



SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

What is sexual violence?

These are acts of a sexual nature against a person, by force, or by threat of force or coercion, such as that caused by fear of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression, or abuse of power, or by taking advantage of a coercive environment or a person's incapacity to give genuine consent. Thus, sexual violence includes but is not limited to rape, forced nudity and other non-physical acts are also types of sexual-based violence.

What is gender-based violence?

Gender-based violence are acts committed against persons, whether male or female, because of their sex and/or socially constructed gender roles. These incidents may include non-sexual attacks and persecution on the grounds of gender. Minor/forced marriage, female genital mutilation, honor killings, forced conscription, the denial of resources, and psychological abuse can all be types of gender-based violence.

Why document SGBV?

While SGBV has been committed on a large scale by a variety of perpetrators in Syria, these types of violations are not always openly discussed in Syrian society. This can mean that this type of violence often goes undocumented, making it difficult to seek justice in the future. Additionally, when such violations are shrouded in silence, they are often misunderstood, leaving survivors feeling more isolated. Documentation ensures that this crime is recorded and that survivors have a chance

to seek justice. Accurate documentation can also help alleviate misunderstandings surrounding sexual and gender-based violence. For example, while sexual and gender-based violence is often associated with women, both men and women can be victims of these crimes. Documenters should not make assumptions about who might be a victim, so that documentation can better depict the diverse experiences of survivors.

Why is documenting SGBV in Syria important?

- Thorough documentation will increase the chance for future justice
- Documenting these crimes, which are often suffered in silence, will ensure they are better understood
- The process of sharing their stories may help survivors heal

Where does SGBV take place?

SGBV survivors experience violations in a large variety of settings. In Syria, many acts of sexual violence have been committed in detention centers, but others are committed in homes or at checkpoints. Sexual violence often, but certainly not always, accompanies torture. When interviewing survivors of other violations, documenters should remain alert to the possibility that the interviewee may also have experienced sexual violence, and inquire about this possibility, even if this was not the original focus of the interview.

Ethically Documenting SGBV

Survivors of SGBV may find that reliving their experience through an interview can be traumatizing or shameful. Since explaining incidents of SGBV may require a survivor to share intimate details, interviewees should be particularly sensitive. While concerns regarding confidentiality and informed consent should always be of utmost importance during documentation, these issues take on even more importance in the context of SGBV. The following principles should be at the center of all SGBV documentation efforts.

Do No Harm

The principle of “do no harm” forms the foundation of SJAC’s documentation work. This means that survivors come first. If collecting documentation would put the interviewee at risk of excessive harm, or if the interviewee has extreme difficulty telling his/her account of the events, then SJAC’s documenters do not continue. Additionally, SJAC makes efforts to avoid re-traumatizing the interviewee by conducting only one interview and demonstrating sensitivity during the process.

Documenters should also allow the survivor to choose when and where an interview will be conducted to ensure that they are able to choose a location where they will feel most comfortable.

The following policies are all in line with the principle of do no harm:

- Allowing the interviewee to choose the location for the interview
- Choosing not to conduct an interview with a survivor who has previously provided an interview to another organization
- Offering to pause or finish an interview because an interviewee is upset by the discussion

Informed Consent

Prior to conducting any interviews, SJAC’s documentation team first obtains signed informed consent. Informed consent is never assumed, and requires that the interviewee is made aware of SJAC and its mission, the confidentiality standard and its limits, the possible uses of the documentation, the types of questions that will be asked, and the fact that the interviewee has total choice over whether to proceed. For children, consent is obtained from legal guardians. In the case of interviews regarding sexual and gender-based violence documenters should be explicit about the nature of the questions they plan to ask.

Recounting an incident of SGBV can be a traumatic experience in its own right. Interviewees must have all the information about what they will be asked to share with a documenter before an interview begins.

Confidentiality

Because of the private nature of sexual and gender-based violations, the confidentiality of the information shared by survivors is of particular importance. Documenters should take care to protect the privacy of all information, both by securing any physical records of the interview, and by ensuring that information from the interview is not shared unless all identifying information has been redacted. The organization’s policy for storing and sharing the interview should be made clear to the interviewee during the informed consent process.

How and whether the information in an interview will be shared should be detailed in the informed consent paperwork and discussion. In regards to SGBV interviews, organizations should implement strict confidentiality measures, since such information being publicly revealed could put survivors at serious risk.

Offering Additional Services

After completing an SGBV interview, documenters should ask the interviewee whether or not he or she would like to have access to any medical or psychosocial services. If they are interested, documenters should refer them to local partners. In support of this practice, SJAC maintains a network of dual referral partners in communities where it collects documentation. These are medical, humanitarian, and psychosocial support organizations that are willing to receive referrals from SJAC, as well as refer their own beneficiaries that are interested in participating in documentation efforts.