

In Her Words

What life is like for young Arab girls living with war, hunger and abuse



EasyRead version

Illustration by Gail Gosschalk





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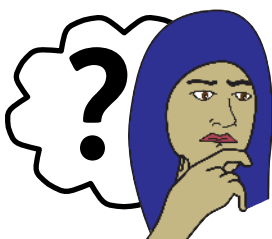
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Some words are in **bold**. There is a list of what they mean at the end of this paper.

Thank you



Thank you to everyone who works for us in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine and the Whole of Syria for their help with this.



And thank you to all the girls who used words, music or pictures to tell their stories. We could not have done this without them.

Illustration by Gail Gosschalk



About these stories



UNFPA is part of the **United Nations**. It works to support the **sexual and reproductive health** of women and girls all over the world



Sexual health means the **right** to enjoy safe sex and keep well and healthy



Reproductive health is the **right** to decide whether or not to have children And support to have healthy children.

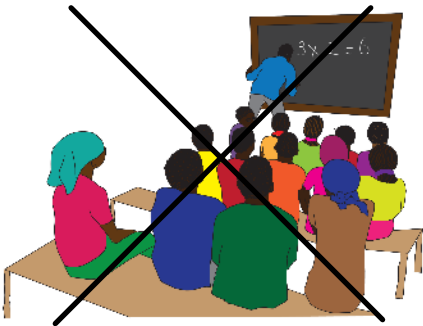
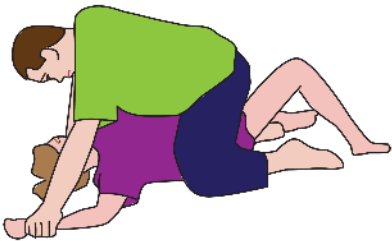


Rights tell us how we should be treated.



Violence against women and girls includes:

- hurting their bodies
- hurting their emotions and feelings
- forcing them to do sexual and other things they do not want to (such as give up their inheritance, leave school, or forcefully marry their daughters, etc.)



Violence can stop young women going to school, college or university. It can stop them going out of their homes and meeting other people.



We help girls feel safe, proud, and confident.



They come to our **Safe Spaces** to meet, talk and support each other.

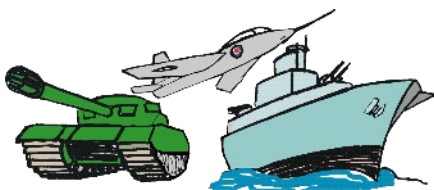
Safe Spaces is a short way of saying Women and Girls' Safe Spaces.



We hope these stories will help you see what life is like for girls growing up with war, hunger, illness or other **emergencies**.



These girls all come from **Arab** countries like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt.

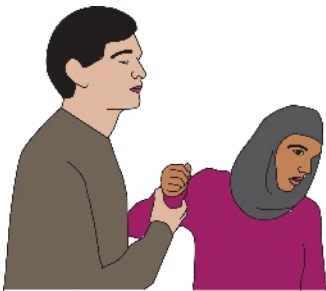


Some of these countries have been going through wars for more than 10 years. Many women, girls, and their families had to leave their homes in a hurry and move somewhere safer.

All countries have been affected by **COVID-19** (Coronavirus). This means:



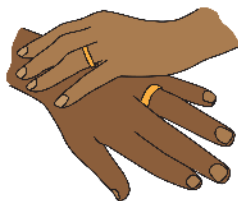
- women and girls find it harder to use health services. Especially services for **sexual health** and **reproductive health**



- there is more **violence** against women and girls by husbands, fathers or brothers



- young girls cannot leave their homes to ask for help if they are being **abused** or harmed



- many families have less money and might force their daughters to get married to help the family cope with this.



Life is often harder for these young women than for other people in their country. But usually no-one asks them what help they need.



UNFPA and other organisations helped some girls tell their stories safely. It is important for them to speak up.



In their stories, different girls talk about:

1. Girl's dreams and their hopes for the future



2. What life really looks like to them



3. Girls' success and times they felt strong and safe.

Illustration by Gail Gosschalk



The girls' dreams

The girls we support want to enjoy being children and dream about the future. But many grow up too soon and have no choice about what happens. This is because:



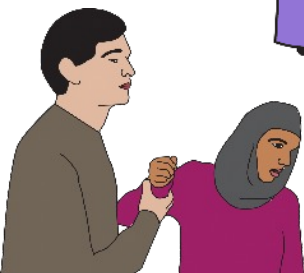
- they do not have the same chances in life as boys



- they are expected to take on lots of work in the home



- they are forced to marry young and have children



- they are **abused** and treated cruelly



- problems in their community make it harder for them to get away from the **violence** or get help.



