

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND

# UNBROKEN

STORIES OF SYRIAN ADOLESCENT GIRLS



*"If I cry, it is not because I'm broken. It is because I feel enormous pride and gratitude that I'm here after all that's happened. So please do not feel sorry for me."*

— NUJOD, adolescent girl from Damascus

This publication is dedicated to Syrian adolescent girls throughout the region, many of whom are grappling with enormous challenges on a daily basis and yet continue to defy numerous odds to fight for their basic human rights. Special thanks go to the courageous girls who shared their stories with UNFPA in order to help the international community understand the many struggles they encounter on their journey to adulthood and help shine light on their resilience during the most difficult of circumstances.

UNFPA is also grateful to all the donors and implementing partners whose support has enabled the delivery of a wide array of programmes geared toward Syrian women and girls region-wide, thus providing these adolescent girls with the platforms and support they need to share their stories with the world. UNFPA's programmes are currently supported by Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, The European Commission, Finland, France, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

**“ I know the world I want to live in. Help me build it, and I will never stop working.**

— RUBA, an adolescent girl from Idlib, Syria

— FREDERIKA MEIJER, UNFPA Deputy Regional Director, Arab States

The trials that Syrian adolescent girls have gone through over the past nine years have defined and indelibly shaped a significant portion of their formative years. Despite the many challenges facing adolescent girls, they continue to rise, surviving and even thriving in the face of enormous odds. This demonstrates their unparalleled resilience and serve to underscore the importance of ensuring that their insights inform any discussion on humanitarian, resilience and peacebuilding programmes.



## INTRODUCTION

*“Despite the pain that I and many like me have been through, I still believe in the possibility of a better world.”*

### What is it like for a young girl growing up in the midst of the Syria crisis?

Such is the question the interviewer addressed to 17-year-old Layali, who was a mere 11 years old when she fled her hometown in Qamishli, northern Syria, to take refuge in Iraq. Outside the steel-panelled caravan where the interview took place, the Domiz 1 camp teemed with life. Children played football, soft music echoed from a nearby arts and crafts class, and nails were being hammered at a construction site across the road.

Layali paused and looked away, gazing through the makeshift window. For a moment, she appeared as if she were about to cry, but then she smiled defiantly and said, “I’ve learned a lot.”

Layali’s story — not to mention her unbreakable character — is that of countless Syrian adolescent girls whose lives have been uprooted by the ongoing violence in their country. For Layali, the crisis confronted her with an array of daunting challenges. Not only had she seen family members and loved ones gunned down in the maelstrom of the crisis, but she is also a survivor of several forms of gender-based violence, including harassment and sexual violence. Listening to her story, one is immediately struck by her strength and eloquence. She speaks with deliberation, displaying the composure of a humanitarian activist far beyond her 17 years, toughened yes, but wiser too, after years of being exposed to strife. And yet, for all that she has endured, she clings adamantly to her innocence and her sense of humour.

Since the onset of the Syria crisis in 2011, the United Nations Population

Fund (UNFPA) has consistently documented the toll the crisis has taken on adolescent girls, many of whom were between five and eleven years old when the crisis erupted. While women and girls alike have borne the brunt of the crisis, girls — especially adolescent girls — have faced increasingly complex challenges that stand to alter the course of their development and impact the rest of their lives. Violation of privacy, movement restrictions, child marriage, and sexual and physical violence continue to be part of their daily reality, embroiling them in a web of violence that can transcend generations. The trials they have gone through over the past nine years have defined and indelibly shaped much of their formative years. The data collected by UNFPA was documented in two comprehensive publications, beginning with *The Adolescent Girls Strategy* (2017), which underscored the importance of programming for adolescent girls, and *When Caged Birds Sing* (2018), an in-depth analysis of the challenges confronting adolescent girls and their far-reaching consequences for survivors, their families and communities at large.

*“At some point, I had to ask myself where I go from this point onwards.”*

And yet girls like Layali emerge from the ashes of crisis to demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit, surviving and thriving where many seemingly stronger adults might falter.

“At some point, I had to ask myself where I go from this point onwards,” Layali explains, her voice firm and steady. “Despite the pain that I and many like me have been through, I still

believe in the possibility of a better world, where young girls can live out their childhoods in peace and freedom. This is why I decided to volunteer to help those who have suffered as I have, to make sure that my generation will not make the same mistakes.”

This publication is an attempt to showcase the strength of girls like Layali, girls whose lives were forever altered by the callous and discriminatory depredations of crisis, yet remained determined to persevere and pursue their dream of a better world. The stories featured in the following pages not only demonstrate the remarkable strength of adolescent girls in the face of enormous odds, but also serve to underscore the importance of ensuring that their insights inform any and all discussions about humanitarian activities, human resilience and peace-building programmes.

The stories featured in the following pages were acquired in direct conversations and interviews with Syrian adolescent girls and their families living in Syria or in refugee camps and in host communities in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, and protection and the potential security issues associated with telling these stories, special care has been taken to adhere to the wishes of these girls. No real names feature in these accounts and details of hometowns and current whereabouts appear only intermittently in keeping with the wishes of those interviewed and quoted. Moreover, the photographs of adolescent girls that feature throughout this publication are not directly linked to the quotes that appear on them.

**Boys have all the freedom in the world, but we girls are expected to abide by too many rules. They treat us like criminals, not like people.**

— LUMA, an adolescent girl from Damascus, Syria

Information collected by UNFPA in 2019 shows that gender-based violence continues to pervade the lives of Syrian adolescent girls, manifesting as web of violence that follows them throughout their life-cycles. This web of violence spans violation of privacy, harassment, restriction of movement, family violence, forced and early marriage, and others.

## VOICES, UNHEARD

**“If a young man or a married man who is wealthy, regardless of his age and marital status, proposes to marry any girl in the camp, the girl is forced to marry him even if she does not want to.”**

“Growing up, I felt as though my wings were slowly clipped against my will, and life became a cage from which there was no escape,” writes Amal, a Syrian adolescent from Qamishli, her words painting a painfully accurate picture of the life cycle of the average adolescent girl caught in the midst of the Syria crisis. “An entire world waited outside where women were becoming leaders, scientists, engineers, but I was trapped in a different world where being a girl meant having no voice.”

Amal’s struggle — and the struggles of countless girls like her — have been extensively documented by UNFPA, inspiring a series of in-depth analyses that culminated in the 2018 publication of *When Caged Birds Sing*. Based on interviews with adolescent girls inside Syria and in refugee communities region-wide, *When Caged Birds Sing* provided an in-depth exploration of the challenges facing Syrian adolescent girls (and many others of their peers in the region), spanning violation of privacy, family violence, child marriages and domestic violence, just to cite a few. These challenges emerge once a girl is perceived to be reaching sexual maturity, almost threatening to envelop her in a web of violence that can follow a girl for her lifetime.

