

THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN OF SYRIA'S WIDOW CAMPS:

Hardest
to reach,
most at risk



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The authors would also like to acknowledge the valuable contributions to the report of: Brett Tarver, Katherine Shaw, Rawan Abukhadra, Natalia Korobkova, Leah Donoghue and Phiona Koyiet as well as the members of the World Vision Syria Response Advocacy Response Group and MEAL team, including Dr. Ghassan Aziz in his capacity of independent data analyst.

We would also like to extend our gratitude and thanks to the local organisations –Ihsan Relief and Development, MARAM Foundation for Relief & Development, Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA) and Shafak, who have supported with data collection services inside the widow camps in Northwest Syria that have informed this report.

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Cover photo credits: © Courtesy of local NGO in NWS. Mother of three, Rania*, 39, standing in front of her tent in a widow camp.

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CHILD AND ADULT SAFEGUARDING CONSIDERATIONS

We ensured safe and ethical participation of children, parents and caregivers, or other adults when they shared their stories and surveys were conducted in compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures, and in line with World Vision's safeguarding protocols. Names of children and adults have been anonymized and changed to ensure confidentiality. All photos were taken and used with informed consent.

DISCLAIMER

This report has been prepared based on the data collected by the local organisations named above, in their capacity as service providers. World Vision are unable to verify with a hundred per cent certainty the identity of the women and children interviewed in the aforementioned "widow camps". Service providers attested these women are not affiliated with any foreign fighters' groups, and reside in the mixed or pure widow camps.

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Rania*, 39, mother of three. Walking
inside a widow camp in NWS.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eleven years into the war in Syria, the humanitarian crisis is worse than ever. More than 13 million Syrians have been affected by the ongoing war and persecution, and 6.2 million, including 2.5 million children, are now internally displaced.¹

World Vision's 2021 "Too High a Price to Pay" report² estimates that the Syrian economy has been hit with more than \$US1.2 trillion in cumulative financial losses from the conflict, and that the life expectancy of Syrian children has been reduced by 13 years.

This new report investigates the impacts of the Syrian war in some of the hardest-to-reach places. It focuses on the so-called "widow camps", home to tens of thousands of widows and other single women - including women who are divorced or whose husbands are missing - and their children, living in the 28 accessible camps across northwest Syria (NW Syria)³.

These women and their children face chronic and high levels of violence, including neglect, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, as well as child marriage and child labour. Boys are especially at risk of recruitment into armed groups, and later radicalisation. This is because boys older than 11 are considered male adults by the community and are forced to leave the camps, with no place to go, no employment prospects and no future.

Despite the dire living conditions in the widow camps, humanitarian access remains extremely challenging across NW Syria with only one entry point for UN humanitarian assistance still open. In fact, widows are the most at risk of being excluded from humanitarian aid and services⁴ and are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV). Yet, they and their children remain largely de-prioritised by donors and are mostly invisible in humanitarian operations in NW Syria. There have also been access restrictions for aid agencies to support women and children living in these camps, which has made the prioritisation of this group even more important.⁵

These women and their children wake up every day under constant threat of violence with no means to earn a living and no access to basic services – the rights of girls in particular are being compromised, including denial of their right to education.⁶ Movement restrictions drastically impact their lives. In contrast to other displaced women in general internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, women in widow camps do not have the right to move freely and are unable to work to support themselves and their children.⁷ In some cases, the women in these camps choose to take their own lives when faced with overwhelming levels of deprivation, stress and desperation.⁸



© Courtesy of local NGO in NWS.
Dina*, 41, mother of three. Brushing
her daughter's hair inside the tent.

KEY FINDINGS

World Vision survey of 419 respondents living in 28 widow camps in NW Syria (200 adult women, 139 children aged 11 to 18, and 80 children aged 6 to 10) found that:

34%



of children said they had experienced one or more forms of violence.

Of those, **32%** had been married from an early age, and **9%** had experienced sexual abuse.⁹

These experiences were corroborated by the women, with



60%
25%

reporting they had witnessed child marriage, and
witnessing sexual violence in the camps.

Child labour is frequent in the camps.

58%

of boys aged 11 and above¹⁰ are involved in child labour, and



49%

of girls of the same age are also forced to work.

83%

of children aged 11 and above¹¹ are in desperate need of safe spaces and protection.

88%

of women report a lack of essential services, including **healthcare (42%), proper shelter (31%),** and **protection (30%).**¹²

95%

of women have negative feelings or hopelessness with almost no access to mental health support.

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS



Negotiate humanitarian access: The UN and donor governments must use their diplomatic leverage to advocate for humanitarian workers' access to widow camps across NW Syria as they remain completely and unjustifiably invisible in the humanitarian response to the conflict to date.



Prioritise women and girls in widow camps: The international humanitarian community must include hard-to-reach widow camps in their assessments, programmes and advocacy efforts.



