

## SYRIA

Sexual violence against women, girls, men and boys has been, and is, a constant feature of the civil war in Syria. Perpetrators involve both government forces and some armed opposition groups. Since mid-2014 there has been a significant increase in reported cases of SV perpetrated by terrorist groups, including Daesh. However, it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable data on conflict-related sexual violence because of the prevailing insecurity, cultural norms that prevent victims speaking out, the fear of stigma and reprisals, the lack of specialised, safe and confidential services and challenges in accessing services where they are available.

### 1. What are the issues surrounding the stigma faced by survivors of sexual violence, their families, communities etc.

- Since before the conflict began, discriminatory laws and practices encouraged impunity for gender-based violence in Syria thus preventing victims from accessing justice. Syria's criminal laws facilitate impunity for rape while widespread harmful beliefs about rape further endanger victims that include placing them at risk of "honour" killings. In the midst of the ongoing armed conflict, this legal and social underpinning has resulted in horrific outcomes for victims of sexual violence.
- The ramifications of stigmatisation are immense ranging from victim-blaming, spousal abandonment, rejection, isolation, physical abuse, exclusion from public life, reduced access to services and economic insecurity. Young girls may be forced into early marriages either because they are victims of sexual violence or due to the family's dire economic circumstances. Cultural norms prevent women and victims from speaking out about their experiences and becoming active participants in addressing the issue within their communities. Children born of rape also suffer as they are either rejected or their mothers may not want to acknowledge their origins so it is easy to integrate into the community. This may cause confusion and alienation for a child. In addition women are also faced with further problems in obtaining necessary documentation for children born of rape, where paternity cannot be proved (nationality for official purposes passes through the father). This means that children are in danger of being stateless.
- Male survivors of sexual violence are unlikely to report attacks for a number of social reasons such as the loss of status and authority within their family and or community or for fear of prosecution for homosexuality, as well as fear of the stigma that haunts many survivors of sexual violence.

### 2. Who is doing something already in these countries incl. FCO, DFID, Champion countries, local initiatives (NGO, government, leaders)

- **BBC Media** project to use radio to inform and empower women and girls to increase their understanding and capacity to take action to challenge negative social norms. It will also engage men to be more active partners.
- **UK (DfID)** launched the Call to Action to Protect Women and Girls in Emergencies in November 2013 – provides funding for support to survivors and those at risk.
- **UK (DfID)** and partners are providing safe spaces, psychosocial support, legal counselling and reproductive health services.

- **UK (NGO)** project to address the lack of skills and the concerns that crucial evidence would be lost or destroyed – intensive training programme for doctors and lawyers.

3. Specific activities that need doing e.g. access to legal or medical care, judicial reform, evidence gathering etc.

- Support the development of a strategy for the Middle East and North Africa; engage with the regional authorities as appropriate.<sup>1</sup>
- Ensure that women are represented at the highest level and that women's needs and priorities are addressed.
- Encourage the National Coalition and the Interim Government to follow up on their plans to document SV in Syria and establish safe houses for survivors.
- A strategy needs to be prepared that aims to meet the needs of men, women and children who have been subjected to abuse. This strategy needs to be put into effect at the earliest opportunity. It should address the immediate medical and psychological needs of survivors; counter the stigma associated with such crimes; and mitigate against the long-term, cross-generational effects.<sup>2</sup>
- Access to identity documentation for children

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<sup>1</sup> Team of Experts: Rule of Law/Sexual Violence in Conflict: Table of Activities 2016-17

<sup>2</sup> Select Cttee on Sexual Violence in Conflict Rpt 2015-16