Information collected by UNFPA in 2019 shows that the reality for Syrian adolescent girls remains largely unchanged. Gender-based violence continues to pervade their lives, following patterns similar to those observed in previous years. These forms of gender-based violence occur everywhere — in homes, schools, universities, marketplaces, and in public streets, and have come

to define many of the ways in which young girls perceive and interact with their communities. Furthermore, due to the continuing after-effects of the crisis and their inherent vulnerability, adolescent girls are growing up in an environment rife with restrictions that are being reinforced consistently by their families and community. As Dalia, an adolescent girl from Idlib, explains: “After the war came, we thought we would have to worry about fighter planes and bullets, but instead we found ourselves worrying about harassment, kidnapping, and rape. We don’t leave our houses anymore. Some girls cannot even go to school because their families won’t let them.”

**After the war came, we thought we would have to worry about fighter planes and bullets, but instead we found ourselves worrying about harassment, kidnapping, and rape.**


Dalia’s words succinctly summarize the experience of countless adolescent girls inside Syria and in host communities throughout the region. Information provided by Syrian adolescent girls shows that they face a shared pattern of violence that manifests itself directly and indirectly. It begins during the early stages of adolescence and grows substantially in terms of intensity and consequence as the girl approaches adulthood. More importantly, the evidence shows that these forms of violence are interlinked — that the presence of one form

significantly compounds the likelihood of others occurring. For example, a girl forced into child marriage in 2011 may by now have become a widow or a divorcee — sometimes more than once — with children of her own to protect and feed. It is likely she would have had to forgo her education as a result of her untimely marriage, resulting in significantly diminishing her prospects for a livelihood and personal growth. This, in turn, not only puts her at greater risk of additional forms of discrimination to which divorcees are typically subjected, but it also substantially increases the risk of exploitation and negative coping mechanisms such as polygamy, survival sex, and the like.

“I can’t see the fairness in the way girls are treated,” explains Luma, an adolescent girl from Damascus. “Boys have all the freedom in the world, but we girls are expected to abide by too many rules. They treat us like criminals, not like people.” Nada, aged 14, distinctly recalls the phase in her life during which these abrupt social changes became evident. “It began with the women in my family asking me where I go and who I talk to, telling me not to play with my friends outside. Then I started sensing strangers watching me when I walked to school or sat outside with my friends. If a boy talks to me, I see people looking at me with aggression, as if I am somehow doing something wrong.”

While these behavioural patterns are present in communities worldwide, they intensify significantly during humanitarian crises, particularly in communities with deeply-rooted patriarchal beliefs. They usually begin

The collective sense of entitlement to control or influence the life decisions made by adolescent girls, practiced by parents, male family members and the wider community, puts girls at increased risk of various forms of violence. This not only serves to cultivate an environment of impunity that is conducive to gender-based violence, but it also helps create a fundamentally unhealthy relationship between girls, their bodies and their male counterparts



**Many of the teenage girls we receive in our programmes struggle to interact with their male counterparts simply because of the fear and guilt ingrained into them by their families and communities.**

— Youth volunteer, Domiz 1 Camp, Iraq

inside the home and gradually extend to a girl's larger community, resulting in a heightened sense of anxiety and unwarranted guilt among adolescent girls. Many report being frequently accosted by strangers about their day-to-day interactions, their choice of clothing, and even about increasingly personal matters such as their menstrual cycles and sexuality.

The collective sense of entitlement to control or influence the life decisions made by adolescent girls puts girls at increased risk of various forms of violence. What initially manifests as a violation of privacy can set the stage for family violence (physical and psychological violence, humiliation, denial of resources, etc.) as tensions in the household mount over time. This collective infringement not only serves to cultivate an environment of

impunity that is conducive to gender-based violence, but it also helps create a fundamentally unhealthy relationship between girls, their bodies and their male counterparts -- a relationship that replaces intrinsic partnership and respect with domination, fear and distrust.

**Adolescent boys are pressured at an early age to embrace traditionally masculine qualities and habits that can distort the way they perceive and interact with adolescent girls.**

This is further exacerbated by some behavioural patterns exhibited by adolescent boys, who in turn are

pressured at an early age to embrace traditionally masculine qualities and habits that can distort the way they perceive and interact with adolescent girls. These behaviors, such as verbal abuse and sexual harassment, are often considered "normal" by members of the wider community, which helps foster a culture of acceptance around them and forces girls into assuming a defensive stance when interacting with their male counterparts.

Undoing this damage and creating opportunities for healthy partnership among adolescents is one of the more difficult tasks facing service providers when programming for adolescent girls. "Many of the teenage girls we receive in our programmes struggle to interact with their male counterparts simply because of the fear and guilt ingrained into them by their families

and communities," explains one volunteer at a youth centre operating within the Domiz 1 Camp in Iraq. "Breaking through this barrier is one of the most difficult challenges we face."

**"Harassment, restriction of movement and violation of privacy are often followed by the looming threat of child marriage."**

Harassment, restriction of movement and violation of privacy are often followed by the looming threat of child marriage, which is often seen as a long-term insurance policy to protect girls (and the "honour" or reputation of their families) against perceived risks. Assessments conducted by UNFPA show that child marriages,

while not a new phenomenon in Syrian communities, have been influenced by the protracted nature of the crisis in a way that has placed additional pressure on adolescent girls. Families may arrange marriages for their girls because they perceive it as a means of preventing sexual violence, particularly since girls who have experienced sexual violence are considered unsuitable for marriage and, more often than not, are deemed to have brought dishonour to themselves and their families. For a significant portion of the girls interviewed by UNFPA, child marriage was a foregone conclusion; an inevitable path that they felt compelled to take irrespective of their own hopes and aspirations.

The impact of child marriage on girls has been widely documented in a variety of assessments conducted by UNFPA and other humanitarian organizations

such as Unicef, Save the Children, and Human Rights Watch. Similar patterns of potentially fatal ramifications are observed among Syrian adolescents, including complications during pregnancy and childbirth, domestic violence, inadequate education as well as significantly reduced economic opportunities, in addition to restrictions limiting their freedom to socialize with children of their own age. Syrian child brides face even more complications given that many marriages end up unregistered, often leaving adolescent girls with little protection for themselves or their children.

Poverty also plays a key role in perpetuating child marriage among Syrian communities in the region. With disruptions to livelihood opportunities since the crisis began, some parents seek to minimize expenses by passing

on the financial burden of daughters to other families through marriage. This goes back to the longstanding and erroneous notion that daughters are an economic burden — that feeding, clothing, and educating them is costly and ultimately a poor investment given that they will eventually leave the household and will not be passing on the family's name or bloodline. This has not only increased the risk of child marriage but has also given rise to the phenomenon of serial marriages, in which girls become unwitting participants in a system that mercilessly exploits their innocence and bodies.

**“Syrian child brides face even additional complications given that many marriages end up unregistered, often leaving adolescent girls with little protection for themselves or their children.”**

“These are perhaps the hardest cases to track and address, as such practices are done discreetly,” explains Ghaida, a volunteer at a women's and girls' centre in Iraq. She specifically notes that a significant number of adolescent girls availing of the centre's services are in fact survivors of sexual exploitation. “It has become a recurring phenomenon for many girls in underprivileged communities. They are either forced to enter into a series of short-term marriages, or worse, become unwilling participants in family-endorsed survival sex.”

