

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND

SAFE + EMPOWERED

THE LIFE-SAVING FUNCTION OF WOMEN
& GIRLS' SAFE SPACES IN HUMANITARIAN
SETTINGS IN THE ARAB REGION

THE SAFE SPACE EMPOWERED ME TO MOVE
PAST THE VIOLENCE I EXPERIENCED AND
TO HELP PREVENT IT FROM HAPPENING TO
OTHER WOMEN AND GIRLS.

– DOHA, a Syrian refugee living in Türkiye



BACKGROUND

WHAT I VALUED MOST WERE THE FRIENDSHIPS I'VE FORMED WITHIN A SHORT PERIOD OF ARRIVING AT THE SAFE SPACE. THAT ALONE WAS ENOUGH TO GIVE ME THE STRENGTH I NEEDED TO RECOVER.

– SALI, a Syrian refugee living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Women and girls' safe spaces (Safe Spaces) provide a secure, non-stigmatising environment for women and girls and their children to receive comprehensive care services. They constitute an integral, life-saving intervention when programming for gender-based violence (GBV) in emergencies, as outlined in the [Inter-Agency Minimum Standards](#) for GBV programming in emergencies.

UNFPA supports more than 1,000 such spaces globally. There is [substantial evidence](#) that the establishment of women and/or girls-only spaces helps reduce the risks of violence and prevent further harm during emergencies and protracted crises. For GBV humanitarian stakeholders, including UNFPA, the implementation of Safe Spaces across the Arab region continues to be a key strategy for the protection and empowerment of women and girls, who continue to report that Safe Spaces are often the only places in their environments where they feel safe and where they can access the services and care they need. In the words of Yusra, a Syrian woman from Damascus, "this safe space has allowed me to find my own worth and community. I feel stronger and ready to start living."

Unfortunately, the larger humanitarian community, including donors, sometimes questions the need for and the life-saving function of Safe Spaces. The most common queries and concerns revolve around the standards applied at Safe Spaces, such as the female-only nature of Safe Spaces or the value they add to the provision of GBV prevention and response services.

This advocacy document aims to answer the most frequently asked questions on Safe Spaces and to clarify the value of Safe Spaces within the framework of the GBV in emergency programming in the Arab region. It also aims to further explain how Safe Space activities and services are interlinked and complementary components of a lifesaving, empowering and transformative intervention.

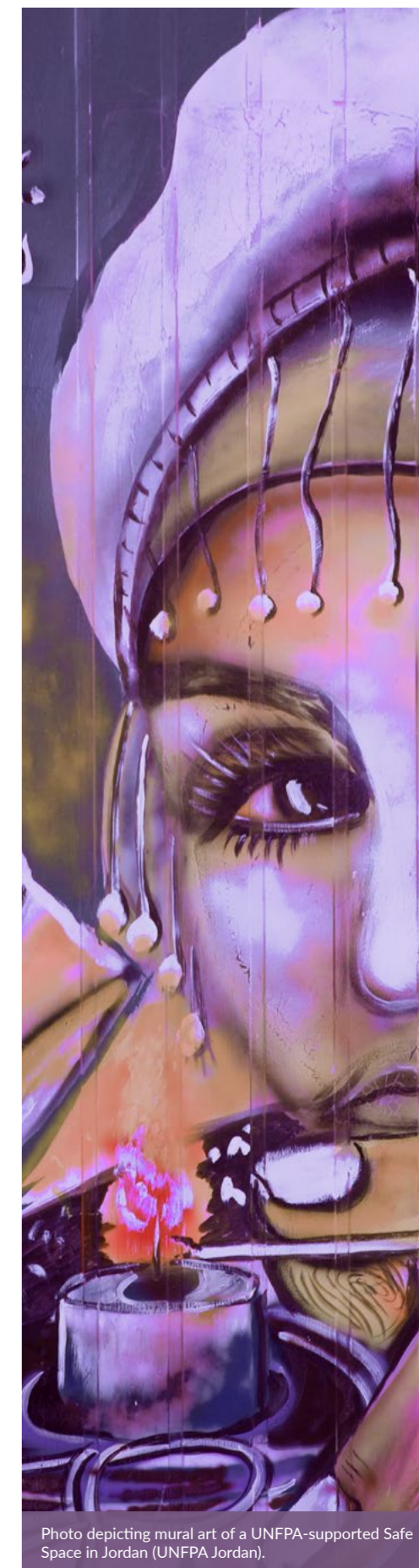


Photo depicting mural art of a UNFPA-supported Safe Space in Jordan (UNFPA Jordan).

