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Guidance Note on GBV within the Context of Returns

Purpose:

This Guidance Note aims to equip service providers with clear, accurate, and context-specific information related to gender-based violence (GBV) in the context of refugee returns to Syria. The guidance note was prepared by UNFPA and UNHCR as co-chairs of the GBV SWG group, in consultation with a dedicated taskforce. It supports frontline actors in providing informed, rights-based counseling and guidance to refugees—particularly GBV survivors—on the principles of voluntary, safe, and dignified return. It also outlines available GBV-related services in Jordan and Syria, and clarifies what information should be provided to returnees, along with key do's and don'ts to ensure confidentiality, protection, and survivor autonomy throughout the return process.

Section 1: Information on Voluntary Return

Context Analysis

As a service provider, it is important to understand the operational context. Since 20 January 2025, UNHCR has been facilitating voluntary refugee returns to Syria. Refugees are interviewed before departure to confirm that their decision is voluntary and well-informed, with counseling provided on available services in Syria. Coordination with UNHCR Syria ensures support upon arrival.
Returnee demographics have remained stable, with women and girls comprising 46%, children 41%, and men of military age around 22%. Most returnees depart from host communities in Amman and Irbid. For updated figures and profiles, please refer to UNHCR Jordan's Returns Dashboard.
UNHCR Jordan's Returns Dashboard

Voluntary Return

Returning home is a personal choice that should be voluntary, well-informed, and carried out in safe and dignified conditions.

As a service provider; Reinforce that return must not only be voluntary and informed but also free of coercion, including indirect coercion such as withdrawal of services or pressure from family or community.

For GBV survivors, additional considerations should be made to ensure their ongoing protection and confidentiality during the return process. Service providers must not share personal data with any third parties, including authorities, without informed consent.

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Counseling Prior to Return Arrangements/ Key Counselling Lines:

Below are some key information, for your reference as a service provider, if you are approached for counseling on Returns

- The situation inside Syria is rapidly changing and evolving, including around the requirements and procedures for interested refugees to return to Syria. Refugees should follow the advice of relevant government authorities, the Syrian Embassy, or call UNHCR's helpline (064008000) for the most up-to-date information.
- **Non-Refoulement Principle:** No refugee or asylum-seeker should be returned to a country where they may face persecution or harm.
- At the present time, and due to the constantly evolving situation, UNHCR is not able to provide refugees with information on the situation in the areas of intended return. UNHCR Syria has developed a new platform, Syria is Home https://syriaishome.org/, that will be regularly updated with information to address some questions you may have about the processes and services available to support your return journey to Syria as it becomes available.
- The Jaber/Nasib border remains open for Syrians planning to travel to Syria 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Syrians require some form of a document to enter Syria. This document can be issued by Syrian authorities (Laissez-Passer or a valid or expired national passport), the Ministry of Interior service card issued by the Government of Jordan, and the original copy of the UNHCR Asylum Seeker Certificate. One or all of these documents can be used.
- Additional information on UNHCR's services in Jordan can be found on UNHCR Jordan's Helpsite. Should refugees have questions related to other service areas (including protection, health, livelihoods, registration, cash assistance, and resettlement), they are encouraged to call UNHCR's Helpline (06-400-8000). For information on UNHCR's services in Syria, refugees should visit UNHCR Syria's Help Site or the Syria is Home Platform Syria is Home
- Service providers can refer refugees seeking to return to UNHCR's IVR helpline for more information and personalized counselling.

Additional Counseling Considerations:

Refugees may also need counseling on issues beyond return procedures, such as:

- Custody arrangements or documentation for children.
- Family separation in the returns process.
- Disagreements within a family on return decisions

Service providers should be ready to offer information and referrals to legal aid, psychosocial support, GBV services, and hotlines.

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Procedures at the Border:

Service providers should inform refugees that UNHCR staff are present at the border five days a week and are easily recognizable by their visibility vests. Refugees experiencing difficulties or needing support during the border crossing can approach UNHCR personnel for advice and assistance. In case additional help is needed, the UNHCR IVR helpline is available to provide support remotely.

Section 2: Understanding GBV in the Context of Refugee Returns

The return process can expose refugees—particularly women, girls, and other at-risk groups—to new, continued, or intensified risks of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). These risks stem from a combination of factors such as insecurity in areas of return, fragmented support systems, legal and social discrimination, and economic instability.
Key Factors Contributing to GBV Risks in Return Contexts:

- Unstable or Insecure Environments
- Economic Vulnerability
- Breakdown or Absence of Legal and Protection Systems
- Gender Discrimination and Harmful Social Norms

Common Forms of GBV in the Return Context:

- Sexual violence
- Domestic violence
- Forced and child marriages (as a negative coping mechanism)
- Economic violence
- Human trafficking and sexual exploitation and abuse

Additional Risks could include Transit Risks (Sexual harassment or assault during the return journey) and limited/ restricted access to essential services and support networks

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Section 3 :Implications for Service Providers

Service providers must:

- Understand the multifaceted nature of GBV risks during return.
- Recognize that return is not automatically protective—it may trigger or worsen violence.
- Incorporate risk mitigation, safe identification, and survivor-centered response mechanisms into every stage of return planning and service delivery.
- Work with protection actors to ensure GBV survivors have access to services both during transit and in areas of return, including referral pathways where possible.
- Ensure non-discrimination and do-no-harm principles are upheld at all times, particularly in handling sensitive disclosures.

