

Supporting refugees against sexual violence:

a practical guide for experts and
grantees

Authors: Rusnė Kirtiklytė, Reda Jureliavičiūtė
Translators: Yauhen Ihnatsyeu, Eteri Kakuliia
Layout: Vilija Biekšaitė

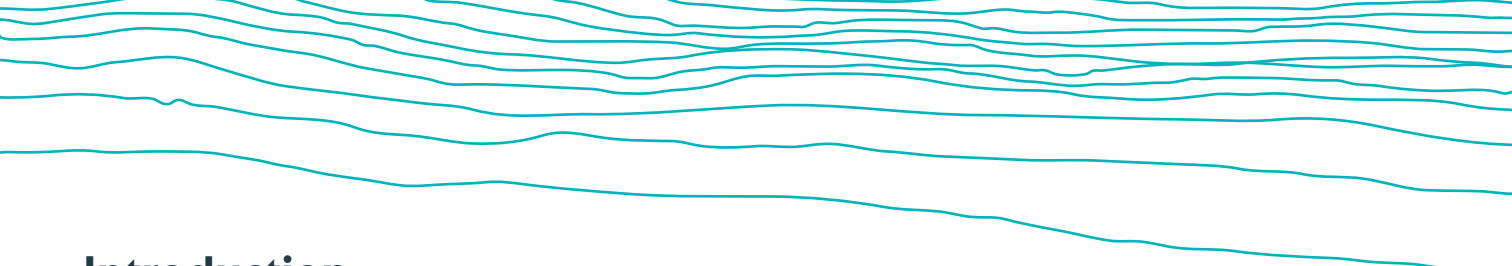
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Introduction

Purpose of the Guide

The purpose of this guide is to enable professionals, volunteers and support staff who work closely with refugees to comprehend, identify and address sexual violence. Given that refugees frequently endure unspeakable suffering, this guide attempts to highlight the prevalence of sexual violence in these marginalized groups. We hope that by providing you with useful understandable information, you will be better able to defend, support and advocate for survivors—especially those who might be reluctant to come forward.

Why This Matters

Imagine leaving everything familiar behind—your home, your family, and your support network—only to face new threats in a place meant to offer safety. For many refugees, this is the reality. Refugees, especially women and children, are at a high risk of sexual violence. This violence can come from strangers, smugglers, or even others within their community. Studies have shown that sexual violence affects a large number of displaced individuals, with women and girls often the most vulnerable. Adding to the complexity, sexual violence can be hidden by shame, fear of retaliation, or lack of trust in authorities.

Yet the consequences of such violence are deep and lasting—physically, emotionally, and socially. Refugees are often left isolated, unsure of who to turn to or what their rights are. With this guide, we aim to build a bridge of understanding and practical support that can truly make a difference.

Who Should Use This Guide?

This guide is for everyone working on the front lines with refugees, whether you're a healthcare provider, a social worker, a volunteer, or a representative of an NGO. Your role in recognizing and responding to sexual violence can be life-changing for those affected. This guide is also a valuable resource for educators, counselors, and community leaders who may not work directly with refugees daily but want to understand the challenges they face better.

Ultimately, we all have a part to play in making the lives of refugees safer and helping them rebuild with dignity. This guide is here to support you in that mission, giving you the knowledge and resources to make a real difference.



1.0

Understanding Sexual Violence in Refugee Contexts

1.1

Sexual Violence: Definitions and Forms

Sexual violence is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or unwanted sexual comments or advances directed toward a person mainly using force, threats, or coercion. In the context of refugees, sexual violence is a particularly serious issue, as refugees often face extreme vulnerability and limited access to protection. When we talk about sexual violence, it's essential to understand that it can happen to anyone, regardless of age, sex, or background. Many refugees have experienced trauma and loss, and sexual violence only adds to this burden. Understanding what sexual violence is and the forms it can take is the first step in recognizing it and providing the support victims need.

Here are some accessible definitions to help clarify:

- **Sexual Assault:** Any unwanted sexual act that uses force, coercion, or intimidation. This can include physical acts, such as rape or unwanted touching, as well as forced exposure to sexual materials.
- **Sexual Harassment:** Unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature that creates a hostile or intimidating environment. In refugee contexts, harassment can occur in shelters, camps, or even in spaces meant to offer safety.
- **Human Trafficking:** The recruitment, transportation, or harboring of individuals through force, deception, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation, often sexual in nature. Traffickers prey on refugees' vulnerability, promising work or safety but instead forcing them into sexual exploitation.
- **Sexual Exploitation:** Taking advantage of someone's vulnerable position to exploit them sexually. Refugees may be pressured into sexual acts in exchange for basic needs like food, shelter, or protection.

