



EXPLORING INNOVATIVE MONITORING AND EVALUATION PRACTICES TAILORED FOR GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE PROGRAMMES

Taking a Local Perspective: Syria



ABOUT ELRHA

Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) is a grant making facility supporting organisations and individuals to identify, nurture and share innovative and scalable solutions to the most pressing challenges facing effective humanitarian assistance. Elrha's HIF is funded by aid from the UK Government (DFID) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

Visit www.elrha.org for more information about Elrha's Work to improve humanitarian outcomes through research, innovation and partnerships.

ABOUT THE CONSORTIUM

The consortium was established for the purpose of applying the HIF/Elrha grant funding call to implement a project "measuring the impact of GBV programs based on a local perspective".

The consortium members are:

- **Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA):** SEMA, the lead member, is a non-political, non-profit, medical relief organization, registered in Turkey, and works mainly in health, protection and nutrition sectors.
SEMA believes in a world where vulnerable people are no longer exist, and provides access to its services, while pursuing the highest standards of quality under the slogan: "We Hold Good for All". Visit www.sema-sy.org for more information about SEMA's work, the implemented projects and the partnerships SEMA has.
- **Syrian Bright Future (SBF):** SBF is a Syrian NGO specialized in MHPSS, protection and capacity building. SBF has worked in GBV and protection in general since 2012.
- **Women Now for Development (WND):** WND is specialized in women's empowerment projects and works in protection. WND leads many campaigns to raise the awareness about GBV related issues.

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Executive Summary

In the Syrian context, where the conflict has lasted for more than nine years, gender-based violence (GBV) is an inevitable consequence. GBV is widely spread, especially among vulnerable groups such as women, children, elderly, and people with disability. Although there is a large number of GBV projects, the effectiveness of these projects or their relevance to reality is not clear and is hard to measure. In response to the call made by Elrha's HIF to explore the practices used to measure the impact of gender-based violence projects in Syria, and to draw out potential innovations, the consortium implemented activities over six months. The project activities included two questionnaires, focus group discussions (8 groups, 4 in Syria and 4 in Turkey) and key informant interviews (16 interviews, 11 in Syria and 5 in Turkey).

The most prominent findings are:

- The understanding of gender-based violence concepts in the context is still not enough, even from some service providers.
- There is a gap between GBV technical staff and M&E staff. It seems they both do not know about the nature of the other's work.
- There is a shortage of female staff in M&E field.
- Most monitoring and evaluation approaches focus on monitoring activities through the number of beneficiaries, the number of awareness-raising sessions, the results of pre and post-tests, in addition to the number of positively closed cases with case management.
- There is not much focus on impact measurement. The few examples of impact measurement include follow-up with beneficiaries after the project ends to find out if they economically empowered, and collecting success stories.
- Practices that may have innovation potential are:
 1. Taking advantage of modern technology and applications in monitoring and evaluation, and benefiting from cluster coordination mechanisms to establish a comprehensive evaluation system.
 2. Developing the practice of "collecting success stories", so more deep insights about the real impact of GBV programs can be captured in a context-relevant way.

Introduction

In March 2019, Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund supported the Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA) to undertake the project "*Exploring Innovative Monitoring and Evaluation Practices Tailored for Gender-based Violence Programmes*". The project aimed to provide a deeper understanding of gender-based violence (GBV) monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches in Syria.

Nearly nine years of conflict in Syria has left many people, whether inside or outside the country, vulnerable to many different forms of GBV. Despite the reasonable number of organisations working on GBV in the area, the information needed on currently applied M&E practices, gaps, and innovative opportunities for development is still very limited.

This information is needed to successfully assess the impact and outcomes of such programmes, regardless of the presence of obstacles including the nature of the protracted crisis, conservative society, ever-changing dominance-map among fighting groups including extremists, and the highly competitive environment among implementing organisations.

This project sought to raise the perception level of stakeholders and organisations supporting GBV programmes by providing a better understanding of the current barriers, methodologies, and opportunities for innovation. It also aimed to consider how M&E tools could be more effective to support the measurement of the impact and outcomes of such programmes.

