriarchal beliefs and societal norms. This form of violence encompasses a range of harmful behaviours directed at individuals based on their gender, and it's perpetuated by long-standing gender inequalities and power imbalances. Women and girls, due to prevailing patriarchal structures in many societies, often hold a perceived subordinate status, making them particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence. This vulnerability is not limited to specific regions or cultures but is a global phenomenon, influenced by socio-cultural, educational, religious, and legal institutions that often reinforce male dominance.

Nergis, an adolescent girl from Qamishli, Syria, poignantly captures this reality: “As a girl, I always feel like I'm walking with a thousand eyes on my back and an invisible knife held against my throat. Every word, every glance, and every step is a potential affront to the honour of my family.” Nergis, who is also a survivor of sexual violence, echoes the experiences of countless girls and women worldwide, who must contend with the constant threat of violence in their daily lives.

Meanwhile, individuals with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are also at greater risk of GBV, largely due to societal stigma and inadequate legal protections. Such individuals often face violence aimed at punishing or “correcting” their non-adherence to traditional gender norms, ranging from verbal abuse to physical and sexual violence. The reluctance to report these incidents, driven by fear of further discrimination, leads to underreporting, highlighting the need for more inclusive policies and legal frameworks to protect and support those at risk.

In some contexts, such as detention and torture, GBV also extends to men and boys, particularly when violence is used to enforce rigid gender norms and expressions. In some cases, men and boys may experience sexual violence intended to assert power and dominance and reinforce traditional notions of masculinity. This dimension of gender-based violence underscores its deep-rooted nature within the societal framework, revealing that it extends beyond the acts of violence themselves. It is also intricately linked to entrenched gender norms and stereotypes, which rest at the core of the definition of GBV.

2.2 THE ROOTS GO DEEP

The root causes of GBV are multifaceted and deeply ingrained in societal structures, requiring a nuanced understanding, particularly for those reporting on the issue.

At its core, GBV is entrenched in the pervasive beliefs of male supremacy, which often place women and girls at a heightened risk of discrimination and marginalisation. These gender-based inequalities are not just about physical power but also encompass economic, social, and political dimensions, leading to a power imbalance between men and women. This imbalance is a key driver of GBV, as it fosters an environment where violence against women and girls is more likely to occur and be tolerated.

The situation becomes even more dire during humanitarian crises. In such scenarios, the usual protection mechanisms and social support networks that might offer some safeguard against GBV are often weakened or completely absent. The ensuing chaos and instability can exacerbate the risk of violence, making women and girls even more vulnerable.

Furthermore, societal norms and stereotypes play a significant role in both the occurrence and the perpetuation of GBV. Socially prescribed gender roles often dictate a hierarchy where men are dominant, and women are subservient, thereby normalising and even legitimising violence against women and girls. These stereotypes can manifest in various ways, from the subtle reinforcement of gender roles to outright victim-blaming in cases of violence.

In addition, gender discrimination often results in women having less access to resources, rights, and opportunities, further perpetuating their subordinate status. This systemic inequality means that women are often economically dependent on men, making it difficult for them to escape abusive situations and seek help.

Tackling GBV thus requires addressing these underlying causes - challenging deeply-held beliefs and stereotypes about gender, redistributing power more equitably between genders, and ensuring that women and girls have equal access to resources and opportunities. It also involves creating robust systems that can withstand the disruptions of humanitarian crises to protect the vulnerable. This comprehensive approach is essential to effectively reduce and eventually eliminate GBV.

2.3 THE CONSEQUENCES ARE FAR-REACHING

At the individual level, survivors of GBV face serious, immediate, and long-term health impacts. These include a variety of psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The trauma of GBV can leave lasting emotional scars, affecting survivors' mental health and overall well-being. Physically, the impact can be just as severe, with survivors often suffering from serious injuries, unwanted pregnancies, complications from unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections, and in the most tragic cases, death due to the violence they have endured.

Beyond the physical and psychological toll, GBV carries a significant social and economic burden for survivors. Stigmatisation is a common and debilitating consequence, often leading to ostracization from families and communities. This social exclusion not only deprives survivors of critical support networks but can also lead to economic hardship, as they may lose access to shared resources or opportunities for employment. The stigma associated with GBV can further escalate into increased risks of further exploitation and violence, including extreme cases of retribution, such as so-called honour killings, where family or community members retaliate violently against the survivor.

On a broader societal level, the impacts of GBV are equally destructive. It represents a grave violation of human rights and reflects deeper issues of gender inequality and injustice. The fear and trauma engendered by GBV undermine the social fabric, affecting the sense of security and trust within communities. Additionally, when perpetrators of GBV operate with impunity, it sends a dangerous message that undermines the rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights.

Furthermore, GBV contributes to the erosion of civil liberties and social progress. It stifles the voices and participation of women and girls in public life, limiting their contributions to development and peacebuilding efforts. Societies that tolerate GBV often witness hindered social and economic development, as half of their population is unable to fully participate and contribute to the community's wellbeing. This creates a significant barrier to achieving gender equality and sustainable development, exacerbating vulnerabilities during times of geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian crises.

2.4 GBV AND DATA

The prevalence of GBV is a critical topic in the realm of human rights and social welfare, yet accurately gauging its extent poses significant challenges. These challenges are magnified significantly during humanitarian crises, where limitations in services, security concerns, and access issues impede data collection (and why GBV experts discourage the gathering of prevalence data gathering in such settings). Moreover, the stigma surrounding GBV often acts as a barrier to survivors coming forward, leading to considerable underreporting.

Data on GBV typically reflects only those incidents that are reported, which are believed to constitute a mere fraction of the actual cases. A [study](#) published in the American Journal of Epidemiology found that only about 7 percent of survivors in developing countries report incidents of GBV to a service provider, and less than half (46 percent) disclose their experiences to anyone at all, including family or friends. This underreporting is driven by several factors, including the fear of not being believed, victim-blaming, social ostracization, and potential repercussions from perpetrators.

DURING EMERGENCIES AND IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS, JOURNALISTS ARE STRONGLY DISCOURAGED FROM PURSUING AND RELYING ON GBV DATA.

GBV data is not really necessary to gauge whether or not GBV is occurring, as past experiences have sufficiently established that the risks of such violence increase dramatically in these settings. Instead, journalists are encouraged to focus on the inherent power disparities, inequalities, and harmful norms and practices that render women and girls at higher risk of violence, in addition to highlighting how the situation is impacting women and girls and the various forms of violence they face.

Instead, the best data available on GBV often comes from qualitative assessments and analyses. However, the interpretation of such data is fraught with complexities. For instance, a reported increase in GBV cases may not necessarily reflect a rise in actual incidents but could be attributed to factors such as the opening of a new reporting platform or awareness campaigns encouraging women to report and for more response services to be made available.

2.4.1 GBV is under-reported worldwide

The under-reporting of GBV worldwide is a complex issue influenced by various factors. Social stigma often silences victims, who fear repercussions from perpetrators or their community. This can include financial repercussions, the risk of losing their home, or even child custody. Additionally, there's a widespread lack of information about reporting mechanisms and legal procedures, which can be daunting for survivors. Many victims also lack confidence in the police and legal structures, feeling that their grievances may not be taken seriously or handled sensitively.

The absence of support services further exacerbates the problem, leaving survivors without the necessary help and guidance. In some cases, fear of deportation

“At its core, GBV is entrenched in the pervasive beliefs of male supremacy, which often place women and girls at a heightened risk of discrimination and marginalisation. These gender-based inequalities are not just about physical power but also encompass economic, social, and political dimensions, leading to a power imbalance between men and women.”

can deter reporting, especially among immigrants and refugees. The high cost of legal action can also be a significant barrier. Moreover, in numerous countries, violence against women is not legally criminalised, which not only limits legal recourse for survivors but also perpetuates a culture where such violence is normalized or overlooked. These factors collectively contribute to the widespread under-reporting of GBV, underscoring the need for systemic change and increased support for survivors.

2.4.2 Why prevalence data is problematic

Prevalence data refers to the proportion of a population that is affected by a particular condition or event at a specific point in time or over a specified period. In the context of GBV, prevalence data would indicate the percentage of individuals in a given population who have experienced such violence.

