

MARCH 2014

# THREE YEARS OF CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT

HOW THIS CRISIS IS IMPACTING SYRIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS



## Syrian women and girls who have escaped their country are refugees from war, but have found no refuge from gender-based violence.

The Syrian civil war has had a devastating impact on women and girls. Women and girls account for more than half of the seven million people displaced during the past three years and are consistently subject to serious forms of gender-based violence. Women and girls' efforts to escape the conflict in Syria have exposed them to serious risks, both during flight and as refugees in camps and cities in Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. Displaced women and girls from Syria report multiple forms of gender-based violence, such as forced and early marriage, domestic violence, sexual assault and rape, and exploitation and abuse. These incidents and risks of violence often are exacerbated by social attitudes and practices that limit women and girls' mobility, potentially further increasing their isolation. As tensions between host and displaced communities flare, and families respond to perceived and real risks of further violence, women and girls fear leaving their homes alone or require permission from family members to do so. These restrictions on women and girls' movement not only inherently limit their access to essential services and pose important challenges to humanitarian aid delivery. They represent one of a number of ways in which ongoing displacement and conflict has eroded the hard won rights of Syrian women and girls.

Based on IRC's nearly two decades of programming to respond to and prevent gender-based violence

in conflict settings, we continue to adapt standard humanitarian assistance models to better address the needs of women and girls affected by the Syrian conflict. Our programs consider the unique challenges women and girls face and that require even more diverse and innovative approaches to service delivery.

In June 2014, the IRC will release a report that further explores women and girls' realities, both in Syria and across its borders, and how this conflict affects their lives. The report will examine the current humanitarian response and offer recommendations to increase women and girls' access to and benefit from humanitarian interventions in the region.

Reaching those in need is challenging because the majority of displaced Syrians, whether in Syria or neighboring countries, are not living in formal camps where services can be more easily centralized and accessed. Instead, they live dispersed in overcrowded apartments in small towns already burdened by unemployment and weak service infrastructure, or in informal tented settlements on the outskirts of towns. In Syria itself or in Lebanese and Iraqi towns precariously close to the Syrian border, it is dangerous and difficult to reach Syrians in need with food, water, shelter and medical assistance.

- › Over **7 million Syrians** have been displaced
- › Over **50%** of these displaced Syrians are **women and girls**
- › The UN estimates that a total of **4 million Syrians will have left their homes** for Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq by the close of 2014





# SYRIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS: THEIR REALITIES AND CHALLENGES

**In Za'atari the second largest refugee camp in the world, movement is no easier or safer. A safety audit in the camp revealed that:**

**75%** of survey respondents perceive their environment to be unsafe.

**59%** reported a lack of privacy for women and girls, placing them at risk of sexual abuse

**62%** reported that they did not use communal toilets because of the proximity of male and female bathrooms.<sup>1</sup>

**It is clear that the mere threat of violence can change women and girls' considerations, basic habits, and movements.**



Displacement has increased Syrian women and girls' vulnerability at all levels.

Women report feeling afraid to leave their dwellings for fear of harassment, theft, rape, and violence towards their children; their mobility is further reduced in restrictive households that require them to seek permission to leave first. In some locations contending with burgeoning refugee populations, Syrian women and girls are targeted for sexual harassment.

The limited mobility of women and girls and their resulting social isolation impedes their access to essential aid and services. For example, survivors of sexual violence are often forced to suffer additional torment at home and in the community, where they may be humiliated, beaten, rejected by their family or killed, and considered unmarriageable. Numerous other barriers, including lack of money, distance, and lack of information, pose additional barriers between women and the help they need. These combined factors create profound obstacles for survivors of gender-based violence to reach services safely and contribute to underreporting of gender-based violence. Moreover, the humanitarian aid community struggles to find ways to reach women and girls inside Syria and those displaced in neighboring countries safely. It is imperative for the humanitarian community to re-think how life-saving aid and service delivery is adapted to meet the myriad needs of Syrian women and girls.

“I wonder if I should have stayed in Syria to die.”

—**SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMAN**  
IN ZA'ATARI CAMP

<sup>1</sup> InterAgency Safety Audit, 2014/01, cited in Syria Needs Analysis Project, Regional Analysis Syria Part II – Host Countries, 07 February 2014: [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/part\\_ii\\_host\\_countries\\_1.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/part_ii_host_countries_1.pdf)

# NO “ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL”

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to addressing the challenges posed by the Syrian conflict and its impact on women and girls. Therefore, the primary task facing the IRC and other humanitarian aid agencies is to adapt our approaches to the realities on the ground and specific challenges of accessing this population.