This learning document presents the key findings of the project following a process of in-depth analysis, joint discussions, reflection, and information sharing. Here, the consortium has identified potential opportunities for innovation to improve the flow of information, services, and optimal conclusions in M&E.

We hope this will be helpful for practitioners and implementers and will further enrich the knowledge, studies, and the innovative ideas for those who are interested.

A Review of Current Practices and Key Challenges to Measuring the Impact of GBV Programs in the Syrian Context

Current Practices and Perceptions

A general overview on the implementation of GBV programs

There are organizations that carry out activities, which are mainly GBV-related and give them indirect names to encourage the survivor to participate in, and to reduce the negative view by the community towards these activities. This may add a new challenge to the implementing organization to evaluate the activity and measure its impact. "Our society does not accept GBV projects and the psychological support, and just mentioning that this centre for recovery and for psychological support no one will come, (so that) it is called empowerment centre".

Some of the Community Based Organizations carry out projects that have protection and GBV related activities without knowing that these activities are actually under GBV. This may also hinder their understanding of the need to assess the activity and measure its impact.

Other local organizations carry out GBV activities secretly in the community. They are aware that these are GBV activities but still, they are not fully aware of the need to assess and measure their impact.

The lack of a clear understanding of GBV among humanitarian workers themselves may further hinder evaluation and impact measurement. For example, one participant in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) said that: "economic violence is the deprivation of resources and the empowerment doesn't relate to GBV".

On the other hand, some humanitarian workers consider that the advocacy for women's political and social issues is part of civil and political organizations work and not related to humanitarian organizations. One interviewee said: "It is carried out by civil organizations and not by humanitarian ones".

Most GBV project activities and services focus almost exclusively on women and girls without men and boys (recently, special awareness sessions for men and boys have been developed by GBV sub-cluster), which negatively influenced the measurement of the impact these activities are supposed to have. "Honestly, we have not yet reached to the measurement of the impact because we cannot study one category in the community and we ask for GBV activities for men. For example, when we talk about early marriage, it is not useful to talk only to the girl, but we need to advocate with men to reach the desired goal. Another participant said "we raise girls' awareness on early marriage and early pregnancy and we do not raise boys and men awareness. If the young men are aware, the number of early marriage cases may decrease in some locations. "

A general overview on the implementation of M&E activities

Most GBV related activities in the Syrian context rely on fixed or mobile sites to provide outreach, psychosocial support and case management activities. The activities provided by

the organizations vary per district, available funds, organization experience and more. However, the above-mentioned components are the most common activities of GBV in the Syrian context.

There is a marked absence of standardized M&E approaches used by all organizations working in GBV in northwest Syria. It was also noted, during KIIs and FGDs, that there was no systematic use of indicators that assess the extent to which implementing organization adhered to the principles of humanitarian work and M&E approaches, while other concrete indicators had more attention.

The lack of female staff in M&E teams may make the monitoring and evaluation process less effective. Due to gender sensitivity in society, it is difficult for female survivors to fully disclose and express the concerns to male workers. Thus, one of the recommendations is to attract and train women in the monitoring and evaluation process so that they can reach beneficiaries and get their evaluation of services more effectively, in a safe and confidential manner.

Sometimes M&E tools are designed without the engagement of field M&E teams who are more familiar with the researched communities. This poses challenges for the field teams in explaining the tool to the participants and encouraging them to effectively fill it out so we can optimize the translation of the results.

Despite the lack of systematic use of monitoring and evaluation indicators, most organizations carry out the same monitoring and evaluation activities, due to communication among organizations, coordination meetings they regularly attend, and the staff movements from one organization to another transferring experience and ideas.

The Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) SEMA conducted indicated that most of the M&E activities used by organizations include: Surveys, KIIs, and observations by M&E teams. One of the interviewees said: "We have a training centre to raise the skills of women; we have internal monitoring for all of the activities. The task of monitoring is to check all the activities in the centre. Tools we use are surveys, KIIs, sometimes the notes observed by M&E employee while GBV and psychological support activities".