Collecting and/or reporting prevalence data on GBV is a challenging, costly, and prolonged exercise, particularly in contexts where such collection is not done routinely as part of national statistics. In humanitarian settings, such collection is not only considered unethical but is largely impossible to conduct properly. As such, the pressure to present concrete figures can lead to the circulation of flawed estimates or the sharing of statistics devoid of necessary context.

The draw of prevalence data is that it can potentially offer a useful (albeit not always perfectly accurate) snapshot of the extent of GBV within a population over a specific period. However, as extensive GBV research has shown, such data falls short in painting a full picture of the experiences of women and girls in crisis situations. It provides limited insight into the risks associated with violence, the specific needs of survivors, and therefore is of constrained utility for developing robust response programming.

It is therefore that understanding and reporting on GBV requires a nuanced approach that goes beyond prevalence data. It necessitates an appreciation of the complexities involved in reporting GBV, a sensitivity to the myriad reasons that deter survivors from coming forward, and a commitment to providing contextually rich, accurate, and empathetic coverage. This approach is crucial not only for ethical journalism but also for effectively contributing to the broader discourse on GBV and advocating for meaningful change.

2.5 THE CONSEQUENCES ARE FAR-REACHING

In humanitarian crises, such as those stemming from geopolitical conflicts or natural disasters, the risk of GBV notably escalates. These emergencies often result in women and girls being separated from their families and established community support systems. The

ensuing social disarray disrupts traditional norms and behaviours and creates vulnerabilities, creating a fertile ground for GBV.

Mass displacement further aggravates the situation, leading to increased violence. It disrupts community networks and fosters environments conducive to lawlessness, where GBV can thrive unchecked. The root causes of GBV, deeply embedded in societal structures, are marked by gender discrimination and a fundamental power imbalance between genders.

With numerous countries in the region experiencing acute and protracted crises, the risks of violence against women and girls have skyrocketed. Despite ongoing efforts to prevent and respond to GBV in the Arab States region, it remains a pervasive and critical issue. Common forms of GBV in the region include movement restrictions, sexual harassment, sexual violence, child marriage, and female genital mutilation.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, for example, GBV has been a significant problem, with factors such as poverty, instability, political conflict, and deteriorating living conditions contributing to its complexity. The situation has been exacerbated by the low uptake of multi-sectoral GBV services, with less than 2 percent of survivors seeking healthcare, legal, or protection services due to weak protection systems and national referral mechanisms.

In Syria, more than a decade after the crisis that erupted in 2011, GBV has become normalised and a daily reality, with increasing reports of family violence, child marriage, sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual violence, and various forms of TFGBV. As 16-year-old Mariam from Aleppo describes it: "For girls our age, life quickly became an open-air prison after the war. Suddenly, we were told not to leave our houses because we might get harassed, raped, or kidnapped. I'm told that being married is my only path to true safety, but I don't want to get married. I'm simply not ready."

Yemen, amidst one of the worst humanitarian crises, has around 2.6 million women and girls at risk of GBV, with 52,000 facing a high risk of sexual violence, including rape. The escalation of the conflict and the ensuing humanitarian repercussions have further weakened the position of women and girls in Yemeni society, leading to a near erosion of their protection mechanisms and increasing their vulnerability to violence and abuse.

In Sudan, years of conflict and mass displacement have made the situation for women and girls unbearable. Data collected by UNFPA showed that GBV is widespread and has become deeply woven in the fabric of society, with women and girls facing increased risks of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and other forms of abuse amidst economic and societal instability. There have also been widespread reports of conflict-related

sexual violence against internally displaced and refugee women and girls since the outbreak of fighting, including disturbing accounts of sexual violence perpetrated by armed forces.

In Iraq, recent years have seen a significant surge in violence against women and girls, with nearly one million women and girls at risk of some form of GBV, particularly *intimate partner violence*, with many cases likely going unreported due to societal pressures. Moreover, UNFPA estimates that 10 percent of girls under 14 may have undergone FGM in 2018, while estimates from 2015 showed that, among the mothers surveyed, 44.8 percent reported undergoing the practice themselves.

In Egypt, where around 7.8 million women suffer from all forms of violence yearly, the prevalence rate of FGM among women and girls aged 15 to 49 stands at 92 percent. Meanwhile, Libya continues to face a protracted humanitarian crisis, affecting over 400,000 women and girls, with more than 37,000 women of reproductive age in urgent need of protection and essential services.

2.6 THE ROLE OF THE JOURNALIST

Journalists have a vital role in addressing GBV, an issue that is often shrouded in a culture of silence and taboo. This silence is not just a byproduct of societal norms but also a barrier that perpetuates the cycle of violence. By reporting on the topic, journalists can play a pivotal role in challenging the status quo and bringing the issue into the public discourse. Below are some of the many advantages of reporting, ethically and professionally, on this global scourge.

Raising awareness: GBV often remains shrouded in secrecy, stigmatised, and misunderstood. Journalists have the power to break this silence, shed light on the realities of GBV, and raise public awareness. Through their reporting, they can help demystify misconceptions and educate the public about the nature, causes, and effects of GBV. This heightened awareness is the cornerstone of societal change, paving the way for community discussions and actions to address this global issue.

Amplifying voices: Survivors of GBV frequently feel voiceless, isolated, and shamed. Ethical and sensitive reporting by journalists can provide these survivors with a platform to share their stories. This not only validates their experiences but also empowers them and others in similar situations.

Challenging harmful norms and stereotypes: GBV is deeply rooted in gender inequality and societal norms that perpetuate discrimination against women and girls. Journalists play a key role in challenging these norms and stereotypes by highlighting the inherent

injustices and inequalities that lead to GBV. Through investigative reporting and thoughtful storytelling, they can critique and question societal norms that have long been accepted uncritically.

Influencing policy and legal reforms: Media coverage of GBV can exert pressure on policymakers and governments to enact or strengthen laws and policies that protect against GBV. Journalists can hold authorities accountable for implementing these policies effectively and ensuring justice for survivors. By reporting on both successes and failures in addressing GBV, journalists can influence the direction of policy reforms and resource allocation.

Promoting prevention and intervention strategies: Through their reporting, journalists can inform the public about available resources, support services, and intervention strategies. They can highlight effective prevention programs and advocate for increased support and funding for such initiatives. By doing so, they contribute to building a more informed society where GBV is actively countered at both individual and institutional levels.

2.7 THE STATE OF GBV COVERAGE

The state of GBV coverage in the Arab region leaves plenty to be desired, with media representation often failing to meet professional standards. This issue has become increasingly critical as GBV continues to impact countless lives across the region, yet the nuanced and sensitive portrayal of such violence in the media remains inadequate.

Since 2014, in addition to monitoring coverage of SRHR and GBV issues, UNFPA has been conducting regular consultations with journalists throughout the Arab region and beyond in order to further understand the challenges impeding quality coverage and contribute to addressing them. The following is an overview of the key issues observed in the vast majority of media coverage related to GBV in the region.

2.7.1 Sporadic coverage

Media coverage of GBV in the Arab region remains sporadic and inconsistent in terms of quality. In some instances, reports fall short of professional journalistic standards, failing to provide a comprehensive and empathetic view of the issue. This inconsistency in coverage does not only affect the portrayal of GBV in the media but also influences public perception and awareness. The failure to consistently and accurately report on GBV contributes to a societal misunderstanding of the severity and prevalence of the issue.

2.7.2 Stagnant quality

Despite an increase in the quantity of GBV coverage, the quality, particularly in new media channels like online portals, has not seen a corresponding improvement. Consultations with UNFPA reveal that journalists and influencers frequently resort to sensationalism, bias, and inaccurate reporting. This trend is especially worrying in the digital age, where information spreads rapidly and can significantly impact public opinion and awareness. Sensationalist and biased reporting not only distorts the reality of GBV but also potentially victimises survivors and trivialises their experiences.

2.7.3 Lack of context

Another significant issue is the tendency of media coverage to focus on individual cases of GBV without placing them within a larger social context. There is a notable lack of in-depth features that explore GBV as a societal issue, taking into account the unique cultural, social, and legal nuances of the Arab region. This limited approach hampers the public's understanding of GBV as a complex phenomenon influenced by a myriad of factors, including cultural norms, legal frameworks, and socio-economic conditions.

