

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND

In Her Words

Stories of adolescent girls
living in humanitarian
settings in the Arab Region

“ I’m lonely sailing in the face of all the difficulties.
I’m the only one who decides my destination.
I’m the captain.”

— Hanan, northwestern Syria

Cover art by Gail Gosschalk



DEVELOPED BY THE REGIONAL
HUMANITARIAN HUB FOR SYRIA AND
THE ARAB STATES

“ My words are important.
They’re all I have left.
I’m glad someone is listening.

— Ruba, Jordan

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In the course of developing this project, we embarked on a fascinating endeavor to explore what adolescent girls in the region have to say, either through words, illustrations, music, or any other form of communication. Their boundless capacity for creative self-expression, particularly when provided with the right tools and guidance, has been crucial to making this initiative possible.

Prologue

“ I My mother taught me to keep learning,
to be the best person I can be,
**and to never bow my head down to those
who wish to steal my dignity.**

— Yara, Lebanon



In Her Words aims to amplify the voices of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings throughout the Arab region, including Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, and the Whole of Syria.

Today, several regions in the Arab states are coping with the lasting impacts of longstanding and emerging humanitarian situations. Both the Syria and Yemen crises have marked their tenth years, while recent developments in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Lebanon have resulted in additional displacements and disruptions in community networks, placing the lives and dignities of millions of people at risk. The lingering effects of the humanitarian situations in Palestine, Iraq, Somalia, and Libya also continue to produce numerous and protracted challenges that require strategic responses.

Meanwhile, the worsening impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the challenges facing communities in those countries, impeding access to lifesaving sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and gender-based violence (GBV) services and resulting in restrictions on movement that have significantly increased the risks of violence against women and girls in communities throughout the region. The pandemic has also intensified the economic fallout of these crises, which in turn have further disrupted social safety nets and increased the likelihood of negative coping mechanisms such as sexual exploitation and child and forced marriages.

Today, several regions in the Arab states are coping with the lasting impacts of longstanding and emerging humanitarian situations.

As in other parts of the world, adolescent girls in the region face a dual reality. They strive to experience the full breadth of their childhoods but are significantly impacted by rigid gender norms that manifest at a young age to significantly limit their opportunities. They are often told — and conditioned to believe — that they are worth less, and yet somehow find themselves shouldering enormous responsibilities. Many have their childhoods taken from them altogether through the myriad forms of gender-based violence, including harassment, early and forced marriage, early pregnancies, sexual violence, and others. Meanwhile, girls in numerous communities in the region continue to experience their formative years amid large-scale and protracted humanitarian crises, some of which have been ongoing for decades. These crises have further exacerbated the risks and challenges facing adolescent girls, exposing them to additional restrictions, loss of opportunities, and various forms of gender-based violence. UNFPA's programme data shows that girls in humanitarian settings face a web of violence throughout the course of their lives. Denial of resources and opportunities, restrictions on movement, harassment, child and serial marriages, internet-related risks such as online harassment and sextortion, and many other forms of gender-based violence have become daily realities for many.

Despite the many challenges that beset them, adolescent girls are also among the most forgotten population segments when it comes to humanitarian programming. More often than not, they are rarely targeted with tailored interventions and, as a result, their voices are seldom incorporated into the design and development process, making it that much harder to address their unique needs.

The following pages feature narratives told directly in the voices of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings throughout the region. Most of the stories featured were developed as part of a regional initiative implemented in direct consultation with adolescent girls, taking place over the course of a year. The initiative was conceived in the hope of further highlighting the issues facing girls in humanitarian settings and the many insights they can offer to those attempting to serve them. Other stories were generously provided to us by girls who have accessed services at UNFPA-supported facilities in their communities. Their stories, insights, and impressions were also gathered through a number of consultations in which they were presented with the stories of their peers, offering the opportunity unique reflection, healing, and a sense of solidarity.

Girls in numerous communities in the region continue to experience their formative years amid large-scale and protracted humanitarian crises.

The narratives given have been divided into three parts based on the overarching themes they tackle. The first section, titled *Her Dreams*, highlights the ambitions and drive of adolescent girls, some of whom had drawn clear and inspiring trajectories for their lives (now derailed by conflict), while others had discovered their passions even as they survived violence and displacement. The second section, *Her Realities*, illustrates the difficult and unjust experiences to which adolescent girls are frequently subjected, particularly in humanitarian settings. Lastly, *Her Triumphs* features narratives that capture the remarkable resilience of adolescent girls as they conquer their challenges.

Girls in the region face a dichotomous reality. They strive to experience the full breadth of their childhoods but are significantly impacted by rigid gender norms that manifest at a fairly young age that affect their opportunities.

Throughout the publication, the real names and current locations of the girls featured have been omitted or altered to ensure their safety. The publication concludes with an Epilogue written from the vantage point of Mariam — UNFPA's virtual ambassador for adolescent girls in the Arab region.

We hope the narratives provided will serve to highlight the experiences of adolescent girls in the region, the inherent power they have to effect real social transformation, and the value of supporting programmes that allow them to tap into that power.



Art by Elham, northwestern Syria

“I believe that girls have the power to fight for their rights if given the right guidance.”

— Maram, northwestern Syria

Part One

Her Dreams

One of the most devastating consequences of gender-based violence on adolescent girls is that it can severely limit their potential, either by denying them opportunities for education, forcing them into unwanted marriages, or severely restricting their movements and social interactions as a misguided means of security.

In its programmes, UNFPA works to empower adolescent girls by consistently reinforcing their belief in their own potential and capacities, in addition to working with them to build life skills to serve as a foundation. Throughout the implementation of these programmes, UNFPA staff would often have conversations with girls on their vision of the future: what they see themselves doing as adults and why, and how they will work toward realising those dreams.

This section outlines some of the statements made by these girls.



In the words of **Rima**

13 years old — Palmyra, Syria

I've been dancing since my early childhood and I will continue to dance when I'm an old woman. I want to be a ballerina or a theater dancer and to bring joy to those around me.

Many of us grew up in this crisis and have no memories of what has happened. We also don't know when it will end and what will happen after. When I dance, I forget the past and the future, and I see that people around me do as well. It doesn't need thinking or planning or practicing — you just move with the music you like and try to get others to move with you.

One day, I hope to dance all over the world and to meet famous dancers who can teach me their moves. When I watch musicals and see how flexible and confident they are, it makes me see the world differently and it becomes easier to remember that life is full of beautiful things waiting to be discovered.

In the words of **Nalin**

16 years old — Qushtappa Camp, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

One day, I will be a journalist. That dream is on hold now, but it will come true. One day.

It was summer 2013 when we left Syria. I was 8 years old and my father and his family decided that we needed to go. The situation, he said, had gotten much worse and our lives were at risk. I had never seen him so frightened, so I knew it was real.