1.2

Types of Sexual Violence Encountered by Refugees

Sexual violence is tragically common in situations where people are displaced, as vulnerability and power imbalances create conditions where abuse can thrive. Here's a breakdown of the types of sexual violence that refugees may face, using accessible language to make each type easier to recognize:

- **Rape and Physical Assault:** Refugees may face physical assault in unsafe transit locations, refugee camps, or even from individuals exploiting their situation. Rape and physical assault can have lasting psychological and physical consequences, leaving victims feeling isolated and traumatized.

- **Harassment in Shelters and Public Spaces:** In shared accommodations like shelters or camps, harassment can happen regularly. Refugees may experience unwelcome advances, lewd comments, or inappropriate behavior, creating a hostile environment where they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- **Trafficking and Forced Prostitution:** Some refugees are tricked into exploitation with promises of work or safe passage but are then forced into sexual labor. Traffickers take advantage of desperate situations, isolating victims from potential sources of help and trapping them in abusive environments.
- **Transactional Exploitation:** Due to extreme circumstances, some refugees may feel pressured to engage in sexual acts in exchange for necessities. This could involve bartering for essentials like food, shelter, or security, which can have damaging effects on their dignity, self-worth, and well-being.

Each of these forms of sexual violence is devastating in its own way, and each requires a compassionate, informed approach to support. Understanding these different types helps those on the ground recognize signs and intervene appropriately. Refugees deserve safety, dignity, and the right to rebuild their lives without fear of exploitation or abuse.



2.0

Forms of Sexual Violence

2.1

In-Depth: Types and Manifestations of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence comes in many forms, and understanding these types helps us see how and why they happen, especially in refugee settings.

2.2

Contextual Risks: Where and When Sexual Violence Happens

Certain environments and situations put refugees at higher risk for sexual violence such as in transit, refugee camps, shared shelters and host communities. Knowing these “hot spots” can help us take preventative measures and provide targeted support.



3.1

Women and Girls: Facing Everyday Risks in Refugee Environments

For women and girls, the refugee experience often brings added dangers. Simply moving through daily life—getting water, visiting the bathroom, or accessing food distribution points—can expose them to threats. Crowded camps and shelters, where privacy is limited, can make them feel constantly at risk.

Common Risks Include:

- **Harassment and Assault:** Women and girls may face unwanted advances or physical assault, especially in places with little security.
- **Transactional exploitation:** With limited access to resources, some women are forced into “survival sex,” where they feel pressured to exchange sexual favors for basic necessities like food or shelter.
- **Domestic Violence:** For those in families or with partners, the stress and displacement can worsen domestic violence. Trapped in unfamiliar surroundings, women may have little power to escape these situations.

Awareness of these risks is essential for creating safer spaces and providing effective support for women and girls in refugee communities.

3.2

Children and Youth: Protecting the Youngest and Most Vulnerable

Children and young people are especially vulnerable in refugee settings, and sadly, they are often targeted by those looking to exploit their innocence and lack of protection. Refugee children can lose the watchful care of their parents or guardians, making them easy targets for abuse.

Specific Dangers Include:

- **Sexual Exploitation:** Children may be forced into exploitative situations, with traffickers or abusers taking advantage of their vulnerability. Exploitation can take many forms, from forced labor to sexual abuse, leaving deep emotional scars.
- **Child Marriage:** In some refugee contexts, families may feel compelled to marry off young girls as a form of “protection” or financial relief. While intended as a safeguard, child marriage only

exposes these girls to further sexual and physical harm.

● **Trafficking and Abduction:** Unaccompanied minors are especially at risk of being trafficked or abducted, as they often travel alone or with minimal supervision.

To protect children, it's critical to establish safe zones and services within refugee settings specifically designed for their needs. Staff and volunteers should be trained to identify signs of exploitation and provide trauma-sensitive care.