THE VALUE OF SAFE SPACES.

GBV disproportionately affects women and girls, and its risks increase significantly during emergencies and protracted crises. In humanitarian settings, too few spaces are considered safe for women and adolescent girls. Public spaces in most cultures are largely inhabited by men and the limited space allocated to women can significantly shrink during crises. Women and girls are systematically discriminated against and less likely to have the options, resources, and power to leave an unsafe or violent situation. The discrimination women and adolescent girls face increases the risk of various forms of gender-based violence, including harassment, intimate partner and family violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, among others.

Women and girls consider Safe Spaces to be among the few environments they can access safely, free from any form of discrimination or stigmatisation. In many communities, they are often the only spaces where women and girls are allowed to go. As one FGD participant from Jordan states, “my husband does not allow me to leave the house except to go to the [Safe Space].”

More importantly, the positive impact of Safe Spaces is emphasised by the women and girls themselves. This is because these spaces provide or link to life-saving services for women and girls at risk or survivors of GBV, such as case management and psychosocial support, essential sexual and reproductive health services, legal support, and others, all of which are provided in a secure and respectful environment. At the same time, the spaces serve as important entry points for empowerment programmes, skills building, and prevention activities. As Rama, a survivor of gender-based violence from Qamishli, Syria, explains, “the Safe Space became more than a lifeline. It became my life, my one outlet from the madness, hatred, discrimination and cruelty I was encountering on a daily basis.”

Safe Spaces use a survivor-centred approach that prioritises the safety and confidentiality of each case, as well as the agency of women and girls. Survivor-centred GBV programming is not only about healing and recovery but also about empowerment of women and girls, creating and widening women and girls' spaces to act, and supporting an environment where they thrive and realise their rights free of violence.

THE SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACH CREATES A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THE SURVIVOR'S RIGHTS AND WISHES ARE RESPECTED, THEIR SAFETY IS ENSURED, AND THEY ARE TREATED WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT. A SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACH IS BASED ON THE GBV GUIDING PRINCIPLES (SAFETY, CONFIDENTIALITY, RESPECT OF SURVIVOR'S WISHES AND NO-DISCRIMINATION).

— *Interagency minimum standards for GBV in emergency*



Photo depicting mural art of a UNFPA-supported Safe Space in Egypt (UNFPA Egypt).

This is a key aspect of the Safe Spaces model as, most of the time, women and girls do not feel entitled (or lack sufficient trust in service providers) to seek help. Harmful gender norms, traditions, and rigid gender roles make it difficult for survivors to feel empowered to look for help, more so when the violence they experience is normalised in their community. Survivors may also face retaliation from their community if the GBV disclosure is not treated confidentially and safely.

While women and girls alike bear the brunt of any crisis, girls – particularly adolescent girls – face increasingly complex challenges that stand to alter the course of their development for the rest of their lives. Yet, adolescent girls are [too often forgotten](#) by humanitarian responses, and Safe Spaces usually offer the only humanitarian programmes with a growing range of activities that are tailored to girls. Reports previously published by UNFPA show that in humanitarian settings across the Arab region, adolescent girls are [at an increased risk](#) of GBV, including movement restrictions and denial of participation and decision-making. They also have limited access to information and essential services, particularly with regards to sexual and reproductive health. Safe Spaces provide the required programming and resources to bridge these gaps, including staff, space, activities, material, and strategies dedicated to engaging, serving, and [empowering adolescent girls](#).

The [objectives and guiding principles](#) of Safe Spaces help GBV practitioners create and maintain an environment where women and girls are supported and empowered. These include:

1. Facilitating access for all women and adolescent girls to knowledge, skills, and a range of relevant services.
2. Supporting the psychosocial well-being of women and adolescent girls and creating social networks.
3. Serving as a place where women and adolescent girls can organise and access information and resources to reduce risk of violence.
4. Serving as a key entry point into specialised services for GBV survivors.
5. Providing a place where women and adolescent girls are safe and encouraged to use their voice and collectively raise attention to their rights and needs.

WHAT MAKES SAFE SPACES LIFE-SAVING?