2.7.4 Intractable norms

Media coverage of GBV in the Arab region is significantly affected by cultural norms and deeply entrenched patriarchal ideas, which can compromise the objectivity and neutrality of reporting. This issue is not confined to male journalists; female journalists are also susceptible to these biases, reflecting the pervasive nature of cultural norms and attitudes towards gender.

In societies where patriarchal values are deeply rooted, there is a risk that media coverage may inadvertently justify or downplay GBV. This results in overtly biased narratives that obscure the reality of GBV, often placing the responsibility on the victim or weaponising the violence to suit other agendas. For example, coverage that suggests that a survivor's actions, appearance, or choices might have provoked the violence perpetuates the harmful myth that survivors are responsible for the abuse they suffer. This not only undermines the severity of the crime but also places an unjust burden of guilt and shame on survivors.

The lack of objectivity in reporting GBV can be further compounded by a journalist's individual biases, regardless of their gender. Journalists may bring their own cultural and societal beliefs into their reporting, consciously or unconsciously, influencing how they interpret and present stories of GBV. This can lead to narratives that reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and norms, such as the portrayal of women as inherently weak or submissive, or men as naturally aggressive.



Furthermore, biased reporting on GBV can have far-reaching implications. It not only affects public perception and understanding of GBV but can also influence policy and legal responses to these issues.

When the media perpetuates stereotypes and fails to challenge patriarchal norms, it contributes to the normalization of GBV and hinders progress towards gender equality and justice for survivors. It also contributes to the disempowerment of women and girls, bolstering their fears of seeking justice and further reducing the chances of survivors actually coming forward.

2.7.5 Insufficient knowledge

Another critical challenge in the coverage of GBV in the Arab region is the general lack of understanding about the issue. Many journalists and media outlets lack comprehensive knowledge of the root causes of GBV and its far-reaching impacts on individuals and society. This gap in understanding often leads to superficial reporting that does not capture the complexity of the issue. Additionally, prevalent myths and misconceptions about GBV, such as victim-blaming or the normalization of certain forms of violence, further hinder effective and sensitive reporting. An in-depth understanding of GBV, including its psychological, social, and economic dimensions, is essential for media professionals to accurately and responsibly report on these issues.

Media coverage also demonstrates a lack of understanding of local GBV laws and policies. This oversight results in missed opportunities to educate the public, contextualise individual incidents within broader legal frameworks, and advocate for policy change. Knowledgeable reporting is crucial in promoting awareness of legal rights and protections, thereby empowering survivors and the public to seek justice and support.

2.7.6 Disinformation abounds

A significant concern in media coverage of GBV is the prevalence of disinformation and inaccurate reporting. This issue is exacerbated by the rise of conspiracy theories that negatively portray gender and women's rights issues. Organisations working in these fields are often vilified, undermining their efforts and misinforming the public. Such disinformation not only distorts the reality of GBV but also impedes constructive dialogue and progress. It creates an environment where myths and falsehoods can thrive, further entrenching misunderstandings and prejudices against gender equality and women's rights initiatives.

2.7.7 Journalists become survivors

According to a 2022 [report](#) issued by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) in Washington D.C. and UNESCO, a survey involving 714 women journalists from

215 countries revealed that almost three-quarters of them had experienced online abuse related to their work. Additionally, around 40% reported that this abuse led to reduced visibility in their professional roles, including diminished airtime, bylines, or other professional opportunities.

More than 120 women journalists in the Arab region interviewed by UNFPA reported similar experiences. Women journalists covering the issues of women and girls, particularly GBV, frequently encounter violence themselves, including online harassment, rape threats, and other forms of mass stigmatization. This retaliation not only poses a direct threat to their safety and well-being but also serves as a barrier to free and fearless journalism. The risks faced by female journalists highlight the pervasive nature of GBV and the urgent need for protective measures and support systems for those reporting on these issues.

2.7.8 Silencing voices

Journalists often face editorial censorship, which impedes effective coverage of GBV. This censorship can manifest as the omission of critical details or complete prevention of reporting on certain incidents. Such constraints not only limit the public's access to information but also undermine the role of the media as a tool for social change. The impact of editorial censorship is far-reaching, stifling public discourse and hindering efforts to address and combat GBV.

“Women journalists covering the issues of women and girls, particularly GBV, frequently encounter violence themselves, including online harassment, rape threats, and other forms of mass stigmatization. This retaliation not only poses a direct threat to their safety and well-being but also serves as a barrier to free and fearless journalism.”

COMMON MYTHS ABOUT GBV

MYTH: GENDER EQUALITY HAS ALREADY BEEN ACHIEVED IN MOST PARTS OF THE WORLD.

The belief that gender equality is a resolved issue is far from reality. Despite significant progress in some areas, gender disparities persist globally. For instance, the [Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum](#) highlights ongoing gaps in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Women worldwide also continue to suffer heightened risks of GBV, with similar trends manifesting even in countries where greater progress has been made.

MYTH: GBV ONLY IMPACTS CERTAIN KINDS PEOPLE OR GROUPS.

GBV is a global issue that transcends all demographic boundaries. It can happen to anyone, regardless of their socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, religion, or education. This universality of GBV challenges the misconception that it only happens in certain communities or to certain types of people.

MYTH: GBV IS USUALLY COMMITTED BY STRANGERS.

A significant percentage of sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim, often an intimate partner. The World Health Organization [reports](#) that a considerable proportion of women in relationships have experienced violence at the hands of their partner. Acknowledging the reality of family and intimate partner violence is crucial in providing appropriate support and resources to survivors.

MYTH: PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE ARE 'MONSTERS' OR SOCIAL OUTLIERS.

Perpetrators of GBV come from diverse backgrounds and are often integrated into society. They can be respected members of the community, colleagues, friends, or family members. This myth can lead to disbelief and mistrust when survivors report abuse, especially if the perpetrator does not fit the stereotypical image of an abuser.

MYTH: A WOMAN'S CHOICE OF CLOTHING AND HER BEHAVIOUR/DEMEANOUR PUTS HER AT RISK.

Blaming a woman's clothing or behaviour for her assault is a form of victim-blaming and shifts the responsibility away from the perpetrator. It's essential to understand that the perpetrator is solely responsible for the violence, regardless of the victim's attire or behaviour.

MYTH: POVERTY AND CONFLICT ARE THE CAUSES OF ATTACKS ON WOMEN..

While poverty and conflict can exacerbate GBV, they are not the sole causes. GBV occurs across all economic and social strata and in various contexts, including affluent and peaceful settings. It's a complex issue rooted in gender inequality and power imbalances.

MYTH: SURVIVORS OF GBV WOULD BE VISIBLY UPSET WHEN DISCUSSING THEIR ORDEAL.

Responses to trauma, such as GBV, vary greatly among individuals. Some survivors may not outwardly display their distress or may take considerable time before they feel able to talk about their experiences. Expecting a uniform emotional response can be harmful and dismissive of the survivor's individual experience.

MYTH: FALSE REPORTING IS WIDESPREAD OR USED BY WOMEN TO ACCESS SERVICES / RESETTLEMENT.

False reporting of GBV is relatively rare, and the larger issue is under-reporting, often due to fears of stigma, social exclusion, or other repercussions. Studies indicate that the rates of official reporting are much lower than the actual occurrences of GBV.

MYTH: GENDER, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ARE FOREIGN CONCEPTS AND PART OF A GLOBAL AGENDA AGAINST TRADITIONS, CUSTOMS, AND FAMILY VALUES.

Women's rights as human rights are a universal principle, transcending cultural and national boundaries. Historical evidence suggests that many ancient and indigenous societies recognised various gender roles and respected women's rights in different capacities.

Emphasising gender equality and fighting GBV is about protecting basic human rights, crucial in any societal framework. Far from undermining traditional family values, these principles foster stronger, more resilient family structures. Empowering women and ensuring gender equality contributes to nurturing environments where all family members are respected and can flourish. This universal pursuit of gender equality and combating GBV strengthens family values, promoting societal harmony and respect for all individuals.

MYTH: EMPOWERING WOMEN INVARIABLY MEANS DISEMPOWERING MEN.

