



Europe Refugee Crisis: urgent action needed for protection of women and girls

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Women and girls fleeing conflict, violence and insecurity are finding unsafe and substandard living conditions as they arrive in Greece, transit through the Balkans and seek refuge and asylum in Europe. The lack of consideration given to women and girls within the crisis response has serious implications for their safety and well-being. Organisations at the front lines of the refugee crisis report that women and children – who have made up 59% of arrivals in Greece since January 2016¹ – are experiencing serious and varied forms of gender-based violence, including rape and sexual exploitation.² The international community has a responsibility to protect all women and girls, regardless of their immigration status, from gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation, and to provide life-saving assistance to those that have been subjected to such harm.

Urgent action is needed to improve the safety and protection of women and girls in Europe:

- 1. Governments hosting refugees and asylum seekers must allow non-government organisations access to camps and transit sites so that they may treat survivors of gender-based violence;**
 - 2. Donors should provide funds specifically for responding to gender-based violence;**
 - 3. All actors involved in the humanitarian response in Europe need to implement minimum standards across all programme sectors to mitigate gender-based violence and reduce women's and girls' risk of abuse and exploitation;**
 - 4. European leaders should provide safe alternative pathways to Europe as the closed borders leave women and girls at high risk of being exploited by smugglers or trafficked.**
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- 1. Governments hosting refugees and asylum seekers must allow non-government organisations access to camps and transit sites so that they may treat survivors of gender-based violence with life-saving services**
 - a) Gender-based violence is life-threatening; when a woman or girl is raped, she has 72 hours to prevent the potential transmission of HIV, 120 hours to prevent unwanted pregnancy, and just a few hours to ensure her injuries do not become fatal. It is vital that health and protection service providers are able to deliver life-saving services as and when women and girls choose to access them.
 - b) The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) requires governments to promote and protect the right of women to live free from violence, and to ensure survivors have access to services facilitating their recovery – without discrimination on grounds of migrant or refugee status.³
 - c) Organisations in Greece, Turkey and the Western Balkans with capacity to deliver services for survivors of gender-based violence can only access camps, transit centres and other refugee sites with government permission. National and local organisations in Croatia, Serbia, Hungary and Slovenia, for instance, have reported difficulties in being able to reach women and girls where the government or police have restricted their access.
 - 2. Donors should provide funds specifically for responding to gender-based violence**
 - a) Funding for gender-based violence programmes has not been prioritised in the humanitarian response overall, and many local women's networks who are frontline responders have difficulty securing and maintaining funds that are available. There remains a significant and serious gap between available resources and the level of need with regards to prevention and response programming.

¹ UNHCR, Mediterranean sea arrivals, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

² See IRC's workshop report: [Balkans regional workshop on gender-based violence](https://www.rescue-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Balkans-regional-workshop-on-gender-based-violence.pdf)

³ Istanbul Convention, 2011, <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008482e>

For a list of countries that have signed and ratified the Convention, see http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210/signatures?p_auth=A1HaUkAj

- b) Dedicated funding should be used to address a range of challenges including: severe shortage of safe spaces for women and girls; unavailable or limited supplies of Post-Exposure Prophylaxis kits and emergency contraception; limited capacity to provide quality and specialised trainings on gender-based violence for key workers across the health, mental health, security and legal sectors; lack of specialised and quality services for women and girls who have survived or are at risk of gender-based violence; and difficulties in providing culturally sensitive services for women and girls without funding for interpreters or cultural mediators.
 - c) The guidance to immediately begin programming on gender-based violence in any emergency setting is well established in the humanitarian sector, with the global minimum standards on gender-based violence (GBV guidelines) stating that “all humanitarian personnel ought to assume GBV is occurring and threatening affected populations; treat it as a serious and life-threatening problem; and take actions based on sector recommendations in these Guidelines regardless of the presence or absence of concrete ‘evidence’”. This guidance has been poorly implemented in the context of the refugee crisis in Europe.⁴
 - d) All donors, as a matter of urgency, should dedicate funds specifically for organisations providing services and programmes for women and girls’ protection and training on gender-based violence minimum standards, as well as urge national governments hosting refugees and asylum seekers to allow these organisations access to sites where women and girls are accommodated.
- 3. All actors involved in the humanitarian response in Europe need to implement minimum standards across all programme sectors to mitigate gender-based violence and reduce women’s and girls’ risk of abuse and exploitation**
- a) All national and international actors responding to an emergency have a duty to protect those affected by the crisis; this includes protecting them from gender-based violence. The GBV guidelines provide comprehensive instructions for the different sectors of humanitarian response, yet these are not being consistently used and adhered to in Greece or the Balkan countries hosting refugees and asylum seekers. Many refugee facilities are not designed with risk mitigation in place: for example, in Bulgarian detention facilities there are no efforts to separate unaccompanied girls or women from men in sleeping quarters; in Greece, of the 44 refugee sites profiled by UNHCR, over 60% lack separate toilet and shower facilities for women and girls.⁵
 - b) Thousands of refugees are living in substandard conditions on European soil and there must be a coordinated approach between national governments, international and national organisations, and EU and UN agencies to ensure living conditions are improved and essential services are provided quickly. In particular, urgent action is needed by all stakeholders in the humanitarian response to ensure living conditions and services mitigate risk of gender-based violence where possible.
- 4. European leaders should provide safe alternative pathways to Europe as the closed borders leave women and girls at high risk of being exploited by smugglers or trafficked**
- a) The EU-Turkey deal has not dampened the desperation of refugees and asylum seekers to reach sanctuary in Europe. Since the deal, the IRC has seen a sharp increase in the number of people moving via smuggling routes across the Balkans, which has been corroborated by our partners in Serbia. Women and girls are already at increased risk of being trafficked or abused and exploited by smuggling gangs; the protection risks that they face are exacerbated by the lack of legal options to seek asylum.
 - b) Providing safe and legal asylum options for women and girls is in line with principles of the Istanbul Convention which necessitates parties “to develop gender-sensitive reception procedures and support services for asylum-seekers as well as gender guidelines and gender-sensitive asylum procedures, including refugee status determination and application for international protection”. As such all future discussions on asylum and resettlement in Europe should have a strong gender dimension, ensuring that the specific needs and experiences of women and girls are meaningfully and carefully addressed, particularly in relation to experiences of gender-based violence.

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⁴ 2015 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action <http://gbvguidelines.org/>

⁵ UNHCR, Site profiles in Greece, 1 June 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1428>