Moreover, in some focus groups held in Syria, both women and adolescent girls have indicated that even after becoming aware of the risks of child marriage, they would still opt to marry off their daughters (or themselves) at an early age if the prospective husband held a position of authority in the community or was perceived to earn a decent living, underscoring how complex the correlations are between

poverty and early marriage as a coping mechanism, and how deeply ingrained the practice can become in times of crisis. As Yara, an adolescent girl from Damascus, notes, “if a young man or a married man who is wealthy, regardless of his age and marital status, proposes to marry any girl in the camp, the girl is forced to marry him even if she does not want to.”

It is important to note that child marriages significantly increase the likelihood of domestic abuse, particularly in cases where the marriage is coerced. In women and girl safe spaces throughout the region, case managers are dealing with hundreds of instances of adolescent girls enduring abusive marriages in varying degrees, which place the lives of girls at risk every day. Meanwhile, girls increasingly face the risk of maternal mortality, a serious and frequently documented concern in many Syrian communities throughout the region. With girls forced into pregnancy long before their bodies are ready, death can result from the complications of such pregnancies or due to unsafe abortion.

**“I've seen many girls enslaved like that, holding newborn babies when they're as young as thirteen.”**

“Young girls are still becoming mothers,” says Umaira Salam, a Syrian midwife from Qardaha, a village in northwestern Syria. For decades, Salam practiced midwifery peaceably, only to see her profession become a crucial element within the Syria crisis, particularly with the rise of ISIS and increasing reliance on child marriage as a survival mechanism in communities throughout the country. Recalling the changes that had taken place after the war, Salam appears distraught. “When you do what I do, you see everything, and it becomes harder for families to lie. You know when a girl has been forced to marry, to share her bed and

give birth against her will. I've seen many girls enslaved like that, holding newborn babies when they're as young as 13 years.”

**“Syrian adolescent girls throughout the region continue to demonstrate unfathomable resilience in the face of such adversities, immersing themselves in art, learning and creativity.”**

This is the web of violence in which countless Syrian adolescent girls find themselves ensnared, all too often long before they are physically and mentally capable of discovering who they are as individuals. And yet, Syrian adolescent girls all across the region continue to demonstrate unfathomable resilience in the face of such adversities, immersing themselves in art, learning and creativity, and somehow finding the strength to embrace social activism with a dedication, compassion and perseverance that was not afforded to them in their own formative years. The stories that follow not only demonstrate the often overlooked resolve that so many of these adolescents possess, but also serve to underscore the importance of tailoring programmes to meet their needs and match their courage.

**“I've seen many girls enslaved like that, holding newborn babies when they're as young as thirteen.”**

— UMAIRA, a midwife from Qardaha, Syria

*With disruptions in livelihood opportunities following the crisis, some parents seek to minimise expenses by passing on the financial burden of daughters to other families through marriage. This goes back to the longstanding and erroneous notion that daughters are an economic burden. In addition to lost opportunities in education and development, child marriage puts girls at greater risk of gender-based violence or death from complications from early pregnancy.*

**At first, I mainly came for the company. I looked forward to the awareness sessions all day because that is where I felt at home.**

— YARA, an adolescent girl from Aleppo, Syria



Providing adolescent girls with safe, constructive spaces where they feel encouraged to collaborate is one of the simplest and most effective ways in which humanitarians can support their needs. This is especially true when it comes to preventing or responding to gender-based violence, as a growing network of support amplifies the positive impact of other interventions on adolescent beneficiaries.

## IN SEARCH OF A FRIEND

**“Girls need to feel safe, supported and understood, and they need an environment where they can let go of negative emotions such as shame and guilt.”**

“If I cry, it is not because I’m broken,” said Rasha as she dried her eyes, her smile radiant and confident. “It is because I feel enormous pride and gratitude that I’m here after all that’s happened. So please do not feel sorry for me.”

Rasha, who is a survivor of child marriage, recently celebrated her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday in the Domiz 1 camp in Iraq, where she and her family sought refuge shortly after the war broke out in Syria. She was 17 by the time she managed to divorce her husband after enduring three years of unrelenting physical and emotional abuse. As is common in cases of child marriage, she lost custody of both her daughters following her divorce, and was diagnosed with clinical depression.

**“I feel enormous pride and gratitude that I’m here after all that’s happened. So please do not feel sorry for me.”**

Rasha exudes the kind of positivity and exuberance to which most people aspire, and her resume is replete with achievements that far outpace her 19 years. In addition to being a volunteer at the women and girls’ safe space, Rasha is a passionate playwright, as well as a producer and director. She has written and produced two plays that premiered at the camp and has dabbled in film production. According to her case manager, Aza, seeing Rasha walking through the camp while using her phone camera has become a matter of routine, as is watching

her sift through hours and hours of footage to create various short videos for use at the centre.

“I love making things,” Rasha explains. “I love the process of imagining, writing and producing, and I think there is nothing more powerful than a work of fiction that accurately represents reality. This was how I felt as a child when I first read ‘The Thief and the Dogs’ by Naguib Mahfouz or when I watched classic films like ‘The Sin’ and ‘Lawrence of Arabia’. They made me realize how big the world really is and made me feel things that I’d never felt before.”

For Rasha, theatre is where all her creative passions come to life since the scarcity of resources at the camp prevents her from taking her filmmaking to the next level. She takes inspiration from the theatre’s organic and open nature that welcomes everyone in her circle to participate. “Writing for the theatre,” she explains, “is a challenge that is extremely satisfying to complete. You have to work with the basics and make sure that your message is clear without fancy scene cuts and special effects. It’s all about the dialogue and the movement of the performers.”

Her success notwithstanding, Rasha still laments the years taken from her because of child marriage, which, she explains, caused her enormous pain and suffering and prevented her from exploring and discovering her full potential. She started visiting the women and girls’ safe space when she was 15, two years before the dissolution of her marriage. It was

there, in the safe space, that she began feeling her circle of support widen to the point where the healing process began.

“When I first walked into the centre, I was somewhat surprised by how simple and normal it was,” she recalls. “I didn’t really have expectations. I assumed I would meet many women in distress and that it would be difficult for me to spend time there. What I found was friendship and support, and people who, like me, were just trying their best to move on.”

**“All I found was friendship and support, and people who, like me, were just trying their best to move on.”**

Friendship, according to Rasha, is what allowed her to move past the years of hardship and abuse, including the searing pain of losing her daughters. She tried to finger-count the names of the women and girls who have supported her over the years, but quickly ran out of fingers. “I’m sure I’m missing about ten people which just goes to show how fortunate I have been to be surrounded by such amazing women and girls, many years younger than I am, but they too saw the darkest side of war and were a great comfort to me in my darkest days.”

*Friendship, more than any other driver, is what encourages Syrian adolescent girls to seek out women and girls safe spaces region-wide and participate in the programmes on offer. This demonstrates the importance of fostering collaboration among adolescents, many of whom struggle with restriction of movement, social isolation, and a multitude of other challenges.*

tens of cases involving adolescent girls, friendship is the key driver for programmes targeting adolescents. “For girls who have been through abuse, direct approaches to counseling are essential, but they become even more effective when combined with a socially-enabling environment. Girls need to feel safe, supported and understood, and they need an environment where they can let go of negative emotions such as shame and guilt, which are often used by families and communities to influence their behaviour and choices.”