“I want to be a journalist because my and many other stories need to be heard.”

The journey was difficult and an awakening for me. I realised how terrible this crisis has been for so many people, and I decided that I needed to act. I was captivated by the work of journalists risking their lives to help bring our stories to the world, many of whom died in the process. Some were young women, like me now, who have seen their loved ones displaced or killed and decided to help the world learn of what is happening to the people caught in this crisis, especially the women and girls who continue to experience unimaginable violence.

I want to be a journalist because my and many other stories need to be heard. I want to document everything: the violence against women and children and the courage of the people who continued to work hard for the future of the Syrian people, like the health workers and volunteers and the case managers who continually help girls like me find hope amid the chaos.

“ I cannot imagine a better way to spend life than to spend it writing: **to create beautiful stories that touch people while also discussing difficult subjects.** ”

In the words of **Rasha**

17 years old — Qamishli, Syria

Ever since I was a child, I have wanted to be a writer.

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 realise how big the world really was and made me feel things that I'd never felt before.

This is why I work in the theatre, writing and directing plays and sometimes even helping with the set design, which I find inspiring. I love everything about it: the open space, the smells, the sense of creativity that being there generates. I'm constantly overwhelmed with inspiration for new stories and characters but seldom feel like I have the time or space to bring them to life. I cannot imagine a better way to spend life than to spend it writing: to create beautiful stories that touch people while also discussing difficult subjects.

When I first walked into the Women and Girls' Safe Space supported by UNFPA, I was somewhat surprised by how simple and normal it was. I didn't really have expectations going in, but I assumed I would meet many women in distress and that it would be difficult for me to spend time there. But all I found was friendship and support, and people who, like me, were just trying their best to move on.

As I make a list of the people who have made a difference in my life, I'm surprised by how many they actually are. **This is how fortunate I have been to be surrounded by such amazing people, many of whom are years younger than I am but who also saw the darkest side of war and were a great comfort to me in my darkest days.**



Art by Eman, a Syrian refugee living in Jordan

Eman, a Syrian refugee living in Jordan, created the artwork above. In it, she reflects the story of each girl in her society, where girls look for a way to be free and wishing that they could be birds where they can fly in the sky that has no limits or restrictions. “We all have wings,” she explains, “and are waiting patiently to use them.”

In the words of **Ahed**

19 years old — Amman, Jordan

When I tell people I love to rap and recite Bedouin poetry, many are consistently surprised. You do not hear of many girls in our region, especially those living in camps, having such different interests. But I do, and both art forms have been such beautiful outlets for me to discuss the issues I care about, such as the rights of women and girls.

As a 19-year-old, I have a unique perspective on what girls experience and what they are capable of. I am constantly surrounded by remarkable girls who are ambitious, determined, and fully committed to making the best of the opportunities available to them. Many simply do not get these opportunities.

“As a 19-year-old, I have a unique perspective on what girls experience and what they are capable of.”

I was fortunate enough to meet the right mentor at the right time, at a UNFPA-supported facility in Zaatari Camp. She saw my potential and knew what work needed to be done, but she also helped me to create my own plan. She immediately recognised my desire to express myself through writing, poetry, photography, and music, and helped me build these skills slowly as I developed the wisdom and confidence to express my thoughts without fear. She also guides me when I face challenges, such as those faced by many other girls in the camp.

Art in all its forms is quite important, especially for girls who struggle in their daily lives. It allows us to find new ways to express our experiences and feelings, and reach more people with our voices. I am immensely grateful that I was surrounded with the right people for my skills to flourish. These days, girls are facing more challenges than before. With many displaced and living as refugees, our dreams can often become permanently deferred, especially if we cannot access good education and services. Many girls are frequently harassed or assaulted to the point that they become afraid to leave their homes. Even those who refuse to leave are not safe, because they are also harassed online. Harassment in all its forms harms us greatly, particularly psychologically. Nothing is worse than living in fear.

I encourage every girl to stand for her right to express herself in any form she desires. Our voices and our message of gender equality need to reach people so that they understand what we go through. I also wish for girls around the world to be given safe and easy access to education and the services such as those I received; they make all the difference in the world.

“I encourage every girl to stand for her right to express herself in any form she desires. Our voices and our message of gender equality need to reach people.”



Nour from Syria, who created the artwork to left, dreams of a world where patriarchal norms no longer force girls to feel isolated and unloved. “This is my way of illustrating myself and it shows my isolation from the world around. I live in a 200 percent male-dominated community, and even my family believes my brothers are worth more than I am. They consider me an unnecessary appendage, both at home and in society.

“For Syrian girls, especially those like me who live as refugees, it is important to keep dreaming. The world is a complex and sometimes unfriendly place.”

In the words of **Maya**

17 years old — Amman, Jordan

I was around 12 years old when I realised what was really happening around me; the crisis in Syria, the millions who have been forced to flee, and the hardships my family continued to face as we struggled to find safety. When we finally reached Jordan, it was almost impossible to believe.

It took me a few years to find my feet in this country. Fortunately, I was blessed to meet many remarkable individuals who helped me find my path. When you see so much suffering around you, it not only changes you but, if you are lucky, you also get to play a part in the solution, and this is why I decided that I will volunteer to help other girls who have seen worse fates than me.

“When you see so much suffering around you, it not only changes you but, if you are lucky, you also get to play a part in the solution.”

There is no doubt that violence against girls has become more normal after the crisis. Many of my friends have experienced this, and some do so on a daily basis. Many of my friends are continuously harassed, beaten, and forced to marry so young even when they don't want to. They say that it is for their protection, but it ends up harming and sometimes killing them, especially if they have children before they are ready.

In the words of **Layan**

13 years old — Beirut, Lebanon

I have many dreams. First and foremost is that I want to become a doctor. Ever since the coronavirus and seeing so many people around me sick and dying, it became clear to me that my original plan was correct. The world needs doctors who understand the meaning of pain.

For Syrian girls, especially those like me who live as refugees, it is important to keep dreaming. The world is a complex and sometimes unfriendly place. I often struggle to understand some of the things that happen to me every day and why some people choose to be hurtful, especially towards girls. We know there is discrimination and that boys are treated differently. I know that, as a Syrian girl, I will never be treated the same as everyone else. If I go into a shop, I am prepared; it may be another boy saying something inappropriate; it may be that the shop owner today might refuse to sell me because I'm Syrian, or it may even be that prices have gone up again. We are all always prepared.

I wish to see a world where these things simply cannot happen, and where girls like me can feel safe, accepted, and motivated. I am also eager to play a part in making this world possible, even if I fail. And I am grateful that I have parents who want me to fulfill my dreams and who are determined to see me succeed at all costs.

Part Two

Her Realities

Despite being filled with limitless potential, the realities of adolescent girls do not always conform to their dreams, particularly in humanitarian settings. For many girls, crisis and instability are all they have ever known, which can make envisioning a brighter future virtually impossible.