4.0

Prostitution and Human Trafficking

For refugees, the struggle for survival sometimes brings dangerous choices and situations that are out of their control. When forced into desperate circumstances, many are exploited by traffickers or even coerced into prostitution. Understanding the risks and knowing what signs to look for can make a difference in protecting these vulnerable individuals.

4.1

Prostitution and Refugees: A Desperate Choice or No Choice at All?

Refugees often find themselves in extreme financial hardship, with limited ways to earn a living and support their families. In these circumstances, some may be forced into prostitution simply to survive. This isn't a "choice" in the usual sense; rather, it's often a last resort, a way to get food, shelter, or money when all other options seem out of reach.

Even worse, traffickers and predators know how to take advantage of refugees' desperation. They may lure them with promises of safe housing or job opportunities, only to trap them in exploitative situations. Many refugees are manipulated into sex work under conditions they can't escape, where they may face violence, isolation, and severe health risks.

4.2

Human Trafficking: The Hidden Trap for Refugees

Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery, where people are recruited, transported, or held by force, coercion, or deception for exploitation—often sexual in nature. Refugees are prime targets for traffickers due to their lack of resources, isolation, and fear of authorities. Once trapped, they can find it nearly impossible to escape.

How Trafficking Uniquely Affects Refugees:

- **False Promises of Help:** Traffickers often approach refugees pretending to offer legitimate work, shelter, or a way to get to safety. But these “offers” quickly turn into a nightmare.
- **Isolation and Fear:** Traffickers will often keep victims isolated and controlled, threatening them with violence or reporting them to authorities if they try to leave.
- **Debt Bondage:** Some traffickers claim refugees owe them for transportation or “helping” them cross borders, trapping victims in a cycle of debt they can't repay.

Knowing these tactics can help those working with refugees identify potential trafficking situations and take action to support victims before it's too late.

4.3

Preventive Measures and Recognizing Red Flags

One of the most powerful ways to combat trafficking and forced prostitution is awareness. Being able to recognize red flags can enable frontline workers to intervene early and provide support. Here are some warning signs to watch for:

- **Signs of Fear and Control:** Victims may appear afraid of certain people or situations, or they might not be able to move freely without someone's permission. Traffickers often control their movements and interactions tightly.
- **Unusual Work Arrangements:** Refugees who claim to have "jobs" that seem too good to be true or who mention working long hours without pay may be in a trafficking situation.
- **Visible Signs of Abuse or Neglect:** Physical injuries, malnutrition, or signs of trauma can be indicators of trafficking or exploitation, especially if they seem fearful of seeking medical help.
- **No Identification or Personal Documents:** Traffickers commonly withhold passports, IDs, or travel documents, leaving victims without proof of identity or a way to escape.
- **Reluctance to Speak Freely:** Victims might seem unwilling to speak up or answer questions directly, especially if they're accompanied by someone who insists on answering for them or doesn't allow them any privacy.

4.4

What You Can Do

If you notice any of these signs, it's essential to act with caution and empathy. Support workers can play a critical role by:

- **Creating Safe Spaces:** Make it clear that refugees have a safe, private space to share their concerns without fear of judgment or reprisal.

- **Providing Resources:** Offer contacts for local organizations that specialize in trafficking and sexual exploitation support. Knowing where to get help can be the first step toward safety.
- **Connecting with Law Enforcement or NGOs:** In some cases, law enforcement or non-governmental organizations specializing in human trafficking can help intervene. Building connections with these groups can make it easier to get immediate support when needed.

By being aware of the realities of forced prostitution and trafficking, you can help refugees avoid exploitation and find safety. These issues are complex, but every small effort counts. Supporting refugees in these vulnerable moments can mean the difference between a life of freedom and a life of exploitation.



5.0

Support Resources

5.1

Specialized Support for Children

When it comes to addressing sexual violence, children are among the most vulnerable. They rely on adults for safety and trust, yet when abuse happens, they often don't know how to express what they're going through. This makes specialized support absolutely essential for helping child survivors of sexual violence heal and rebuild their sense of security. Here, we outline some child-focused resources and guidance on how to handle sensitive disclosures, as well as counseling and legal support options tailored to young victims.

