

Documenting Sexual and Gender Based Violence

The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre faces challenges accessing survivors and witnesses of sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV). As part of SJAC's commitment to expand and improve its ability to document SGBV – and recognizing the ethical duties owed to those who choose to come forward – SJAC had established the following practices in its SGBV documentation.

Do No Harm — The principle of “do no harm” forms the foundation of SJAC’s documentation work. This means that survivors come first. If collecting documentation would put the interviewee at risk of excessive harm, or if the interviewee has extreme difficulty telling his/her account of the events, then SJAC’s documenters do not continue. Additionally, SJAC makes efforts to avoid re-traumatizing the interviewee by conducting only one interview and demonstrating sensitivity during the process.

Confidentiality — SJAC has a strict confidentiality standard that applies to all of its documentation. If the information is not already publically available, SJAC does not share its information with anyone outside of the organization – unless sharing would further justice and accountability in Syria, as in the case of prosecutions or alternative justice mechanisms. Even in those cases, SJAC only agrees to share information with those who adhere to the same confidentiality standards.

Informed Consent — Prior to conducting any interviews, SJAC’s documentation team first obtains signed informed consent. Informed consent is never

assumed, and requires that the interviewee is made aware of SJAC and its mission, the confidentiality standard and its limits, the possible uses of the documentation, the types of questions that will be asked, and the fact that the interviewee has total choice over whether to proceed. For children, consent is obtained from legal guardians.

Dual Referral System — After completing an SGBV interview, SJAC’s documenters use a dual referral system to connect the interviewee with partner organizations (in Syria as well as in the refugee camps) that provide tailored support and treatment, including medical, psychosocial, and economic support. Likewise, many of SJAC’s partner organizations inform the survivors they serve about SJAC’s documentation program, providing SJAC with the opportunity to access and document accounts of SGBV.

Security — In a conflict zone like Syria, security is a top priority, particularly for more sensitive violations, such as SGBV. SJAC’s documenters follow strict security protocols, from choosing the location of the interview to the manner in which they store and secure the collected SGBV documentation. Once

the documentation has been processed into SJAC’s database, additional precautions are taken for data involving children or survivors of SGBV, including storing that type of documentation in a separate offline database.

Ongoing Support — Providing ongoing support to the SJAC documentation team ensures that they are able to effectively and ethically handle the SGBV cases they encounter. While documentation team members currently undergo annual trainings that include an SGBV-related component, SJAC also plans to hire an SGBV consultant who can provide ongoing support and answer questions as they arise.

This is a summary of SJAC’s sexual- and gender-based violence practices. Please contact SJAC if you have any questions or suggestions, or if you would like a copy of our detailed Gender and SGBV Policy.