Provide integrated multi-layered mental health and psychosocial support programs (MHPSS): The international humanitarian community must expand MHPSS for women and children in widow camps and integrate these across multi-sectoral humanitarian interventions.



Increase funding: Donor governments must fully fund the forthcoming two-year Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). Despite its importance, the protection sector appeal within the 2021 Syria HRP was only 29% funded¹³, limiting the ability to fully address issues like child marriage and child labour.

INTRODUCTION

After 11 years of war, there is no end in sight for the conflict in Syria. In 2021, the overall needs of Syrians in the country reached unprecedented levels, especially in the northwest¹⁴ which hosts around 2.8 million IDPs.¹⁵ A staggering 12.4 million Syrians are food insecure,¹⁶ and 2.4 million children remain out of school.¹⁷ Responsibility-sharing and humanitarian aid have never been more important, but donor fatigue and COVID-19 have led funding to drop to its lowest level since 2015.¹⁸ Only 46.4% of the Syria HRP needs were met in 2021.¹⁹

Whilst the war has caused \$US1.2 trillion in financial losses, the human cost of the conflict is much greater, especially for the millions of internally displaced women and children stuck in limbo with no hope for their future.²⁰ Children and women make up 80% of the overall displaced population in Syria.²¹ They live in overcrowded camps, in conditions that worsen with each weather-related emergency and COVID-19 outbreak. Both the trauma of the war and daily exposure to violence - domestic violence, sexual exploitation, rape, early marriage of girls and child labour - have created an immeasurable and unconscionable mental health crisis.²²

Among the 1,300 estimated IDP camps in NW Syria, 46 exclusive sites for widow camps host tens of thousands of widowed, divorced and other single women and their children.

These widow camps have been operating since at least 2014, when first reports of their existence emerged.²³ Although they differ in size, management and set-up, these camps can fit broadly into three categories:



Pure widow camps – where only women and their children can live.



Mixed widow camps – that usually consist of segregated sections for single women and their children within a larger IDP camp.



Widow camps reserved for divorced and widowed wives of foreign and ISIS fighters.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted between January and February 2022. It primarily consisted of qualitative interviews conducted with women and children living in 28 “pure” and mixed widow camps²⁴ in Idlib and Aleppo as well as local organisations to better understand their protection needs in these hardest-to-reach camps.²⁵ World Vision spoke to 200 women, 139 adolescents (11-18 years old) and 80 children (6-10 years old), most of whom have been living in widow camps for years. More than 80% of the women interviewed were widows, and 90% of women had children.²⁶ World Vision also carried out six Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with humanitarian coordination actors (Sector Cluster leads) and local organisations who have had access to some of the camps since 2021. This is the first known assessment of its kind by an INGO and was carried out with the support of local NGOs.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the differences between camps, the results are not representative of the whole populations living in all of the widow camps across NW Syria, but are indicative of the situation faced by surveyed respondents in assessed locations at the time of assessment. As boys are required to leave the camps when they reach the age of 11-13, the findings of the surveys vis a vis protection needs and feelings of 11–18-year-olds may more often represent the views and experiences of girls who made 65% of the adolescent respondents.

While most IDP camps offer some form (however limited) of humanitarian assistance and are explicitly included in humanitarian operations, widow camps’ residents have limited access to humanitarian aid. Aid is currently limited to 46 camps, and access is restricted to local NGOs that have been able to secure

entry permits from camp managers since late 2021 when private funding from Islamic charities and Gulf countries was significantly reduced.²⁷ To date, no INGO has been granted access to the widow camps, which are managed by the Syrian Salvation Government in Idleb's Department of Displaced People and by the Turkish authorities (AFAD) in Aleppo Governorate. Only a few agencies specialised in protection or mental health, including some World Vision local partners, have had access to a select number of sites.²⁸

As a result, little is known of the situation for women and children in those camps. However, quick rapid assessments conducted by local NGOs have raised the alarm about women and children in widow camps facing "the worst of the worst" protection challenges. The majority (57%) of women we spoke to went to widow camps because they had no other place to go, or for perceived increased safety (24%) compared with staying in the communities where they are stigmatised. But instead of finding a safe haven and protection, they met daily abuse, violence and deprivations, including from camp managers and from people outside the camps. Children are exposed to violence and neglect, and almost half of those aged 11 and above whom World Vision spoke with, have lost hope and have no aspirations for their future. Mothers are at 'breaking point' with alarming mental health needs and no income to care for their families, driving them to adopt harmful survival strategies

for themselves and their children. The fact that only 46 widow camps are accessible also means that the situation for thousands of women and children in the other IDP camps is unknown and could be far worse than what we know for those.



© Courtesy of local NGO in NWS. Dalal*, 6, playing with her toy in a widow camp.