For some community-based organizations that do not have monitoring and evaluation systems, they depend on recording the number of attendees or beneficiaries at the sessions. The high turnout indicates the positive impact and the encouragement for further participation in the upcoming sessions. An interviewee said: "When twenty women come we feel the good impact on them", another interviewee was asked: "have you ever measured the impact after the project ends?" she answered, "Practically, no, we don't use tools but we can only know that the number of women has increased by these training".

Others emphasize that there are no monitoring and evaluation activities for GBV projects. What is done is an assessment of the organization as a whole. The success of the work is assessed by the turnout to the centre and the community acceptance. One of the centres' managers says: "Being a manager in a GBV centre, I monitor the performance, and provide technical consultation; I have no M&E activities just rely on the turnout to assess the activity

(annually, semi-annually, and sometimes monthly). The centre is assessed as a whole; I confirm the lack of the actual evaluation". Another participant in one of FGDs conducted inside Syria considered that relying solely on turnout does not reflect the real impact, because beneficiaries may use the centre for getting other services such as money, or vocational training without being aware of the GBV and psycho-social support (PSS) activities especially when centre has indirect name. An interviewee said: "The project did not succeed as a GBV or PSS centre and we did not mobilize the community to accept PSS, people come to get trained on hair-dressing or wool-knitting and not to access PSS service."

Another participant says that they use the numbers of beneficiaries, success stories and comparisons between pre and post indicators to monitor and evaluate the project, but no indicators are used to effectively assess the actual impact. Thus, the project can continue as long as funding is available. "We use tools: Success stories, numbers of beneficiaries, pre and post-assessments, and FGDs in monitoring the project. The pre-project phase is to identify the needs and determine the scope of the project. There are no (long-term) indicators therefore the project may last one year, or two, or five".

Others said they rely on Most Significant Change method in the city or the district they work in, to evaluate their project. They link general indicators with the impact measurement despite not having a systematic approach to allow for collecting and documenting these changes, in order to confirm the cause-and-effect between the activities carried out and the presented results. For example, one participant said: "the increasing number of women who found a job, and the increasing number of women's empowerment centres are linked to the impact that GBV programs produce".

Some organizations conduct the community preparedness assessment before starting implementation. They share key ideas of the proposed project with the community and then assess their acceptance of it. In case the community rejects the project, it will be cancelled, such as the project of *Folk Dance for females*.

When asked: Is the continuation of the project linked to the results of evaluation (or impact measurement)? Some linked the continuity of the project to its success by having the impact on the community, while others linked it to the availability of funds. For those who linked it to its impact or evaluation's results, they justified it through explaining the process as: GBV technical Focal Point (FP) would explain project activities to M&E technical FP, then M&E FP would design the appropriate tools then collect data, afterward, GBV technical FP would analyze data and conclude findings, finally M&E FP is able to study the final results and evaluate the feasibility, quality, and effectiveness of the project.

A general overview on the humanitarian work environment:

There has been a gap between GBV and M&E technical teams in some organizations. The average knowledge of each team about the other's work is 34%. The researchers reckon this will greatly affect the project stages: designing, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Lack of knowledge is attributed to the following:

- The GBV technical team considers that the GBV projects have specific privacy more than other projects. Thus, M&E team should have a limited role, especially in case management.
- GBV team members think that they are more capable of developing M&E tools than the M&E teams as they are more knowledgeable and more familiar with the needs. While M&E teams mostly work on ready-made toolkits without previous specialties in GBV. Some participants said: [“the monitoring and evaluation of GBV survivor don't assess her/his recovery and well-being but it assesses the empowerment services: wool knitting, tailoring”](#).
- There is a sensitivity between GBV and M&E technical teams. It is misunderstood by most organizations that the monitoring process is an error-spying activity, and not realised as a process to monitor, evaluate, and measure the impact of the project and the quality of service.
- Male M&E staff face difficulties accessing Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) as these spaces are dedicated only to women and girls.
- The workload on each team (GBV, M&E) in the same organization keeps both sides busy so they do not have time to set together and coordinate their activities in a way that gives synergy and complementarity.