Several girls interviewed by UNFPA support this conclusion. In the case of Yara, a 17-year-old from Aleppo who suffered family violence and was forcibly taken out of school, the safe space not only allowed her to reconnect with girls of the same age group but also enabled her to make up

for lost time. “At first, I mainly came for the company. I looked forward to the awareness sessions all day because that is where I felt at home. Some of the people I’ve met in the centre have now become my best friends.”

Yara was quick to see the opportunities presented in some of the classes offered at the centre. A skilled communicator, she always gravitated toward languages, spending hours long before she even understood the meaning of the words. “I’ve always been taken by the sight and the smell of books, and I’ve always wanted to learn to read and write in English. This is why I chose to attend the classes, which have helped me recover some of the time I’d lost since being forced out of school.”

Since starting the course in 2017,

Yara has earned her status as one of the fastest-learners in her group. Not only has she become a voracious reader, always with a book in hand, but she has written more than 20 essays and stories about challenging subjects, including the delicate series of incidents that defined her journey from the onset of the crisis in Syria. One essay broached the subject of her strained relationship with an abusive grandfather, who instigated her removal from school and consistently encouraged her parents to force her to marry. Another spoke of Azal, a Syrian refugee slightly younger than Yara who spent a few months at the camp and became her closest confidant before suddenly moving out of the camp (and out of Yara’s life). Her absence still troubles Yara, as was plain from the tears that filled her eyes when she read the opening paragraphs of her story. Fortunately, the awareness sessions

she had attended on child marriage offered a healthy outlet for the mounting pressure she had been experiencing, both at the hands of family members and others in her wider social circle. Today, she knows better, and is determined to place her education and self-development at the top of her priorities.

“I see what happens to girls who marry that young,” explains Yara. “Sometimes, I wish I can hold them all close to me and keep them safe. They deserve better.”

For 16-year-old Ranwa, a Syrian refugee living in Jordan, friendship has essentially meant the difference between a broken childhood and a life of social activism. After experiencing mounting social pressure to marry, Ranwa decided to enroll in a series of awareness sessions on the subject, in

“At the sessions, they offer us the chance to discuss these subjects openly, and this creates an environment where we are encouraged to be honest with one another.”

— RANWA, an adolescent girl from Palmyra, Syria

the process forming a number of key friendships that have shaped much of her life since. “At the sessions, they offer us the chance to discuss these subjects openly, and this creates an environment where we are encouraged to be honest with one another. This has allowed us to become much closer friends and to work together to help girls.”

After attending the sessions and forming her own “squad” of volunteers, Ranwa has become one of the most active figures in her community, organizing her own sessions on child marriage and holding one-on-one sessions with girls her age to make sure they understand the toll a child marriage will have on their lives. “It became clear at some point that I either spend my days complaining or become part of the positive change,” explains Ranwa as she sorts through a

folder full of flyers and pamphlets on the subject.

In Turkey, Zina — a 13-year-old girl from Aleppo — was undergoing a similar experience. A survivor of child marriage and family violence, the crisis in Syria forced Zina and her family to flee their hometown shortly after the violence erupted. “I’ve often felt like I was somehow born into a prison sentence and that I’m being punished for a crime I did not commit,” she says.

Zina had given birth to her two children years before ever reaching adulthood. She was forced into marriage at age 13, entering a life of restriction, emotional blackmail and verbal and physical abuse at the hands of her husband and family. While her priority was to divorce her husband and undo the damage he had done to her life, divorce was not an option



lightly entertained by the family, who saw it as a blemish on the family's honour. Such was the pressure placed upon Zina by her family that she twice attempted suicide. "I had entered a depression unlike any other I had ever experienced. Between the abuse, the war, and the feelings of resentment I had felt from the men in my family, I felt like I had nowhere to turn to in this world. I needed help."

Zina was able to seek counseling from a UNFPA-supported centre that offers awareness building and engagement activities to those in need. She was immediately referred to individual counselling so that she could begin to address the root causes of her issues. Moreover, she was put in touch with the Turkish Bar Association to receive legal assistance in the divorce proceedings. The centre was where Zina met Samia, who has since become one of the most influential people in her life.

"Samia is my friend, my teacher and my inspiration," explains Zina. "Although she is only a few years older, she made me feel loved and accepted in a way that only a mother can."

Samia, herself a survivor of gender-based violence, was also undergoing counseling and it wasn't long before the two girls bonded over their shared need for support and companionship. Not only did she find in Zina a much-needed source of comfort and understanding, but she also felt instantly protective of her, further strengthening the bond between them.

"I immediately connected with her and felt that I had known her for years," Samia explains. "Through the sessions, you learn the importance of reclaiming your ability to trust people, and she made it very easy for me to feel at home again."

For Zina, Samia provided a more sober understanding of the world, helping her through her tumultuous divorce and offering her valuable lessons

on how to resume her life after the divorce. She was a seasoned Arabic linguist who was adept at writing and poetry, and the two would frequently host poetry readings that quickly began to draw in other participants from the centre. For Samia, Zina was "the most understanding listener," one who made her feel loved and respected. As for Zina, who has since finalized her divorce proceedings, Samia continues to be both cornerstone and catalyst in her journey toward recovery.

"This is a phenomenon we frequently see at our centres," notes Zahra Damer, a GBV-specialist who works at Jordan's Azraq Camp. "For most adolescent girls and even many of the adults, coming to these centres is about much more than just the programmes. They come to spend time with each other, and that becomes the primary source of healing."

According to Damer, designing programmes with this particular objective in mind has redefined the way humanitarians approach GBV programming. By prioritizing relationship-building, programmes can begin to enjoy an organic quality that is not as vulnerable to such variables as the reluctance or readiness of participants to speak, the effectiveness of individual therapy methods and approaches, and the negative impact the absence of certain talents and abilities (literacy for instance) may otherwise have on the overall experience of the individual.

*Through various programmes, humanitarians can encourage healthy interaction between adolescent girls and their male counterparts, and can provide an array of tools that can mitigate the negative consequences of harmful social structures, beliefs and practices.*



**“For most adolescent girls and even many of the adults, coming to these centers is much more than just about the programmes; they come to spend time with each other.”**

— ZAHRA DAMER, GBV Specialist, Azraq Camp

**I, too, want to kick a ball and run through the fields without feeling like I'm committing a crime.**

— ROYA, an adolescent girl from Eastern Ghouta, Syria

Adolescents have the right to participate in the design, development and evaluation of the programmes that target them. This has been demonstrated by many programmes in development settings, which show that adolescents' involvement in the design and implementation of programmes as well as in programme monitoring are vital to ensuring that programmes are acceptable and accessible in meeting the needs of their adolescent beneficiaries.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ASKED

*“What we have discovered is that the more they are involved, the better the outcome, particularly as they near adulthood.”*

### **If you were in charge of a programme for adolescent girls, what would you do?**

Maisa, somewhat surprised at the question, smiled and took a moment to collect her thoughts. “We’re not used to being asked questions like these,” she eventually replied, as she reached for her pen and notepad to start listing all the things she and her friends desire. What emerged from this brief exercise was that adolescent girls have a clear idea about what they want in life.