This section brings excerpts from or full accounts of stories that illustrate the web of violence that entangles adolescent girls and often accompanies them into adulthood.



In the words of **Jomana**

16 years old — Gaza, Palestine

Seven months ago, my family and I moved to a new house in a new area — one of the liveliest areas in the Strip. We were hoping for a better life, but the exact opposite happened. I live in this building now, which has been almost destroyed. The fear and insecurity I have experienced this week cannot be put into words. All we wanted was to live, and live decently.

The violence may end soon, but I am certain that the fear and anxiety will not. The feeling of insecurity is a constant one. **Wars come and go, but their impact stays forever.**

In the words of **Sham**

17 years old — Idleb, Syria

I had many dreams and aspirations. I used to go to school, play with my friends and live my life like any other girl on this earth who has wishes and dreams. When I turned 14, I learned that dreams are called dreams because they're not real.

The course of my life was turned upside-down after a well-off man from a neighbouring village proposed to me. My family believed he was the right man and I had no right to voice my opinion. I was forced to oblige with their decision. Less than a month later, my marriage was completed unofficially, jotted down on a piece of my school paper by the local village chief. This was to be my marriage certificate. After this, I had two daughters who, without my knowledge, were not officially registered. Fate slapped me again when my husband died in a traffic accident and my two children were deprived of any inheritance given the fact that they had never been officially registered.

After visiting the Women and Girls' Safe Space, I was able to find some support to heal the wounds that these experiences have created. I now feel I have some hope back and I feel strong enough to face the challenges of life. I am also receiving legal counsel with regards to my daughters and the best path to take to get their documents in order. **I want to teach my children what I am learning at the Safe Space so that one day they can achieve the highest level of education.** I am so grateful to the staff working at the safe space.

In the words of **Hala**

18 years old — Aleppo, Syria

When you ask girls my age about life in the camp, they would usually struggle to answer. Many of them can barely remember what life was like before the war, but — at least for most of them — life has not changed much. The restrictions that rule their lives today have always been there, regardless of what was happening around them.

To be a girl in my community is to feel like a lifelong refugee: restricted, ashamed, and constantly feeling threatened. Every word, every glance, and every step is a potential affront to the honour of my family. They tell us that we are constantly at risk, that the world is filled by those who want to kidnap us, sell us, or take advantage of our bodies. We are made to feel like a burden, and the risks we face outside our homes also put us at risk inside the home. We are constantly imprisoned and controlled.

To be a girl in my community is to feel like a lifelong refugee; restricted, ashamed and constantly feeling threatened.

I was taken out of school at the age of fourteen and forced to marry a man twice my age. I hated him strongly, but I hated my father and brothers more for making me marry him. Four years have passed since then, during which time I have been married twice. My first husband left me less than a year after our marriage because he said I was infertile. That turned out to be untrue because I fell pregnant shortly after my second marriage to a man several years older than the first. He treats me well enough, especially if I don't protest much, but we come from different worlds.

Today, I am about to turn eighteen, and I am the mother of a six-month-old boy. I love him with all my heart. He is my world, because he is just as helpless as I am, but he is also my invisible chain. Because of him, I will forever be tied to a man for whom I feel absolutely nothing, and to a life I simply did not choose.

“When I turned 14, I learned that dreams are called dreams because they are not real.”

In the words of **Serena**

17 years old — Beirut, Lebanon

For me and many other girls my age in Lebanon, thinking of the future now seems futile. When you are consistently in a surrounding that works against you, that limits every aspect of your life, it becomes quite impossible to continue working towards a goal. Still, we do it, because the young people of Lebanon have learned the hard way that we are our only hope. Every girl my age wants to be part of the solution and simply needs a place to start.

My parents raised me in a way that kept these realities hidden from view. I grew up feeling safe, loved, and that my voice mattered. But as I grew older, I started noticing the reality of things: that it is acceptable for some people to go hungry, or for children to have to work to survive. I started seeing this clearly around two years ago as the economy began to collapse, and it became inescapable in 2020 after COVID-19 and the Beirut Port incident. People everywhere are hurting and dreaming of stability.

The pandemic also shifted our realities, for good and for bad. While the routine of lockdowns and restrictions became almost deadly to some, it was also a time for me to escape the pressures of daily life and work on myself. When you look at all that has happened in such

a short time, it is almost as if I and many girls like me were forced to grow, to understand that this world needs to go in an entirely different direction if we are to protect future generations.

When these realities kept hitting, the change in people was clear to see, even in the people around me. There are certain experiences that simply defy one's ability to cope. I constantly see people in despair, in one form or another. I would often see my mother crying, either over someone else's pain or her own pain. I learned to hold things inside; to stay strong for those around me and to hold everything together for as long as I had strength.

I'm constantly asked what I want — as a girl, as a Lebanese citizen, and as an Arab. I dream of a world without political divisions. They are what tore us apart, leaving us hungry, lost, and unhappy as a society. And yet, these crises have helped show us the importance of humanity and charity, particularly as we all came together to support those in need.

My humanity and my unending love for Lebanon is what drives me. **I want to give people hope. I want to continue working to help the people of Lebanon rise up from these ashes as they have done many times before.**

“I was told to remain homebound and to focus on building my home-making skills instead of going to school. I and many girls know what this feels like, and expressing my feelings through art helps me to heal and find my strength.”

— Elham, northwestern Syria



Art by Elham, northwestern Syria

In the words of **Afraa**

18 years old — Al Rukban Camp, Syria

It was frightening — giving birth during a full-blown pandemic. I had left my hometown in Homs after the violence broke out, and I found refuge in Al Rukban camp in 2016 after a difficult journey. At the camp, another challenge awaits: there were simply no jobs to be found.

To make matters more complicated, I became pregnant less than a year into my marriage. Unable to afford the food at the camp, I really struggled to maintain a healthy diet to keep my growing baby nourished, and I feared the worst. Then COVID-19 came, turning the whole world on its head.

Fortunately, I found my way to a UNFPA-supported clinic, where several other women I know had received care. After consulting with the medical team on site, I was transported to a hospital in Homs under strict isolation — a journey that took such a long time to complete. By the end of it, I found myself in a temporary shelter. Once I finally arrived at the hospital, I was to undergo a C-section, as this was the only way to ensure my and my baby's health.

Fortunately, the procedure went well. Hours later, my daughter was born. **I named her Jude, which translates to “generosity” in Arabic. Somehow, in spite of everything, we have welcomed new life into our family. I am grateful.**

In the words of **Aisha**

15 years old — Gaza, Palestine

I often imagine walking through the streets of my beloved Gaza. The moment I see the rubble, though, my heart breaks. In my mind, I see images of the wounded and dead, and the images haunt me over and over. I imagine the missiles falling on their houses, the residents fleeing while carrying their children to seek shelter. I hear their screams and see their tears.