The limitations on the mobility of women and girls are manifested differently across the various countries where the IRC works. In Lebanon, for example, women and girls need to be bussed to services, both in order to access centers safely but also as a condition for obtaining permission from male family members to leave the house. Likewise, whether living in refugee camps or in surrounding towns, harassment, restrictive social norms and the cost of public transport similarly prevents Syrian refugee women in Iraq from obtaining the services they need. In Jordan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has found that some widows and female heads of households fail to register for assistance unless accompanied by

a male relative. Yet, given that only 20% of refugees in Jordan are adult males, most of whom are engaged in full-time search for work, these women will not be reached unless alternative opportunities to register.<sup>1</sup> Further, information about where help can be sought is not reaching women and girls. An alarming 83% of those surveyed by IRC and other agencies stated that they did not know of any services available for survivors of GBV in their community.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of these challenges, when service delivery is designed in ways that facilitate women and girls' safer access, there is a higher chance that women will leave their shelters to seek reproductive health care, economic opportunities, and safe places where they can be supported by other women. For example, the IRC designed multi-purpose, integrated service delivery Women's Centers in Jordan and Lebanon that provide a range of essential services to women and girls, from cash assistance and livelihoods trainings, to trauma-related psychosocial services. The design of the Women's Centers, and the multiple needs they meet, often provide women and girls with the “permission” they need from male family members to leave the home. In Iraq, this model includes legal assistance enabling women to secure critically needed identification, birth registration for their children and other legal documentation. Once inside, women and girls experience the safety and trust necessary to disclose experiences, seek and receive appropriate support and start the recovery process. In the Jordan Women's Centers alone, the IRC social workers and psychologists treat over 100 women monthly for gender-based violence and war-related trauma. The IRC operates four similar women's centers in North Lebanon and the Beka'a Valley; since opening our first center in Arsaal in November 2012, we have reached 5,400 women and girls total.



1 Inter-Agency Assessment. Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection Among Syrian Refugees in Jordan, with a focus on early marriage. UN Women. 2013. p.3

2 Ibid. p.26

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## Women and girls inside Syria



Women and girls inside Syria experience a constant lack of safety—living under the threat of attacks, high levels of detention (with associated torture and often sexual violence), and kidnapping. Many women face these threats alone, as their husbands are out of the

home, have been killed or leave in search of economic opportunities.

Access significantly restricts humanitarian response, so there are very few services overall and those that are available are very basic. Services targeting women and girls are almost nonexistent, and increasing conservatism in groups that control parts of Syria further limit what can be done by aid organizations, necessitating adaptability in programmatic approaches.

The IRC supports three Women's Centers (with three more on the way). These spaces allow respite from the many challenges women and girls face including the threat of harassment and sexual and domestic violence. The spaces provide a sense of normalcy amidst chaos through recreational and educational activities.

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Further, in an effort to reach more women and girls inside their communities, the IRC operates mobile services through outreach teams, partnering with local organizations, or working with informal women's groups and networks to reach isolated women and girls in areas that are cut off from services.

- ▶ **Health and wellbeing promotion and services** are available through reproductive health services. Dignity kits comprised of basic hygiene items and head scarves increase women's comfort and capacity to engage in daily activities as well as decrease their risk of exploitation.
- ▶ **Safe spaces** in urban areas and camps where women and girls can safely meet, learn new skills, and network with one another to strengthen their coping skills.
- ▶ **Building solidarity** among women in displaced and local communities by supporting women's groups, as well as engaging community members in activities.
- ▶ **Strengthening the resilience** of women's household economies through economic activities such as cash assistance, cash for work, financial literacy, support with economic decision making, and life skills.
- ▶ **Advocacy** to promote women and girls' needs across sectors.

“When I leave here, I feel less angry.”

—14-YEAR-OLD SYRIAN GIRL

WHEN ASKED WHAT SHE LIKES ABOUT  
THE IRC'S WOMEN & GIRLS CENTER



## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE:

### The IRC's June 2014 report on Syrian women and girls

The IRC will expand on its findings of Syrian women and girls' realities in a new report to be released in June 2014. In particular, the IRC will examine how the humanitarian aid community can confront the particular obstacles facing women and girls, and adapt the humanitarian response to find creative and critical solutions for reaching women and girls in need. In this report, we will examine key questions facing humanitarian actors, policy makers, and donors, such as:

- › What does it mean and what would be required to change the standard modes of humanitarian aid delivery to better meet the needs of women and girls?
- › How is domestic violence impacting women and children, and how is the humanitarian community responding?
- › How do we reach and support the efforts of women inside of Syria; what actions are necessary to ensure Syrian women and girls participate in and benefit from reconstruction and peace efforts when this conflict ends?

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