THEY RESPECT US HERE. I'VE LEARNED NEW THINGS ABOUT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND EARLY MARRIAGE, AND NOW I KNOW THAT WHEN FORCED MARRIAGES INVOLVE PEOPLE UNDER THE AGE OF 18, WE CAN CALL THE POLICE OR GO TO THE SPACE AND ASK FOR HELP.

– An adolescent girl living in Türkiye

1 WOMEN + GIRLS COUNT ON THEM FOR THEIR HEALTH & WELL-BEING.

In addition to being among the few available lifelines for women during crises, [assessments](#) conducted across humanitarian countries in the Arab region confirm that Safe Spaces are perceived as such by women and girls themselves, with 91 percent of those consulted describing them as “essential” or “very important.” As Duha, a Syrian refugee living in Türkiye explains, “the Safe Space empowered me to move past the violence I experienced and to contribute to the work being done to prevent it from happening to other women and girls.”

2 THEY HELP (RE)BUILD SOCIAL SAFETY NETS.

Women and girls experiencing GBV face even greater risks to their well-being when they are alone and/or isolated. Abusive dynamics often feed feelings of powerlessness and reinforce various forms of isolation. Women and girls often express the need for interacting with peers and for community support as a whole, which allows them to share experiences and interests, to support each other to overcome the challenges they face, and to collaborate on different programmes and projects. This often results in a greater sense of safety and empowerment. As one adolescent girl from Idlib explained, “it was only at the Safe Space that I decided to disclose the violence I was experiencing simply due to the support and understanding I found, especially by other women who have experienced similar things.” In addition to the environment itself, group activities at Safe Spaces are conducive to the recovery of survivors by cultivating social and safety networks as well as a sense of communal support and empowerment, which in turn contributes to the overall well-being of the wider community.

3 THEY PRIORITISE THE SAFETY & CONFIDENTIALITY OF WOMEN + GIRLS.

All aspects of the Safe Spaces, including their location, design, and the activities provided therein, prioritise the safety and confidentiality of women and girls, which is not only conducive to their well-being but also makes it more likely for survivors of gender-based violence to disclose such crimes. This is where Safe Spaces also serve as fundamental entry points to life-saving GBV specialised services, particularly since activities and services complement each other through a [comprehensive approach](#). Through these activities, survivors are able to familiarise themselves with the space, to personally know the service providers, to better understand safety and confidentiality, and to make the informed choice of seeking specialised help. **Having GBV specialised services available in the Safe Space makes the referral safer, easier, and faster.**

4 IMPLEMENTED CORRECTLY, SAFE SPACE PROGRAMMING HELPS BUILD AWARENESS AND TRANSCEND HARMFUL NORMS.

Group activities in Safe Spaces are informed and co-coordinated by women and girls themselves. In addition to helping them better understand the consequences of harmful norms and gender-based violence, activities provided at Safe Spaces enable women and girls to apply violence prevention and risk mitigation approaches that are crucial to their safety and well-being. Moreover, by participating in recreational, awareness-raising, and life-skills activities, women and girls develop decision-making abilities, critical thinking, and a sense of trust toward the space and its services. Those activities empower individuals and groups to pursue personal or communal objectives, identify their potential, and engage in healthy interpersonal relationships.

5 SAFE SPACE PROGRAMMING CAN HELP COUNTER SOCIAL STIGMAS & ISOLATION.

Shame, stigma, and social isolation are defining features of the psychosocial impact of GBV, imposed by social norms that not only permit and encourage violence against women and girls but also blame and punish survivors for having been victimised. As such, mitigating such feelings in the context of a Safe Space is also considered life-saving. In humanitarian settings, psychosocial support activities are implemented in Safe Spaces to address the impact of displacement, chronic stress, and the associated absence of control experienced by all women and adolescent girls, survivors and non-survivors alike.

I LOST THE SENSE OF ISOLATION AND FELT SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN MY PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING. MY LIFE CHANGED FOR THE BETTER BECAUSE THE SERVICES HELPED FUEL MY TALENTS AS THE CARING STAFF LISTENED TO MY ISSUES WITH COMPLETE DISCRETION. THIS WAS A RELIEF FOR ME.ON).

A woman from Deir- ez-Zor, Syria, on accessing services during COVID-19

WHY ARE SAFE SPACES ESSENTIAL TO WOMEN + GIRLS?