I feel as if I am suffocating when I think of those who could hardly breathe as they lay pinned under the destruction while waiting to be rescued. I can only try to imagine the scenes from their life that crossed their minds before they drew their last breath, or what they were talking about in the minutes before the deadly airstrikes — the prayers they whispered and the dreams they wanted to pursue if only they could live a little longer.



“Girls like me are always made to feel like we don't matter; like we are burdens to our families. Our thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams are not important because **a man's word has no equal.**

— Hiba, northwestern Syria

In the words of **Maya**

23 years old — Raqqa, Syria

I was born in Raqqa in 1998. I attended school until 9th grade, but my father took me out of school when I was 14, and I was forced to marry a man who was 12 years older. I felt as though my life had ended, but little did I know that my nightmare was just beginning.

My husband had strange tendencies. I could never understand his behavior. He was extremely violent towards me, even sexually, which at the time I was too young and inexperienced to realise. Three days into our marriage, he came to me and demanded that I give him all my jewelry. As a 14-year-old girl from a poor family, I had never owned jewelry — not the valuable kind, anyway — an idea that he did not seem to grasp. It was then that I received my first beating. I sought refuge at the feet of my mother-in-law, hoping she would have the compassion to make him stop, but she encouraged him to hit me again. By the time he was done, I was wiping blood from my face and looking at them both in amazement. How can people be so cruel?

Two weeks into my marriage, the violence only became worse. My husband, suspecting that I was nearing the end of my tether, locked me in a room, only letting me out when it was absolutely necessary. I demanded to see my mother, which afforded me another beating, but by then my family had begun asking to see me, and so I was allowed to visit them. On my way out, he promised to kill me if I told any “lies” about him.

When I saw my family, I broke down in tears. I told them what had been happening to me, but they did not believe me; they thought it was the imagination of a newly-wed girl. Still, my sister — who suspected I was telling the truth — decided to accompany me as I was forced to return to my husband's house, and she saw firsthand the uncontrollable monster with whom I shared my bed. A brief argument ensued, and both my sister and I ended up being locked in the room. We screamed, we cried, and then we threatened to go to the police, at which point he let her go. As soon as she left, he unleashed his fury at me, leaving me bloodied and half-conscious.

“I was treated like a curse that had been forced upon them, and my father spared no effort to try and sell me to other potential suitors. He was determined to get rid of me at all costs.”

My husband had a plan. He would accuse me of stealing his money and having an affair with another man, and — much to my surprise — everyone believed him, including my own family. Upon hearing his tale, my father and brothers were more than happy to do his work for him, beating me until I felt my bones breaking. My mother stopped them eventually, taking me to another room and attempting to calm me down. She left me to rest and sleep.

As soon as she left, I walked to the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet, took out a pack of painkillers and swallowed every pill inside. I was in dire pain and wanted it to stop.

I awoke in what seemed like a clinic, with a doctor looking down on me with kind, sorrowful eyes. “You had tried to take your own life, and several bones in your body were broken,” he said. He seemed certain, but the words struck me as odd; I was not trying to kill myself. I just wanted the pain to go away. Nonetheless, he decided to refer me to a psychiatrist. Ironically, my so-called suicide attempt was somehow considered an affront to my family and their honour, and I was treated like a criminal. But there was one silver lining in this entire ordeal: my accidental suicide freed me from my abusive husband.

“I gradually began letting go of the past. I learned to stand by myself, to guide myself and trust myself. I began to see a life where I am free of the many ghosts that haunt me every day.”

Alas, my freedom was short-lived, as shortly after that the war in Syria broke out, and it felt as though the world itself was breaking apart. My family and I first took refuge in Iraq before eventually moving to Turkey, where many had sought refuge in the hope of leading a better life. In Turkey, the family placed me under house arrest and forbade me from speaking to anyone. I was treated like a curse that had been forced upon them, and my father spared no effort to try and sell me to other potential suitors. He was determined to get rid of me at all costs.

One day, I learned from one of my relatives about a women's health centre nearby, where she had been receiving emotional support for some time. I had confided in her about my current mental state and my desire to speak to a psychiatrist to help me find a way out before it was too late. Her experience with the centre was incredibly successful, and after considering my options I decided to go.

At the centre, I found the outlet I had been searching for. I was immediately enrolled in extensive counselling to process the years of unending abuse I had endured, and my therapist encouraged me to join the many empowerment activities on offer. I finally felt as though I had a social circle of my own, filled with people who had survived similar experiences. I gradually began letting go of the past. I learned to stand by myself, to guide myself and trust myself. **I began to see a life where I am free of the many ghosts that haunt me every day. Perhaps the greatest lesson I have learned is that no woman or girl should ever accept violence. It is not a destiny to embrace but rather a temporary roadblock on the way to a better life.**



Art by Elham, northwestern Syria

In the words of **Rand**

16 years old — Idlib, Syria

I was nervous and felt shy the first time I entered the Women and Girls' Safe Space. Hiba, my case worker there, quickly changed that. She made me feel protected and gave me the comfort and confidence I needed to open up and share my story.

I am a married woman, displaced by war, living in extreme poverty. Even though my husband beats me, I cannot leave him because I will be separated from my two beloved children. Hiba and the other staff at the safe space helped me develop positive communication skills and provided me with new ways to think about my life.

They gave me cash assistance, which I used to buy some food, clothing, and medicines. Although my husband still beats me, he is less angry and I live with less violence. When I go to the safe space and talk with Hiba and the other women I feel empowered. **This gives me energy and makes me feel strong to live a better life for me and my children, especially given the many challenges we are currently facing with the new coronavirus pandemic.**

“Even though my husband beats me, **I cannot leave him because I will be separated from my two beloved children.**”

In the words of **Khanke**

23 years old — Nineveh, Iraq

My memory constantly takes me back to the night before it all happened.

I was young, but I do not recall how young. Time has become a blur since. It was a summer evening, and my family were engaged in an intense discussion about this strange group of militants called “ISIS.” It all sounded surreal; they were going through the country and killing all the Yazidis, driving them from their homes and kidnapping the women and girls. The stories I heard were horrific and some I thought had to be made up; back then, I hadn't known how violent people can be.

That night, I couldn't sleep. A feeling of dread had taken hold of me, and I spent it tossing and turning, waiting for dawn to come. When it did, it brought the madness with it. I awoke to a sight I had never imagined seeing — people fleeing from their homes, scared and anxious, leaving everything they had ever known behind. My family left in a hurry, many of us barefoot and unprepared. I recall asking my father why we were leaving and being frightened at his loss for words. He looked worn down, but there was something beyond fear and exhaustion in his eyes. He was hopeless. He had always been the master of any situation, but this time, it was much bigger than all of us.

That night, I couldn't sleep. A feeling of dread had taken hold of me, and I spent it tossing and turning, waiting for dawn to come. When it did, it brought the madness with it.