NORTHEAST SYRIA'S DEADLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN'S DETENTION CAMPS

Northeast Syria also hosts many IDP camps which include segregated sections for women and children. Al Hol and Roj detention camps are home to over 64,000 people, a large majority of whom are women and children.²⁹ As well as Syrian and Iraqi nationals - many of whom fled from ISIS - there are women and children from 57 other countries, many of whom have also fled their homes to escape ISIS and have been left to languish by their governments. An estimated 12,000 women and children from countries outside Iraq and Syria are detained in the camps - two-thirds are children under 12, and there are many under five.³⁰ Al Hol camp has an annex separated from the main camp by a checkpoint and hosts all women and children (other than Iraqis). Children in the Annex are subjected to various forms of forced separation from their caregivers, and are subjected to violence, exploitation, abuse and deprivation. Women and children are living in appalling conditions, with severely limited access to medical care. Between January and September 2021, at least 62 children died of violence, disease or accidents, with the actual number likely to be much higher.

Unlike widow camps, the grim conditions in which displaced women and children live in northeast Syria have been well-documented. In February 2021, UN experts warned that the conditions and treatment may amount to torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under international law.

SURVEY FINDINGS – LEFT BEHIND WITHOUT HOPE



Key Finding 1:

Children are severely neglected, abused and forced to work

Our research found that **children are bearing the brunt of their mothers' economic deprivations and living conditions. Traumatized, distressed, and isolated, women are unable to care for and protect their children.** Mothers are moving to the widow camps because they are seeking protection and have nowhere else to go. Outside the camps, women are stigmatised, harassed and discriminated against; their children too. However, 16% of women and 26% of children World Vision spoke to, still do not feel safe inside the camps. Sexual harassment (34.4%) and child abuse are the main reasons camp residents report feeling unsafe. Women said that other residents, external people and family members (40.6%, 34.4% and 15.6% respectively) are abusing children in the camp. KII respondents in this study explained that men, male security forces and armed groups are allowed to enter some sites, heightening women and children's risks of sexual and other forms of abuse.



More than **50%** of all women, regardless of their marital status, reported being verbally abused in these camps.

Due to the movement constraints, lack of access to protection services, barriers and risks to disclosing protection incidents, including fear of reprisal, likely stopped even more women and children from speaking out.³¹ Children are known to understate the risk of harm they face, particularly in the absence of awareness services aimed at preventing violence against children.³² Children in the widow camps said they feel unsafe due to abuse (55.5%), harassment (63.8%) and the lack of a safe home (52.7%). Boys are more likely to feel unsafe because of abuse (83.3%) than girls (50%); however, more girls than boys feel unsafe due to harassment (66.7% compared with 50%, respectively).

For children, widow camps are anything but safe. They are neglected by their mothers, verbally and physically abused, married off early and forced into child labour.

Child labour (**61%**), child marriage (**60%**), child neglect (**56%**) and verbal abuse (**53%**) were identified by women as the main forms of violence they *witness*. Children themselves report child neglect (**33%**) as the main form of violence they witness in the camps, followed by child labour (**27%**), verbal abuse (**26%**) and child marriage (**32%**).

Children also experience several forms of violence.

35%



of children told us they have experienced one or more types of violence. Girls, in particular, spoke to us about the high level of physical and emotional violence they are exposed to, including abuse from their mothers. This is largely explained by women and girls' perceived low status in society and intergenerational cycles of violence.³⁴

Of the children who have experienced violence,

63%



of girls (v. 33% of boys) told us they **experience child neglect**, and nearly

50%



of them are **subjected to physical abuse** (v. 33% of boys). Violence increases the likelihood of girls suffering severe depressive issues, including psychological distress, poor self-esteem and hopelessness.

“Harassment, suicide and attempted suicide, isolation from outside world; [this is what is happening in the camps]. Teenage girls feel particularly restricted and they resort to desperate measures, many have attempted suicide.”

KII respondent

Boys face different protection challenges. They see themselves as “providers” and are expected to step up and fulfil the “male roles” in the household. While they are less likely to experience physical and GBV, they are more likely to be sent to work than girls. More than a quarter (30%) of women reported child labour within their household, and 58% of boys as young as 11 who had reported experiencing violence, said they were involved in child labour. Almost half³⁵ of the girls of the same age are also forced to work, including being forced to spend time on household chores and having more responsibility than boys.

World Vision found that girls exposed to protection risks are more likely to be engaged in work than the rest. The prevalence of child labour within widow camps is also likely to be higher when no cash or income-generating activities are available, where movement is restricted and, over the past two years, due to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. One of the KII respondents also said that mothers may also have no choice but to ask their sons to join armed groups due to financial constraints. In multiple interviews, respondents also indicated that camp managers may have links to armed groups. World Vision was told that once the boys are forced to leave the camps, they tend to be looked after by camp managers and many end up being recruited by armed groups. This highlights the vicious cycle of violence, displacement deprivations, lack of livelihoods and educational opportunities and radicalisation³⁶ in a country where conflict shows no sign of ending.

“The camp managers are affiliated with the armed groups who then look after the child boy when he is kicked out of the camp at 11-13 years of age.” KII respondent



Key Finding 2: Sexual violence against women and girls occurs every day

Being isolated in a camp, without income or other means of exerting influence over their circumstances, women are especially vulnerable to sexual abusers.