AFTER MY FAMILY LEARNED THAT ONE OF THE TEACHERS AT THE SCHOOL WAS HARASSING FEMALE STUDENTS, THEY FORBADE ME FROM GOING TO SCHOOL. ATTENDING THE SAFE SPACE AT THE CAMP WAS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ME TO LIVE AGAIN, AS I WAS CONSIDERING COMMITTING SUICIDE DUE TO THE PRESSURE MY FAMILY WAS PUTTING ON ME.

— An adolescent girl living in Areesha camp, Syria

1 TO GIVE WOMEN + GIRLS AN UNCOMPROMISING SENSE OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SECURITY.

Gender-based violence is predominantly committed by men against women and girls. This is due to the fundamental power disparity that places women and girls at risk, and which is further reinforced by harmful norms and institutions. As such, women and girls are seldom granted the same level of autonomy and protection as that afforded to men and boys. Given that the overarching purpose of Safe Spaces is to give women and girls an uncompromising sense of physical and emotional security, making Safe Spaces exclusive to them is all but necessary. It also makes it much more likely for women and girls of diverse backgrounds to access and benefit from the services available without jeopardising their physical safety or psychological well-being. The female-only nature of Safe Spaces often makes them the only places where women and girls are not exposed to potential perpetrators of violence.

2 IN MOST COMMUNITIES, WOMEN + GIRLS DO NOT HAVE SPACES WHERE THEY FEEL PROTECTED AND SAFE TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES.

Meanwhile, many public spaces (e.g., schools, community centres, sports fields, etc.) cater to the needs of men and boys. In communities with conservative, male-centric norms, many women and girls are not allowed to be present in the same public space as men and boys, or are otherwise uncomfortable speaking or sharing opinions in their presence. Moreover, women and girls who speak up, exercise their essential rights, and proactively engage in activities may be judged or further marginalised by male community members.



Photo depicting mural art of a UNFPA-supported Safe Space in Egypt (UNFPA Egypt).

3 DURING EMERGENCIES OR CRISIS RESPONSES, SPECIFIC TARGETING CAN REDUCE RISKS + PREVENT FURTHER HARM.

Crises significantly exacerbate the risk of gender-based violence by men and boys, and Safe Spaces offer women and girls an entry point for critical response services in addition to serving as a trusted source of vital information. They also provide opportunities for women and girls to engage with each other and exchange information in an environment that is shielded from sexual harassment and moral judgment by men and boys. As Janeh, a Syrian refugee living in Iraq, explains, “the awareness sessions I attended shortly after my arrival at the camp likely saved my life. I had lost everything, watched loved ones die, and there were many men around me trying to take advantage of my situation. The sessions made me acutely aware of the risks and showed me where to find quality support.”

4 MALE FAMILY MEMBERS VALUE THE FEMALE-ONLY NATURE OF THE SPACE.

In addition to mixed-gender spaces being unacceptable in many communities, gender-segregation in certain contexts can serve (or be perceived) as a protection measure. This is particularly true in humanitarian and other contexts where women and girls are subject to heightened risks of gender-based violence. As such, offering women and girls-only spaces makes it much more likely that women and girls access and benefit from the space. By extension, women and girls in these contexts usually feel safer and more at ease when they are amongst other females exclusively.

HOW CAN SAFE SPACES BE GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE?

1 SAFE SPACES ARE TAILORED TO GIVE VOICES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO WOMEN + GIRLS LIVING IN UNEQUAL AND RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS.

This is particularly necessary in humanitarian settings where traditional roles and norms may prevent them from exercising their human rights and assuming essential roles in their communities. Gender transformative approaches are designed to build on the societal shifts that occur during crises to ensure more impactful social progress by helping women and girls overcome such restrictions and reach their full potential as individuals. To achieve gender transformation, Safe Space programming should be tailored to give voices and opportunities to women and girls living in unequal and restrictive environments, especially in humanitarian settings where traditional roles and norms may prevent women and girls to work toward their empowerment, the one of their peers, and their communities. Humanitarian situations can also bring about changes in gender roles in households and communities, which in turn can serve as an opportunity for gender transformation. Gender transformative approaches can leverage such opportunities to alter harmful social and gender norms.

2 THEY ARE OFTEN THE ONLY SPACES CO-CREATED & CO-LED BY WOMEN + GIRLS FOR THE PURPOSE OF THEIR EMPOWERMENT.

When attending the Safe Space, women and girls manage the space, provide inputs on the programmatic components, and co-facilitate group activities. They also choose the skills they wish to cultivate and are often given more room to experiment and realise their own potential. As Huda, a 16-year-old girl living in Egypt explains, "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."