That walk seemed endless. We did not know where we were going or how we were going to get there. We did not even know if any place remained safe for us. We decided to stop and regroup, and to plan our passage to safety. That was when they came.

It all happened so quickly. They descended upon us almost out of nowhere, armed and impatient. They separated the old from the young, lining up the young men and killing every last one of them. My brother was among the corpses; I watched him die. The old people were spared, and the women and girls were taken on board a bus headed to Mosul.

Along the way, passing through Sibashikhdar, Ba'aj, and Tal Afar, I saw what must have been the corpses of thousands of my fellow Yazidis lining the streets. Inside the bus, the horror was no less frightening. The militants would often approach us and boast about how they will divide us girls amongst themselves, however they desire. I cannot describe the fear I felt that day, simply at the thought of being “married” to one of them. Two of their commanders had chosen me and my friend as their brides. When we objected, telling them that we are too young to wed, they beat us and tortured us for most of that night. We had no choice but to relent. We were given razor blades and ordered to shower and prepare for the wedding night.

The militants would often approach us and boast about how they will divide us girls amongst themselves, however they desire.

I don't know how I had the thought, but instead of shaving, I cut myself on the inner thigh and claimed to my captor that I am on my period and cannot consummate the marriage. When he saw the blood, he believed me and decided not to touch me. My friend was not so lucky; she was raped repeatedly by the man who took her. To this day, I cannot forget her cries.

It is hard to remember how long we had stayed, but at some point during the course of that night an opportunity presented itself and we ran, ending up in the house of a generous man who agreed to grant us asylum. He also transported us part of the way to where he said the displaced Yazidis are gathering. We walked the rest of the way, on what seemed to be the longest journey of our lives. When we finally reached safe harbor, it felt like a dream.

Today, after years of hard work and healing, I have managed to move past that trauma. I cannot describe the sorrow I feel at all that we have and continue to go through in this region. Still, my experiences made me stronger, and they strengthened my resolve to liberate girls from the forces that continue to harm and exploit them. **Whether it is one girl or a thousand, if I can make a difference, I will.**

“Whether it is one girl or a thousand, if I can make a difference, I will.”

Part Three

Her Triumphs

Despite the multitude of challenges besetting them, adolescent girls continue to rise above these realities to create their own, demonstrating the true meaning of resilience. Many of the survivors whose accounts have been included in this publication have moved on to become artists, exceptional students, activists, and change-makers in their communities — a clear testament to the depth of their capacity for healing and transformation.

This section will feature some of those accounts.

“To other girls going through problems, I say stay strong — we will eventually win. The most important thing is to **keep committing to our loved ones how feel.**”

— Sunaya, northwestern Syria

Art by Gail Gosschalk

In the words of **Mirav**

19 years old — Qushtapa camp
Kurdistan Region of Iraq

I was almost six when we left Syria. I am 14 years old now.

I don't have happy memories in Syria because all I remember are the sounds of war. Some details come up every now and then; I recall a beautiful, three-floor house. My sister was only days old when my father decided that we had to move. The gunfire and explosions had gotten so much worse that it was impossible to live there anymore. My mother was also sick because she just gave birth to my sister and she didn't know what to do.

I can still remember how nervous she was packing our bags. I heard them saying that we are going to Kurdistan and I recall wondering: "what is Kurdistan?" I tried to imagine how far it was, hoping that it would be far enough. I imagined what it would be like, and whether or not I would still hear the gunfire there.

Before heading to Iraq, we spent a couple of days with our relatives on their farm. It was there that we learned that our house was destroyed by an airstrike. My father was very sad looking at the pictures of the rubble. I cried a lot. Even my sister, days old, was crying.

When we arrived in Iraq, we stayed at a school building for some time until our next destination became clearer. It was very cold and we were hungry. Later, we moved to the camp, and that is when we began to experience some stability, but quickly enough the reality hit again.

Work was difficult at the camp, and it became harder to pay the bills. As the days passed, life at home became more tense, and it wasn't long before my father left for Germany in search of better opportunities, leaving us behind in a world that becomes more uncertain every day.

I spent most of my days in isolation at my tent, sometimes fearful and sometimes simply unwilling to go out. It was by total coincidence that a girl from a neighboring tent came by and told me that Ms. Layla from the nearby women's centre organizes activities for girls and encouraged me to join. It was the best decision of my life.

After being introduced to Ms. Layla, it became much easier for me to find hope in life again. She helped me simply by being there; by showing me all that I can be and listening to my fears and hopes without making me feel guilt or shame. I opened up to her about my life, my dreams, and my desire to live a life of my own making, and her guidance helps me overcome my challenges every day.

Today, I have more hope than I have had in years.

“She helped me simply by being there; by showing me all that I can be and listening to my fears and hopes without making me feel guilt or shame. I opened up to her about my life, my dreams, and my desire to live a life of my own making, and **her guidance helps me overcome my challenges every day.**”

In the words of **Inaya**

17 years old — Beirut, Lebanon

I am among the girls who did not get the chance to live their childhood. I was married at the age of 14 and did not get the opportunity to continue my education. My family wanted to marry me by force, so I threatened them with suicide. Can you imagine a 14-year-old girl feeling forced to use suicide to defend her basic rights?

Ultimately, I had no choice but to abide by their decision, so I tried to make it work. I told them that I would agree to marry — but only to a man I loved. How little did I know about love at the time. Of course, they accepted the compromise, so long as I was married under local traditions and norms. Today, I'm a 17-year-old divorcee, living in Tripoli with my two brothers and my mother. As for my father, he went missing when we fled Syria, so he was almost never around to provide for us.

My family wanted to marry me by force, so I threatened them with suicide. Can you imagine a 14-year-old girl feeling forced to use suicide to defend her basic rights?

During my marriage, I lived the most horrendous years of my life. It saddens me because those were supposed to be my best and simplest years; I was supposed to be concerned with play, doing well at school, and discovering who I am as a person. Instead, I had to endure physical and verbal abuse from a husband I did not want, forced upon by a family who did not believe in me. Moreover, I was also forced into child labour, working as a farmer. My days involved long hours in the sun, where I was constantly exposed to toxic pesticides and other risks — all to be able to put food on the table. My employer also joined the list of my abusers.

Above all, I couldn't get pregnant. I was blamed for it. The girl or woman always gets the blame for failing to provide the man with a child. In reality, we weren't sure where the problem was or if there even was a medical cause, and we couldn't find out because we simply couldn't afford a consultation. I still remember the horrible feeling I had during that time; I felt hopeless, I lost my appetite for life, and I was still only 15 years old.

The girl or woman always gets the blame for failing to provide the man with a child.

The day I was informed about the UNFPA-supported sessions, I went to the Safe Space to know more. I sat among other girls and women, feeling shy and yet curious



and optimistic.