Around 25% of women stated that they had witnessed sexual abuse in the camp daily, weekly or monthly. However, 9% of women and girls reported experiencing sexual abuse themselves - with the actual number likely to be significantly higher. Under-reporting of sexual abuse is a common limitation of data collection and can be explained by the security context, fear of reprisal, stigma and lack of support services which often prevent victims from reporting or talking about incidents.³⁷ Movement restrictions and lack of access to basic services and livelihoods opportunities both inside and outside the camps increase women's dependency on male guards/camp managers, leaving them with no choice but to engage in survival sex.³⁸ Sexual abuse both inside and outside the camps is common for women and girls. While women and girls face sexual abuse from camp managers and other men accessing the camps, they are equally vulnerable when outside, for example when they work in the fields or when girls are walking to go

to school as very few widow camps have educational facilities, and schools tend to be a few kilometres away.³⁹

“Camp management can be abusive of the women and girls in the camp because they have all the power... the geographical isolation of the camps, the sanitation facilities [that are outside camp residents' tents], also puts them at risk.” KII respondent

“We have seven or eight cases of GBV in general per month ... in terms of rape, maybe per year we have two to three cases; they are often minors. Some women also go alone to work the fields and they are raped there when ploughing the field or picking olives because they are alone.” KII respondent



Key Finding 3: Women and children have extreme mental health and psychosocial support needs, but receive no support

The multiple and severe protection risks faced by women and children in widow camps, coupled with movement restrictions and no access to services and opportunities, exacerbate existing serious mental health challenges caused by the war, displacement and their socio-economic status.

Our results highlight poor emotional well-being compounded by negative feeling of sadness, hopelessness, and despair commonly mentioned by children and women. Mothers are heavily affected by the violence experienced by their children, including when they are responsible for that violence.



Almost all women World Vision spoke to reported having negative feelings (91%), having felt sad or hopeless (95%), while a quarter had been sleep-deprived (25%) in the previous two weeks, primarily as a result of witnessing violence.⁴⁰



Women are **EIGHT TIMES MORE LIKELY** to have negative feelings (e.g. despair, anxiety) if they have witnessed child labour.



Women with children outside the camp are **FIVE TIMES MORE LIKELY** to have negative feelings such as a blue mood, despair, anxiety or feelings of depression.



Women are **SEVEN TIMES MORE LIKELY** if they have witnessed sexual violence or child marriage.



Women are **7.5 TIMES MORE LIKELY** to be bothered by feeling down, depressed or hopeless.

This is particularly concerning given that older Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan have displayed three-times higher rates of mental distress than the average refugee population.⁴¹ WHO estimates that rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and any mental disorder among people exposed to conflict in the previous 10 years are 11%, 15% and 22% respectively.⁴²

Despite the alarming level of protection needs, women have very few options for help. A quarter (24%) reported relying on friends for support. Where local organisations are able to provide support, 35% of women reported being able to access women's centres.⁴³ However, the women we spoke to reported that, these facilities are crucially missing in most of the widow camps. Some women (11.4%) also report seeking help from camp management - the very same people who are, in some cases, perpetrating abuse and violence against children, according to our findings.

Women have no access to mental health professionals and psychosocial support. Only 1.4% had access to a psychologist, reflecting a chronic lack of specialized care across NW Syria.

There are only two psychiatrists for almost 4 million people in the region, and only two facilities have the capacity to manage mental health conditions through inpatient care.⁴⁴ This is also only possible outside the widow camps and many women are not able to reach these facilities due to movement restrictions or long distances. Community support systems that could have provided support systems and recovery for women and children, have also been eroded.

On account of this inadequate specialized care, almost a third of women turn to prayer as a positive way of dealing with their worries. Yet, a worrying 18% choose to disengage from people, further isolating themselves and internalising their feelings. Some also accept their emotions (11%), as hard as that is. When asked about the impact of violence on women, one of the KII respondents reported incidences of women attempting suicide or dying from suicide as a result of the compounding crisis. While no direct statistics were collected on suicide prevalence in the World Vision survey, the level of mental distress and deprivation,

as well as daily exposure to violence,⁴⁵ indicate a potentially heightened prevalence of suicide inside the widow camps when compared with the rate across the rest of NW Syria. Further research into this specific issue is needed.

“Recently we had four women who tried to commit suicide with medication. We have many suicide cases and attempted suicide cases. It’s difficult to measure because when the woman dies, they [camp residents] hide the cause of death.”

KII respondent

Children’s mental health and wellbeing are also severely affected by their living situation. Nearly 30% of children aged 6-10 have felt unhappy or in a bad mood in the past two weeks; 42% have felt stressed and nervous; and 45% told us that their day was not filled with things they love⁴⁶ reflecting a deep sadness and lack of joy in their lives. Older children, aged 11 and above, also often worry

about the future – only 12% never worried. These children know nothing but war. Additionally, younger boys⁴⁷ were more likely to experience those feelings than girls, in particular feelings of unhappiness/bad mood, and being nervous and stressed.