This is what 6 girls said about their hopes and dreams.



Rima – Syria

I do not remember life without war and danger.



I love to dance. I danced when I was a child. And I will still dance when I am old. When I dance I forget everything else and just move to the music.



I dream of being a dancer and learning from famous dancers all over the world.

Nalin – Iraq



My family is from Syria but it was so dangerous we had to escape. Now I live in a **refugee** camp in Iraq.

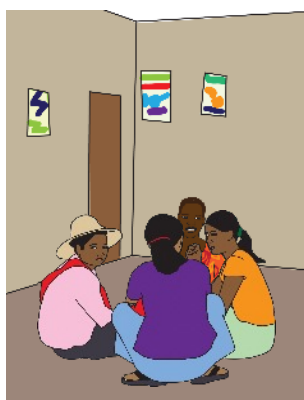


I saw journalists making sure everyone knew what was happening in Syria. Some of them were young women and I want to be like them.

Rasha – Syria



I always wanted to be a writer. I love working in the theatre. I want to tell stories about things that are difficult to talk about.



When I went into the **UNFPA Safe Space** I thought this would be full of girls who were frightened and upset. But it was just normal. Everyone helped each other because they all know what war is like.

Ahed – Jordan



I love to perform **rap** music and poems. People do not expect girls who live in **camp**s to do things like that. But it is a great way for me to speak up about the **rights** of women and girls. We could do so much. But usually never get the chance to show people what we can do.

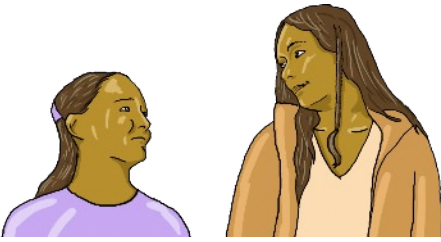


I was lucky and had a really good **mentor** who helped me use writing, poetry, photography and music to talk about my feelings. All types of art are important to girls like me. Especially when so many **refugees** are frightened, abused and cannot do the things we want to. I want every girl to feel safe and have the same chances that I did. It would make such a difference.

Maya – Jordan

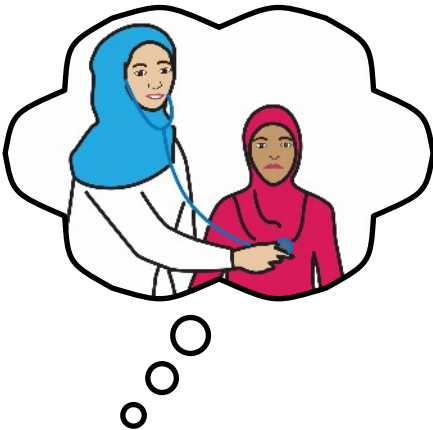


I was about 12 when my family had to escape from Syria and find somewhere safe to live.



It took me a while to settle here but lots of people helped me. Things have become worse for girls. Many of my friends are **abused** or forced to marry when they are young. I want to help girls who are not as lucky as me.

Layan – Lebanon



My family came here from Syria and it is really important for girls who are **refugees like me** to have dreams. I want to be a doctor. I know I am treated worse than other people because I am a girl and because I am Syrian. I want to stop this happening to girls like me. I am so lucky that my family support me and want me to do well.



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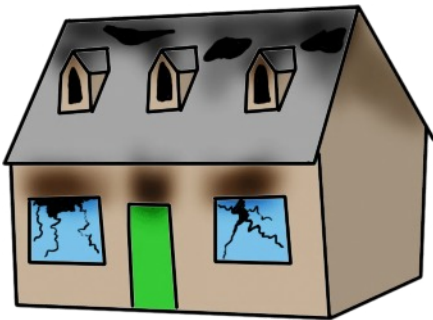
What life really looks like



Many young girls have never lived anywhere safe. When they are treated badly or **abused** it is hard to dream about the future.

This is what 9 girls said about their lives.