A general overview on Administration, Human Resources and Training:

The lack of females working in M&E may make the monitoring and evaluation process less effective due to gender sensitivity in society. It is often difficult for females to fully disclose and express the concerns to male workers. Thus, one of the recommendations is to attract and train females in the monitoring and evaluation process so that they can reach beneficiaries and get their evaluation of services in a safe and confidential manner.

The M&E male staff also face restriction in accessing the WGSS in most times, as these are safe spaces dedicated to women and girls.

Remote management sometimes puts pressure on the monitoring and evaluation of GBV projects. This requires using a developed M&E system that includes multiple forms and tools. Contrastingly, this may lead to further complaints by beneficiaries and humanitarian workers to repeatedly fill out different forms.

Furthermore, most organizations do not provide technical training for M&E teams in regards to GBV programs. Increasing this would be beneficial to improve communication between these teams.

Key Challenges

Some of the key challenges for translating data into better programming were found to be:

- Lack of standardized systems capable of collecting and analysing information, identifying and addressing gaps and building on results obtained to enable us to further improve our tools and activities.
- The absence of post-closure assessment in specialized services, such as case management, makes it very difficult to measure the impact of GBV response programs.
- GBV and M&E teams do not often coordinate enough to achieve successful monitoring and evaluation activities for GBV programs.
- Lack of projects that last more than a year leading to stoppage in service delivery. This is one of the key factors that hindered this study and hinders the translation of data into better programming.
- GBV programs that focus on prevention usually need longer-term continuation to achieve intended results (e.g. changes in social attitudes etc.), another factor that hindered this study and translation of data into better programming.

Existing Good Practices that Successfully Measure the Impact of GBV programs in the Syrian Context.

Despite the above, there are some monitoring and evaluation practices being employed in the Syrian context to measure GBV programs that do work, these include:

- One organization has a special tool to measure the gap in the community and applies it before, during and after the project. Although its project is not the only one in the area where they are implementing, they have made a baseline assessment before starting the project, covering the majority of the target community. This organization intends to assess the reality of GBV in the middle and at the end of the project. Basically, it is a best practice, but it is uncommon in the Syrian context, so we believe that following it up and the results of its assessments may show us a good opportunity to improve impact measurement practices.
- On another level, some organizations apply a baseline and end line practice to measure the impact of projects on individual cases (e.g. to assess improvement in psycho-social wellbeing of women and girls). This is a best practice but, still uncommon in the Syrian context.
- There are some outstanding practices in evaluating the projects several months after their completion. For example, following up with beneficiaries who were able to support themselves after participating in "Economic Empowerment Projects". Some organizations created a WhatsApp Group to ensure continuous consultation. The

organization, through this group, was able to know who found a job and thus became aware of the success rate of interventions. The project researchers believe that studying such practices and mainstreaming them over the rest of activities may contribute to improving our capacity to measure the real long-term impact. This in turn, helps to adopt successful projects and interventions and abandon projects and activities that do not achieve tangible impact. Sometimes follow-up can be costly, and here we need to do advocacy with donors to fund post-project evaluation assessments. On the other hand, follow-up can sometimes be inexpensive but there is no motivation for organizations to do so. Hence, organizations should be urged to proceed with it.

- Some organizations design their projects in phases starting with a pilot phase that lasts long enough to measure its impact and then plan the second phase according to the first phase evaluation results. The project researchers found out one organization measures the societal impact of all its activities including case management and awareness-raising through qualitative data rather than numbers and results. This is done through personal communication, through e-mail or through case managers. It also conducts FGDs and adds bullet points to the project proposal for the upcoming year. These sessions identify the needs of the community and monitor its acceptance at the end of the project. Moreover, a number of participants expressed the need to conduct FGDs and evaluation sessions during the implementation of the project in order to assess its progress.
- Some organizations have benefited from their collaboration with third party M&E teams, and they developed their existing tools based on the strengths of the third parties' practices and now they regularly review and evaluate those tools.
- Some organizations succeeded in bringing together M&E and GBV technical teams in the same project activities. This enhanced the awareness and knowledge of roles of both and highlighted the need for scaling up M&E teams' capacities on GBV.