I began attending awareness and the psychosocial support sessions, which made me feel alive again. I was even supported by a social worker who really understood my problems and showed great interest in helping me. I realised that I had to make an urgent change in my life. I learned how to confront my husband whenever I felt abused, and I even learned how to stand up for my rights, which led to my decision to file for a divorce. Of course, my decision was not welcomed by my two brothers; to them, it was about avoiding social stigma, but to me it was about saving my life. I chose myself this time.

I often meet girls in my area who either want to get married or are forced to do so. When I was at their age, there was no one to guide me through this unimaginable pressure and confusion, but I was lucky enough to survive the experience. Unfortunately, not every girl will be as fortunate, so I feel responsible to help by supporting awareness efforts as much as I can. Who knows — I might change a young girl's life forever.

For now, I still plan to carry on with my education when the situation gets better in the country. When I was married, I always wanted to be a pediatrician — I don't really know why. Perhaps it was because I couldn't have my own children. I still dream of the day when I can be a mother, on my own terms and with the right partner, but let's be rational: it feels distant and unlikely. **What is possible, however, is to tell the world that there are girls everywhere and in Lebanon who are still struggling against child marriage, and that it destroys every girl's dream. Let's do something about it.**

“I made the choice to use my frustration to fuel my desire for a better life. **This was around the time that one of my relatives had registered for a course at a nearby Women and Girls’ Safe Space.**

In the words of **Amal**

19 years old – Damascus, Syria

When you are both a girl and deaf, you have to work twice as hard to be considered at all.

I have faced many challenges trying to live a normal life as a deaf person. I was even forced to leave school at the age of twelve to become a housewife. In many communities here, young people with disabilities are often invisible, excluded from education and services, and discriminated against even by their own families. For girls, it’s even worse.

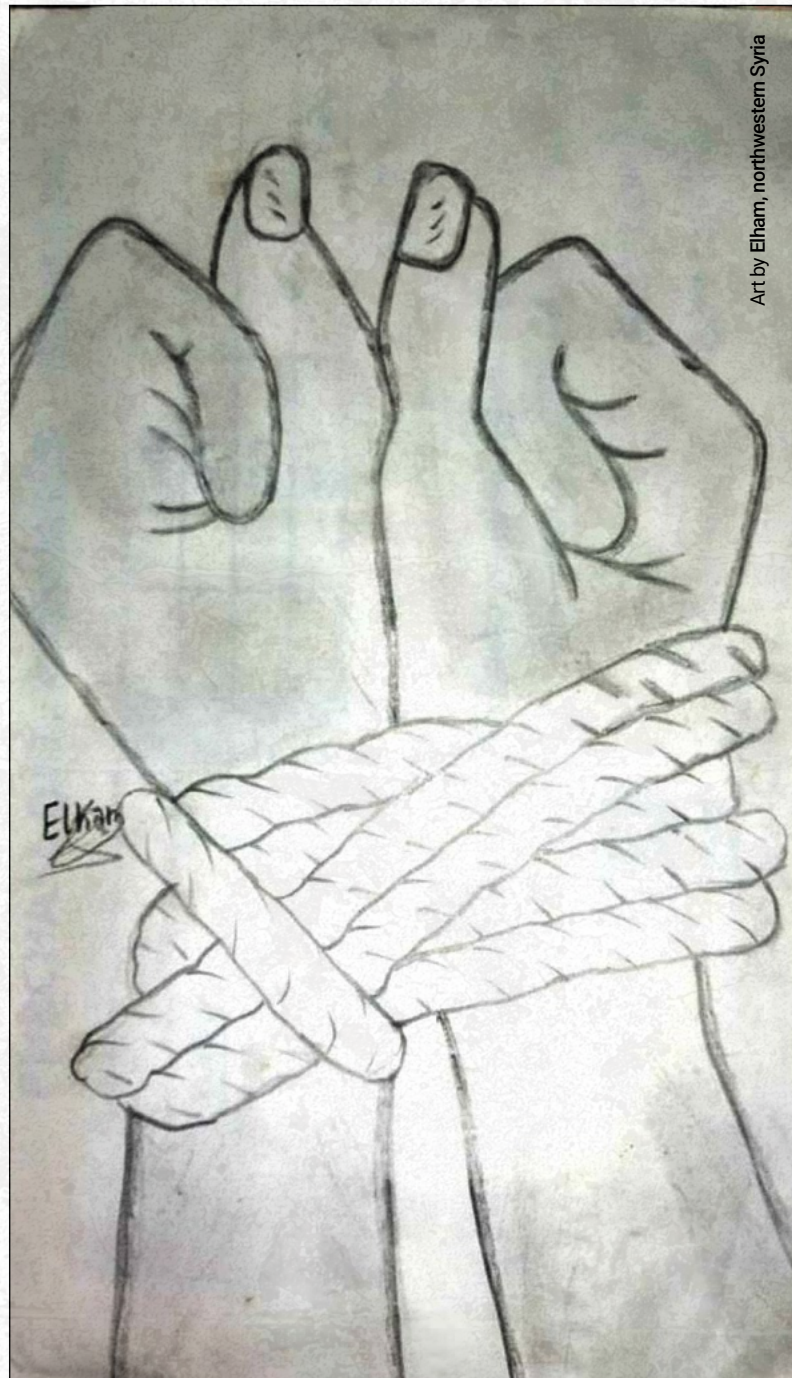
Growing up, I was completely isolated from my community, which made addressing my challenges all the more difficult. I didn’t even have the opportunity to learn sign language in order to overcome the barriers to communication. Like many girls in my situation, most of my life prospects were decided by the men in my family – specifically my father. I never really knew the meaning of choice.

“I fully intend to continue and to completely break free from the restrictions that have been imposed on me long before I was born. With the support of other women and girls around me, I have hope.”

When I turned 19, I tried to convince my father to allow me to go back to school. His shame of my disability stood in the way. Being denied an education and consistently made to feel like a burden and an outsider was incredibly frustrating. But I made the choice to use my frustration to fuel my desire for a better life.

This was around the time that one of my relatives had registered for a course at a nearby Women and Girls’ Safe Space. When I heard about the space and what they were doing for people like me, I was eager to participate. Fortunately, my relative was able to interfere on my behalf and convince my father to let me participate, so I immediately registered for the hairdressing programme. I made the decision to become the best hair stylist in the city.

I am still learning both hairdressing and sign language. I fully intend to continue and to completely break free from the restrictions that have been imposed on me long before I was born. With the support of other women and girls around me, I have hope.



Art by Elham, northwestern Syria

In the words of **Samara**

18 years old – Idleb, Syria

I live in a camp for internally displaced persons. As for many of us, the war in Syria has made the living conditions for my family very difficult. I have an ageing father and a mother who suffers from many health problems. My brother used to support the whole family, but he is no longer with us.