Jomana – Palestine

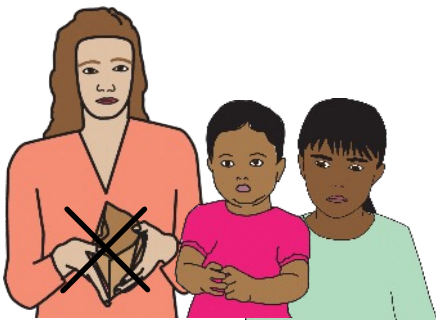


My family moved to a new house in a new area. We thought things would be better. But they are worse. I live in a building that has been bombed and is falling down. I do not feel safe at all. Even if the war ends I will still feel frightened. Will I ever feel safe?



Sham - Syria

I used to play with my friends and dream about what I would do. But that stopped when I was 14.



My family forced me to marry a man with lots of money. I had 2 daughters but my husband did not **register** them as his children. This meant they had no money when he died.

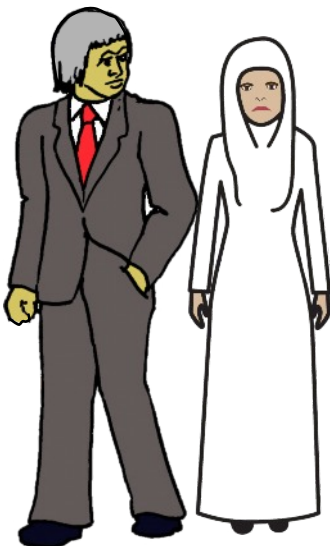


UNFPA Safe Spaces is helping me feel stronger and get papers for my daughters. I want my daughters to get an education and do well.

Hala – Syria



Most girls here cannot remember life before the war. We still feel unsafe and are frightened of men inside and outside our homes.



I had to leave school at 14 and marry a man much older than me. I hated my father and brothers for making me do it. My husband left me and I had to marry an even older man. I am 18 now and have a lovely baby boy. I do not love my husband but have to stay with him or I would lose my son.

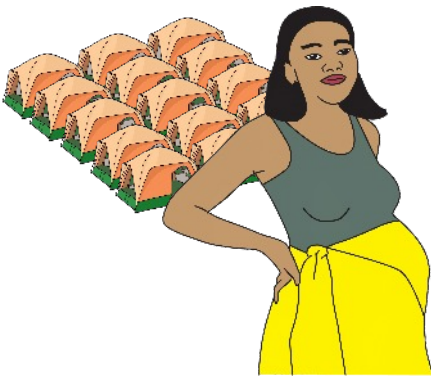


Serena – Lebanon

When life is so difficult I cannot think about the future. But young people can make things better.

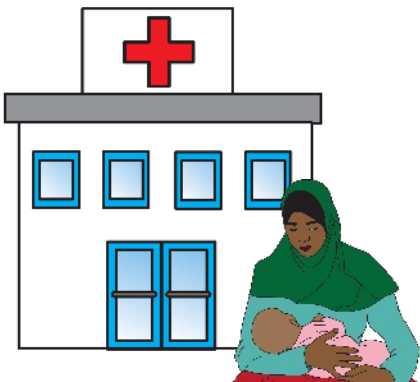


My parents protected me when I was younger. Then I realised that people were hungry and even children had to work to get food. **COVID-19** made things worse for many people. But it made me decide that I want to help people in Lebanon make things better.



Afraa – Syria

I went to the **refugee** camp because it was too dangerous to stay at home. I was pregnant but there were no jobs and I had no money to buy food.



Then **COVID-19** came and things got really bad. I went to a **UNFPA** clinic and they moved me to a hospital where my beautiful baby was born.

Aisha – Palestine

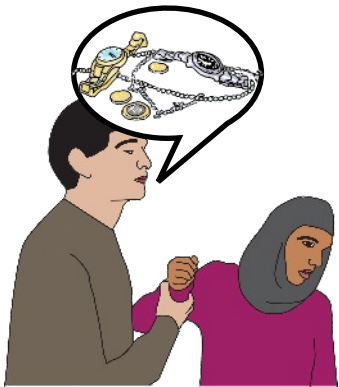


I loved walking through the streets in the city of Gaza. But the bombs have knocked down all the buildings and killed many people. All I can think about is people running out of their houses screaming and crying. I wonder what it was like for the people who could not escape.

Maya – Syria



My father made me leave school at 14 and marry a man who was 26. He was violent and abused me.