“I love to swim, so I would definitely fill the camp with swimming pools” said Roya, a 17-year-old Syrian refugee from Eastern Ghouta. Roya is described by her case manager as one of the more active and ambitious participants in the programme — a girl who has made her own way ever since fleeing her hometown at age 13.

“I like to swim because water is life, and being here in the desert has made me miss it,” she explains, pointing to the arid surrounds of Azraq, Jordan. “I find that I’m constantly craving water and greenery. I would love a pool that is exclusively for women, where we don’t have to look over our shoulders constantly.”

**“I would love a pool that is exclusively for women, where we don’t have to look over our shoulders constantly.”**

As Roya spoke, one could not help but recall the Syrian Olympic swimmer Yusra Mardini, who, along with her elder sister, fled the war in Syria and

embarked on a perilous maritime journey to Europe. Some 15 minutes at sea, the engine on their vessel failed, putting all on board at risk. Yusra, her sister and two others jumped into the open water and braved the waves for three-and-a-half hours to prevent the boat from capsizing, successfully saving the lives of 20 people by their efforts. One year later, in 2016, Yusra competed at the Olympic Games in Rio, representing 65 million displaced people worldwide.

**“You see boys playing football, basketball, and running, while we are expected to knit and sew.”**

When asked where she hoped to take this unique and remarkable passion, Roya’s enthusiasm seemed to dwindle. “I don’t know what I can do with it, really. These choices are not always available.”

According to Roya, men enjoy privileges that women do not, thereby creating an imbalance in the type of activities the latter are offered. “You see boys playing football, basketball, and running, while we are expected to knit and sew. I, too, want to kick a ball and run through the fields without feeling like I’m committing a crime. I want to go out and play, and if it were up to me I would make sure that these programmes treat men and women equally.”

Rama, who’s been Roya’s best friend since her arrival at the camp in 2015, agrees. “While I’m not a seasoned swimmer,” she says, teasing Roya,

“I definitely agree about sports in general. They like to think that girls hate physical activity, but we both grew up running. I and most girls our age would love to play a game of football once in a while. We’ve even participated in tournaments - I won second place at the last tournament in April. So I would definitely create more programmes where girls are encouraged to be athletes.”

Rama and Roya are unequivocal about their shared longing for all things green. In fact, both recently launched their own gardening campaign in partnership with friends, the aim being to plant at least five trees every month to beautify the areas around their homes. It is a challenge, they admit. “Water does not come by easily, so we choose trees that are easy to feed and that don’t die in the harsh summer heat.”

For 13-year-old Salma, dancing is what she feels that girls her age need. “I love to dance and teach dancing. The music doesn’t matter much — all that matters is that it has a beat and makes people smile.”

Salma had left her hometown of Palmyra shortly after the violence broke out. While the crisis had taken its toll on her sense of stability, dancing has allowed her to focus on the bright side, particularly as a group activity. “Dance can quickly change people for the better, even if they are going through their worst day. This is how I feel and this is why I believe they need to start teaching dancing to girls.”

**When I dance, it can quickly change people for the better, even if they are going through their worst day.**

— SALMA, an adolescent girl from Palmyra, Syria

*Given that many of the issues impacting Syrian adolescent girls are now fundamentally ingrained in the fabric of their communities, encouraging and enabling their active participation in the development process is of paramount importance. By ensuring that the struggles, restrictions, and individual needs of adolescent girls are taken into consideration, humanitarian actors can deliver much more focused and realistic programming.*

“When I first attended the life skills programme at the camp, I was barely able to put two sentences together,” explains Naja, a 15-year-old Syrian from Qamishli. She had arrived in Iraq in 2015 after experiencing the most traumatizing journey of her life, during which she was forcibly married several times and survived a sexual assault at the hands of a family member. When she first enrolled in the life skills course at the camp, she had lost all ability to communicate with others.

**“We’re used to being told what we needed. Nobody ever really cares enough to ask us if we have any opinions on the matter.”**

“Although the course I attended focused on basic life skills, I was lucky enough to have a case manager who cared enough to ask me what I felt I needed,” she recalls. “I don’t remember much from that particular conversation, but we talked about life as a whole — about my journey getting there, the frequent abuses, the family members whom I’ll never see again. Then I told her about school and how much I missed the ability to read and write, and she helped me realize that this should be my goal for the coming years. Since then, I carry a book with me all the time, and I spend an hour every week telling her about what I’m reading and what I’m learning from it.”

According to Naja, being asked about her needs meant everything to her. “We’re used to being told what we needed. Nobody ever really cares enough to ask us if we have any opinions on the matter.”

As outlined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child, a guiding principle of working with adolescents is to ensure the participation of adolescents themselves, reflecting and respecting the right of adolescents to express their views in all matters affecting them. The right to participation is relevant to the exercise of all other rights, within the family, the school, and in the context of the larger community. Participation

is the catalyst and the key to ensuring each individual right is protected and respected. It is a criterion by which to measure and assess progress when implementing adolescents’ rights; and, as an additional dimension of the universally-recognised right to freedom of expression, it feeds into the right of adolescents to be heard and to have their views or opinions taken into account.

“They might still be young, but adolescents have a lot to inform us in terms of what they need and how they feel they should get there,” explains Frederika Meijer, UNFPA Deputy Regional Director for Arab States. “This is why we believe that they not only have the right to participate in but should lead the design, development and evaluation of the programmes that target them. What we have discovered is that the more they are involved, the better the outcome.”

**“After months of dealing with liars, cheaters and abusive men, she gave us hope.”**

According to Nujod, a 19-year-old Syrian from Damascus, not involving adolescent girls in the conversation has had a far-reaching impact on Syria as a whole. Nujod, who firmly believes that girls (particularly girls’ education) can have an unparalleled effect on development, insists that girls want and feel a need to play a part in solving the Syrian crisis but often are made feel as though their voices don’t matter. “I can’t recall the last time I was asked: What would you do for Syria? I have many answers, but never hear the right questions.”

Nujod, who has always dreamed of being a lawyer, awoke to a world spinning out of control in 2013 when her village was overrun. She and her family made their way safely to Turkey before they were separated. She took refuge in Iraq along with her mother and extended family, while her father and brother sought better livelihoods in Turkey. Her mother had

lost most of her documents before their escape from Syria. Not having the requisite documents made movement especially difficult and, in some instances, potentially life-threatening given the rising risk of exploitation among displaced communities. Word eventually reached them that Nujod’s father may have died after returning unexpectedly to Syria. With this news, their lives took a sudden and expected turn for the worse.