This myth arises from a zero-sum perspective of power and resources, assuming that one gender's gain is inherently the other gender's loss. However, women's empowerment and gender equality are beneficial to all members of society. When women are empowered, it leads to diverse perspectives in decision-making processes and promotes a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. This, in turn, fosters healthier, more resilient communities. Empowering women is not about taking away from men; it's about creating a fair and balanced society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

3. TELLING THE RIGHT STORY

Even for highly seasoned journalists, it can prove daunting to traverse the nuances and challenges tackled in previous sections and deliver impactful coverage of the issues related to women and girls. In addition to the persistent pressure to generate content and engage audiences en masse, journalists must also navigate seemingly insurmountable barriers like cultural taboos, rigid editorial policies, government censorship, mass retaliation, and others. The end result is that the story, or rather the right story, is seldom told.

This is where professional, ethical, and innovative journalism can become a balancing force, particularly when driven by the central objective of highlighting the realities of women and girls and communicating their voices to the public. The following sections offer general insights, guidelines, and effective approaches that can aid any journalist, irrespective of their experience, to achieve this essential objective.

3.1 COMMON PITFALLS WHEN REPORTING

There are a multitude of ways in which journalists can inadvertently cause harm to women and girls when reporting on their issues, particularly when it comes to challenging topics like SRHR and GBV. From sensationalism and stereotyping to inaccurate reporting and violations of confidentiality, these pitfalls can often go unnoticed throughout the process and can have detrimental effects on everyone involved in the process.

More than 40 years later, similar patterns pervaded coverage on the outbreak of m-pox (commonly known as monkeypox), which unfairly portrayed certain groups that were at higher risk of infection. This included geographic stigmatisation, where the outbreak was linked to specific regions or communities, leading to stereotypes and biases, in addition to coverage that associated the outbreak with certain ethnic or minority groups.

3.1.1 Sensationalism

When it comes to GBV and SRHR, sensationalist reporting can manifest in various detrimental ways. It often involves focusing excessively on the most graphic and provocative details of an incident with the key objective being to elicit a strong reaction from audiences. This approach not only risks re-traumatizing survivors but also reduces their complex, deeply personal experiences to mere headline-grabbing fodder. For instance, in cases of sexual assault or domestic abuse, emphasizing lurid details can shift the audience's attention away from the systemic issues and broader societal implications of such acts, instead turning them into a source of titillation or entertainment.

Furthermore, sensationalist reporting can lead to misinformation and misunderstanding. It can create a skewed perception of the prevalence and nature of GBV and SRHR issues, leading the public to form opinions based on individual incidents rather than a comprehensive understanding of the issues. This can hinder effective policy-making and societal efforts to address these challenges.

Moreover, sensationalism can inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes and stigmas. By sensationalising stories about GBV or SRHR, the media can perpetuate a narrative that trivialises these issues. This approach often overlooks the individual's perspective and agency, focusing instead on aspects that might attract more readers or viewers, regardless of the impact on those involved or the broader societal discourse.

3.1.2 Pressuring and exploitation

Regrettably, some journalists, driven by self-interest or a lack of ethical consideration, exploit the vulnerabilities of women and girls for stories, often reducing them to mere objects of sensational narratives. This can take on many forms, such as pressuring survivors to provide information or conduct interviews, or manipulating survivors and their trauma to direct the reporting in a certain direction.

Harmful reporting practices were rampant in the early years of the HIV epidemic in the 1980s, during which media coverage often stigmatised individuals living with the disease. Many reports misrepresented the virus's transmission, casting the spotlight on high-risk groups like gay men and intravenous drug users without considering the broader context. These harmful practices perpetuated fear and discrimination against affected individuals.

“Sensationalism can inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes and stigmas. By sensationalising stories about GBV or SRHR, the media can perpetuate a narrative that trivialises these issues.”

Informed Consent

In the context of interviewing a GBV survivor, 'informed consent' occurs when someone, without coercion, fully understands the consequences of their decision to speak, and consents freely. For this to happen, you must avoid putting pressure on a survivor to agree to an interview, as well as explaining what will be kept confidential and the limits of confidentiality, the objective of your interview, and the potential risks and benefits of speaking out.

There is no consent when agreement is obtained through deception or misinterpretation, or if the power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee means that the right to decline or refuse any part of the interview is in any way limited.

Responsible journalism, on the other hand, demands a commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of women and girls. It requires treating them as individuals with agency and respect, allowing them to share their stories on their terms and in a manner that prioritises their safety and well-being. Upholding these principles is essential not only for ethical reporting but also for advancing the cause of women's and girls' rights and empowerment.

3.1.3 Inaccurate reporting

Inaccurate reporting and the use of poor data in journalism pose significant risks and can have far-reaching consequences. Misinformation in this context not only distorts public understanding but also directly impacts the lives and safety of those involved, particularly for survivors of GBV.

When journalists report inaccurately on the issues of women and girls, either through a lack of understanding or by using unreliable or misinterpreted data, they contribute to the spread of potentially harmful misinformation. For instance, overstating or understating the risk of GBV in certain communities can lead to a skewed perception of the issue and impede much-needed discourse on the topic. Misinterpreting or misrepresenting data related to SRHR and GBV can also perpetuate longstanding myths and can cause harm to the individuals being covered. For instance, if journalists misinterpret statistics on sexually transmitted infections and suggest that certain groups are solely responsible for their spread, it can lead to the stigmatisation of those groups.

Using Data Wisely

The poor use of data, particularly prevalence data, in reporting on GBV and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), can lead to significant misinformation and misrepresentation of these critical issues. Reliance on prevalence data without proper context or understanding often results in skewed narratives that either exaggerate or downplay the reality of the situation. For instance, reporting high prevalence rates without delving into the systemic and societal factors that contribute to GBV can sensationalise the issue, creating a perception of inevitability or normalcy around such violence.

Conversely, underreporting or misinterpreting data can lead to a dangerous underestimation of the problem, potentially influencing policy decisions and public awareness negatively.

Accurate and responsible journalism requires not only quoting reliable data but also providing a comprehensive analysis that considers the complexities behind the numbers. This involves understanding the nuances of data collection in GBV and SRHR contexts, recognizing the challenges of underreporting due to stigma and fear, and presenting data in a way that informs and educates rather than misleads or sensationalises. Only then can the media play a constructive role in shedding light on these issues and advocating for meaningful change.

For survivors of GBV, inaccurate reporting can have direct and personal consequences. Misinformation can stigmatise survivors, subjecting them to further social ostracization or even retaliation. It can also influence public opinion and policy in ways that do not reflect the reality of survivors' experiences, potentially leading to inadequate or harmful responses from society and policymakers.

Inaccurate reporting and the reliance on poor data are particularly dangerous in the digital age, where information spreads rapidly and can be difficult to correct once disseminated. This underscores the responsibility of journalists to thoroughly verify their sources and data, and to approach the reporting of GBV and women's issues with the utmost care and diligence.

To combat these inadvertent stigmatising practices, journalists should undergo training on sensitive reporting, adhere to a human-centred approach, and prioritise a holistic understanding of women's issues. Additionally, involving affected individuals and communities in the storytelling process can help ensure that their experiences are accurately represented and their voices are heard. This, however, must be done under the highest journalistic standards and in the presence of qualified experts (see section 3.3.10)

3.1.4 Bias

Bias and lack of objectivity are significant pitfalls in reporting on the issues of women and girls. When journalists approach these topics with preconceived notions or personal biases, it skews the narrative, often leading to a one-sided portrayal that can misinform the public and reinforce harmful stereotypes.

Victim blaming

Victim blaming occurs when the responsibility for GBV is placed on those being victimised rather than the perpetrator or the systemic issues that perpetuate such problems. This can manifest in subtle ways within reporting, such as through the choice of language that implicitly suggests the victim's behaviour, clothing, or lifestyle choices were responsible for the violence they experienced. Such reporting reinforces harmful stereotypes and contributes to a culture where survivors are hesitant to come forward.