Because of these circumstances, my family told me, at the age of 16, that I had to quit my education and get married in the hope of having a better life. My sisters and I had been attending awareness raising sessions in our camp about gender-based violence and child marriage. I felt safe to ask many questions in these groups: would early marriage give me a better life? Would my suffering end? Is this truly the way towards a better future?

Through these talks, I was able to explore these questions without external pressures. I learned how to improve my communication skills, which made me more confident and outspoken. As a result, I was able to discuss with my family and explain to them the risks that I would face if I were to get married at the age of 16. My family listened and supported me, and I was given the chance to return to my education!

In the words of **Nour**

17 years old – Cairo, Egypt

I fled to Egypt five years ago to escape the escalating violence in Syria. I lived through the crisis and saw the atrocities with my own eyes. My children and I feared for our lives, given everything that was happening at the time. After our own house was shelled, we made the difficult choice to leave the only home we’d ever known. I can recall very clearly my first few minutes in Egypt. I was afraid – new country, new people, new traditions, and new challenges. It was incredibly overwhelming.

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A year later, I was introduced by a friend to the Women and Girls’ Safe Space in my area. This was the very place I needed; suddenly, the

emptiness and estrangement I felt receded into the background, and I began to know the many wonderful people I have met in this place. I was also given a fresh start through the many workshops and classes they held, which were not only a source of emotional comfort but immensely beneficial on a practical level. I felt empowered and cared for.

Today, I am a crochet instructor and truly feel like I have a part to play in this community. I am also even more committed to supporting this vital work as we all work together to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and its many challenges.

In the words of **Mira**

14 years old – Aleppo, Syria

I think what makes these safe spaces work is the simple idea of support, whether it’s emotional or otherwise. It makes a huge difference when you come across someone who is older, wiser, but who has also experienced many of the same things you have. I never expected that any grown woman would ever understand my situation and offer guidance and support without judgement. This is exactly what I found, and it may have saved my life.

In the words of **Fatima**

23 years old – Idleb, Syria

I was married when I was twelve years old. At the age of 23, I now have six children. Through so many pregnancies my body and mind started to shut down. I was not in a position to give my children the care they needed and deserved. I pleaded with my husband that we should use family planning methods – even my mother and father got involved – but he simply refused. During one of my visits to a UNFPA-supported health clinic for women, I was referred to their case management office where I started to receive counselling sessions.

With the help of their team, they were also able to reach out to my husband and explain that my body needed to rest in order to avoid a miscarriage. They made it clear that he needs to take care; that any additional trauma came with serious risks, and he seemed receptive. Over time, I began seeing him change his attitude towards me, becoming more attentive to my needs and more considerate of my feelings. We had finally begun communicating.

“I think what makes these safe spaces work is the simple idea of support.”



Art by Amani, northwestern Syria

In the words of **Janeh**

19 years old — Qushtapa camp
Kurdistan Region of Iraq

When I was 16, which was two years ago, I began experiencing strange behaviour by some of the older boys in my area. One in particular became very aggressive and — sorry for using this word — shameless. He would constantly wait for me on my way to school and would make inappropriate and sexual remarks about me, my body, and my morality. Several times he tried to grope me, but I screamed and ran.

I tried to ignore him, but of course that never works. Girls all around me suffer the same kind of harassment, and many do not really know what to do. I was taught to never hold my head down and to always seek help when I need it, which is what I did. I told my mother, who was already going to a

Women and Girls' Safe Space in the area and knew about the things that happened at the camp. She was furious but proud that I came to her before going to anyone else.

With the help of my mother and some remarkable women at the centre, we filed an official complaint and involved other members of the community. It turned out that this man had done this to many other women and girls before, and we were told that this would never happen. The harassment has since stopped, but I do see him from time to time at the camp. He now avoids me completely.

For many of my friends, speaking up against such treatment is not an option. Many would be blamed for the harassment — because of what they wear, how they talk, or where they walk, even if it was just on the way to school. I still think that things are changing for the better. More and more girls are realising that being treated this way by anyone is simply unacceptable. Every girl has the right to live in dignity and free from harm.

In the words of **Kafa**

21 years old — Rural Aleppo, Syria

Having been married at the age of 15, I had to put any dreams I had on hold. I am tremendously happy to have the opportunity to achieve them now as an adult.

I come from Deir Hafir in rural Aleppo, where I also grew up. My experience is the experience of many other girls who were forced to become women long before they were ready. For me, it was an untimely marriage that made it hard for me to think of myself; almost overnight, I went from a teenager to being a wife, a mother, and a caretaker in a world that never gave me a choice.

I had always wanted to pursue an independent career, particularly in handicrafts, and had even made an agreement with my husband that marriage will not prevent me from doing so," she recalls. "Unfortunately, an early pregnancy shortly after my marriage, and eventually being a mother to six sons, made that incredibly difficult.

Almost overnight, I went from a teenager to being a wife, a mother, and a caretaker in a world that never gave me a choice.

I had originally visited the Women and Girls' Safe Space in rural Aleppo to overcome some of the challenges I faced during the COVID-19 lockdown. I was anxious, isolated, and needed someone to help me make sense of what I was experiencing. When I went to the safe space, I immediately knew that I would find some comfort here.

I enrolled in recreational sports, which was exactly what I needed after months of isolation and inactivity. It also helped me to meet so many other women and girls who are facing similar issues, and who were so generous with their time, love, and advice. I also learned that there were other courses on offer that really spoke to my passion, such as crochet and handicrafts. It felt meant to be. Before long, I had mastered the craft and was receiving so many compliments on the products I was designing.

I decided to begin marketing my skills by making woolen scarfs for others in my community, and quickly enough a stream of commissions followed. I started taking photos of my work, which at that point included a good number of handicrafts, clothing, and decorative items. I shared them on social media and hoped that people would find value in the work.

It felt meant to be. I quickly mastered the craft and was receiving so many compliments on the products I was designing.

Before long, my page and business became popular, to the point where I needed to hire other women and girls to help me. Luckily, the safe space had many remarkable women and girls who were eager to work and help, and who loved the work as much as I do. It felt good to not only have a source of income for myself but to help others like me to put their skills to work.

The girls I work with now truly feel like my own daughters, which has made this experience even more rewarding.

Things quickly took off. I had always wanted daughters but was never fortunate enough to have any. The girls I work with now truly feel like my own daughters, which has made this experience even more rewarding. Today, I am proud to be showing my work in a number of stores in Aleppo, including one of the most well-known bridal shops here. This is only the beginning; I fully plan to continue my education. I want to learn English and computer skills, which I think will help me reach more people with my work. I hope to take this business to new levels in the coming years.

“When I went to the safe space, I immediately knew that I would find some comfort here.”

