

SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE IN REFUGEE SITUATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



FOREWORD

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is facing humanitarian crises and forced displacement on an unprecedented scale. Syrians are now the single largest refugee population in the world, with a total of over 4 million Syrian refugees registered in the region. Forced displacement and insecurity are also on the rise in Iraq.

These conflicts and the resulting displacement disproportionately burden women and children, who now comprise 78 per cent of Syrian refugees. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is becoming increasingly widespread in these conflict-affected countries, and is often one of the causes of flight.

Even as refugees escape from the immediate dangers of armed conflict, the risk of SGBV remains. Refugees—and women and girls in particular—face increasing risks of violence, abuse and exploitation as their displacement becomes more protracted. Among other reasons, this is due to prolonged family separation, break down of community structures existing prior to the conflict, loss of financial and social assets, or overcrowded housing lacking privacy.

During violent conflict, regular social structures are disrupted, and many women are forced to flee to new and unfamiliar places. Women who now head their households alone in exile face a particularly difficult challenge. A Syrian refugee woman describes the situation of female heads of households this way in United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2014 report *Women Alone*: *“When left alone, you have to push boundaries and make things happen. When you are weak, you are done. You have to be strong to defend yourself, your kids, and the household.”*

Refugee men and boys are also at risk of SGBV, and persons with disabilities remain highly vulnerable and in need of specialized services. In addition, refugees who flee their countries after surviving SGBV incidents continue to require protection and services in the country of asylum, given the long-term consequences and risk of repeated violence.

As a serious human rights problem further intensified by conflict and its ensuing displacement, SGBV requires all sectors to work in concert to strengthen prevention and response programmes. UNHCR therefore seeks to engage closely with governments, civil society, other United Nations (UN) agencies and refugee communities themselves in a comprehensive approach that allows all refugee women, girls, men and boys to fully enjoy their rights to safety, dignity, and non-discrimination.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SGBV is a growing concern for thousands of women, girls, men and boys affected by the Syria and Iraq crises. Women and girls as well as men and boys face increased risks and multiple forms of violence as a result of the conflict and displacement, including forced and early marriage, sexual violence, including sexual abuse and exploitation and domestic violence. The situation of refugees in both camp and non-camp settings and the growing phenomena of mixed migration situations throughout the Middle East and North Africa require the adoption of different assistance strategies and methods on the part of the humanitarian community.¹ Thus, SGBV continues to be a key concern for people affected by the crisis in the MENA region and the prevention and response to SGBV a key area of engagement for UNHCR.

In support for multi-sectorial and coordinated SGBV prevention and response, this report outlines strategies, in line with international standards, that UNHCR uses in coordination with national authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other partners across the region, to bring tangible results in preventing and responding to SGBV in refugee situations, as well as in the inter-agency response in situations of internal displacement.² Despite the variations in context seen throughout the region, many of the good practices highlighted in this report can be replicated and scaled up to achieve a greater, longer-term prevention of and response to sexual and gender-based violence. The collective action of countries, together with international and national actors and communities, in SGBV prevention and response is a vital investment in the future of the MENA as a region free from violence.

UNHCR Programming to Address Sexual and Gender-Based Violence :

UNHCR's global SGBV strategy, entitled Action Against SGBV, focuses on improving the quality, effectiveness and coherence of SGBV programming, while tackling the root causes of SGBV by empowering women and girls, working constructively with men and boys, and promoting non-discrimination. UNHCR supports multi-sectorial SGBV prevention and response programming in four key areas of intervention (health, psycho-social services, protection, and legal aid) at structural, systemic and operative levels, adhering to the established guiding principles in UNHCR Regional Strategic Approach to SGBV Prevention and Response.

A Rights Based Approach to Preventing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence :

Recognizing that the needs and capacities of refugees may differ considerably on the basis of age, gender, disability and other factors, UNHCR supports regular participatory assessments to understand the needs and concerns of women, men, girls and boys and tailor SGBV programmes, accordingly, in keeping with an age, gender and diversity (AGD) approach.³ The AGD approach emphasizes the importance of analysing the diversity of the refugee population to better understand the multifaceted protection risks and capacities of individuals and communities, and to address and support these more effectively to promote the full enjoyment of human rights, including rights to be protected against SGBV.

1. Annual Consultation with NGOs, UNHCR, 2014

2. However, this overview focuses on the refugee response and does not provide figures in relation to IDP situations in the MENA region, where such reporting is done jointly with partners.

3. <http://www.unhcr.org/4e7757449.html>

Investing in National Systems and Capacity :

In order to achieve sustainable SGBV prevention and response UNHCR provides governments with technical advice and financial support to address protection gaps in national legal framework related to SGBV in line with the international standards. This includes mapping the legal frameworks and services in place to address SGBV, in countries across the MENA region, to identify the gaps and to design and implement strategies to address these gaps.

Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence :

UNHCR's prevention efforts aim at identifying and addressing the root causes and contributing factors of SGBV, and designing strategies to improve protection for all refugee community members. UNHCR aims to make positive changes in gender relations and power dynamics within the community towards the prevention of SGBV through strengthening the community-based protection approach, raising awareness on SGBV, empowering women and girls, and engaging men and boys in SGBV prevention and response.