**“They might still be young, but adolescents have a lot to inform us of in terms of what they need and how they feel they should get there.”**

While Nujod’s mother was able to put food on the table and pay for her children’s schooling, her environment was not conducive to a stable life, particularly as they faced growing concerns about the level of control her extended family now exercised over their movements. Shortly after her father’s death, her mother began receiving marriage proposals from men. One in particular began taking significant liberties, making unannounced visits to their home and lobbying with the family. Fortunately, her mother had been attending sessions at a women and girls’ safe space for months, and was encouraged to seek the services of an attorney to help her acquire documentation for the family and set their legal affairs in order.

“I will never forget what that attorney looked like,” Nujod recalls, her face beaming at the memory of their mentor. “Her name was Avan, and she was everything that I thought a woman should be — beautiful, intelligent and extremely pleasant to deal with. After months of dealing with liars, cheaters and abusive men, she gave us hope.”

**“My plan is to take this knowledge back with me to Syria and use it to rebuild the country.”**

Ever since that day, Avan defined Nujod’s image of success. She grew up reading every legal thriller she could lay her hands on and has been paving her way to a law degree ever since. “I’ve made it a point to stay focused and to begin specializing in international law. My plan is to take this knowledge back with me to Syria and use it to rebuild the country.”

Asked whether she actually saw herself returning to Syria, Nujod paused for a moment before answering. “For me, it is not a question of if, but when, and that date keeps slipping over the horizon. I want to go back today, before tomorrow, and I want to do everything in my power to prevent what happened from happening again.”

In Idlib, north-western Syria, Jana — a 17-year-old survivor of child marriage — was struggling with serious suicidal thoughts when she started going to the area’s women and girls’ safe space. At the time, she was already caring for two children and in the midst of her third pregnancy, which had come at an inopportune time given the family’s dwindling financial resources. Jana had become the head of the household shortly after her first child was born when her husband succumbed to a debilitating injury during the violent upheavals in her hometown. With a third child on the way, she was struggling to put food on the table, making ends meet through various odd jobs that provided very little. The stress and lack of support nearly pushed her over the brink.

This was when Jana came upon the Young Mothers Club — an initiative organised in response to the evolving needs of adolescent girls in Syria. Targeting mothers aged 19 and younger, the Young Mothers Club (YMC) offers two-hour sessions on various life skills, particularly those relevant to new mothers. This includes general health awareness, problem solving, communication,

language, critical thinking, prevention and treatment of pre and post-natal infections. More importantly, the YMC was created to provide adolescent mothers with a safe and collaborative environment in which they can learn, grow and support each other through the many potential challenges of early motherhood.

“The Young Mothers Club came as a direct response to the issues we saw were impacting the lives of adolescent girls in Syria, particularly the challenges that intensified following the crisis,” Hanaa Adel Aboud, a case worker and a key facilitator of the YMC programme, explains. “This includes displacement, child marriage, early pregnancies, lack of access to education, and gender-based violence. The programme was entirely developed based on direct engagement and consultations with the girls themselves, which is why it is proving its success.”

**“The programme was entirely developed based on direct engagement and consultations with the girls themselves, which is why it is proving its success.”**

According to Aboud, the club has become immensely popular among adolescents and has been operating above capacity recently because of growing demand for its services. In Jana’s case, it literally saved her life by helping her form a wider network of support, engage in individual and group therapy, and draw up a more realistic and cohesive plan for addressing the needs of her family. Her plan benefited greatly from the insights offered by more experienced mothers in the group, reinforced by the many skill-building programmes on offer.

“The club helped her change her mind; to embrace life and tap into her inner strength, of which there was plenty,” Aboud adds.

A few kilometres away, Zudi — an adolescent girl was experiencing a similar transformation after

enrolling in the Educational Robotics course offered to girls in the area. By encouraging girls to delve into cutting-edge fields such as engineering and software development, the programme presents them with an unprecedented opportunity to explore fields of interest that are typically offered to boys and men.

**“The club helped change her mind; to embrace life and tap into her inner strength, of which there was plenty.”**

“I’m fascinated by robots, particularly by the way they look, move and behave like human beings,” Zudi says. “I was eager to disassemble, reassemble and programme the instructions to make the robot move, and the entire process showed us that it is not only fun but relatively easy too. I also learned patience, as we would frequently make errors during assembly and programming and would need to spend hours troubleshooting. It was hard work, but so rewarding.”

According to Malak Hassany, an animator and robotic trainer at Ihsan, the programme has helped its organisers uncover much about the inherent potential of adolescent girls and the many common misconceptions about their level of interest in fields such as IT and engineering. “The programme has proven that not only are girls immensely interested in technology and software, but introducing such programmes can have a lasting positive impact in terms of addressing gender-equality, helping girls re-imagine their potential as productive members of their community, and providing another avenue for humanitarians when it comes to programming for them.”

**“I want to go back, today before tomorrow, and I want to do everything in my power to prevent what happened from happening again.”**

— NUJOD, an adolescent girl from Damascus, Syria

*While there is a growing body of information on how to reach and target adolescent girls in humanitarian settings and design programmes to best serve their needs, a concerted effort is required to continue broadening the quality and specificity of information available and encouraging more actors to consistently address the needs of adolescent girls.*

**“This is why I decided to volunteer to help those who have suffered as I have; to make sure that my generation will not make the same mistakes.”**

— LAYALI, an adolescent girl from Idlib, Syria

*From challenges as commonplace as restriction of movement, child marriage or sexual harassment, to potentially more complex cases such as domestic violence or rape, adolescent girls represent a unique segment in any community, one that faces mounting pressures and risks and requires increasingly specific levels and modalities of care.*

## TIMING IS EVERYTHING

*“Now, it feels like I have room to grow and discover what I truly want before making such a serious and long-term commitment.”*

“Without awareness, many girls my age never think twice about marriage,” Fatima, an adolescent living in South Lebanon, confidently asserts. At 16, and before joining the UNFPA-supported peer-to-peer programme, she had become engaged at the behest of her family.

Sometime after joining the programme she asked a social worker to help her convince her father to postpone her wedding until she reached the age of 18. The team immediately began to provide awareness sessions to Fatima’s father about the risks associated with child marriage, drawing his attention in particular to the possible consequences for young girls’ physical and mental health. As is often the case among displaced communities, the rush to marry Fatima was in large part driven by the family’s financial challenges. Her father believed that securing her future now was in her best interest, particularly given the instabilities of displacement and the fact that her prospective husband was a dentist, a profession seen as both admirable and stable in her community.

**“Some time after joining the programme she asked a social worker to help her convince her father to postpone her wedding until she reached the age of 18.”**

Fatima, meanwhile, had only agreed to marry in an attempt to alleviate her family’s economic burdens, responding as many children in her situation feel

compelled to do. The social workers, however, continued to work towards finding possible alternatives to secure financial support for the family in an effort to help Fatima avoid the perils of child marriage. In parallel, Fatima’s case managers strove to help her feel more empowered as an individual, providing a series of engagement activities that allowed her to tap into her potential and cultivate independence. This approach included awareness sessions on early marriage and a series of capacity-building programmes that complemented and strengthened her education and personal growth.