If left unaddressed, children’s prolonged exposure to stress and violence, including any form of emotional, verbal and physical abuse, neglect and the absence of a nurturing and reliable adult support system, has long-term and severe negative consequences and jeopardise a child’s lifetime outcomes. Children who continuously feel extremely sad and fearful, could be at risk of developing moderate to severe mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety.⁴⁸

For children exposed to warfare and under a constant threat of violence, stressors can have a significant effect on their emotional well-being and mental health including anxiety, depression and PTSD, especially for girls, who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and other forms of violence.



© Courtesy of local NGO in NWS. Leen*, 8, waiting for her mother to come back from the mountain to collect woods for heating.



Key Finding 4:

Movement restrictions and lack of essential services drive protection risks in widow camps

Our research found two major drivers of protection risks for women and children in widow camps: **movement restrictions and lack of critical services.**⁴⁹

While the rules vary from camp to camp, in a large majority of cases - and in contrast with other IDP sites - the movement of women and children in widow camps is heavily regulated by camp managers. The level of restrictions largely depends on who is controlling the area, camp management and the funding sources.⁵⁰ Restrictions are most severe in Idlib governorate. When residents are allowed to go out, they must apply for permission and provide a reasonable justification for needing to leave the camp before being issued with a time-limited permit. If they do not come back until the permit expires or return late, they face sanctions such as being denied daily allowance of food.⁵¹

Movement restrictions severely affect mothers' ability to find employment, maintain social networks outside the camps, or access the services they need. It also dramatically impacts children's access to education with schools often unavailable in widow camps.⁵² Children who reported not feeling safe in the camp are 3.5 times more worried about completing their education. Lack of access to schooling also compounds child labour and the risk of child marriage. It also further worsens children's mental health issues, as they are more likely to feel marginalised and hopeless, which makes them vulnerable targets for recruitment and radicalisation.⁵³

"The widow camp residents need permits from the local council or with the administration management to leave the camp. In a normal camp you do not need any permission." KII respondent



© Courtesy of local NGO in NWS. Rania*, 39, looks out the tent window waiting for the water truck to arrive.

"We tried to get the children to access child-friendly spaces outside the camp, but we were not allowed, even if the caregiver gave us consent."

KII respondent

"Some camp managers do not allow the women to go outside to get services; they only allow them to receive services inside the camps. This makes it very difficult, especially for GBV or protection cases, because they cannot explain to camp management why they have to go out."

KII respondent

"Widow camps are like open-air prisons. They are very restrictive with the women, and some of them are only allowed to leave the camp once a week for one hour or so."

KII respondent

88%



of women reported that essential services and facilities are needed in the camps, with women listing as priorities: safe space/protection (44.5%), healthcare (42.5%), income-generating activities (42.5%),⁵⁴ freedom to move outside the camps (33%) and decent shelter (31%).

Although children's needs for services mirrored their mothers',

83.5%



identified accessing safe space/protection services as the main service-provision gap, followed by healthcare (56%) and income-generating activities (46%).

"We did a needs assessment when we first entered the camp, and the needs were really huge. We quickly realised that the women and children in these camps were even more vulnerable than others and at risk of exploitation."

KII respondent

World Vision has responded to the ongoing crisis in northern Syria since 2013, supporting more than 3 million people last year across Syria, Jordan and Turkey – almost half of them children. Preventing and responding to the specific protection issues affecting individuals, families and communities in the hardest-to-reach places – like the so-called widow camps – is at the core of our mission in NW Syria. World Vision, through its implementing local partners, works towards enhancing the protective environment and access to comprehensive GBV support and empowerment for women and girls in 46 widow camps across NW Syria. This project is aimed at complementing existing projects, especially those funded by the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF), to cover gaps and provide additional activities that enhance women and girls' living conditions in these camps, mitigate economic violence and abuse, and attempts at suicide.

This programme targets specialized protection, child protection and GBV services in addition to emergency protection activities. As women and girls remain especially vulnerable, due to the restrictive freedom of movement outside the camps, World Vision plans to set up a women's committee in each of the widow camps to facilitate women's participation in making decisions inside the camp settings. Our protection programme also focuses on structured and non-structured awareness-raising sessions, child protection and GBV case management for children and adults, structured and non-structured psychosocial support and life skills and empowerment training for women and girls to support them with income-generating activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Children are suffering from severe and multiple forms of violence daily, including inside their homes. As their mothers struggle financially, emotionally and psychologically, and without access to safe spaces and child-friendly services and education, they see their hopes and dreams disappearing.

The level of hopelessness and despair among children is heart-breaking.⁵⁵ Almost 30% of 11 - 18-year-olds still dream of going to school and finding a job, but **40% of them have no hope at all.** Their mothers' perception of the future is equally bleak. **Just 3% of women told us they think they will be able to leave the camps within the next three years.**

The survey findings point to the startling level of needs and protection challenges in the widow camps. Arguably, these are drastically higher than in regular camps,⁵⁶ and even greater in the widow camps that remain inaccessible to aid organisations.