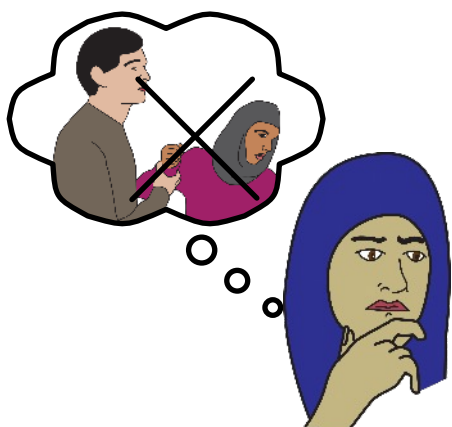
He asked for my jewellery but I had nothing to give him. So he beat me. I asked his family for help but they said he should beat me more.



I told my family what was happening but only my sister believed me. My husband lied and said I stole his money and had sex with another man. My family believed him and my father and brothers beat me.

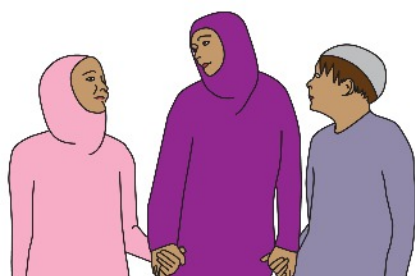


Because of the pain, I took too much medicine and ended up in the hospital. My husband did not want me any more and my family kept me hidden away from everyone.



When the war started we escaped to Turkey. I went to a health centre for women and met other girls who had been **abused**. I am getting stronger and now understand no woman or girl should be treated like this.

Rand – Syria



When I first came to the Safe Space I was frightened and shy. I am a married woman and left my home because of the war. We are very poor. My husband beats me but I cannot leave him because I have 2 lovely children.



The staff at the **UNFPA Safe Space** helped me think about different ways to talk to my husband and cope with things. They gave me some money for food and medicine. My husband still beats me sometimes but he is not so angry anymore.

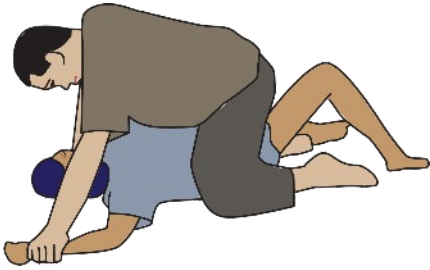


Khanke – Iraq

I keep thinking back to the night before we **escaped**. I was young. My family talked about men making people leave their homes and kidnapping the women and girls. I never knew people could be that violent.



I was too frightened to sleep and in the morning everyone was rushing from their homes. We left everything behind. We were trying to find somewhere safe when the men came. They killed my brother and all the young men and made all the women and girls get on a bus.



The men said my friend and I must marry them and beat us when we said we were too young. I cut myself with a razor and said I could not have sex because I had my **period**. But my friend was **raped**. We escaped and a kind man helped us to a safe place. That was a long time ago and I have worked hard to make my life better. But I am sad about the way girls are still treated here. I will do anything I can to change things.

Illustration by Gail Gosschalk



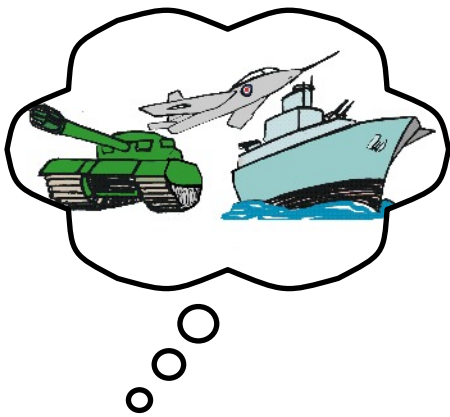
Successes



These young girls live in dangerous places with lots of problems. But many of them become students, get involved in their communities and speak up for the **rights** of young girls.

This is what 8 girls said about success and things they are proud of.

Mirav – Iraq



I left Syria when I was 6. I am 14 now and live in Iraq. We lived in a beautiful house in Syria but all I can remember is war and the sound of guns.



When we got to this camp there was no work. It was hard to pay the bills and my father left us and went to Germany. I was frightened and stayed in our tent all the time. Then a girl told me about the **UNFPA Safe Space**. The staff there helped me talk about my worries and meet other girls like me. Now I have dreams about what I will do.

Inaya – Lebanon



I never had the chance to be a child or finish school. My family said I must marry when I was 14.