Epilogue

The Way Forward

In the words of **Mariam**

UNFPA's Virtual Ambassador for Adolescent Girls in
the Arab States



My name is Mariam. I am UNFPA's virtual regional ambassador for adolescent girls in the Arab region. My job should be simple: to help carry the voices of Arab girls my age to the world, including their own communities. Of course, it has never been that simple.

Like every girl, my voice is still growing, shaped by my experiences, passions, and challenges. Over the years, I have learned that these experiences are shared by many other girls and that, like me, their voices are seldom heard. They are essential, precious voices that communicate the experience of an entire generation. Many will grow up to lead this region into a more peaceful, prosperous future.

All over the world, adolescent girls and those working to help them have said it again and again: more work is needed to help advance the protection, health, rights, and development of girls in humanitarian settings. Experiences in different places have also shown that we, adolescent girls, are also capable and need to lead the programmes that target us, which often fall short of addressing our specific needs and challenges. If we are given the opportunity, we can help offer girls like me better programmes — ones that they can actually shape and participate in, and ones that make a real difference in their lives. As Tala, a 16-year-old refugee living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, once told me: “I think every girl wants to be part of the solution.” Tala is a growing artist who creates such beautiful paintings that truly surpass her years (not to mention the restrictions placed upon her and her environment). As she speaks, she proudly shows me a series of mixed-media artworks that she had produced. They contain the faces and names that have defined her childhood and adolescence, in both good and bad ways.

All over the world, adolescent girls and those working to help them have said it again and again: More work is needed to help advance the protection, health, rights, and development of girls in humanitarian settings.

Tala's statement echoes my voice and the voices of many adolescent girls in the region. For the girls who generously agreed to share their stories for this publication, one thing has remained consistent: we are not only able to but genuinely eager to do much more than what is expected of us. More importantly, we have proven again and again that we can stand strong in the face of enormous challenges, and that we have an almost limitless capacity for healing, personal development, and empathy. The world can be a much better place if more people worked to help us raise our voices and take charge of our own destinies. As 18-year-old Ranwa, who left her hometown of Aleppo in 2013, tells me: “I have a lot to say, but nobody is really interested in what girls want.”

Things get even more complicated when we girls face these problems at home — the places where we are meant to feel most safe and accepted. This is why many girls I speak to

tell me that all they need is a safe space where they can be by themselves. As Huda, a 16-year-old girl living in Egypt tells us, “at the Safe Space, I feel like I belong. I have a voice, a community that appreciates me, and an open invitation to express myself. At home, I feel silenced, almost invisible. It is a constant struggle.”

The world can be a much better place if more people worked to help us raise our voices and take charge of our own destinies. As 18-year-old Ranwa, who left her hometown of Aleppo in 2013, tells me: “I have a lot to say, but nobody is really interested in what girls want.”

Today, the world is even more challenging than it had been in the past years, especially in our region. Many countries had already been struggling with their own problems, such as Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, while others like Jordan continue to stretch their resources to host the millions of refugees who continue to struggle throughout the region. Then the coronavirus came and made it all worse, forcing us to be locked up inside our homes, where many of us frequently experience violence, or it made it harder for us to escape and reach the Safe Spaces that shield us from harm. For girls, this has been a serious risk.

“When the lockdown was first announced, I was terrified,” says Jana, a 17-year-old girl from Jordan, who also works as a volunteer to help other refugee girls in her community. “I wasn't really terrified of the pandemic; I was more terrified of being locked up at home with my brothers, with no chance of escape.” Like many other girls, Jana persevered, despite the cruelty she experienced daily.

“The year has definitely made me stronger,” says Simov, a 14-year-old refugee currently living in Duhok, Iraq. “Fortunately, I had the proper guidance, even when I couldn't leave, and things eventually opened up. I was proud that I refused to let the virus break me.”

For many girls, even access to support is difficult or downright impossible. “I wanted to go to the safe space with my cousin, but they wouldn't let us. They said it would poison our minds. I wish they would help us convince society that we are smart enough to know when we're being manipulated.”

But many girls are not so fortunate. We may be strong, but we are also young and deserve to live our childhoods to the fullest. Many of us simply do not.

“I want to go to school and learn, but if we do that our people will starve, so we go to work,” explains Mais, an adolescent girl from Deir-ez-Zor. Dania, another girl from Idleb, echoed that statement, noting that “education after COVID-19 stopped being a priority because many families simply cannot find food.”

“I think the world needs to help girls like us,” says Rana, who celebrated her 18th birthday in 2020. “Some girls know how to deal with violence and inequality, but many simply do not. They need support from older and wiser women and other girls who understand their struggles and who believe in them.”

For many girls, even access to support is difficult or downright impossible. “I wanted to go to the safe space with my cousin, but they wouldn't let us,” explains Rana, who lives in Azraq camp, Jordan. “They said it would poison our minds. I wish they would help us convince society that we are smart enough to know when we're being manipulated.”

For Maram of Rural Aleppo, geography and security stood in the way. “There are no centres near where I live. I cannot walk there alone since it's not safe. Girls on their own will be attacked or kidnapped, so we cannot walk much farther than home.”

If the stories of girls like me tell us anything, it is that we are all fighting for the same right: to be viewed as equals, to have opportunities to choose the lives we want to lead, to choose whom we want to marry and when.

Even beyond crisis settings, girls in the region (and the world) are facing similar challenges. Particularly in humanitarian settings, girls like me rarely get to express their voice to people who can actually do something about it. We sometimes find it difficult to access programmes that are actually made for us and that take into consideration the realities we all face, inside the home and outside.

If the stories of girls like me tell us anything, it is that we are all fighting for the same right: to be viewed as equals, to have opportunities to choose the lives we want to lead, to choose whom we want to marry and when. All we ask is for those who have the power — including humanitarians — to listen to us, treat us as equal partners, and give us programmes that are based on what we need. This is the only way I know for girls like me to truly overcome the risks facing them.

I want to echo the words of Lana, an 18-year old from Aleppo, Syria: “We are not as helpless as people think. We may be young, but we are strong, and we can help create a better world if given the chance.”

“ All we ask is for those who have the power — including humanitarians — to listen to us, treat us as equal partners, and give us programmes that are based on what we need.”

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND

In Her Words

Stories of adolescent girls
living in humanitarian
settings in the Arab Region

This initiative is an attempt to amplify the voices of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings throughout the Arab region, including Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt.

Today, several regions in the Arab states are coping with the lasting impacts of longstanding and emerging humanitarian situations. Both the Syria and Yemen crises marked their tenth years, while recent developments in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Lebanon will result in additional displacements and disruptions in community networks, placing the lives and dignities of millions of people at risk.

This product features narratives told directly in the voices of adolescent girls in humanitarian settings throughout the region. Most of the stories featured were developed as part of a regional mentorship initiative designed to help adolescent girls verbalise their feelings and experiences safely, while others were generously provided to us by girls who have accessed services at UNFPA-supported facilities in their communities.