However, widow camps remain completely and unjustifiably invisible in the humanitarian response to the conflict.



Women highlighted above everything else that they want an end to the war (71%). They also want access to protection services (63%) and to cash/in kind aid (59%).



Children aged 11-18 called for safe places to live (46%) highlighting their challenging living conditions and high levels of violence and abuse they face in the camps.



They also called for access to education (27%) to enable them to build a future and for the war to end so that they can leave the camp and return home (16.5%).



© Courtesy of local NGO in NWS. Dina*, 41, is sitting in front of her tent watching her kids play inside a widow camp.

We are calling on all humanitarian actors, including the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to specifically advocate for the inclusion of widow camps and all women and children living in those camps in all humanitarian assessments, planning and operations, ensuring that their unique and heightened protection risks are considered and addressed as a matter of priority.



In particular, OCHA must:

- Advocate with camp managers for humanitarian access to the camps and ensure women and children's safe access to external services.
- Work with Sector Cluster leads to coordinate an in-depth multi-sector needs assessment in the widow camps, disaggregating data by age, sex and diversity. Assessments should identify child-protection gaps and challenges, with a focus on violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation, including child labour and child marriage, as well as mental health needs for women and children.
- Allocate emergency funding to respond to the immediate humanitarian needs of women and children in widow camps.



The Health and Protection Clusters must:

- Work with other Clusters on developing and delivering an integrated package of essential services including livelihoods, education, youth empowerment opportunities, cash transfer and safe shelter. The complex vulnerabilities of women and children need to be addressed through a holistic approach.
- Coordinate with the Livelihoods Cluster to integrate the gender-based violence (GBV) vulnerabilities criteria and guidelines in their current and future income-generating projects responding to the needs of women and children in these camps. This will also reduce the impact of forced separations on children, particularly boys, from their mothers.
- Ensure mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) – and adapted sexual and gender-based violence referral pathways – are integrated across Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs)

and available for the women and girls in widow camps. WHO estimates that 1 in 5 (22%) people living in fragile and conflict-affected states suffer from significant mental health issues, including depression and anxiety.⁵⁷ Prolonged exposure to toxic stress can have lifelong negative health effects, especially for women and children. Access to mental health and support services is critical to prevent risks of cognitive disorders, impairments in brain development, and chronic physical and mental illnesses that continue later in life.

- Invest in mobile health and MHPSS services to facilitate easier access to MHPSS services for women and children.



Donors must:

- Fully fund the forthcoming two-year Syria HRP and advocate for the inclusion of widow camps in humanitarian programmes. Despite its importance to the response, the protection sector appeal within the 2021 Syria HRP was only 29% funded,⁵⁸ limiting the ability to fully address issues like child marriage and child labour. Additionally, the Protection Cluster⁵⁹ estimates the funding gap for 2022 at \$US4 million to allow the provision of life-saving and life-sustaining GBV and child protection services to 12,715 women and children in 46 sites.
- Use diplomatic leverage to advocate for humanitarian workers' access to widow camps across NW Syria to ensure the hardest-to-reach women and children are protected from harm and are supported.
- Call on the UN Security Council to support all possible modalities for delivering aid to NW Syria, including by reauthorizing the cross-border mechanism for a minimum of 12 months. This is essential for those living in widow camps who will otherwise be further left behind and deprioritised in the response plans.

- All parties to the conflict must immediately cease grave violations against children, and the international community must hold them accountable for any violations committed. Syria's children have suffered enough. Without accountability, any chance of reconciliation and peace will remain elusive. To this end,
 - the international community must continue to support the United Nations-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) for Syria as to systematically monitor and report grave violations of children's rights, including the tracking of age and sex-disaggregated data on grave violations;
 - the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict should include the grave violations against girls and boys from NW Syria's widow camps in its next country specific report on Syrian Arab Republic and the upcoming Annual Report;
 - UNICEF should provide local actors with access to the widow camps should be provided with MRM orientation trainings. This will enable local organisations to document, review and monitor incidents of grave violations against children, as reported inside the camps.
- Put the issue of widow camps on the agenda of the Brussels VI Syria Conference and ensure that women and children in these camps are prioritised in the Conference deliberations and its outcomes. Recommendations from the Conference should include investment in a comprehensive multi-sector response package covering MHPSS, health, protection, education and livelihoods for the affected women and children.