MY FAMILY'S ATTITUDES CHANGED WHEN THEY SAW THE POSITIVE IMPACT THE SAFE SPACE HAD ON ME. THEY NO LONGER WANTED ME TO MARRY EARLY AND COMMITTED THEMSELVES TO MY EDUCATION AND FUTURE.

— An adolescent girl who accessed awareness sessions at a UNFPA-supported Safe Space in Iraq

3 BETTER KNOWLEDGE MEANS WOMEN + GIRLS ARE MORE LIKELY TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS, EXERCISE AGENCY, AND SEEK SUPPORT.

Empowering activities provide gender transformative assets that can enhance the wellbeing of families and communities. Experiences throughout the Arab region show that when women learn a new concept or skill, they are likely to share them with members of their family and wider community, making Safe Space programming a vital component of social development. As one woman from Jordan explains, "I used to think that as a woman, I had very little value and that I was more likely to be a burden to others. Thanks to this safe space, I am now able to help my daughter fight against these ideas."

4 SAFE SPACES CAN HELP TRANSFORM A COMMUNITY'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN + GIRLS, GENDER DYNAMICS, AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.

Behaviour change activities can help communities build a stronger understanding of the power disparities and harmful norms and practices that consistently cause harm to their female members. These often target men and boys outside of the Safe Space and contribute to shifting power dynamics within the family, thus contributing to social progress on a wider scale.

Gender transformative programming seeks to actively examine, challenge, and transform the underlying causes of gender inequality, which are rooted in inequitable power dynamics, social structures, and institutions. As such the gender transformative approach aims at addressing imbalanced power dynamics and relations, rigid gender norms and roles, harmful practices, unequal formal and informal rules as well as gender-blind or discriminatory legislative and policy frameworks that create and perpetuate gender inequality.

By doing so, it seeks to eradicate the systemic forms of gender-based discrimination by creating or strengthening equitable gender norms, dynamics and systems that support gender equality. The gender transformative approach challenges unequal gender relations and discriminatory norms and practices, which are typically biased in favour of men. It also aims to change those norms and practices that discriminate against men.



An adolescent girl holding a sign that reads "I am still a child!" as part of an awareness and advocacy initiative supported by UNFPA (UNFPA Lebanon).

BUT WHAT ABOUT MEN + BOYS?

1 MEN AND BOYS PLAY A KEY ROLE IN GBV PREVENTION AND RISK MITIGATION.

As male members of a family often exercise control over the decisions and movements of its female members, their buy-in is conducive to the success of the Safe Space model. As such, Safe Space programming is usually complemented with a community outreach component that lends particular focus to engaging men and boys. In addition to promoting healthier social dynamics that are free of gender inequalities and of gender-based violence, these community outreach activities can broaden the reach of Safe Space programming to increase the participation of women and girls in Safe Space activities. However, men and boys also need to be engaged through gender-based violence prevention interventions, including behaviour change interventions, as part of the broader programming.

More importantly, men and boys traditionally have greater power and control over resources. This applies to both the home or in the wider community and it makes their commitment to Safe Space programming conducive to ensuring that resources and opportunities are available to (and safe for) women and girls.

Men + boys as allies: Behaviour change activities are part of a strategic and systematic approach rooted in the understanding that men and boys who are initially supportive of harmful gender norms, have the potential to become promoters of healthy and equal relationships and can contribute to breaking the intergenerational cycle of violence against women and girls.

2 MALE SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ARE NEVER LEFT BEHIND.

While Safe Spaces programming rightly focuses on the needs of women and girls as the population segment disproportionately affected by GBV, UNFPA recognises the importance to respond compassionately and ethically to link survivors of sexual violence, including men and boys, to appropriate services. Safe Space staff and front-line workers respectfully receive disclosures and safely refer all survivors to specialised services, while continuing to build partnerships and develop referral pathways with organisations that are best placed to support men and boys survivors of sexual violence.

However, it is important to stress that Safe Space are not appropriate venues for providing services to male survivors of sexual violence. Providing one-on-one sessions or group counselling with adult men and older adolescent boys in Safe Spaces is not safe for the women and girls nor is it safe and appropriate for the male survivors of sexual violence. Evidence shows that male survivors of sexual violence often do not want to receive support from GBV services, as their entry points to assistance differ from those of women and girls. Instead, they often seek support from other actors, such as health service providers, general mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), or child protection services.