**“She became more communicative as an individual, actively participating in the sessions and gradually developing a wide array of life skills that proved vital to her development.”**

As the sessions progressed, Fatima’s perception of her value and her relationship with her family slowly evolved. She became more communicative as an individual, actively participating in the sessions and gradually developing a wide array of life skills that proved vital to her development, including communication, critical thinking and debate. This eventually allowed her to openly discuss her future with her family, especially with her father, as a result of which they agreed to a more sustainable plan in which she continues her education and sets aside the idea of marriage until she is old enough to consider it.

“I feel relieved,” explains Fatima. “Before, I felt the pressure mounting, and it became harder to think and feel without the guilt and shame. Now, it feels like I have room to grow and discover what I truly want before making such a serious and long-term commitment.”

For many girls like Fatima, timing is everything when it comes to dealing with challenges as commonplace as restriction of movement, child marriage or sexual harassment, to potentially more complex cases such as domestic violence or rape. Adolescent girls represent a unique segment in any community, one that faces mounting pressures and risks and requires increasingly specific levels and modalities of care. In humanitarian crises, their needs become even more relevant, particularly in protracted crises such as the one afflicting Syria, and reaching them with tailored, effective and far-reaching services is essential.

**Adolescent girls represent a unique segment in any community, one that faces mounting pressures and risks and requires increasingly specific levels and modalities of care.**

“The time has come for humanitarians to target adolescent girls in their responses,” explains Frederika Meijer, UNFPA Deputy Regional Director for Arab States. “Under normal conditions, adolescent girls go through a plethora

Helping adolescent girls traverse gender-based violence necessitates supporting all efforts to promote gender equality in different Syrian communities throughout the region. As long as women and girls are perceived as inferior in status and potential to men, they will continue to be targets for various forms of gender-based violence.



“Many of the teenage girls we receive in our programmes struggle to interact with their male counterparts simply because of the fear and guilt ingrained into them by their families and communities.”

— Youth volunteer, Domiz 1 Camp, Iraq

of biological and emotional changes that make them in need of consistent guidance and support. During crises, they are ones most at risk of violence and exploitation, particularly because many social structures are designed to discriminate against them. Unless we reach them early enough to help them through these challenges, the risks are simply too high.”

**“During crises, they become one of the most at-risk segments of violence and exploitation, particularly because many social structures are designed to discriminate against them.”**

Nearly three years ago, Dina arrived in Turkey after escaping an impossible living situation in her hometown of Deir ez-Zor in north-eastern Syria. While she had fled in search of safety from war-inflicted violence and instability, she was forced to marry her immediate cousin at the age of 14. Today, at 19, she is the mother of two children and several months into her fourth pregnancy.

“While I managed to give birth to three children, my first child died at the age of four due to complications from the serious deformities he was born with,” she explains. “It was by far the most difficult experience I had gone through and it haunts me to this day. He came into this world too soon, to a mother married too soon.”

For Dina, birth control was never an option that her husband, driven by prevailing customs in his community that favoured larger families, would ever agree to. She had tried reasoning with him multiple times, explaining that pregnancies were slowly destroying her body and that their situation did not allow for additional mouths to feed, but he consistently and sternly refused her pleas.

Toward the end of her first trimester, she had sought help from a UNFPA-supported health clinic, where her neighbours had previously received care. She had been experiencing debilitating abdominal and genital pain. Upon examination, she was diagnosed with a severe urinary tract infection and the doctors concluded that carrying her child to term posed a serious risk to her life.

“While terminating a pregnancy is legal in Turkey, especially when the mother’s life is in danger, it has never been acceptable in my community,” explains Dina. “My family and relatives consider it murder, and it was difficult to even discuss the idea with anyone I knew. I felt like all eyes were on me and that I had nowhere to turn. Fortunately, the staff at the centre were completely understanding and sympathetic to my situation. They made me feel as if my health mattered, which was something I had never truly felt before.”

**“According to WHO, at least 22,800 women die annually as a result of complications of unsafe abortion.”**

Dina’s husband was invited to join her for the following medical visit, during which the medical team gave the couple a detailed diagnosis of her condition, explaining the risks associated with recurring pregnancies. Her body responded to the treatment and her pregnancy was terminated safely at the hospital. Following the termination, the health team scheduled a series of follow-up visits

for her and her husband to monitor her condition and ensure that she remains aware of what to expect on the road to recovery.

According to WHO, at least 22,800 women die annually as a result of complications of unsafe abortion, and between two and seven million women each year survive unsafe abortion but sustain long-term damage or disease (incomplete abortion, infection, bleeding, and injury to the internal organs, such as puncturing or tearing of the uterus). Had Dina not been able to find proper care at the right time, her situation would have been critical, particularly in light of the socio-cultural sensitivities surrounding her case.

“Without the support I received growing up, things would have been quite different,” explains 17-year-old Nara, who has been attending adolescent girls’ sessions offered in her refugee camp for almost two years now. Nara, who had chosen to keep her location anonymous, is a survivor of a gang rape that took place as she and her family fled their hometown in Syria. The incident had ended the life of another nine-year-old girl and almost took Nara’s, but — according

to her case manager, Maysoon — she continues to receive the support of numerous women and girls around her, which has considerably alleviated the trauma of the event.

**“Without the support I received growing up, things would have been quite different.”**

“How would you even begin to address a situation like this?” Maysoon, who has followed Nara’s case for the last four years, demands. “It took all the strength she has left to bounce back from the damage that had been inflicted upon her and her family, and we came dangerously close to losing her at some point.”

In the case of Jana, whose journey epitomizes the struggles of adolescent girls in crisis, finding a lifeline in these support services meant the difference between life and death. Married at 14 to a man 12 years her senior, Jana found herself trapped in an extremely violent relationship, one in which she was frequently subjected to physical and economic violence. When she tried to escape, the husband leveraged the culture of shame in her community

and claimed she was unfaithful, which garnered her even more abuse at the hands of the male members in her family and put her at serious risk of being the victim of a so-called “honour” killing. She was forced to relocate to Turkey via Iraq, only to be sexually assaulted by one of the physicians treating the many bruises on her body.

By the time she had managed to reach the women and girls’ safe space in Turkey, not only was she hanging on to life by a thread, but she had seen the worst humanity has to offer and was faced with a long, arduous path to recovery. The fact that she is able to stand strong today — to tell her story and volunteer to help other survivors of violence against women — is not only a testament to the inconceivable strength of adolescent girls but to the importance of programming for them as well.

## “I think every Syrian girl wants to be part of the solution.”

— TALA, an adolescent girl from Rural Damascus, Syria



A concerted effort is needed across all levels of international aid to help champion the protection, health, rights and development of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. This includes efforts to ensure transformative change across the international humanitarian system.

## AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

*“In the effort to help the people of Syria rebuild their communities on stronger and more resilient foundations, targeting adolescent girls needs to become a core priority.”*

“I think every Syrian girl wants to be part of the solution,” explains 16-year-old Tala, thumbing through a series of mixed-media artworks she recently produced. Her work showed spectacular craftsmanship and creative vision, as well as a resolute courage when it comes to tackling delicate subjects. The largest of her works is an illustration of her hometown in Al Zabadani, rural Damascus, with its stone houses nestled against cedar hills and what appears to be a group of girls running in the background. When asked about the girls, Tala was quick to recall their names: Rama, Miran, Talia and Lujain, all of them girls she met during her visits to the women and girls’ safe space near her house.

