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GENDER-SENSITIVE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND SAFE SPACES

Emergency preparedness is critical for the timely and coordinated response to natural disasters, conflict, and humanitarian crises. A comprehensive preparedness strategy includes clear frameworks, resources, and communication mechanisms.¹

Women, children, and other groups face compounded risks during crises. Women may experience increased risks of gender-based violence, displacement, and lack of access to healthcare.²

Gender-Sensitive Measures in Emergency Plans

► Women's Safety:

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a widespread concern in emergencies, where displaced populations and survivors may experience sexual violence, exploitation, and trafficking. Emergency response plans must prioritize safe spaces for women and girls, including dedicated shelters and protections against sexual violence.³

The IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action emphasize the need for a multisectoral approach to ensure women's physical safety during crises, with clear roles for security forces, humanitarian responders, and community leaders.⁴

► Mental Health:

Women and children are disproportionately affected by the psychological impacts of crises, including trauma from violence, displacement, and family separation. Mental health services integrated into emergency plans must be accessible and gender-sensitive, offering trauma-informed care and counseling.⁵

► Access to Resources:

Women often face barriers in accessing essential resources like food, clean water, shelter, and healthcare during emergencies. These barriers are often exacerbated by traditional gender roles and limited mobility due to safety concerns.⁶

Emergency plans should ensure that women-headed households, pregnant women, and those with disabilities have prioritized access to resources and services.⁷

The Armenian context

In the 2023 displacement of over 100,000 people from Nagorno-Karabakh, approximately 70% were women and children, underscoring the urgent need for gender-sensitive emergency plans.

Refugee women and girls in Armenia are facing heightened risks and challenges in accessing services, particularly GBV support, due to their multiple vulnerabilities. These include isolation, overcrowded living conditions, lack of privacy, and insufficient facilities that compromise their safety and well-being. Women who are heads of households, adolescent girls, women with disabilities, and those from rural areas are among the most vulnerable.

Many refugee women and girls are struggling with social integration, especially adolescent girls who find it difficult to form new friendships and adapt to the new environment. Barriers to accessing education and livelihoods are exacerbated by gender norms, economic dependency, and caregiving responsibilities. As a result, some refugee girls have dropped out of school to support their families, and women often remain confined to their homes due to cultural norms and safety concerns.

Refugee women and girls are disproportionately affected by violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV), harassment, and physical violence. These incidents often go unreported due to stigma, lack of economic independence, and normalization of IPV as a result of the trauma experienced during the conflict.

While mental health and psychosocial support services are available, they are often not tailored to the specific needs of adolescent girls and women with disabilities.⁸

Recommendations for Local Authorities, Women's Organizations and Civil Society Organizations

Local Authorities

► Integrate Gender-Sensitive Emergency Preparedness into Local Frameworks:

Incorporate gender-sensitive strategies into local emergency preparedness and response plans to specifically address the unique vulnerabilities of refugee women and girls, particularly in crisis situations. Ensure these plans are responsive to the compounded risks of GBV, displacement, and lack of access to healthcare for women and children.

► Establish and Maintain Women-Only Safe Spaces:

Ensure that emergency shelters include safe spaces for women and girls, especially for those who are survivors of violence. These spaces should be designed to provide privacy, protection from exploitation, and access to necessary services.

Involve community leaders in maintaining the safety of shelters by establishing regular communication with trusted local figures who can monitor the safety of these spaces. Community-led patrols and safe zone protocols can help build trust and ensure protection.

► Conduct Safety Audits and Consultations:

Regularly assess the safety of shelters and other emergency accommodations through safety audits. Include consultations with displaced women to identify overlooked risks and ensure that the shelters are designed to meet their needs. This will help mitigate risks of sexual violence, exploitation, and trafficking.

► Strengthen Reporting Mechanisms and GBV Support:

Establish survivor-centered mechanisms for reporting GBV and ensure that there is adequate follow-up support for survivors. These mechanisms should be confidential, easily accessible, and promote a survivor-centered approach that emphasizes protection, dignity, and empowerment.

Work to implement mobile units for confidential reporting in remote areas and ensure accessibility for women with disabilities or those facing mobility challenges.

► Ensure Women's Participation in Decision-Making:

Actively involve refugee women and girls in emergency decision-making processes. Incorporate their perspectives into policy development and implementation at both local and national levels to ensure that their needs are prioritized.

Women's Organizations

► Advocate for Gender-Sensitive Emergency Plans:

Advocate for the inclusion of gender-sensitive measures in national and local emergency response frameworks. These measures should prioritize the needs of displaced women and girls, particularly in terms of safety, mental health, and access to resources.

► Provide Gender-Specific Safety and Health Training:

Partner with schools, local communities, and organizations to provide safety and health education specifically for young girls and women. This should include training on how to protect themselves from violence, access healthcare during emergencies, and navigate displaced settings safely.

Organize peer-led training sessions where young girls and women take leadership in educating others in their community. This approach will foster empowerment and ensure sustainability of training efforts.

► Offer Tailored Mental Health and Psychosocial Support:

Expand access to trauma-informed mental health services and psychosocial support for women and children affected by displacement. This should include mobile counseling units and peer support groups to reach women in remote areas, especially those who may have limited access to static services.

Deploy mobile counseling units to regularly visit refugee camps and remote areas to provide mental health support, and organize peer-led support groups to help women and girls share their experiences and coping strategies.

► Facilitate Social Integration Programs:

Organize community-building activities that promote social integration for refugee women and girls, helping them establish connections with host communities. This could include workshops, social clubs, or mentorship programs that focus on shared experiences and resilience-building.

Civil Society Organizations

► Collaborate to Ensure Gender-Sensitive Emergency Frameworks:

Work closely with local authorities to ensure the integration of gender-sensitive frameworks in national and local disaster response plans. Advocate for the recognition of women's and girls' specific needs in these plans and ensure their active involvement in the response.

► Foster Women's Leadership in Crisis Response:

Empower refugee women to take leadership roles in crisis response efforts. Provide training and resources to enable them to actively participate in decision-making processes, ensuring that their voices are heard and that their needs are met.

► Deploy Mobile Distribution Units:

Use mobile units to deliver essential resources, particularly in remote areas, ensuring that refugee women and girls, including those with mobility challenges, receive necessary services such as food, healthcare, and hygiene products. These units should be designed to be culturally sensitive and should prioritize vulnerable women, including those with caregiving responsibilities.

► Enhance GBV Prevention and Response Mechanisms:

Monitor the effectiveness of gender-sensitive measures in emergency settings and collaborate with local authorities and women's organizations to ensure that these measures are robust, coordinated, and impactful. Advocate for the strengthening of GBV prevention and response systems, ensuring that displaced women and girls have access to comprehensive care, including legal, medical, and psychosocial support.

► Provide Training for Caregivers and Community Leaders:

Organize community-based training sessions for caregivers and community leaders, helping them understand the specific vulnerabilities of refugee women and girls and equipping them with the skills to support survivors of violence and trauma. This should include training on identifying signs of abuse, providing initial support, and referring individuals to relevant services.

Footnotes

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