The humanitarian community, particularly protection actors, must:

- Coordinate with Cluster leads and donors on joint advocacy efforts, and leverage their position of influence to call for full access to existing and new widow camp sites to provide the immediate assistance needed to the women and children in these settings, and ensuring minimum protection standards are met.
- Advocate with local authorities and camp management for women's and children's right to freedom of movement as prescribed by the UN Child Rights Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the purpose of facilitating access to basic services outside the camps.
- Advocate for and prioritise the specific needs of, boys aged 11 and above, who are forced to separate from their mothers living in the widow camps. In the absence of an alternative system of care, these children are exposed to increased child-protection risks, including recruitment into armed groups.
- Prioritise investment in raising awareness activities towards the host communities and IDP camps to prevent discrimination against children and women from the widow camps. This should be complemented with the provision of community-based services which will support the psychosocial well-being of the widows and their children.

ENDNOTES

¹ Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021. Accessible online here: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2021-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-march-2021-enar>

² World Vision International Report, March 2021, *Too High A cost To Pay*, p:6 <https://www.wvi.org/emergencies/syria-crisis-response/syria10/cost-conflict-syrias-children>

³ According to the Gender Based Sub Cluster from NWS, there are 46 widow camps spread across the region. See, GBV Sub Cluster NW Syria, December 2021, *Briefing on Widow Camps*, p:1.

⁴ UNFPA report, December 2021, *Voices from Syria 2021*, p: 54. Accessible online here: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/voices_2021_-_final_180521_eng.pdf

⁵ In spring 2021, six partners of the GBV Sub Cluster worked through one consortium to assess the current situation of the so-called: "Widow Camps" in NW Syria. As a result, the assessment field teams reached out and managed to access 46 widow camps in both Aleppo and Idlib governorates. The last Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund managed to fund partners working in 43 widow camps in Aleppo and Idlib. However, most of the interventions funded are still pilot and lack the ability to provide comprehensive, long-term services to women, girls and children living in these camps.

⁶ GBV Sub Cluster NW Syria, December 2021, *Briefing on Widow Camps*, p:2.

⁷ Syria Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) 2022.

⁸ See below section on Findings on Mental Health and Key Informant Interviews notes.

⁹ Based on World Vision survey in the so-called widow camps, 25.7% of girls aged 11-18 and 8.3% boys who experienced violence reported experiencing child marriage. 32% (24 out of 74) of minors who responded also reported witnessing child marriage.

¹⁰ Boys aged 11 and above are asked to leave the widow camps, and separate from their mothers; yet, the exact age is set by each camp management separately, and differs from one camp to another.

¹¹ Ibid 10

¹² GBV Sub Cluster NW Syria, December 2021, *Briefing on Widow Camps*, also reinforces the same - "Reports indicate a strong need for additional services, particularly shelter, health, GBV prevention and response, including women and girls' safe spaces, and support for civil documentation."

¹³ OCHA Financial Tracking System, Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2021. Accessed on 16 February 2022. Available online here: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1044/clusters>

¹⁴ OCHA, Situation Report 30, August 2021. *Developments in north-west Syria and Ras Al Ain – Tell Abiad*, p:4. Accessible online here: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/nws_and_raata_sitrep30_august2021_20210913.pdf

¹⁵ Ibid 12.

¹⁶ WFP blog post, 26 July 2021, *Germany supports WFP assistance in Syria as humanitarian needs reach unprecedented levels*. Accessible online here: <https://www.wfp.org/news/germany-supports-wfp-assistance-syria-humanitarian-needs-reach-unprecedented-levels>

¹⁷ Ibid 1.

¹⁸ In 2015, Syrian HRP was funded at its lowest to date, 42.9% according to the OCHA Financial Tracking System.

¹⁹ OCHA Financial Tracking System, *Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2021*. Accessed 11 February 2022.

²⁰ Ibid 2.

²¹ OCHA Flash Update, 5 March 2020, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria*, p:1. Accessible online here: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/nws_flash_update_20200305_final.pdf

²² World Vision Syria Response policy brief, November 2021, *Shattered Lives: Understanding the Mental Health and Psychological Needs of Women and Children in Northwest Syria*, p:1-2; Almost one in five of all recorded suicide attempts and deaths in NWS are children and all of the internally displaced in Idlib have experienced at least one life threatening event and at least one Post-Traumatic Stress Symptom (PTSD) according to Syria Relief Report, March 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-west-syria-number-suicide-attempts-and-deaths-rise-sharply> 99% as per the Syria Relief's 2011 report, p:11 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ptsd%20report%20-%20final.pdf>

²³ Turkey Cross-Border Protection Cluster, GBV Sub Cluster, Child Protection Working Group, CCCM Cluster, April 2019, *Mitigating Protection Risks in IDP Sites Exclusive to Widowed and Divorced Women and Girls*, p:1. Accessible online here: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/guidance_note-_mitigating_protection_risks_in_idp_sites_exclusive_to_widowed_and_divorced_women_and_girls_final.pdf

²⁴ World Vision made the decision not to conduct any data collection in the widow camps associated with foreign fighters on the ground of lack of access, camp residents' potential associated risks which could have affected the authenticity of the data collected, and staff safety.

²⁵ The data collection inside the widow camps was carried out between 23-26 January 2022, by phone or in person depending on accessibility into these camps due to adverse weather conditions.