When it comes to the issues of women and girls, biased reporting might manifest as an undue focus on certain aspects while ignoring others. For instance, in the case of GBV, there might be an overemphasis on the victim's behaviour or background, subtly implying that they bear some responsibility for the violence they experienced. This not only victimises the survivor again but also detracts from the accountability of the perpetrator and the systemic issues that contribute to violence. Moreover, lack of objectivity can result in the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of women's and girls' experiences and needs. For example, reporting on SRHR issues might disproportionately reflect the perspectives of certain groups while neglecting the voices of those most affected by these issues, such as women from marginalised communities.

Bias may also lead to certain voices and perspectives being silenced. Journalistic narratives that only present one side of the story or limit the range of voices can lead to a skewed understanding of SRHR and GBV issues. It's essential to include a diverse range of perspectives, especially those of the women and girls directly affected by these issues, to provide a more holistic view. Excluding these voices can lead to reporting that reinforces stereotypes and misses crucial aspects of the story.

To ensure accurate and responsible reporting, it is crucial for journalists to recognize and set aside their biases, approaching these sensitive topics with an open mind and a commitment to fairness. Objective reporting requires a thorough understanding of SRHR and GBV,

an empathetic portrayal of survivors' stories, and a balanced presentation of different perspectives. By doing so, journalists can contribute to a more informed and equitable discourse on the issues affecting women and girls.

3.1.5 Inappropriate language

Utilising vague or euphemistic language in journalism, especially when reporting on GBV, can significantly compromise the accuracy and clarity of the information presented. Inaccurate journalism misleads audiences and can distort the reality of the issues being covered. It is imperative for journalists to familiarise themselves with the specific terminology used in the context of GBV, as outlined in specialised glossaries (see Annex I). The choice of vocabulary is crucial in conveying the severity and nuances of GBV.

Clear and precise language helps in creating a more accurate and empathetic understanding of GBV. It ensures that the audience grasps the seriousness of the issue without sensationalising or trivialising it. For instance, using the term «domestic dispute» instead of «domestic violence» or «intimate partner violence» can significantly downplay the gravity and implications of the situation. Journalists must choose words that reflect the reality of GBV, respecting the experiences of survivors while educating the public on the complex dynamics of these situations. This approach not only raises awareness but also fosters a more informed and sensitive public discourse around GBV.

3.1.6 Identifying details of survivors

When covering the stories of survivors of GBV, it is crucial to protect their identities to prevent further harm or stigmatisation. Revealing names or details that could lead to their identification – a process known as 'jigsaw identification' – can put survivors at risk of retaliation, social ostracization, or additional trauma. This ethical consideration is paramount in responsible journalism, as the safety and privacy of survivors are non-negotiable.

Journalists must exercise discretion and sensitivity, ensuring that any published or broadcasted material does not inadvertently reveal a survivor's identity. This might include altering certain details of the story, using pseudonyms, or omitting specific locations or identifiable characteristics. The primary goal is to tell the survivor's story without exposing them to additional risks.

This approach requires a deep understanding of the potential repercussions that survivors might face if their identities are revealed. It also calls for a commitment to ethical storytelling, where the dignity and safety of the interviewee are prioritised. By doing so, journalists can provide a platform for survivors to share their experiences, contribute to raising awareness

about GBV, and advocate for change, all while ensuring the protection and respect of those who have already endured significant trauma.

3.1.7 Neglecting the context

Context is crucial in understanding GBV and SRHR. These issues do not occur in a vacuum but are deeply influenced by systemic factors such as gender inequality, poverty, cultural norms, legal frameworks, and political stability. For example, reporting on cases of child marriage without acknowledging the underlying causes, such as poverty, lack of education, or cultural practices, results in a narrative that fails to address the root causes of the problem. Such reporting might draw temporary attention to an individual case but does little to facilitate a deeper understanding or drive systemic change.

Neglecting the context also means failing to recognize the intersectionality of GBV and SRHR issues. Factors like race, class, disability, and sexual orientation can significantly affect an individual's experience of violence and access to sexual and reproductive health services. A report that overlooks these intersecting identities may inadvertently perpetuate a one-dimensional view of GBV and SRHR, which can be misleading and exclusionary.

Moreover, this lack of contextual understanding can lead to stigmatisation and victim-blaming. For instance, discussing high rates of teenage pregnancies without exploring the lack of comprehensive sexuality education, the prevalence of sexual violence, or the barriers to contraception access can wrongly place the burden of responsibility on the young women themselves. It oversimplifies complex issues, potentially leading to harmful policy responses that do not address the underlying causes.

“Bias may also lead to certain voices and perspectives being silenced. Journalistic narratives that only present one side of the story or limit the range of voices can lead to a skewed understanding of SRHR and GBV issues.”



3.2 FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES WHEN REPORTING ON WOMEN & GIRLS

RESPECT

Approach the issue with seriousness and depth, avoiding any form of sensationalism. Respect the privacy of individuals and families, and treat the subject matter and those involved with dignity, recognizing the profound impact of GBV and SRHR on individuals and communities. Avoid sensational headlines or narratives that exploit the experiences of survivors for attention or shock value.

EMPATHY

Adopt a human-centred approach that prioritises the experiences and voices of vulnerable individuals and gender-based violence survivors. Show sensitivity and understanding towards the emotional and psychological state of those who have been victimised, and ensure that reporting is done in a way that is supportive and non-traumatizing, respecting the agency and dignity of those who have been harmed. Treat people as you would want to be treated.

ACCURACY

Ensure that all reported information is factual and verified, and consult experts to ensure you have the full picture. Avoid generalisations or assumptions that can lead to misinformation or misrepresentation of the issues. When dealing with data, be meticulous about its veracity and use it wisely, making sure to adhere to the principle of 'need to know' and avoiding the use of any sensitive information (or information that could lead to the identification of survivors). Always offer a sobering analysis of data used to place it in context.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Protect your sources, even when pressured to do otherwise. Maintain the anonymity of GBV survivors to protect their identity and safety, unless they have given informed consent to disclose their identity. Understand and avoid the risks of 'jigsaw identification', where combining details from various sources could inadvertently reveal the identity of a survivor or a source.

IMPARTIALITY

Strive for balanced reporting, giving a fair representation of all sides of an issue. Avoid biases or personal beliefs that could skew reporting. Present diverse perspectives, especially those of marginalised and affected communities, ensuring a comprehensive view of the issues.

3.3 EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

To enhance the impact and reach of their reporting on the issues of women and girls, journalists should adopt a strategic and proactive approach. This involves moving beyond episodic coverage to deliver stories that are both engaging and powerful. A professional and ethical approach is key in this endeavour, as it not only increases the frequency and impact of the reporting but also plays a crucial role in raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and promoting positive change. This methodical approach ensures that reporting goes beyond mere storytelling to become a catalyst for meaningful change in society.

The following is an overview of several helpful strategies that leading journalists worldwide have adopted.

3.3.1 Invest in self-development

Education and training are paramount for journalists covering the issues of women and girls. In-depth knowledge of these subjects is essential, not just in terms of factual accuracy but also in understanding the broader social, cultural, legal, and medical contexts. This comprehensive understanding equips journalists to navigate the complexities of these issues and report on them with the depth and sensitivity they warrant.

Participating in specialised training programs and workshops conducted by experts in SRHR and GBV is crucial. These sessions offer journalists the latest research, insights into survivor experiences, and a deeper understanding of the psychological impacts of violence and reproductive health issues. Such education helps in debunking myths, breaking down stereotypes, and fostering a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by women and girls.

Moreover, continuous learning enables journalists to stay abreast of the evolving legal landscape and policy changes concerning GBV and SRHR. Understanding these changes is critical for effective reporting that not only informs but also empowers audiences. Training in ethical reporting practices, particularly in dealing with survivors' stories, is equally essential. It ensures that journalists approach their subjects with empathy and respect, safeguarding the dignity and privacy of those affected while providing comprehensive and responsible coverage.

Section 3.4 provides a variety of sources that can serve as a starting point for greater knowledge on these topics.

3.3.2 Diversify storytelling formats

Embracing diverse storytelling formats is crucial for journalists covering complex topics like GBV and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR). Incorporating a variety of formats not only engages a broader audience but also allows for a more nuanced and impactful exploration of these sensitive issues.