Opportunities for Innovation

Based on the definition of the innovation adopted by Elrha, and followed by project team, the following elements were considered:

- Identifying challenges or opportunity of innovation.
- Exploring and developing innovative tools and approaches in response to challenges and opportunities identified.
- Testing and disseminating these tools to improve humanitarian work.

The project researchers have identified two key ideas that need further exploration in the future to enable us reach innovative tools.

1. Advantage of Technology:

The development of programs and mechanisms that can collect, coordinate and analyze information using up-to-date technology means is considered one of the most essential ideas worth pursuing. For example, GBV Information Management System (GBV IMS), and the programming of electronic applications can be downloaded on smartphones' systems that help the survivors reach services and allow them to share their feedback, satisfaction, or concerns. This will significantly contribute to the impact measurement. In addition, project researchers think that the impact measurement requires collective efforts and is difficult to do individually. Therefore, relying on digital platforms or electronic applications capable of bringing together the efforts of the majority of humanitarian actors is the best way to measure the impact in a complex context such as the Syrian one.

What makes this option an innovative opportunity?

- The interest of GBV sub-cluster management to activate the monitoring and evaluation component for GBV programs.
- The interest of most organizations in standardizing the GBV M&E tools.
- The existence of experiments that some organizations are working on to use mobile applications in providing a secure communication channel with beneficiaries. This can be developed to include monitoring and evaluation elements, and to measure impact.
- The existence of similar experiences in other sectors within the Syrian context, e.g. the Health cluster has a system for collecting all health information.
- The existence of Syrian expertise capable of supervising information management projects with high efficiency.
- The existence of some practices applied in other similar contexts (Iraqi context), that include Commcare and Primero programs.

How this innovative opportunity can be further explored?

This opportunity can be explored through collaboration with GBV sub-cluster and the sub-cluster monitoring and evaluation-working group, in addition to the coordination with the consultant that the GBV sub-cluster intends to hire soon. The consultant will support data collection and data analysis and will contribute to tools standardization. Many workshops can be held involving specialized teams (M&E, GBV, IT etc.) to design and program the final output. A simple application can be launched first to be gradually developed every 3-6 months.

We can also review the use of software like Primero and Commcare in other contexts, to promote the strengths and address the weaknesses (if any), to be tested in the Syrian context. Primero and Commcare are systems that are rolled out through the coordination mechanism, as they are developed to serve the purpose of collecting and consolidating data from a number of different actors. The GBV sub-cluster intends to do an assessment to assess the cost/resource/time required for an organization and partners, and to assess if the conditions for such a roll out exist before considering including it in next year's GBV sub-cluster work plan. Through an inter-agency assessment, different elements including safety will be looked at, and this will lead to identification of which of these systems are best fit to our context.

Coordination with the Global GBVIMS team will also be needed at all stages. SEMA is also seeking to study and assess these systems through a potential partnership with World Vision International and thus to pave the way to copying this experiment on the ground.

2. Advantage of success stories:

Most organizations use success stories to evaluate their projects. Although the concept of a success story may vary from one organization to another or from one person to another, it is still considered as a useful practice of evaluating GBV projects. This is especially true when stories arise in such a complex and sensitive society socially, culturally and in terms of security. For example, an organization tracks the identified cases for 6 months after receiving the services, calculates the percentage of success, and highlights its most distinctive points, to be discussed later and developed individually and deeply.

Why this option needs an in-depth exploration?

The researchers advocate for the large-scale sharing and compiling of success stories captured by humanitarian actors and implementers with the concerned stakeholders. This gives a conclusive impression and deeper information about the impact of GBV projects and activities in Syrian society and contributes to the positive change of attitudes of humanitarian workers and the community itself about GBV.

Final Recommendations

Final recommendations by project's researchers to improve the monitoring and evaluation of GBV programming in Syria include:

Work with the GBV sub-cluster - Working at the GBV sub-cluster level when developing digital or electronic M&E practices and tools is important as this supports the human and financial resources needed, enlarges the scale of access within the target community, and widens the spread of the resulted standardized tools.

