



"Unveiling the Shadows: Understanding Gender-Based Violence Amidst the Syrian Conflict"

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Abstract

The Syrian conflict, now spanning over a decade, has resulted in one of the most devastating humanitarian crises of the 21st century. Amidst the chaos and violence, gender-based violence (GBV) has emerged as a critical issue, significantly impacting the human security of Syrians. This research article explores the prevalence, forms, drivers, and consequences of GBV during the Syrian conflict, highlighting its multifaceted impact on individuals, families, and communities. Drawing on existing literature and reports, this article underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address GBV and uphold the human security of all Syrians.

Keywords- Human security, Gender-based violence (GBV), Loss of lives, Inter-generational impact, Armed groups

I. Introduction

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has led to widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and loss of lives. Amidst the turmoil, another crisis has silently unfolded – gender-based violence (GBV). GBV refers to any harmful act perpetrated against an individual's will based on socially ascribed differences between males and females. This article delves into the phenomenon of GBV during the Syrian conflict, examining its various forms, underlying causes, and consequences for human security.

Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence

GBV during the Syrian conflict has been reported in various forms, including sexual violence, domestic violence, early and forced marriage, and exploitation. Women and girls are disproportionately affected, with reports indicating widespread instances of rape, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution. Men and boys also experience GBV, albeit to a lesser extent, through torture, arbitrary detention, and recruitment as child

soldiers. Moreover, LGBTQ+ individuals face heightened risks of violence and discrimination due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. In the context of the Syrian crisis, gender-based violence (GBV) has been distressingly prevalent, affecting individuals across various demographics and exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation. GBV manifests in multiple forms, including sexual violence, domestic abuse, early and forced marriage, exploitation, and discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation.

Women and girls, in particular, have faced disproportionately high rates of GBV. Reports from humanitarian organizations and advocacy groups have documented widespread instances of rape, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution perpetrated against Syrian women and girls. These acts of violence often occur in the context of conflict-related situations, such as during military offensives, at checkpoints, or in detention centers. Moreover, the breakdown of social norms and protective structures, coupled with the displacement of millions of Syrians, has left women and girls more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

The prevalence of GBV in Syria is further exacerbated by a culture of impunity, wherein perpetrators often evade accountability for their actions. Weaknesses in the legal system, coupled with the breakdown of governance structures, make it challenging for survivors to seek justice or access support services. Additionally, traditional gender norms and patriarchal attitudes perpetuate a culture of silence around GBV, discouraging survivors from reporting incidents or seeking assistance.

The consequences of GBV extend beyond immediate physical harm, causing long-lasting psychological trauma, social stigma, and economic hardship for survivors. Access to essential services such as healthcare, legal aid, and psychosocial support is often limited, exacerbating the suffering



of survivors and hindering their ability to recover and rebuild their lives.

Drivers of Gender-Based Violence

In the complex landscape of the Syrian crisis, several interconnected factors contribute to the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV). Some key drivers of GBV in the Syrian crisis include:

- **Breakdown of Social Norms and Structures:** The prolonged conflict in Syria has led to the erosion of traditional social norms and protective structures. Displacement, loss of livelihoods, and breakdowns in community cohesion have disrupted the social fabric, leaving individuals, particularly women and girls, more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In the absence of functioning institutions and support systems, survivors may face challenges in accessing assistance and seeking justice.

- **Proliferation of Armed Groups:** The presence of multiple armed groups, including government forces, opposition factions, and extremist organizations, has contributed to a climate of insecurity and lawlessness. Armed groups may perpetrate GBV as a tactic of war, using sexual violence and other forms of abuse to intimidate, control, or punish civilians. Additionally, the proliferation of weapons and militarization of society increase the risk of violence within communities, including domestic and intra-community violence.

- **Weak Rule of Law and Impunity:** The breakdown of governance structures and the justice system in Syria have created an environment of impunity, wherein perpetrators of GBV often evade accountability for their actions. Limited access to justice, corruption, and the politicization of legal processes hinder survivors' ability to seek redress and hold perpetrators accountable. This culture of impunity perpetuates cycles of violence and undermines efforts to address GBV effectively.

- **Gender Inequality and Patriarchal Norms:** Deep-rooted gender inequalities and patriarchal norms exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls to GBV in Syria. Traditional gender roles assign women subordinate positions within society, limiting their autonomy and decision-making power. Discriminatory practices, such as child marriage and honor-based violence, further compound the risks faced by women and girls. Gender-based discrimination also affects men

and boys, who may face stigma for not conforming to traditional notions of masculinity.

- **Economic Instability and Poverty:** The economic collapse resulting from the Syrian conflict has exacerbated vulnerabilities and increased the risk of GBV. Poverty and economic desperation may drive individuals to engage in exploitative practices, such as human trafficking, forced labor, or survival sex, further exposing them to violence and abuse. Economic dependence on abusive partners or caregivers can also trap survivors in cycles of violence, making it difficult for them to escape or seek help.

- **Displacement and Refugee Status:** The mass displacement of millions of Syrians, both internally and as refugees in neighboring countries, has created precarious living conditions and heightened vulnerabilities to GBV. Displaced populations often lack adequate shelter, access to basic services, and legal protections, increasing their susceptibility to exploitation and abuse.

Consequences of Gender-Based Violence

The consequences of GBV extend far beyond immediate physical harm, encompassing long-term psychological trauma, social stigma, and economic hardship. Survivors of GBV often face barriers to accessing essential services such as healthcare, legal aid, and psychosocial support. Moreover, the intergenerational impact of GBV can perpetuate cycles of violence and hinder efforts towards reconciliation and peacebuilding. The widespread prevalence of GBV undermines the human security of Syrians, eroding trust in institutions and community cohesion.