Long-form feature stories are particularly effective in exploring the intricate details and broader contexts of GBV and SRHR. They allow for an in-depth examination of topics, going beyond the surface to explore the underlying causes, societal impacts, and personal stories of those affected. This format provides the space to delve into the complexities of these issues, presenting a comprehensive narrative that can foster a deeper level of understanding and empathy among readers.

Firsthand accounts, especially when presented in the first person and in full adherence to the basics of informed consent, offer a powerful and intimate perspective. These personal narratives bring authenticity and immediacy to the reporting, allowing readers to connect with the experiences of individuals on a more personal level. The use of first-person accounts can be particularly impactful in humanising the data and statistics often associated with GBV and SRHR, providing a face and voice to those numbers.

Additionally, the integration of multimedia elements like videos, audio clips, and interactive infographics can significantly enhance the storytelling experience. These elements can provide visual and auditory dimensions to the narrative, making the stories more engaging and accessible. For instance, a video interview with a survivor or an expert can add a layer of emotional depth, while interactive infographics can help in effectively conveying complex data.

Employing these diverse storytelling tactics ensures that the coverage of GBV and SRHR is not just informative but also compelling and empathetic. It helps in drawing the audience into the narrative, fostering a deeper understanding and engagement with the issues.

3.3.3 Adopt a human-centred approach

Adopting a human-centred, and particularly a survivor-centred, approach in reporting on the issues of women and girls is crucial for ethical and impactful journalism. This approach prioritises the experiences, rights, and dignity of individuals and survivors, ensuring that their stories are told with empathy, respect, and sensitivity.

A human-centred approach involves more than just recounting events; it delves into the emotional and psychological impacts of GBV on individuals. It requires journalists to listen to and validate survivors' experiences, offering them a platform to share their stories in their own words. This not only helps in portraying the real-life consequences of GBV but also empowers survivors by giving them a voice and agency in the narrative.

Moreover, a survivor-centred approach is mindful of not retraumatizing individuals during the reporting process. Journalists must be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of survivors, respecting their boundaries and consent at every stage of the story. This includes careful consideration of how much detail to include and ensuring that survivors are comfortable with how their stories are being told.

Such an approach also extends to the choice of language and imagery used in reporting, avoiding sensationalism and stereotypes that can perpetuate stigma and harm. By centering the humanity of individuals and treating them with the utmost respect and care, journalists can contribute to a more informed, compassionate, and responsible discourse.

3.3.4 Investigate

Investigative journalism plays a pivotal role in uncovering and bringing to light the complex issues faced by women and girls, including GBV and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR). Adopting innovative approaches in investigative journalism can significantly enhance the impact and reach of these stories, shedding light on often overlooked or hidden issues.

One effective approach is data-driven journalism, which involves analysing large data sets to uncover patterns and trends related to issues like GBV or disparities in healthcare access. This method can reveal systemic problems and provide a solid, evidence-based foundation for stories. For example, analysing police records or healthcare data can uncover under-reported instances of domestic violence or barriers to accessing reproductive health services.

Investigative journalists covering women's and girls' issues can also leverage social media platforms not just for dissemination but as investigative tools. Social media can be a rich source of firsthand accounts, trends, and public sentiment, providing valuable insights into the lived experiences of women and girls.

By integrating these innovative approaches, journalists can bring greater depth, context, and power to stories about women and girls, driving meaningful change and raising awareness about critical issues that impact their lives.

3.3.5 Collaborate

Collaborative journalism presents a powerful avenue for enhancing the coverage of issues affecting women and girls, particularly when covering the issues of women and girls. This approach involves journalists, media outlets, and sometimes even non-journalistic entities like NGOs, gender-based violence experts, research institutions, and activists, working together to report on complex issues that require diverse expertise and resources.

In the realm of women's and girls' issues, collaborative journalism can transcend geographical and organizational boundaries, enabling a comprehensive exploration of complex and often transnational subjects like human trafficking, female genital mutilation, or global health disparities. By combining diverse perspectives and skills, journalists can construct a more nuanced and thorough narrative. This form of journalism is particularly beneficial in unearthing and linking systemic factors across different regions and cultures, providing a global context to locally manifested issues.

Moreover, collaborative efforts in journalism allow for the sharing of resources, such as data sets, contacts, and research, which can be particularly valuable when covering stories that require extensive investigation or are situated in regions with restricted media freedom. This shared approach not only enriches the quality of reporting but also ensures a wider dissemination of critical stories, amplifying the voices of women and girls, and bringing greater attention to their experiences and challenges.

3.3.6 Engage local communities

Gaining access to local communities is vital for journalists reporting on issues impacting women and girls. Building relationships with these communities allows for a deeper, more authentic understanding of the issues from the perspectives of those directly affected. Engaging with community members, particularly in grassroots settings, offers invaluable insights into the daily realities, challenges, and resilience of women and girls. It provides a platform for their voices and stories, often overlooked or unheard in mainstream narratives.

To effectively access local communities, journalists must approach with respect, sensitivity, and an awareness of cultural nuances. Building trust is crucial; it involves time, patience, and a commitment to ethical storytelling that honours the experiences and privacy of individuals. By establishing these connections, journalists can ensure their reporting reflects the true complexities of women's and girls' lives, contributing to more nuanced, impactful, and empathetic journalism.

3.3.7 Be aware of intersectionality

Intersectionality is a crucial concept in reporting on issues impacting women and girls. This framework recognizes that various forms of social stratification, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability, do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Intersectionality highlights how these overlapping identities contribute to unique experiences of discrimination and privilege.

In journalism, an intersectional approach involves acknowledging and addressing the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity can affect their experience of issues like GBV and SRHR. It challenges journalists to move beyond a one-dimensional perspective and consider the multifaceted realities of individuals' lives. By incorporating intersectionality, stories become more inclusive and representative of diverse experiences, avoiding the pitfalls of oversimplification. This approach enriches journalistic narratives, offering a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by women and girls in varying contexts.

3.3.8 Find a hook

When reporting on issues related to women and girls, finding a suitable 'hook' or angle can be helpful. Journalists should look for current news items or upcoming events to which they can 'peg' their stories, such as International Women's Day or the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. This approach aids in pitching stories and convincing editors of their relevance.

It's also essential to explore new themes or underreported aspects of these issues. While early pregnancy and marriage often receive attention, other areas like the impact of poverty on SRHR, barriers to accessing reproductive healthcare, or the nuanced challenges faced by specific groups like adolescent girls or refugees need more coverage. For instance, the assumption that certain populations are sexually available can exacerbate risks of harassment and assault, highlighting the intersection of GBV and SRHR in specific contexts.

Follow-up features and 'diary stories' offer opportunities for in-depth analysis. Timed around significant dates or campaigns, these pieces allow journalists to delve deeper into topics, conduct thorough research, and gather comprehensive interviews. Editors often appreciate such well-prepared material that provides context to current news.

Additionally, less-explored GBV topics like domestic violence in refugee settings, the role of men in combating violence, or the impact of unemployment on GBV can provide fresh perspectives. Covering these topics from various angles – legal, health, familial – can yield informative pieces. For SRHR, examining barriers



to contraception access, maternal health challenges in crisis situations, or the effects of restrictive laws on women's health can provide valuable insights.

Human interest stories also play a crucial role. They might not directly address GBV or SRHR but can showcase the resilience and contributions of women and girls in challenging circumstances, such as their roles in development, peacebuilding, or art in refugee or conflict settings. Such stories bring a human face to broader issues, highlighting personal triumphs and challenges.

3.3.9 Support advocacy

Policy and advocacy reporting plays a critical role in shaping public understanding and influencing change on issues related to women and girls. Effective coverage in this realm involves scrutinising and explaining policies, legal frameworks, and advocacy efforts that impact women's and girls' lives. Journalists covering these topics need to dissect complex legislation and policies, translating them into accessible information for the public. This type of reporting can highlight gaps in legal protections, deficiencies in healthcare systems, or barriers to justice for survivors of GBV. It serves not only to inform but also to hold policymakers and institutions accountable for their actions and inactions.

Additionally, by showcasing successful advocacy initiatives and innovative solutions, journalists can inspire and mobilise public support for necessary reforms. Policy and advocacy reporting, when done thoroughly and thoughtfully, can be a powerful tool for advocating change and advancing the rights and well-being of women and girls.