Key Resources for Helping Children:

- **Child-Friendly Safe Spaces:** Some support centers and shelters offer dedicated spaces just for children. These areas are designed to make kids feel comfortable, with toys, art supplies, and a calming environment. Here, children can open up naturally, on their own terms, without feeling pressured.
- **Interactive Tools and Books:** To help children understand what has happened to them, there are storybooks, drawings, and interactive tools that gently explain boundaries and safety. These resources are available in multiple languages and cater to different age groups, helping children relate without feeling overwhelmed.
- **Supportive Adults and Trained Staff:** Staff members trained in child trauma know how to create an environment of trust and safety. They can guide children through their feelings without rushing them, using simple, reassuring language to help the child feel safe and valued.

Encouraging children to express themselves in these safe, supportive settings allows them to begin processing their experiences in a way that feels safe.

5.2

Counseling and Legal Support for Child Survivors

Once a child discloses abuse, it's crucial to have both psychological and legal resources in place to provide immediate support.

Counseling helps young survivors start their healing journey, while legal support ensures they're protected and given justice. Here's a closer look at the kinds of services available for child survivors:

Psychological Counseling

- **Trauma-Informed Therapy:** Specialized therapists trained in trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) work specifically with children to help them process and heal from their experiences. These sessions are often playful and include activities that help children express feelings they may not know how to put into words.
- **Group Therapy and Peer Support:** Sometimes, children benefit from knowing they're not alone. Group sessions with other young survivors can provide a sense of shared experience and support, helping children see that others understand what they're going through.
- **Parent and Caregiver Support:** Counseling isn't only for the child—often, parents and caregivers are also included in sessions to learn how to support their child's recovery. These sessions teach parents how to listen, respond, and encourage their child in a way that fosters trust and security.

Legal Support

- **Child Advocacy Centers:** Many organizations offer specialized legal support for children, providing child advocates or attorneys experienced in handling cases involving young survivors. These

advocates guide families through the legal process, making it as smooth and non-traumatic as possible.

- **Child-Friendly Reporting:** Reporting abuse can be intimidating for anyone, especially children. To make this process less frightening, child advocacy centers often have special interview rooms where children can share their stories in a comfortable, private setting. Interviews may be recorded in a safe, respectful way, so children don't have to repeat their experience multiple times.

- **Legal Rights Education for Families:** Families of young survivors often have many questions. Legal aid organizations provide guidance on what legal protections are in place for their child, what steps they can take to ensure their safety, and how they can access further legal resources.

Contacts and Organizations for Child Survivors:

- **National Child Helplines:** Many countries offer free, confidential helplines for children to call or text if they need help.

- **Local NGOs and Global Organizations:** Groups like UNICEF, Save the Children, and local NGOs offer counseling, legal support, and safe spaces specifically designed for children. They can connect families with legal aid, psychological services, and emergency support.

For children, every small act of support counts, from a warm smile to a safe space to talk. By making these resources accessible, we can help young survivors feel secure, heard, and on a path toward healing. These organizations and services work tirelessly to ensure that no child has to face the journey alone, empowering them to rebuild their lives with confidence and hope.



6.0

Domestic Violence among Refugees

6.1

Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence in Refugee Contexts

In the chaos and uncertainty of refugee life, domestic violence can become an unspoken issue, often hidden behind closed doors. For many refugees, home is supposed to be a place of safety and comfort, but for some, it's a space marked by fear and control. Understanding how domestic violence manifests in refugee settings and recognizing the unique barriers victims face is essential for providing the right support.

Here's how domestic violence often plays out in refugee settings:

- **Physical and Emotional Control:** Some individuals may use violence or emotional manipulation to exert control over their partner, especially in crowded and tense environments like refugee camps where privacy is scarce.
- **Financial Dependence:** Many refugees are unable to work or earn money due to legal restrictions, making one partner entirely financially dependent on the other. This power imbalance can lead to control over resources, like food and shelter, creating another layer of vulnerability.
- **Escalation of Pre-existing Issues:** For some families, the pressures of displacement may exacerbate tensions that existed before they fled. With little relief from daily stress, even minor conflicts can escalate, leading to abusive situations that become hard to escape.

These conditions make it clear that domestic violence in refugee settings isn't just a "family issue"—it's a survival issue that deserves urgent attention and culturally sensitive intervention.

