

## EDITORIAL

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*“The entire international community will need to dig deep to help put back together what is being shredded into pieces”.*

George Rupp, International Rescue Committee President & CEO

The internal armed conflict in Syria, which stretches out to about three years, but reached heightened violence a year and a half ago, has resulted in the uprooting of many Syrian nationals, who have displaced themselves both in and outside the country. The UNHCR estimates that about 2,5 million people have left their homes, fleeing the violence. Many of the Syrian nationals have fled to neighboring countries, about 600,000 Syrians crossed borders to seek safe haven in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan. The number of people being forced to flee their homes keeps increasing, in January the UNHCR estimated that there was a 25% increase in registered refugees in a single month, calculating that about 5,000 people left their home in order to escape from violence<sup>1</sup>.

As it is usual in armed conflicts, both women and girls face additional risks and are subjected to multiple forms of gender violence, turning them into the most vulnerable within the re-

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<sup>1</sup> United High Commissioner for Refugees, Syria Regional Refugee Response Information Sharing Portal. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

fugee and IDP population. Many of the families that were forced to flee, did so either to prevent women from becoming victims of gender violence, or as result of women being raped. Gender violence represents great challenges in any context such as the ongoing in Syria. Particularly, given the role that shame and modesty plays not only in the life of each women and girl but how this is closely linked to the honor of the family as a whole.

There have been widespread reports of rapes in Syria. Sexual violence against women, and more concretely rape has been traditionally used as a weapon of war, and consequently it has been included as a crime under international criminal law. However, finding and putting into practice different forms of prevention and protection for women and girls is quite challenging. Gender violence, particularly, sexual violence is highly underreported. Globally, women and girls do not come forward to report sexual violence; and in specific contexts, given the dishonor and shame that will fall upon them and their families, these crimes are rarely reported, and when they are it generally happens long time after the attack has happened. In Syria, some parents have dealt with this reality, by marrying their daughters in order to protect them from being raped or, once it has happened, to preserve their honor. In other contexts, given the dire need for food, women find themselves trading sex to feed themselves and their families<sup>2</sup>.

Currently, the humanitarian aid workers dealing with the conflict in Syria, who are working with and for the refugee population, face a twofold challenge. On one side, there are limited resources to identify and treat women and girl victims of gender violence. On the other side, the additional hurdle of the crime being unreported or underreported, given the fear of dishonor, and the consequences of it on them and their families.

However, there have been interesting developments and efforts to address gender violence within Syria and the refugee population in neighboring countries. Learning from past ex-

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2 International Rescue Committee, Syria: a regional crisis. The IRC Commission on Syrian Refugees, <http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRCReportMidEast20130114.pdf>.

periences, where the gathering of information and reporting of gender violence, particularly the one related to armed conflicts and refugees tends to happen after the conflict is over, has been identified as a weakness, and Women Under Siege<sup>3</sup> project is profiting from technology and social media in an effort to live-track how sexual violence is occurring in Syria. Efforts such as these should be mainstreamed.

Hopefully the efforts of international organizations, NGOs, humanitarian volunteers, workers, and all the people involved in aiding the victims of the conflict, particularly women and girls, keeps finding not only an increase in funding but also generating a stronger political and global impact. The international community has failed victims of internal and international armed conflicts in the past, and as members of society we are highly indebted with women who constantly find themselves in the center of conflicts in a heightened condition of vulnerability, lacking mechanisms for the protection of their human rights. Many are the challenges that the global community faces in dealing with the conflict in Syria, both in the short and long term. One of the greatest challenges faced is paying particular attention to gender violence as a focus point of the conflict in Syria, prioritizing on attention and protection measures in their favor.

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3 See more: <https://womenundersiegesyria.crowdmap.com/>.