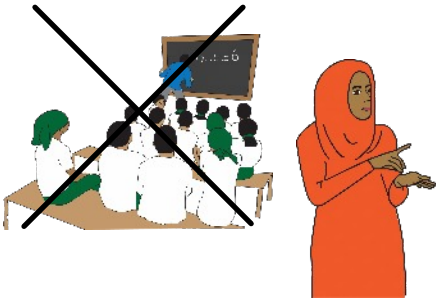


I said I would kill myself if they made me do this. They agreed I could marry someone I loved. But the man I thought loved me beat me and **abused** me and made me work on a farm where my boss also **abused** me. My husband said it was my fault when we could not have children.



Then I found the **UNFPA Safe Space** and things changed. They understood my problems and helped me ask for a divorce. My brothers were angry but I chose what to do with my life. I want to study and perhaps be a doctor and work with children. I am not sure as things are very difficult now. But I can tell the world about young girls like me who are forced to marry. And say 'lets do something about it.'

Amal – Syria



Many people with disabilities are ignored by schools, services and their own families. It is even worse for girls.



I am deaf and my family made me leave school at 12 to be married. I did not have the chance to learn sign language. My family were ashamed of me and decided what I could do. But then I heard about a women's centre. I am learning hairdressing and sign language and have lots of support from other women. I want to be the best hairdresser in the city.

Samar – Syria



I live in a camp and things are very difficult. My father is old and my mother is sick. My brother used to help but his not here now. So when I was 16 my family said I must leave school and get married. My sisters and I went to a group where we talked about **violence** against women. I felt safe and asked lots of questions. This helped me talk to my family. They listened and said I could go back to school and not get married.

Nour – Egypt



I left Syria and escaped to Egypt because it was not safe for us. When we got to Egypt I was afraid for myself and my children. I went to a **UNFPA Safe Space** and they supported me. I went to classes so I could teach other women crafts. We are all working together in this community. Especially with all the problems with **COVID-19**.

Mira – Iraq



The **UNFPA Safe Space** helps support each other. It really helps to talk to someone who is older but has been through the same things as you. You can talk to people who know what you are feeling and they can help you decide what to do. I think it saved my life.

Fatima – Syria



I got married when I was 12. Now I am 23 with 6 children. Being pregnant so many times made me ill and I could not care for my children properly. I wanted to use **contraception** so I would not get pregnant again but my husband said no.



The women's health clinic told my husband I needed a rest so I could care for the children we have. They helped my husband understand how I felt.

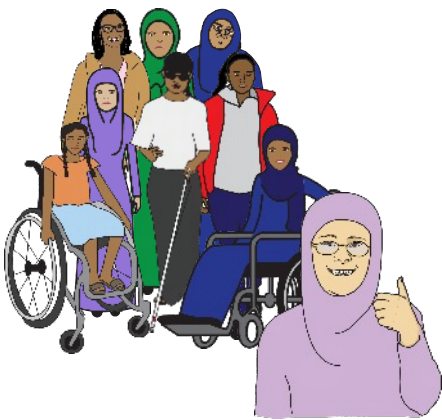


Janeh – Iraq

I am 18 and live in a **refugee** camp. When I was 16 an older boy started making sexual comments and trying to touch my private parts. I ran away and tried to ignore him but it did not work.

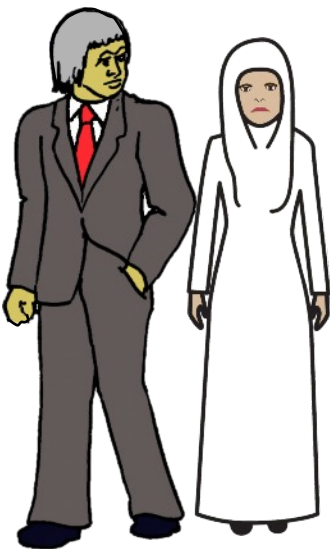


I told my mother and she and other women at the **UNFPA Safe Space** helped me complain. The boy had **abused** other women and girls but has stopped now. It is important for girls to speak up.



It is never your fault if men treat you badly. All girls have the right to be safe.

Kafa – Syria



I was married at 15 and had to forget about my dreams. Many young girls are forced to marry and grow up too young. They have to care for their husband, the house and their children. My husband promised I could work when we were married. But I had 6 sons and it was very hard.



