

# Addressing Gendered and Intersectional Barriers to Reporting Civilian Harm

Two billion people – one quarter of the human population – live in conflict-affected areas. When these civilians experience harm at the hands of armed actors, too many have nowhere to go to report that harm and seek accountability. Barriers to reporting continue to persist even when reporting pathways exist. This brief outlines how gender, age, ethnicity, and other identities influence which of these barriers civilians face and how significant they are. It concludes with recommendations for governments and armed actors on how to improve access to accountability for all civilians.


## Knowing Where to Report

After experiencing harm, civilians often do not know where to find reporting pathways or how to use them. This is especially true for marginalized populations, for whom different advertising mediums present different accessibility challenges. For example, advertisements in print or online text-based media may struggle to reach populations with lower literacy rates globally, including women and girls, elderly persons, and poor and rural communities. Online advertisements are also less likely to reach women and girls, elderly persons, and poor and rural populations, who tend to have less access to the Internet, along with communities lacking Internet access due to the destruction of critical infrastructure during conflict. Governments and armed actors must also take care to advertise reporting pathways through mediums and channels beyond only those used primarily by high status men from specific ethnic groups.

## Accessing Reporting Pathways

Even when civilians do know where to go, accessing reporting mechanisms can present challenges. Reporting channels do not always exist in the full diversity of languages spoken. When translation options are present, these options are not always accurate or easy to navigate to. For example, to reach the Somali translation of US Africa Command's (AFRICOM) civilian casualty reporting portal, Somali civilians must first access an English-language website and navigate to a small "translate" button, also in English. The translation itself is poor and appears to have been done using translation software rather than a custom translation. Beyond subpar translation, text-based pathways, such as AFRICOM's online portal, further preclude civilians who lack literacy skills from reporting without support. Relying solely on an online mechanism, as AFRICOM does, also excludes civilians without Internet access. Again, these accessibility challenges disproportionately fall on women and girls, as well as elderly persons and poor and rural communities.

Pathways that require civilians to travel to a military installation to report in person present obstacles as well. Of those civilians physically able to travel, not all can afford the trip, or to leave their livelihood for the time it takes. Civilians in more remote or underserved areas face additional financial and logistical



challenges due to poorly maintained or absent infrastructure and the greater distances they need to traverse. Women and girls face uniquely gendered barriers. Care responsibilities for children, elderly, or disabled household members can tie them to their homes. Further, they may confront cultural, security, or legal restrictions to traveling without a male family member. When men have been killed or injured, are away fighting, or must remain at home to defend the household or support it economically, travel for women and girls becomes all but impossible.

## **The Security Risks of Reporting**


Reporting can place civilians at risk of additional physical harm. Gender, ethnicity, and other identity categories influence what these risks entail and can compound them. For example, traveling to a military base or embassy often requires traversing insecure areas or active hostilities, where civilians risk death and injury through crossfire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), land mines, and other unexploded ordnance (UXOs). Armed actors may target civilians based on ethnicity, religion, or other salient identity category, or simply in order to rob, kidnap, or extort them. Men and boys risk detention, torture, and death as perceived or potential combatants or supporters of the wrong “side.” Women and girls also risk detention, torture, and death due to perceived affiliations, combined with the heightened potential for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Reporting SGBV also carries unique risks, which frequently inhibit survivors from doing so at all. The possibility of social stigma represents only one such risk. In some contexts, women and girls whose relatives discover they have reported SGBV risk further gender-based violence. Men and boys who report SGBV risk abuse at the hands of relatives and communities due to real or perceived homosexuality. Members of the LGBTQI+ community risk being forcibly outed and subjected to criminalization and physical and sexual violence as a result. Reporting SGBV can also put civilians at risk of further SGBV at the hands of community members or even those they report to, based on harmful stereotypes about the kinds of people who experience SGBV.

No matter how or what type of harm they report, civilians may risk retaliation from security forces for doing so. Retaliation can include intimidation, threats, and actual violence against the reporter and their loved ones. These forms of retaliation may take on a gendered or sexualized character, especially for women and girls.

## **Taking Claimants Seriously**

For civilians who do manage to report, their identities can influence whether armed actors take their reports seriously. Security forces, as highly masculinized institutions, are less likely to take women and girls – and by extension, their reports – seriously. Ethnicity, religion, language or dialect spoken, socioeconomic status, and region also shape armed actor perceptions of civilian credibility. When these identities intersect, such as for a poor ethnic minority woman, the likelihood of an armed actor taking her report seriously decreases.



## Solutions: Making Accountability Accessible

Civilian populations are not monolithic. If governments and armed actors treat them as such when designing and advertising reporting channels, they will render these channels inaccessible to large swaths of the population and place accountability further out of reach. To ensure civilians of all identities can safely report harm, governments and armed actors can implement several key reforms:



### **Create multiple reporting options, based on consultation with women and other marginalized groups, to ensure maximum access.**

Phone hotlines, online portals, and in-person reporting options can exist side by side and should include all relevant languages and dialects. Channels should employ mixed-gender teams to receive reports and provide women and girls with the opportunity to report only to another woman if preferred. Options to report anonymously should exist as well. Channels should be designed based on consultation with a range of civil society, including women's groups, groups representing ethnic/religious minorities, and disability advocacy groups.



### **Advertise reporting channels through a range of mediums and outlets.**

Depending on context, these can include print, online, and social media, radio broadcasts, and WhatsApp or Telegram channels, among others. Advertising mediums and outlets should be chosen based on consultation with a range of civil society, including women's groups and groups representing ethnic/religious minorities, and disabled populations.



### **Train personnel receiving reports to process reports while recognizing bias.**

Personnel receiving reports should be gender diverse and trained to recognize how personal and societal biases may influence how they interpret information. They should also be trained in how to evaluate and process reports in a manner that minimizes bias. Zero tolerance policies for retaliation should also be enforced.

Implementing these measures may not entirely eliminate the challenges conflict-affected civilians face in accessing accountability, especially when other conflict actors may place less of an emphasis on addressing civilian harm they cause. However, improving access to reporting channels can play a significant role in institutionalizing accountability within security forces, increasing trust between communities and armed actors, and meeting the needs of civilians caught in conflict across all of their diversity.

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*Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) envisions a world in which no civilian is harmed in conflict. We support communities affected by conflict in their quest for protection and strengthen the resolve and capacity of armed actors to prevent and respond to civilian harm.*

*This brief was researched and authored by Rosie Berman, with support from Annie Shiel and Vanja Kovac.*