3.3.10 Approach interviews with care

Conducting interviews with survivors of GBV is an area where journalists must tread with utmost ethical sensitivity and care. The drive to obtain firsthand accounts for authenticity needs to be meticulously balanced against the responsibility to uphold the dignity and emotional well-being of survivors. Journalists are strongly discouraged from contacting survivors directly; instead, they should always endeavour to work through qualified organisations specialising in GBV. These organisations have the expertise to assess whether an interview is appropriate and can facilitate the process in a way that prioritises the survivor's safety and mental health.

Before considering an interview with a GBV survivor, journalists must critically evaluate its necessity and contribution to the public's understanding of the issue. It is essential to approach such interviews with a sense of responsibility, ensuring questions are sensitively framed and do not delve into graphic details that could re-traumatise the individual.

Clear, informed consent is paramount, and the survivor must fully understand the interview's purpose and potential reach.

Moreover, interviews with GBV survivors should never be conducted without the presence of a qualified expert, such as a GBV specialist, psychologist, or caseworker. These professionals can provide necessary support to the survivor and guide the journalist in navigating the conversation responsibly. If at any point during the interview the survivor becomes upset or shows signs of distress, it is the journalist's ethical duty to pause or completely stop the interview, placing the individual's well-being above the story. This approach is crucial in maintaining the integrity and empathy that are foundational to responsible journalism, particularly in scenarios involving deep personal trauma.

As stated in previous sections, journalists must never pressure survivors to conduct interviews in any form, including by offering payments or gifts as a form of coercion. Doing so not only harms the survivors themselves but also contributes to the erosion of public trust in the institution of journalism.

3.3.11 Know the law

Understanding the legal framework surrounding issues related to women and girls, including bodily autonomy, SRHR, gender equality, and GBV, is crucial for journalists. Familiarity with these laws and policies not only informs accurate and responsible reporting but also enriches the depth and relevance of the coverage. It allows journalists to contextualise individual stories within the larger legal landscape, highlighting the intersection of personal experiences with national and international laws.

Knowledge of laws pertaining to SRHR, for instance, enables journalists to critically analyse the accessibility and quality of reproductive healthcare services, legal restrictions on abortion, and the rights of individuals to make informed decisions about their reproductive lives. Similarly, understanding laws related to GBV is essential in assessing how effectively these laws protect survivors, hold perpetrators accountable, and address systemic gender inequalities.

Furthermore, being well-versed in legal matters empowers journalists to challenge policies that infringe on the rights of women and girls and to advocate for legal reforms. It also positions them to hold authorities accountable for implementing and enforcing these laws. In doing so, journalists not only inform their audience but also contribute to the broader discourse on women's rights, influencing public opinion and policy-making. This level of reporting is instrumental in driving social change, advancing gender equality, and protecting the rights and well-being of women and girls.

3.3.12 THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN

Rana Husseini, Joumana Haddad, Milia Eidmouni and Lina Ejeilet have been covering women's rights and gender-based violence for many years. When asked about the role of journalism in transforming harmful social norms, they all agreed: continuous and survivor-centred reporting on GBV is essential.

"When you are attempting to shatter the culture of shame and fear surrounding gender-based violence, you need to expect some resistance at first," explains Rana Husseini, an award-winning Jordanian journalist, author, and human rights activist who has been influential in bringing so-called honour crimes against women to public attention and encouraging changes in the law in Jordan to bring stronger penalties for these types of crimes.

"If you are considering actively covering gender-based violence, there is definitely a learning curve involved, but the value of the work is unquestionable," adds Husseini. "It took some time for me to build my network – to cultivate a growing number of sources and to build sufficient trust so that my reporting not only became impactful but also began changing long standing perceptions about women, girls and violence within the community."

A place to start

Husseini began reporting in 1987, back when issues surrounding women's rights, social norms and gender-based violence were seldom openly discussed in the public sphere. As a staunch activist for equality, Hussaini began leveraging the power of journalism to raise awareness on the issues impacting women and girls. By adopting a straightforward and fact-based approach, her reporting quickly began having an impact.

"I wanted to investigate the stories I heard on a daily basis from family members, neighbours, and colleagues, all of which showed a growing pattern of abuse," recalls Husseini. "Later, my investigations took me to a variety of other sources, including forensic experts, lawyers, former judges, and social workers, all in an attempt to illustrate as accurately a picture as possible for my readers."

This gave Husseini more insight into the phenomenon of so-called "honour" crimes, in which women and girls were being murdered in the name of preserving or "cleansing" the family name. She reported on the subject frequently to ensure that it remained a part of public discourse, making sure that criminal proceedings were also covered extensively. From there, women's rights and issues became her area of expertise, launching a career that inspired countless other reporters to break through the walls of silence on gender-based violence.

Quantity vs. quality

"We can clearly see the impact that courageous journalists throughout the region have had in raising awareness on gender-based violence," explains Joumana Haddad, renowned Lebanese journalist, editor and author. Haddad's writing has significantly impacted the women's rights movement in Lebanon, challenging numerous social norms and broadening the limits of freedom of speech. "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."

According to Haddad, coverage of women's issues and gender-based violence in the Arab States region still gravitates toward sensationalism, which in many cases can cause harm to the survivors themselves or their families. "What I would like to see from journalists is greater consistency in quality, particularly when it comes to adhering to the basic principles of accuracy, objectivity and thoroughness. Journalists are also encouraged to explore the subject in a multitude of approaches, including long-form features that allow for greater exploration of the root causes and contributing factors."

In her reporting, Haddad emphasises the need for boldly challenging taboos, particularly those that work to restrict freedom of speech or discourage challenging accepted patriarchal social norms on gender and gender-based violence. "We need courageous thinkers who are able to look beyond customs, rituals and laws and to call out injustice wherever it thrives."

Portrayals of women and girls

When the crisis in Syria erupted in 2011, geopolitical and cultural limitations meant that only a handful of journalists were actually able to access the frontlines to report on the issues impacting women and girls. One such reporter was Milia Eidmouni, who also established the Syrian Female Journalist Network in an effort to increase coverage of gender justice and women's rights. The network also had another key objective: to enact a professional code of conduct that helped to break stereotypes surrounding women in media.

"What I saw was that conventional media was depicting Syrian women according to rigid, one-dimensional stereotypes: the victim, the widow, the wife of a prisoner, the hostage, the most vulnerable – all of which failed to capture the individualised humanity of these women and the remarkable strength they have" explains Eidmouni. "I wanted to highlight how women, both on the frontlines and behind the scenes, are shaping the future of Syria and helping entire generations recover from the worst of the crisis."

When asked what advice she has for aspiring journalists in the field, Eidmouni said: "Be objective. As a journalist, you cannot come to a story with any preconceived notions or beliefs. You have to be completely objective to be able to explore the issue from a human rights perspective."

Eidmouni also called upon journalists to perform exhaustive research when attempting to discuss issues like gender-based violence. "The lack of adequate knowledge or understanding of the subject and its various nuances can be harmful to both the journalist and the survivor, so journalists need to ensure that they have consulted official organisations, gender specialists, psychologists, and other key experts to strengthen their narrative."

A harmonious voice

Eidmouni's sentiments are echoed by Lina Ejeilat, a prominent Jordanian journalist and co-founder of the independent news platform, 7iber (Arabic for Ink). According to Ejeilat, 7iber was established with the objective of promoting a society that upholds values of accountability, rule of law, human rights, and pluralism through in-depth multimedia journalism. This included having the courage to deconstruct issues such as gender and gender-based violence and to approach their analysis from an unbiased, evidence-based and human rights perspective.

"Being bold in tackling certain topics is admirable, but being consistent in professionalism and quality is another challenge entirely, particularly when facing more challenging stories and deadlines," explains Ejeilat. "More often than not, a good story requires significantly more time for the subject to be explored from multiple angles, and to be supported by facts, quotes, and background information that goes beyond the obvious."

When it comes to gender-based violence, this entails touching upon the many factors surrounding the violence itself, such as inherent socio-cultural inequalities, legal biases, geopolitical challenges, economics, and others, all of which intertwine to disenfranchise women and girls and justify the violence being perpetrated against them.

