

Where did World Vision go wrong in its report about Syrian widows?

On April 11, World Vision published its report titled [“Women and Children of Syria’s Widow Camps: Hardest to Reach, Most at Risk”](#), which was the first known assessment of its kind by an INGO and was carried out with the support of local NGOs as the report said.

This report has created a social uproar and unease among Syrians, activists, and Syrian NGOs workers, who considered that the report was discredited with a lot of mistakes, misunderstandings, and generalizations.

Questions about the report methodology:

The report was written by two British researchers, one identifying herself as an independent researcher and the other as part of the World Vision team, with the contribution of six other people-- one of them is a Jordan researcher-- and members of the World Vision Syria Response Advocacy Response Group and MEAL team.

None of the team above was Syrian or visited the Widows' camps in northern Syria, and the local organizations that collected the data were absent when the results were analyzed and interpreted, and the draft report was not shared with these NGOs as agreed.

Regarding the sample surveyed, the report said that the report methodology has primarily consisted of qualitative interviews conducted with 200 women, 139 adolescents (11-18 years old), and 80 children (6-10 years old), living in 28 “pure” and mixed widow camps in Idlib and Aleppo as well as.

While the report indicates that 20% of the sample was from children 6-11 years old, an important question arises about how these interviews were conducted with children of that age, which the report never made clear.

Whether the data collectors competent and knowledgeable? Were they pre-trained?

Did the interviews take place with parental or a guardian's consent?

Did the child understand the questions well? Especially since the question is asking about a sensitive, such as neglect, harassment, and mental health.

The report was also based on interviews with six Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with humanitarian coordination actors (Sector

Cluster leads) and local organizations who have had access to some camps since 2021.

There is no information about those Key Informant Interviews such as their roles or gender and powers were not known. It is necessary to present more information about KIIs since many organization's directors are working from outside Syria, and females are usually working with widows, while males are not allowed to deal with this segment.

Erroneous or biased information:

The report indicated that widows' camps are supported by Islamic and Gulf charities, and it claims that permits are not provided to foreign organizations operating by the "Salvation Government", the administrative arm of "HTS", or by the AFAD Foundation, only a limited number of local organizations were allowed to offer protection or psychological support projects.

This sentence seems biased, especially with international organizations evading support for many important projects such as education and health care projects under various pretexts. Despite the exacerbation of the needs, the humanitarian response process is still regressing, even in the areas of basic needs such as food.

On the other hand, many courses and projects are held in these camps to raise the efficiency of this segment, enhance its ability to be self-reliant, and start small projects. Many service providers and female trainers who work with widows confirm that the local authority has not been prevented from holding such courses in these camps, which makes the report's information inaccurate.

Elsewhere, the report mentions the following sentence: "Due to the absence of specialized care - medical psychological care - approximately one-third of women resort to prayer as a positive way of dealing with fears." The inclusion of this sentence in this formulation indicates that the researchers are very far from the studied society and its cultural, intellectual, and religious values that consider prayer as a cornerstone maintained by a wide segment of society, helping them to always charge their spiritual energies. They resort to it additionally in crises to seek help and support from God, and not because they lack competent care.

Cultural and Community Sensitivities:

In my opinion, the paragraph that received the most attention from the Arab and International media - which ignored the rest important aspects of the need - was the one that talked about sexual violence within these camps, which caused a deep societal rejection of the report and the party that issued it.

The research did not have any idea about the sensitivity of presenting such topics in Arab societies, and how it is necessary to be accurate in presenting such information in order not to create new societal problems.

The report indicated that "Around 25% of women stated that they had witnessed sexual abuse in the camp daily, weekly or monthly". This sentence has been distorted by some websites claiming that a quarter of the women in the camp have been subjected to sexual abuse, ignoring the next sentence, which indicated that only 9% of women and girls reported experiencing sexual abuse themselves - with the actual number likely to be significantly higher.

According to what has been mentioned in the report, speaking about "witnessing sexual abuse in the camp daily, weekly or monthly" seems very confused and incomprehensible. because seeing these accidents is not possible in this open society, and it may be mean hearing about it.

It was also not clear if the answers were from the same camp or from other camps, as many of the answers may refer to a specific incident that took place in their camp and the women's answers mention it, or they are speaking about the Sexual harassment which can be noticed daily or weekly or monthly.

This hypothesis is reinforced by the quotation from one of the interviewees in the same report, which indicates that they receive between 2-3 GBV cases of rape annually and that these cases are documented and confirmed by many GBV female workers in the camps who emphasize that forced sexual abuse cannot be hidden.

Many media agencies followed [the Guardian report](#) which used " survival sex " that was mentioned in

one of the quotes as a respondent opinion and transformed it into a subheadline. This in turn reflects a state of unprofessionalism, generalization, and misunderstanding of the situation in the studied society.

While the studied society has a cultural perception of the women's reputation, this report and media agencies --especially the Guardian which titled its report with a partial sentence-- have contributed a wrong and negative stereotyping of a sensitive segment. In addition, they exposed them to a societal stigma that could affect their security or deprive them of the services they have received.

Furthermore, this stigma will enhance their weakness and problems and make them vulnerable to additional exploitation on the pretext of their weak resistance and needs.

Although the report discussed many important aspects such as minor marriage, child labor, the absence of education, and the decline in the mental health of this sample, the media's bias in presenting the report and some methodological errors weakened its local impact.

The negative social reaction against the foreign organizations' work can increase because of ignoring the societal and cultural context, especially with the absence and marginalization of local cadres as partner researchers and field workers in the analyzing and interpreting process.