Survivors of GBV often experience severe physical injuries, including bruises, lacerations, fractures, and internal injuries resulting from acts of violence such as sexual assault or physical abuse. These injuries may require medical attention, including emergency care, surgeries, and rehabilitation services. In cases of sexual violence, survivors may also be at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancies, further exacerbating their health risks. GBV can have profound and lasting effects on survivors' mental health and well-being. Many survivors experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and avoidance behaviors. Depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation are also common among survivors of GBV. The psychological impact of violence can



impair survivors' ability to function in daily life, maintain relationships, and participate in social activities, leading to feelings of isolation and hopelessness.

Survivors of GBV often face social stigma, blame, and discrimination from their communities and even their own families. Cultural norms and attitudes surrounding shame and honor may further compound survivors' reluctance to disclose their experiences or seek help. Stigmatization can isolate survivors, erode their support networks, and exacerbate their feelings of shame and self-blame. Moreover, survivors may fear reprisals or retaliation from perpetrators or their associates, further inhibiting their ability to seek assistance or pursue justice.

Further, the consequences of GBV can have significant economic repercussions for survivors and their families. Survivors may experience disruptions to their education, employment, and livelihoods as a result of the violence. Economic dependence on abusive partners or caregivers may further trap survivors in cycles of violence, making it difficult for them to leave or seek assistance. In addition, the costs associated with medical care, legal fees, and psychosocial support services can impose financial burdens on survivors and their families, exacerbating their economic vulnerability. And, subsequently, the consequences of GBV can extend across generations, perpetuating cycles of violence and trauma within families and communities. Children who witness or experience GBV may suffer from emotional and behavioral problems, impairing their development and well-being. Moreover, the normalization of violence within households can perpetuate harmful gender norms and attitudes, reinforcing patterns of abuse and discrimination.

GBV undermines the human security of individuals and communities, eroding trust in institutions, weakening social cohesion, and hindering efforts towards peacebuilding and reconciliation. In conflict-affected settings like Syria, where the rule of law is weak, and impunity prevails, GBV perpetuates cycles of violence and instability, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and impeding efforts to achieve sustainable peace and development.

Addressing Gender-Based Violence

Enhancing legal frameworks to protect survivors of GBV and hold perpetrators accountable is essential. This includes enacting and enforcing laws that criminalize GBV, including

sexual violence, domestic abuse, and forced marriage. Legal reforms should prioritize survivor-centered approaches, ensuring access to justice, protection, and support services for survivors while combating impunity for perpetrators. Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, and Equality have challenged harmful gender norms and stereotypes that are fundamental for preventing and addressing GBV. Efforts to empower women and girls economically, politically, and socially can enhance their resilience and reduce their vulnerability to violence. Education and awareness-raising campaigns can promote gender-sensitive attitudes and behaviors, fostering environments that reject violence and promote respect and equality.

Ensuring survivors have access to essential services, including healthcare, psychosocial support, legal aid, and shelter, is critical. This requires strengthening existing service delivery mechanisms and establishing specialized GBV services that are responsive to the unique needs of survivors. Outreach and awareness-raising efforts are necessary to ensure survivors are aware of available services and know how to access them safely. Further, building the capacity of service providers, including healthcare workers, social workers, law enforcement officials, and community leaders, is essential for effectively responding to GBV. Training programs should focus on enhancing understanding of GBV dynamics, survivor-centered approaches, trauma-informed care, and ethical reporting and confidentiality protocols. Community-based training initiatives can empower local actors to identify and respond to GBV within their communities. The prevention efforts should address the root causes and drivers of GBV, including gender inequality, conflict-related violence, and social norms that condone violence. Comprehensive prevention strategies may include community mobilization, gender-sensitive education programs, economic empowerment initiatives, and advocacy campaigns to challenge harmful cultural practices. Additionally, risk mitigation measures, such as enhancing security and protection mechanisms in displacement camps and conflict-affected areas, can help reduce the vulnerability of individuals, particularly women and girls, to GBV. Effective coordination and collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, humanitarian actors, and international stakeholders are essential for a comprehensive response to GBV. Multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms, such as GBV coordination groups and task forces, can facilitate information sharing, resource mobilization, and



joint advocacy efforts. Collaborative partnerships between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors are critical for addressing the root causes of GBV and promoting sustainable solutions.

Integrating GBV prevention and response into humanitarian and development programming is essential for mainstreaming gender-sensitive approaches and ensuring the needs of survivors are addressed across sectors. This may involve incorporating GBV risk assessments into needs assessments, integrating GBV prevention activities into health, education, livelihoods, and protection programs, and establishing referral pathways to ensure survivors receive comprehensive support.

II. Conclusion

In conclusion, gender-based violence (GBV) within the Syrian crisis presents a critical challenge to the security and well-being of individuals and communities. The drivers of GBV, including the breakdown of social norms, armed conflict, weak rule of law, gender inequality, economic instability, and displacement, further compound the challenges faced by survivors. The consequences of GBV extend beyond immediate physical harm to encompass long-term psychological trauma, social stigma, economic hardship, and intergenerational impact, undermining human security and hindering efforts toward peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Addressing GBV requires comprehensive and coordinated interventions that prioritize the protection and empowerment of survivors, challenge harmful gender norms, and promote gender equality and women's rights. Strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing access to services, capacity-building, prevention efforts, coordination, and integration into humanitarian and development programming are essential components of a holistic response to GBV.

By prioritizing the needs and rights of survivors and addressing the underlying drivers of violence, stakeholders can work towards creating safer and more inclusive environments for all Syrians affected by the conflict. Sustained commitment, collaboration, and resources are necessary to effectively prevent GBV, support survivors, and promote gender equality in post-conflict Syria.

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