Do:	**Don't:**
• Always ask permission before sharing any personal information. • Use trained staff when dealing with GBV-related disclosures. • Provide information about available support services both in Jordan and in areas of return (if known). • Explain the limitations of what the organization can provide, and help manage expectations transparently.	• Assume a survivor should or shouldn't return—return decisions must be survivor-led. • Promise safety or support in areas where services are not verified. • Share information about a survivor's case without explicit, informed consent.

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Section 4: Key Information to Provide to Returnees on GBV Services

How to Protect Yourself and Others from Violence against Women and Sexual Exploitation and Abuse during Border Crossing

Risks You May Face at the Syrian Border During Returns

General Risks: Additional challenges you may face when returning to Syria may include:

● The risk of violence, exploitation and trafficking may increase.

● Access to safe spaces or support services may be restricted.

● There may be difficulties in restoring basic rights and services.

What to Do to Stay Safe and Prevent Violence against Women

Basic Safety Precautions:

● Travel in groups or be with people you trust.

● Always let someone you trust know where you are going and what days and times you will be there.

● Avoid going to isolated/deserted areas where you will be alone and be careful when entering a new place.

● Trust your instincts; if a situation feels unsafe, it is probably dangerous.

● Voluntary repatriation must always be carried out with the person's consent. If you find yourself in a situation against your will, UNHCR staff are present at the border 5x per week and are wearing visibility Should you be facing challenges, you can approach them for advice and counselling. For any challenges at the border, refugees can also call IVR.

What should you do if you have experienced GBV?

When facing violence against women in Jordan or Syria, your safety comes first. There are few important steps you can take when you are faced with this situation. If you encounter such situations in Jordan and Syria, there are some steps you can take to protect yourself and get support. These steps are as follows:

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GBV services in Jordan:

Link to the GBV Service Referral Pathway: Document - GBV referral pathway 2025

GBV services in Syria:

As a Service provider; you are encouraged to keep yourself updated with the information provided to support and guide refugees who may reach out to you with related inquiries.

It is important to understand that the support available inside Syria remains very limited and varies based on location inside Syria. Available assistance programs and eligibility requirements will be regularly updated on the Syria is Home website (www.syriaishome.org).

UNHCR is working to scale-up community-based interventions inside Syria to support returnees and local communities, focusing on strengthening the resilience and enhancing access to vital services. To find more information and contact details of UNHCR's community centers in Syria, please visit: https://www.unhcr.org/sy/cc

Types of assistance include:

• Legal support (for civil documentation)

• Some medical assistive devices may be provided based on need and availability.

• Gender-based violence (GBV) and child protection case management

• Awareness raising on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse • Mental health and psycho-social support

• Limited multi-purpose cash assistance (based on assessed needs)

• Livelihood support

• Shelter support

• Inclusive care for the elderly and persons with disabilities

• Orientation/Referral towards other services providers, support programmes etc.

Humanitarian Aid and Support Services

- **In Syria, there are local and international NGOs/associations and humanitarian organizations that provide support when it comes to gender-based violence. These services are:**
    - o Safe shelter and temporary accommodation.
    - o Counseling and psychological support to help you heal from trauma.

o Hotlines to provide support and guidance

Report Violence

- If you do not feel safe enough, you can report the violence to local authorities. This may be difficult, but the Syrian government and humanitarian organizations can help you get immediate support and protection.
- In some regions, law enforcement agencies (such as police and gendarmerie) or security forces can assist in cases of domestic violence or sexual assault, but law enforcement varies from region to region.

Organizations and Contact Addresses in Syria:

للتواصل معنا من قبل السوريين - سورية

You can also access this website https://syria.servicesadvisor.net/ar via QR code on your smartphone to find services available in Syria:

Important!

YOU ARE NOT ALONE. There are organizations and people who want to support you.

No one has the right to harm you, no one has the right to force you to do something you don't want to do and you always have the right to seek protection and support.

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Additional Useful Links:

UNHCR Syria - Help for returnees, internally displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers.

Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response

العودة الطوعية إلى سوريا - المفوضية السامية للأمم المتحدة لشؤون اللاجئين الأردن

2025 Operational Framework on Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and IDPs | Global

Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria | Global Focus

Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response

Information for Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Stateless People | UNHCR