²⁶ Whilst our research found that 20% of women have children outside the camp, those children are not unaccompanied. However, according to existing evidence, we know that there is a worryingly large number of separated/unaccompanied children outside widow camps.

²⁷ Ibid, 6. This was also mentioned in the KIs we conducted for the research.

²⁸ Ibid 6.

²⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Syria, 8 February 2021, *UN experts urge 57 States to repatriate women and children from squalid camps*. Accessible online here: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26730&LangID=E>

³⁰ Rights & Security International report, October 2021, *Abandoned to Torture: Dehumanising rights violations against children and women in northeast Syria*, p:11. Accessible online here: https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Abandoned_to_Torture_-_Final_Report.pdf

³¹ UN report of the Secretary General, 23 March 2015, *Conflict-related Sexual Violence*, p:33. Available online here: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/790993?ln=en> <https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/CPMS-2019-EN.pdf>

³² As per World Vision's experience implementing child protection services in fragile states, including case management and referrals as well as The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Aid, accessible online here: <https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/CPMS-2019-EN.pdf>

³³ Exact figure is 34% based on World Vision's data analysis conducted for the purposes of this report.

³⁴ World Vision International report, October 2021, *Empowered Women, Empowered Children: Mixed method design to examine the relationship between women's empowerment and the well-being of children in structured families in Syria Response countries*, p:9. Accessible online here: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GESI%20report%20final%20designed.pdf>

³⁵ Exact figure is 48.6% based on World Vision data analysis conducted for the purposes of this report.

³⁶ International Alert report, 2016, *Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria*, p:5. Accessible online here: <https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Syria-Youth-Recruitment-Extremist-Groups-EN-016.pdf> and Newline Institute report, August 2019, *Deradicalizing Syria's Children of ISIS*. Accessible online here: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Deradicalizing-Syrias-Children-of-ISIS-1.pdf>

³⁷ UN News, 15 June 2020, *Children caught in conflict facing "brutality and fear while the world watches"*. Accessible online here: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066342>

³⁸ As reported in KIs.

³⁹ As reported in KIs.

⁴⁰ We also found that women with children outside the camps are five times more likely to have negative feelings and 7.5 more times likely to be feeling depressed or down, which is likely to impact on their behaviour towards their other children.

⁴¹ HelpAge, HI analysis, 9 April 2014, *Hidden Victims of the Syrian crisis: disabled, injured and older refugees*. Available online here: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/hidden-victims-syrian-crisis-disabled-injured-and-older-refugees>

⁴² WHO news post, 11 January 2022, WHO psychological intervention effective in preventing mental disorders among Syrian refugees in Turkey. Accessible online here: <https://www.who.int/news/item/11-01-2022-who-psychological-intervention-effective-in-preventing-mental-disorders-among-syrian-refugees-in-turkey>

⁴³ Women safe spaces where communities (and humanitarian actors) create nurturing environments in which women and girls can access free and structured activities, recreation, leisure and learning and vocational activities.

⁴⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2-psychiatrists-almost-4-million-people>

⁴⁵ According to Health Cluster data, and Save the Children's 2021 report, almost one in five of all recorded suicide attempts and deaths in North West Syria are children, with a total of 246 suicides and 1,748 attempts recorded in 2020.

⁴⁶ WHO well-being scale interview questions applicable for children in the younger age group.

⁴⁷ Aged 6 to 10 year old

⁴⁸ World Vision and War Child Holland report, April 2021, *The Silent Pandemic*, p:4. Accessible online here: <https://www.wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/silent-pandemic>

⁴⁹ Although our research found no specific positive correlation between access to services and protection risks, this is due to the complete lack of such services that would enable a comparison; but given the concerning levels of sexual abuse, mental health issues and harmful negative coping mechanisms for children, we believe the impact is disastrous for the physical, mental and emotional well-being of mothers and children alike.

⁵⁰ For example, widow camps in Idlib that are funded by the Qatari Government have more severe restrictions for women and children as per the KI interviews conducted.

⁵¹ Maram Foundation Rapid Needs Assessment Report, 2020, *Widows Camps in NW Syria*, unpublished.

⁵² As reported by local partners' assessments and in the KIs.

⁵³ Migration Policy Institute report, October 2015, *The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children*, p:11. Accessible online here: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/FCD-Sirin-Rogers-FINAL.pdf>

⁵⁴ 35% of women listed vocational training, which is linked to income generating activities.

⁵⁵ Exact figure is 27% based on World Vision's data analysis conducted for the purposes of this report.

⁵⁶ Please see the CCCM Cluster, Syria (Turkey cross-border) here: <https://ccmcluster.org/operations/syria>

⁵⁷ WHO blog post, 11 June 2019, *Mental Health in Emergencies*. Accessible online here: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-in-emergencies>

⁵⁸ OCHA Financial Tracking System, Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2021. Accessed on 16 February 2022. Available online here: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1044/clusters>

⁵⁹ Particularly the GBV and CP Sub Clusters

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