**“Adolescent girls want to, and are able to, do much more than what is expected of them.”**

Tala’s statement speaks volumes. In the process of interviewing adolescent girls region-wide, one thing remains consistently clear: adolescent girls want to (and are able to) do much more than what is expected of them. They have repeatedly demonstrated their unwavering resilience in the face of enormous challenges, showing an endless capacity for healing, personal development and far-reaching empathy. This is why it is of paramount importance that the humanitarian community consider, support and programme for them in the context of the Syria crisis.

“In the effort to help the people of Syria rebuild their communities on stronger and more resilient foundations, targeting adolescent girls needs to become a core priority,” explains Frederika Meijer, UNFPA Deputy Regional Director for Arab States. “Humanitarians need to have a shared and long-term vision toward establishing a more girl-responsive humanitarian system, particularly one that takes into consideration the needs, hopes and considerable potential of adolescent girls, and delivers programmes that not only address their basic needs but also help them discover who they are as individuals and the contributions they can make to their communities. It is also of paramount importance that we as humanitarians continue to invest in programming that goes beyond the basic needs to tackle adolescent girls’ psychosocial development, autonomy, voice, and agency.”

**“Humanitarians need to have a shared and long-term vision toward establishing a more girl-responsive humanitarian system.”**

A concerted effort is needed across all levels of international aid to help champion the protection, health, rights and development of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. This includes efforts to ensure transformative change across the international humanitarian system in

a manner that facilitates multi-sector collaboration to meet the needs of this vital and often overlooked segment of the population. In this regard, humanitarians should leverage a holistic strategy that encompasses experts from all sectors, including protection, health, education, water and sanitation, livelihoods and others, to effectively meet the interconnected needs of adolescent girls, and to ensure complementarity of action among service providers.

**“Complex and protracted crises present viable opportunities for transformative change, particularly with regards to gender norms and deeply-rooted patriarchal beliefs and practices.”**

While complex and protracted crises like the one plaguing Syria inevitably result in substantial human suffering, they nonetheless present viable opportunities for transformative change, particularly with regard to gender norms and deeply-rooted patriarchal beliefs and practices. The humanitarian community can work cohesively to maximize the effects of such transformation by delivering programmes that work and help break down longstanding barriers to gender-equality and position the fight against gender-based violence as a crucial step toward building resilience. Programmes that support the developmental trajectory of

*Working directly with Syrian youth is also of paramount importance, as youth programmes have the effect of integrating adolescent boys and girls in a constructive and safe environment where many preconceptions about gender are quickly dismantled. For UNFPA, such programmes have consistently demonstrated their effectiveness, helping adolescent girls find their individuality in a world that consistently tries to stifle it.*

adolescent girls and promote their active participation in rebuilding and peace-building are crucial pillars in such an ambitious and far-reaching approach.

Localization and the terms of the Grand Bargain also play a crucial part in substantive transformation. Local civil society organisations, particularly those that offer long-term girl-focused programming, must be engaged, funded, consulted and encouraged to take a leadership role when it comes to programming for adolescent girls, while the international community should continue to provide sustainable opportunities to build the capacities of these organisations. Through such

an approach, donors and actors alike can work harmoniously to encourage locally-led initiatives that are not only based on a better understanding of the context, but also work to encourage community buy-in long after international organisations move on.

Within the programmes themselves, a multitude of steps can be taken to ensure that response efforts are made as “girl-centric” as possible to yield the highest return on investment. What is urgently needed is a wide array of agile and flexible programmes that carefully consider the transformational needs of girls as they move from childhood into adolescence into adulthood, which can vary greatly at different stages

of a girl’s life cycle. More importantly, they should lend particular focus to the various restrictions that prevent sustainable participation by adolescents, such as restriction of movement and timing, which can be addressed by scheduling programmes more flexibly or safely leveraging the power of new technologies that can transcend mobility restrictions, such as online forums, social media, and others. Most importantly, organisations need to ensure that they have a full understanding of girls’ protection concerns and should programme around them to ensure consistent participation.

Simultaneously, humanitarians need to understand that the life cycles of adolescent girls are fundamentally connected to extremely complex and varied external factors, including larger familial and societal factors that can impact on their development. As such, programmes should actively work to involve parents and guardians, whose support and buy-in is essential to the success of any girl-centric programme.

Working with members of the wider community, including religious leaders and cultural influencers, is also vital when it comes to addressing prevalent social norms and practices

that discriminate against women and girls and prevent their substantive participation in humanitarian and peace-building programmes.

None of the above can be realistically achieved without the meaningful participation of adolescent girls in the design, development and execution of the programmes that target them — a conclusion that has been corroborated by a myriad of studies and projects that explored the needs of adolescent girls in humanitarian contexts. Given that many of the issues impacting Syrian adolescent girls are now fundamentally ingrained in the fabric of their communities, encouraging and enabling their active participation

in the development process is of paramount importance. Too often, adolescent girls are engaged by humanitarian actors in an ad-hoc fashion, when by ensuring that the struggles, restrictions, and individual needs of adolescent girls are taken into consideration, humanitarian actors can deliver much more focused and realistic programming that will have a much stronger and lasting impact on their lives. In the words of Ruba, an adolescent girl from Idlib, “I know the world I want to live in. Help me build it, and I will never stop working.”

**I felt like all eyes were on me and that I had nowhere to turn. They made me feel as if my health mattered, which was something I had never truly felt before.**

— DINA, an adolescent girl from Deir ez-Zor, Syria



**“ I have much love for the people around me, especially the ones I’ve met at the center here. They are my family.”**

— NADIA, an adolescent girl from Quneitra, Syria

*What is urgently needed is a wide array of agile and flexible programmes that carefully consider the transformational needs of girls as they move from childhood into adolescence into adulthood, which can vary greatly at different stages of a girl’s life cycle.*

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UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND

# UNBROKEN

STORIES OF SYRIAN ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Since the onset of the Syria crisis in 2011, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has consistently documented the toll the crisis has taken on adolescent girls, many of whom were between 5 to 11 years old when the crisis began. While women and girls alike have borne the brunt of the crisis, girls — particularly adolescent girls — face increasingly complex challenges that stand to alter the course of their development for the rest of their lives. The trials they have gone through over the past nine years have defined and indelibly shaped a significant portion of their formative years. And yet, Syrian adolescent girls throughout the region continue to emerge from the ashes of crisis to demonstrate the resilience of the human heart, surviving and thriving where many seemingly stronger adults would falter.

This publication showcases the strength of Syrian girls whose lives were forever altered by the discriminant hands of crisis but who have been able to persevere and pursue their dream of a better world. The stories featured in the following pages not only demonstrate the remarkable strength of adolescent girls in the face of enormous odds, but also serve to underscore the importance of ensuring that their insights inform any discussion on humanitarian, resilience and peacebuilding programmes.