I was lonely and found the **COVID-19** lockdowns very difficult. Then I went to the **UNFPA Safe Space** and learnt different crafts. I started selling scarves and soon had other women and girls working for me. I want to learn English and how to use computers. This will help me make my business even bigger.

Illustration by Gail Gosschalk



What happens next?

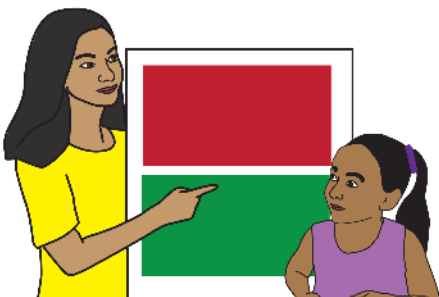


Mariam works with us to speak up for young girls in Arab countries.

This is what Mariam says about the stories.



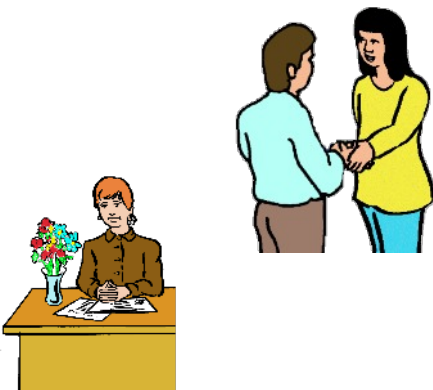
All over the world young girls need support to be safe and get their **rights**. Girls should be involved in planning the support they need.



Girls could do more if people allowed them to make choices about their lives. But other people and their families decide things for them. This is why **UNFPA safe Spaces** are so important. They give young girls the chance to support each other. But many families will not let their daughters go to them.



COVID-19 made things more difficult. Many girls were scared when they had to stay home with brothers or other men who might harm them.



Most young girls want the same things:

- to be treated the same as boys and men
- to have the same chances in life
- to choose who to marry
- to have power over their own lives
- for people to listen to them.



We are strong and can help make the world better if people give us the chance.



What the words mean

Abuse - when someone hurts or treats you badly

Arab – countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Camp – a place with tents and shelters for people to stay in when they have to leave their homes due to the war, an earthquake, flood, etc...

Contraception – things like a condom, pill or injection that can help stop a woman getting pregnant

COVID-19 (Coronavirus) - a serious illness caused by a new **virus** that affects people all over the world. A virus is a tiny germ that can get into your body and make you very ill.

Emergency - something dangerous or serious that happens suddenly or when you do not expect it.

Journalist – a person who finds out what is happening and writes about it for newspapers, magazines, television, radio or news websites.

Lawyer - someone who studied law and can give you advice or speak for you.

Mentor – when someone with more experience talks about what they have done and learnt and helps a young person plan what they want to do.

Period – the days each month when blood leaves a girl or woman’s body through her vagina (an opening between her legs). The blood builds up over the month in case she becomes pregnant and leaves her body if she does not.

Raped – this is when someone is forced to have sex.

Sexual health - the right to enjoy safe sex and keep well and healthy.

Rap - a type of music where a person chants words that usually rhyme to a song or music.

Register – put your name on an official list.

Refugee - a person who was forced to leave their country to escape war, being treated badly, or a natural disaster like a flood or earthquake.

Reproductive health is the **right** to decide whether or not to have children And support to have healthy children.

Rights - Rights are things you are allowed to do like getting married or the right to vote. Rights tell us how we should be treated. For example, you have the right to be treated with respect.

Sexual violence – This is when someone tries to do something sexual to you by forcing you or being violent.

UNFPA – The United Nations Population Fund is part of the **United Nations**. It works to reduce the **violence** against women and girls. And supports the **sexual and reproductive health** of women and girls all over the world.

United Nations (UN) - a group of 193 different countries that work together to try to make the world a better and safer place for everyone

Violence – Violence includes things like:

- Hitting
- Slapping
- Choking
- Cutting
- Pushing
- Burning
- Shooting
- using any weapons
- acid attacks
- being touched in private parts when you don't want to
- being forced to do something sexual that you don't like
- any other act that results in pain or being hurt.

WGSS – These letters are a short way of saying Women and Girls Safe Spaces. They are places where women and girls can feel physically and emotionally safe. Women and girls can talk about problems and worries with other women and with staff. They also take part in fun activities or in learning a new skill.



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