Addressing Specific Areas of Concern for SGBV Prevention and Response :

UNHCR has put a range of services in place in both camp and urban settings to prevent and respond to SGBV by targeting the certain refugee populations who are still often overlooked in SGBV programming, including children, refugees with disabilities, older people, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons of concern. UNHCR works with NGOs, government actors and service providers to tailor programmes to also target specific areas of concern for SGBV prevention and response that may not receive sufficient attention from SGBV programmes, including early marriage, survival sex, and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Specialized Services for SGBV Survivors :

In 2014, some 84,566 refugees, who survived or were at risk of SGBV received specialized support through interagency efforts in the countries involved in the Syrian refugee response. UNHCR works with government and non-government partners to establish safe and confidential reporting, SGBV referral and follow up mechanisms, and to raise community awareness of these mechanisms and available services. In line with its guiding principles as outlined in the Regional Strategic Approach to SGBV Prevention and Response, UNHCR focuses on ensuring SGBV survivors have access to culturally appropriate services including psycho-social support, health, protection and legal aid that are accessible, free or affordable.

Strengthening Advocacy and Partnership :

UNHCR seeks sustainable partnerships with key government actors as primary partners in SGBV prevention and response throughout the MENA region. UNHCR also collaborates and coordinates with other key stakeholders including sister UN agencies, NGOs as well as communities and refugees themselves to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of SGBV prevention and response through complementary interventions, standards and tools, joint programming, and common advocacy interventions

Improving Data Collection and Analysis :

Data collection and analysis are the backbone of results-based SGBV programming. It is critical to the effectiveness of targeted service delivery, advocacy, policy development, and accountability and monitoring. UNHCR has supported the rollout of the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) to ensure the safe, ethical, and confidential collection, management and sharing of SGBV data in various operations.

Advancing Global Initiatives :

UNHCR is committed to advancing the global initiatives “Safe from Start” and “Call to Action” to reinforce SGBV prevention and response programming in its operations across the world. “Safe from the Start” is an initiative supported by the United States of America (US) Department of State to ensure quality services are available for SGBV survivors at the onset of an emergency through timely and effective humanitarian action. The “Call to Action on Protecting Girls and Women in Emergencies (Call to Action)” initiative was launched by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) to mobilize donors, UN agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders in better protecting women and girls in humanitarian emergencies.

CONCLUSION

UNHCR, together with government, UN and civil society partners continues to put the protection of refugee women, girls, men and boys from SGBV, at the forefront of the response to refugee crises. UNHCR is committed to working in partnership with government and other actors to strengthen national, comprehensive and multi-sectorial SGBV prevention and response systems that serve all survivors of SGBV, including refugee survivors in the MENA region.

Women, girls, men and boys, families and other community members have a crucial role to play in prevention of and response to sexual and gender-based violence, through reinforced community-based SGBV prevention and response mechanisms and in challenging harmful norms and practices that condone SGBV, abuse and the exploitation of persons of concern. Involving community members in all stages of the project cycle of SGBV prevention and response interventions addressing the specific SGBV risks they face, regardless their gender, race, class, sexuality, disability is, therefore, one of the key strategies in UNHCR's SGBV prevention and response programming.

UNHCR will also continue to emphasize the availability and accessibility of appropriate specialized services for all persons of concern facing sexual and gender-based violence risks. This includes ensuring that case management and multi-sectorial specialized services by vital sectors such as health, psycho-social, protection and legal are available and accessible, and that staff working with SGBV survivors and service providers are well trained and equipped with skills and tools to undertake this sensitive and crucial work.

Although significant progress has been made, there are still challenges and much work is needed to protect persons of concern against SGBV. The actions outlined below are recommended to further strengthen the protection of refugee women, girls, men and boys against sexual and gender-based violence in the MENA region:

- Strengthen community-based prevention of and response to SGBV through the active participation of women, girls, men and boys in identification of SGBV-related needs, design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of programmes in line with UNHCR's AGD approach.
- Create awareness amongst the population of concern and impacted communities on causes, contributing factors and consequences of SGBV, human rights and existing national and international legal frameworks related to gender equality and SGBV.
- Advocate for national legislation that prevents and responds to SGBV in accordance to international standards
- Support the regular update of inter-agency SOPs, SGBV referral pathways, action plans and strategies developed to reflect up-to-date priorities for SGBV prevention and response.

- Ensure mainstreaming of gender equality and SGBV considerations into other sectors such as Livelihoods, NFI, Food Security and Shelter and Site Planning in order to support resilience and positive coping mechanisms and mitigate factors for survival sex, and so as to support broader prevention and reduction of SGBV.
- Roll out the GBVIMS in the operations, where it has not yet been operationalized.
- Strengthen the capacity of SGBV actors and service providers in prevention of and response to SGBV, including SOPs, caring for survivors, and guiding principles for SGBV programming.
- Ensure availability of quality and accessible services for women, girls, men and boys who experience SGBV in line with guiding principles for caring for survivors.
- Strengthen partnership and coordinated multi-sectorial and interagency prevention and response to SGBV through SGBV sub-working groups, task forces and networks.
- Advocate for the allocation of predictable and sustainable funding to support implementation of UNHCR SGBV strategies and initiatives that will have longer-term impact on refugees.
- Support and advocate with the governments to invest in and integrate SGBV prevention and response in their national plans to ensure sustainability.



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