



GENDER ALERT I



VOICES OF WOMEN ACTIVISTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: First respondents to the Armenia refugee crisis

Centering Gender Specific Needs and Priorities in the Refugee Response in Armenia

Photo: @UN Armenia/Avedisian

INTRODUCTION:

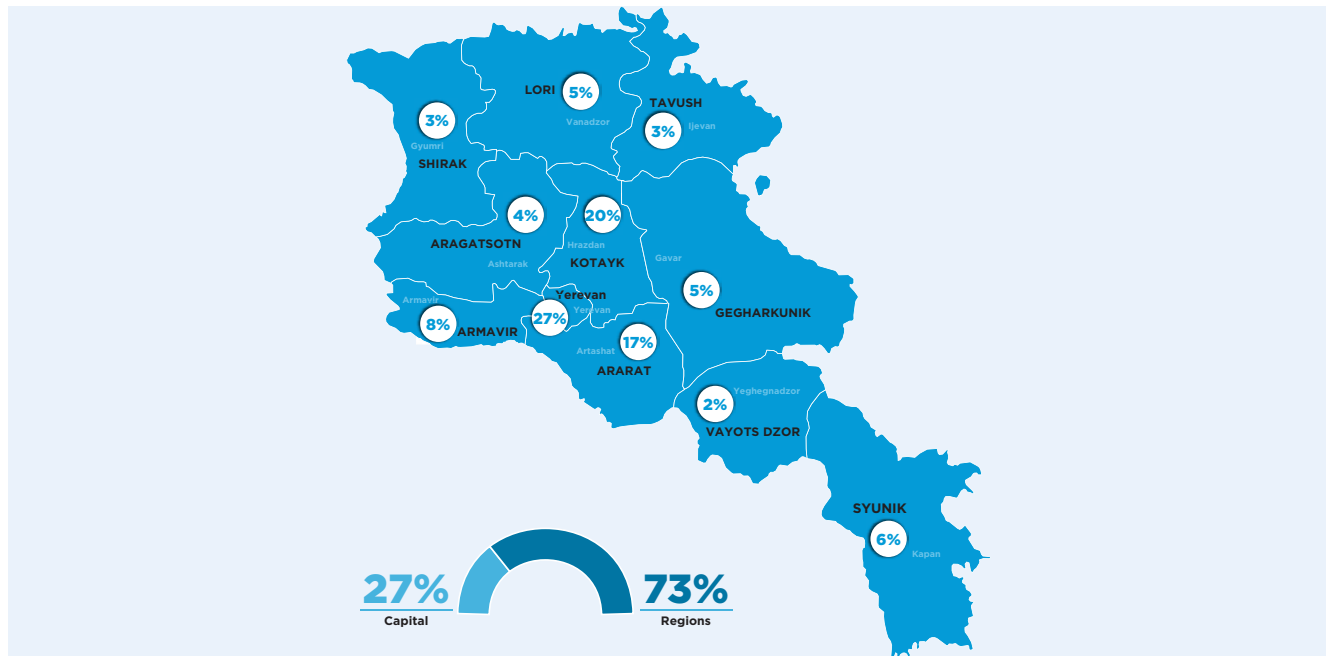
The objective of this Gender Alert is to capture the initial messages conveyed by women’s organizations actively involved in responding to the refugee crisis in Armenia. This information was shared with UN Women during the initial days of the displacement of thousands of ethnic Armenians into Armenia following a nine-month blockade, the recent escalation of the decades-long conflict and isolation in the region.

It’s important to note that this information is not exhaustive; its primary purpose is to provide an insight into the current situation of refugees and emphasize their specific needs from a gender and diversity perspective. As the situation continues to evolve and more data becomes available, a more in-depth analysis will be necessary.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF REFUGEES



GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION



REFUGEE RESPONSE

The Government of Republic of Armenia is leading the response to ensure the protection and lifesaving needs of refugees, including medium- and longer-term plans. UNHCR is leading the Inter-Agency Refugee Response Plan for October 2023 – March 2024, in close collaboration and coordination with the UN Resident Coordinators Office. A Gender Task Force within the Refugee Coordination Forum will provide support to inter-agency

coordination to ensure all sector and sub-sector working groups meet their obligations towards gender equality and inclusion. The plan will support the meaningful participation and leadership of national and local civil society organizations, focusing on women-led organizations, women’s rights organizations, and minority rights groups, through flexible funding, capacity building, and facilitating access to humanitarian coordination structure.

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ▶ Preliminary consultations held by UN Women between 26 September and 3 October 2023 with **14 local women’s organizations** from Armenia covering all **11 marzes** responding to the crisis confirmed the need of urgent support to refugees arrived in Armenia and to the organizations providing immediate assistance.
- ▶ During the 2020 hostilities, about 80% of those who arrived in Armenia were women and children; however, this time entire families left with the expectation of not returning. Since 24 September 2023, the Government of Armenia reported the arrival of some **100,632¹ new** refugees. The proportions were relatively consistent across sex and gender, with the exception of women aged 65 and older, who arrived in higher numbers.