Consider social and cultural attitudes - When measuring the impact of GBV programs, it is important to consider a range of external or interrelated factors that may have a greater impact than the common ones. For instance: Social and cultural attitudes in the community and by humanitarian actors towards "gender", efficacy of humanitarian actors, changes in social roles of men and women during the crisis, and the involvement of men in GBV programs.

Adopt existing M&E tools - There are many sources and tools developed for the M&E process, many of which have been shared by GBV sub-cluster but are not being used. On another hand, there is a point of view that the currently used tools are no longer accepted, by both survivors and humanitarian actors. This is due to the number of forms to be filled out and questions to be answered, and it is time to find out new usable and innovative ones, taking into account the confidentiality and privacy of the beneficiaries. This reflects the need to urge organizations to adopt existing tools and to get their staff trained to use them. (This may be

one of the follow-up activities of our project that the sub-cluster intends to form and activate, and which enhances the sustainability of our project). Afterward, we can study the weaknesses of these tools to be addressed and thus the tools are improved.

Raise awareness of M&E as a process to increase transparency, learning and accountability

– Recognize the importance of highlighting “learning and accountability” in the MEAL department. Learning and accountability requires a complete system based on transparency, governance, and policies. Learning and accountability should not be considered as a tool for spotting and error-spying for humanitarian workers. One of the interviewees said: ["I suggest to focus more on the learning and accountability sections in MEAL department, for example, one NGO encountered weaknesses and strengths in different points of its project. After the end of the project and the launch of a new one, the same weaknesses re-appeared again because they did not learn from previous experiences. Most NGOs have MEAL department but are not adequately committed to activating the role of learning and accountability. I hope to have a system either at organization/or organizations level that ensures this commitment"](#).

Bridge the gap between GBV and M&E technical teams - It is important to bridge the gap between GBV and M&E technical teams and to have more regular discussions and brainstorming on the tools and approaches of the evaluation, development, and innovation. This could also include GBV basics training for the MEAL staff and MEAL training for GBV staff so they could undertake M&E responsibilities that are conducted by GBV staff (e.g. satisfaction surveys at the end of case management).

Make use of Appropriate Technology - It is important to introduce technology-based means that can be used by both beneficiaries and humanitarian workers to enhance remote management. It is also useful to use social media applications that Syrians have become mostly familiar with during the crisis.

Increase the capacity of GBV and M&E technical teams - It is important to scale up the capacity of both GBV and monitoring and evaluation technical teams, through innovative training interventions that follow an actual need assessment and a practical work-plan. The training in addition to the supervision will enhance the competencies of GBV service providers and will mitigate the challenges that may be faced, thus it will improve the quality of service and the satisfaction of survivors and eventually will contribute to the impact measurement.

Use a scientific approach if designing M&E tools - Organizations that rely on themselves in designing their M&E tools, should pay attention to the scientific approach to ensure the quality of the implementation, which contributes to the impact measurement.

Recruit more female M&E staff – It is important to attract and train female staff in the monitoring and evaluation process for GBV projects, so that they can easily reach the beneficiaries and get their evaluation of services.

Next Steps

While introducing the project and its objectives, the GBV sub-cluster Turkey Hub has shown outstanding interest and encouragement as this project paves the way to the development of standardized M&E Tools and practices, which is one of 2019 GBV sub-cluster's priorities. As a result, the consortium was given the leadership to proceed in the identification of the currently applied GBV M&E tools and practices and to contribute to the development of the standardized tools. The consortium, in turn, expressed its willingness to make any voluntary efforts to support the GBV sub-cluster in carrying out the monitoring and evaluation activities tailored for GBV projects for the now being or in the future. Consequently, our work was adopted in the GBV sub-cluster work-plan for 2020.

The GBV sub-cluster have decided to continue to support our work beyond the scope of this project by hiring a consultant who will rely on our research findings and recommendations. The consultant will later contribute to the standardization of M&E tools for GBV programs that will be used by the entire GBV sub-cluster in Northwest Syria.

SEMA and SBF will continue to work with GBV sub-cluster monitoring and evaluation working group to support the development of the standardization of GBV M&E tools kit by forming the technical committee.