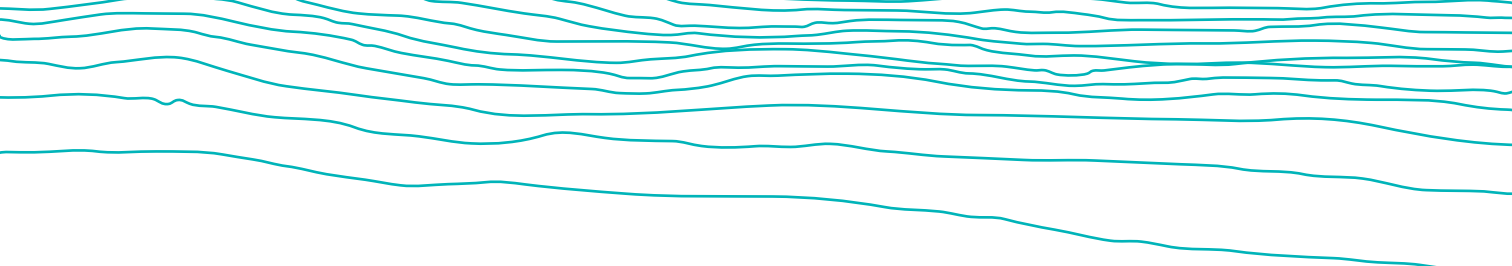
6.2

Barriers to Seeking Help

Even if refugees recognize that they're experiencing domestic violence, seeking help is often a huge challenge. Many factors can prevent them from reaching out, including:

- **Cultural and Social Taboos:** In some cultures, domestic issues are considered private, and speaking out about abuse is seen as shameful. Women, especially, may feel pressured to “keep the family together” and not report abuse.
- **Fear of Repercussions:** Some victims fear that reporting domestic violence could lead to further harm, including retribution from their partner, family members, or even other community members. They might also worry that their family will be stigmatized or excluded from their social circles.
- **Legal and Logistical Obstacles:** Refugees often lack access to local legal systems, either due to language barriers or limited rights in the host country. They may not know where to go or whom to trust, and the fear of deportation or losing custody of their children can make them hesitant to contact authorities.
- **Lack of Privacy:** Many refugees live in shared shelters or camps, where privacy is minimal. This makes it difficult to report abuse or seek help without others finding out, which can add to their fear and sense of vulnerability.

Understanding these barriers is essential for anyone working to support refugees facing domestic violence. Recognizing that there may be hidden, complex reasons for their reluctance to speak out can guide support workers in providing patient, non-judgmental assistance.



7.0

Practical Guidance for Experts and Grantees

Supporting survivors of sexual violence is both a challenging and deeply impactful role. Experts and grantees who work with refugees can make a world of difference by using a compassionate, culturally sensitive approach. The guidance on this page provides practical advice for those working closely with survivors, emphasising the importance of empathy, confidentiality, and clear referral pathways to additional support.

Working with Survivors: Empathy, Confidentiality, and Empowerment

When working with survivors of sexual violence, remember that each interaction is an opportunity to help rebuild trust and safety. Survivors often carry deep wounds, both visible and invisible, and a supportive approach can make all the difference in their recovery journey.

Key Principles for Supporting Survivors:

- **Listen Without Judgment:** Survivors need to feel heard and validated. Let them share their experiences in their own words, without interruption, judgment, or disbelief. Acknowledge their courage in speaking up.
- **Respect Privacy and Confidentiality:** Always keep survivors' stories and information confidential, sharing only with trusted individuals or services if necessary for their well-being. Survivors should feel that they are in control of who knows their story.
- **Empower Survivors to Make Decisions:** Respect survivors' right to make choices about their own care and future. Whenever

possible, give them options for next steps and let them decide how they wish to proceed, empowering them to reclaim a sense of control.

● **By focusing on empathy, confidentiality, and empowerment,** you provide survivors with a foundation of trust and support that can significantly aid their healing process.

By integrating empathy, cultural understanding, and efficient referrals, experts and grantees can play a powerful role in helping survivors of sexual violence find safety, strength, and healing. This practical guidance serves as a foundation for offering meaningful support and fostering resilience in refugee communities.

Key Resources

www.prabilk.lt

Anonymous helpline and online chat for confidential counseling

www.redcross.lt

Offers psychosocial support and assistance for refugees and migrants

www.refugeeslt.com

Information and resources for refugees and asylum seekers

<https://lithuania.iom.int/lt>

Support services for migrants and refugees, including legal aid and social support

www.specializuotospagalboscentras.lt

Confidential resource for victims of domestic violence