1 As of 5 October 2023, according to [government sources](#).

- This situation is causing extreme distress and will have deep psychological effects in what was defined by respondents as a **“collective trauma”**. For this reason, specialized psychological assistance is required urgently and will be needed in the medium to long term. Frontliners dealing with the crisis, who are often women, also require psychological assistance.
- After nine months of blockade during which the basic needs of the population were not met, resulting in cases of malnutrition, miscarriages, lack of medical treatment, etc., refugees are arriving with **acute and chronic health needs**.
- Food, hygiene and other basic needs items are being delivered by the government and organizations on the ground, including women’s organizations who have been at the **forefront of assistance efforts**; however, the needs are great and additional support is required.

“Women are in a difficult psychological state, they are scared and uncertain. They need almost all necessities”

– *Liana Sahakyan, “Sose NGO”, Goris*

- Many refugees faced a journey to Armenia of more than 30 hours, which put women and girls without adequate sanitation facilities and at higher risk of **gender-based violence**. **Protection services** are essential to provide the required assistance upon arrival in their hosting regions.

“In addition to essential goods, women also require a comprehensive, trauma-responsive rehabilitation process. This includes addressing their health-related needs, employment opportunities, and mental health, as well as monitoring gender-based and sexual violations they may have faced during the evacuation”

– *Gayane Hambardzumyan, “Women’s Center. Shushi”, Refugee-led NGO*

- Ethnic Armenian refugees report having a **distinct culture and language dialect**, which it is expected to impact their integration in host communities.
- In a conflict-affected society, men experience specific pressures related to militarization and women may feel unable to report different forms of gender-based violence due to **pervasive social norms around gender roles**.
- The rates of **gender-based violence** are expected to increase greatly, due to the loss of livelihoods, overcrowded conditions, and psychological distress. Information sharing and scale up of GBV mitigation, prevention and response services are crucial.

“Due to the lack of gender education, women fail to recognize, name and report on gender-based violence. In this critical moment the service provision should go hand by hand with awareness raising and education”

– *Knarik Mkrtychyan, “Women’s agenda NGO”, Yerevan*

- The importance of **working with men and boys** has been also stressed as a key strategy to prevent gender-based violence and gender transformative approaches in the humanitarian response.
- Adequate shelter, with **sex-segregated sanitation facilities** and security measures are essential to address specific protection needs related to temporary and unregistered accommodation.
- The government has been offering access to **temporary housing solutions** but take up has been low as refugees prefer not to go to border areas fearing a further escalation in conflict and feel more secure near the capital, where they also expect to find more job opportunities. Additionally, the accommodation provided does not always meet minimum sanitation standards or come equipped with basic furniture or cooking equipment.

- For now, refugees are staying in collective centers led by the government, hotels, host families, or with family members. Accommodation is expected to be a critical issue in the long term.
- A state programme has been announced for **cash transfers** to contribute to rental costs; however, this assistance is temporary and long-term solutions will need to be sought, otherwise women head of households in particular may be at risk.
- Women with few resources are at increased risk of adopting **negative coping mechanisms**. These may include survival sex, and girls dropping out from school to provide childcare while parents are working as reported in 2020 crisis.
- Representatives of women's organizations stressed the need to ensure women are engaged in the **crisis management and the emergency response** as a lesson learned from the previous crisis.
- 9% of refugees have now registered with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA)², but the details of registered people are not shared with response actors. In addition, arrivals are settled by the Armenian Government or self-directing to all regions of Armenia. This could make it difficult to **identify and support vulnerable people**, especially as secondary/repeat internal migration is expected due to the lack of social networks and livelihood opportunities in rural areas.
- Some children have been **out of education** for long periods due to the blockade and will likely require extracurricular support activities. Women's organizations report that schooling materials for those arriving are insufficient, and a lack of clothes and shoes has been observed as a barrier for children to go to school.
- Given the high rates of unemployment in the country and the limited availability of childcare options, promoting **women's access to decent work and childcare facilities** are seen as a major priority. However, there is a need to **overcome the psychological trauma** before initiating any assessment regarding available skills and job placement.
- **Older persons**, especially those who arrived alone and do not have a network, are in need of targeted support, for instance navigating access to medical services, bureaucracy, services and appropriate accommodation. Senior housing will be required in order to meet the specific needs of elderly refugees and host communities.
- Some **persons with disabilities** were unable to leave with their families and have been supported by the ICRC to reach Armenia. With limited resources available, including appropriate accommodation and targeted support, these people are at further risk of being left behind or unnecessarily institutionalized and will require specialized long-term assistance.
- A number of **community-based mechanisms and support groups** set up in 2020 have been now reactivated, which has allowed an immediate and coordinated response. It is essential to engage local civil society organizations, especially those led by women, in **needs assessments** and informing the response to better understand the evolving needs and priorities of those most at risk, including women and girls, persons with disabilities and marginalized groups.

2 As of 3rd October, 91,924 have been registered by authorities as [reported](#) by the Government of Armenia.