MY FAMILY'S ATTITUDES CHANGED WHEN THEY SAW THE POSITIVE IMPACT THE SAFE SPACE HAD ON ME. THEY NO LONGER WANTED ME TO MARRY EARLY AND COMMITTED THEMSELVES TO MY EDUCATION AND FUTURE.

— An adolescent girl who accessed services at a UNFPA-supported Safe Space in Iraq

FUNDING MATTERS.

1 SAFE SPACE FUNDING SHOULD BE GIVEN PRIORITY.

Safe Space programming represents the most comprehensive and far-reaching GBV intervention, be it during emergencies and in humanitarian settings or in contexts at the intersection between emergency and development (nexus), where it maintains its empowering and gender-transformative outcome. Donors should recognise the added value of Safe Spaces as lifesaving, empowering and gender transformative programming and should prioritise funding the Safe Spaces through flexible and sustainable resources. flexible funding will also support the progressive inclusion of women and girls' feedback to inform and adapt Safe Spaces programming to women and girls' needs and priorities. The investment in Safe Spaces means prioritising a comprehensive and complementary package of prevention, risk mitigation, and social activities, together with much needed GBV specialised services (such as case management and psychosocial support).

2 SAFE SPACES BECOME BETTER & MORE ACCESSIBLE WHEN THEY ARE WELL-FUNDED.

Women and girls are better served by these spaces when they offer child care, transportation, access measures for women and girls with disabilities, outreach activities and mobile services, dignity kits distributions and integrated GBV-SRH services. As such, these additional components should always be included when funding Safe Spaces.

3 BUILDING TRUST IS KEY.

Long-term Safe Space programming allows for building trust within the community and increases the potential for gender transformation. Additionally, long-term Safe Spaces programming gives enough time for women and girls to develop the skills needed to take a decision-making role in Safe Spaces activities and supports constructive and solid collaborations with the women-led organisations to increase the impact and the sustainability of Safe Spaces.



Photo depicting mural art of a UNFPA-supported Safe Space in Jordan (UNFPA Regional Humanitarian Hub for Syria and the Arab States).

4 PREVENTION STRATEGIES WORK TO ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.

The fundamental causes of GBV are entrenched in the culture, beliefs, and habits of community members. Working with community members to recognise male privileges and change social norms is a long and progressive process. It is critical to follow a predetermined sequence and timeline for safe and successful implementation and outcomes.

5 THE ENGAGEMENT OF LOCAL, WOMEN-LED ORGANISATIONS SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED AND SUPPORTED.

This should be adopted as a strategy to strengthen existing capacities, amplify the voices of women and girls, and ensure the sustainability of Safe Spaces programming. Partnerships with such organisations should occur from early intervention stages but should also be progressively funded and tailored to growing capacities and existing resources. These partnerships represent an added value for Safe Spaces as they bring local expertise and practices while increasing participation and the gender transformative potential. A meaningful and well-planned partnership with women-led organisations should progress toward the equal sharing of roles, tasks and responsibilities to increase localization and facilitate local partners' access to international funds guaranteeing the continuation of Safe Space programming.



Photo depicting mural art of a UNFPA-supported Safe Space in Egypt (UNFPA Egypt).

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A LOT HAS CHANGED IN MY FAMILY – ESPECIALLY MY HUSBAND. FOR EXAMPLE, I GOT MARRIED AT THE AGE OF 15 AND, ACCORDING TO HIM, I COULD HAVE MARRIED EVEN EARLIER. THAT, HOWEVER, NO LONGER APPLIES WHEN IT COMES TO HIS OWN DAUGHTERS! HIS BELIEFS ON THE SUBJECT ARE NO LONGER AS RIGID AS THEY USED TO BE. HE NOW WANTS HIS DAUGHTERS TO COMPLETE THEIR EDUCATION FIRST AND THEN MARRY A PERSON OF THEIR OWN CHOOSING.

SAFE + EMPOWERED

THE LIFE-SAVING FUNCTION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS' SAFE SPACES IN
HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS IN THE ARAB REGION

DEVELOPED BY THE UNFPA REGIONAL HUMANITARIAN
HUB FOR SYRIA & THE ARAB STATES

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