Ejeilat also emphasised the importance of media organisations adopting clear guidelines that encapsulate their editorial identities, which she explained remains lacking throughout the regional media industry. This, she added, puts journalists in challenging situations as they often tread unexplored territories without the necessary support from editors and organisations.

"It is integral for editors and journalists to be on the same page when it comes to these issues, and to ensure that all policies and regulations are conducive to a free and constructive exploration of gender, violence and other core issues," added Ejeilat.

The impact of quality journalism

In August 2017, the Jordanian Parliament voted to abolish the controversial Article 308 of the Jordanian Penal Code, which allowed sexual assault perpetrators to escape punishment if they married their victims. Activists and journalists alike had campaigned for years to abolish the law, demonstrating the impact that journalism can have in promoting social justice. That same year, the parliaments in Tunisia and Lebanon also passed landmark laws, one to criminalise all violence against women and another revoking a similar law to the one abolished in Jordan. In all three cases, change followed years of public discussion and consistent coverage by journalists across multiple platforms, further underscoring the importance of quality reporting in the fight for social justice.

When taken in isolation, these achievements may seem small, however they are indicative of larger tectonic shifts taking place on a fundamental sociological level. This is where journalism stands to make the greatest impact – by slowly and gradually shifting perspectives, biases and long-held beliefs, and by holding people across all spheres accountable for their actions or their silence.

THE CASE FOR ETHICAL JOURNALISM

By Sherizaan Minwalla, Esq. and Dr. Joanna Foster

"If the purpose of reporting on conflict related violence – including rape – is to draw attention to atrocities, assistance, and eventual justice, then prioritizing the safety and protection of those who are courageously sharing their stories should be a clear priority."

In 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) launched genocidal attacks against the Yazidi people, a small religious minority community in the Nineveh Plains of northern Iraq. They killed thousands of men and boys and elderly women, abducted younger women and girls who militants trafficked and brutally raped, forced children into military camps, and forced thousands of men, women and children to convert from the Yazidi faith to become Muslim. These attacks displaced close to half a million people, most of whom are still displaced, while many had fled the country believing it will never again be safe for their people.

Despite the many crimes ISIS committed against the Yazidis, the one story that peaked journalists' interest was the rape of women and children. In 2014 and 2015, many Yazidis managed to escape from ISIS control and journalists from Iraq and around the world flocked to the camps in the Kurdistan Region to interview rape survivors. Many survivors were interviewed multiple times, and the narrative emerging from this genocide was almost singularly focused on horrific reports of sexual violence, sometimes perpetrated against young girls.

In our research (Foster and Minwalla 2018), we explored how Yazidi women themselves felt about the ways in which journalists gathered and reported on their stories. Overall, a majority of our respondents described experiences with, or perceptions about, reporters that suggested a patterned breach in ethics among journalists gathering the story, who also appeared to disregard the extent to which the reporting of the story might negatively impact the highly traumatised survivors, causing further harm to women's individual and collective well-being.

We found that 85 percent of the Yazidi women we interviewed described incidents that could be defined by the UN as evidence of unethical reporting practices, including promises of money or aid, pressure to reveal details of their traumatic experiences, or the disclosure of identity without consent.

For example, 80 percent of all respondents, and 90 percent of the survivors, felt that journalists' disclosure of photos and other identifying information put them and their relatives still in ISIS captivity at risk for further violence and retaliation. One survivor noted that "with photos, even with my face covered, I did not feel safe. They know everything about me. They can know me from my eyes. Even I know them when they are covered and just by their eyes."

Equally concerning is the fact that 54 percent of respondents overall, and almost 70 percent of survivors, felt that women who had escaped ISIS experienced strong negative emotional and physical responses during the interviews with journalists, and half of the survivors described having flashbacks, as well as feelings of sadness, fatigue, crying, self-flagellation, and fainting during or after interviews. "It is difficult," said another survivor, "and when they come here, each time we tell them our stories, we go back to them, like a flashback. We just go back again to ISIS. I remember everything."

Yet, despite the emotional difficulty and challenges reported by most survivors and those who escaped captivity and were displaced, the majority of the women (75 percent) reported that engaging with journalists was worthwhile. Thirty-one percent of the survivors specifically reported positive feelings or emotions after interviews, such as this survivor who said: "When we talk to the media, we feel comfortable and we feel relaxed. When we speak to the media, they make us comfortable because we tell our story and when people talk, they feel more relaxed."

Our findings reinforce the need for a survivor-centered approach to reporting on conflict-related sexual violence, in which all aspects of gathering information and traumatic storytelling are approached with care, responsibility, and empathy. Taking steps to ensure that survivors give consent freely and after being fully informed of how their information will be used is essential to empowering survivors in the reporting on their trauma. It is also critical to portray survivors in a dignified way; to tell a more holistic story about their lives that go beyond singular narratives of rape and other forms of violence.

It is important to understand how people are affected by trauma to minimise the risk of re-traumatization, and to avoid probing and insensitive questions about gender-based violence that could trigger symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and other underlying conditions caused by prolonged mistreatment. Understanding some background information about the context from which journalists report will help to safeguard against publishing information that negatively impacts survivors. More importantly, consulting experts on gender-based violence and those with expertise in conflict settings is an important part of safely reporting on conflict related violence, where survivors are not only facing mounting risks but so are their families, communities, and nations as a whole.

If the purpose of reporting on conflict related violence – including rape – is to draw attention to atrocities, assistance, and eventual justice, then prioritizing the safety and protection of the those who are courageously sharing their stories should be a clear priority.

"Our findings reinforce the need for a survivor-centered approach to reporting on conflict-related sexual violence, in which all aspects of gathering information and traumatic storytelling are approached with care, responsibility, and empathy."



3.4 FINDING THE RIGHT INFORMATION

Journalists reporting on the issues of women and girls in the Arab Region can benefit from a wide array of sources to enrich their coverage and provide a deeper understanding of the complex issues surrounding SRHR. Each of the following sources offers unique insights and information.

3.4.1 General sources

Medical professionals and health/protection experts:

Interviews with healthcare professionals, including gynaecologists, obstetricians, public health experts, and specialists in SRHR and GBV can provide journalists with valuable insights, expert opinions, and firsthand perspectives. These professionals can offer context, analysis, and real-world examples that enrich reporting.

Local NGOs and advocacy groups: Local organisations in the Arab Region play a vital role in advocating for SRHR and women's rights. These NGOs can provide journalists with firsthand accounts, personal stories, and grassroots perspectives that add depth and authenticity to reporting on SRHR. Engaging with local NGOs also allows journalists to understand the cultural nuances and local challenges related to SRHR.

National health institutions / sources: Government health ministries in Arab countries are essential sources of official data, policies, and guidelines on SRHR. Journalists can obtain valuable information on healthcare infrastructure, reproductive health services, and government initiatives. However, it is important to critically evaluate government-provided information, considering potential biases or omissions. Official government reports, particularly those related to health and population, provide a foundational source of information for journalists. These reports may contain data on maternal and child health, family planning, and reproductive health services. However, journalists should exercise critical scrutiny to ensure the accuracy and transparency of government-provided data.

Academic institutions: Universities and research institutions frequently conduct studies and research on various aspects of SRHR. Journalists can access research papers, reports, and expert interviews from these institutions to gain in-depth knowledge and insights into the latest developments and trends in SRHR in the Arab Region.

International NGOs: International organisations like the International Planned Parenthood Federation, Marie Stopes International, and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) operate in the Arab Region and provide valuable resources, reports, and case studies on SRHR. Journalists can leverage their expertise and on-the-ground experience to inform their reporting.

Regional health organisations: Some Arab countries are part of regional health organisations, such as the Arab League. These organisations may offer data, reports, and information on SRHR initiatives within the region, offering a regional perspective and facilitating cross-border comparisons.

“I wanted to investigate the stories I heard on a daily basis from family members, neighbours, and colleagues, all of which showed a growing pattern of abuse. Later, my investigations took me to a variety of other sources, including forensic experts, lawyers, former judges, and social workers, all in an attempt to illustrate as accurately a picture as possible for my readers.”

— Rand Husseini, a journalist from Jordan

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TELLING THE RIGHT STORY

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THE ISSUES OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

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