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Migration et santé - Nous sommes tous concernés!

Key challenges of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)

Sexual and gender-based violence – a human rights issue requiring more action

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Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is one of the most prevalent protection risks globally, especially for women and girls who are disproportionately affected by it. While SGBV exists everywhere and at any time, it often increases during and after humanitarian emergencies. It is a human rights issue which has a range of severe and long-lasting consequences. However, there are ways for humanitarian organizations, states and donor agencies to prevent and respond to SGBV, and Switzerland's engagement contributes to this. But while SGBV prevention and response work has achieved positive changes, there are still many challenges that remain to be addressed.



Bangladesh: After fleeing violence in Rakhine, hundreds of thousands of people still live in cramped and unsanitary shelters in Cox's Bazar. Photo: Vicci Moyles/IFRC

It is estimated that worldwide, one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organisation 2013: Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women). Women and girls are most often the victims of SGBV. Studies on male survivors are scarce, but several reports have found that a significant number of men and boys are also subjected to SGBV (e. g. Women's Refugee Commission (2019), "More Than One Million Pains"; De Schrijver L. et al. (2018), Prevalence of Sexual Violence in Migrants; UNHCR (2017), "We Keep it in our Heart"). Some of the groups most at-risk of abuse and exploitation are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons, children and adolescents as well as persons with disabilities (IFRC (2018), Alone and Unsafe: Children, Migration, and Sexual and Gender-based Violence; Chynoweth S.K. et al. (2017), Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys in Conflict and Forced Displacement).

A multitude of SGBV risks and consequences

SGBV can be a reason for people to flee their homes and can also occur during and after flight, e.g. in the country of asylum. A wide range of research found evidence that humanitarian emergencies often exacerbate SGBV (e.g. World Health Organization (2013), Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women; IFRC (2015), Unseen, Unheard: Gender-based Violence in Disasters – Global Study). The reasons for the increase in SGBV are diverse. When people have to flee, families often become separated and community protection structures break down, making people more vulnerable to SGBV (Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2015), Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action). Displaced women and girls are frequently exposed to violence when they leave refugee camps in search for water and firewood, but SGBV also happens inside camps when shelters are overcrowded, lighting is poor or sanitation facilities are unsafe (IFRC (2018), The Responsibility to Prevent and Respond to Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Disasters and Crises; UNHCR (2016), SGBV Prevention and Response Training Package). Displacement also leads to heightened socio-economic vulnerability, frequently aggravated by laws which do not allow refugees and asylum seekers access to the formal labor market (Clemens M. et al. (2018), The Economic and Fiscal Effects of Granting Refugees Formal Labor Market Access). Many displaced persons work in the informal sector, which leaves them at risk of violence and exploitation by employers (Women's Refugee Commission (2016), Mean Streets: Identifying and Responding to Urban Refugees' Risks of Gender-Based Violence). Different economic opportunities in the new context may lead to women finding employment more easily than men, which can change the traditional gender roles in the household. Men might perceive this as a threat to their masculinity and resort to violence. This is one of the reasons for the often observed increase in domestic violence after emergencies (IFRC (2018), The Responsibility to Prevent and Respond to Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Disasters and Crises; Le Masson V. et al. (2016), Disasters and Violence Against Women and Girls.) The difficult economic circumstances displaced persons face can also give rise to negative coping strategies such as child marriage, which is often perceived by families as a way to reduce their economic burden and protect girls from the risk of SGBV (CARE International UK (2015), "To Protect Her Honour": Child Marriage in Emergencies).



Nigeria: Nigerian Red Cross and IFRC engage with mothers in a local health clinic in Hong. Photo: Corrie Butler/IFRC

The forms of SGBV described here are just some of the many risks displaced persons experience before, during and after crises. Often, they are even exposed to more than one SGBV incident along the way. During my work with displaced persons in various contexts, I have witnessed firsthand the severe impacts SGBV has on survivors' lives. There can be many serious physical and psychological health consequences, such as injuries, sexually transmitted infections (e.g. HIV), unwanted pregnancies, trauma, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (Priddy A. (2012), *Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys in Armed Conflict*; World Health Organization (2012), *Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Women*). SGBV also has grave social and economic impacts for survivors, their families, communities and countries, e.g. stigmatization and isolation, need for costly services and inability to continue with education or work and to contribute to the economy (UNHCR (2016), *SGBV Prevention and Response Training Package*); Day T. et al. (2005), *The Economic Costs of Violence Against Women*).

Working to prevent and respond to SGBV

It is important to remember that the primary responsibility to protect persons from SGBV lies with states, and that SGBV is a human rights abuse, with some acts also prohibited by international humanitarian law and national legislations (OHCHR, *Violence Against Women*; Klugman J. (2017), *Gender Based Violence and the Law*). Therefore, one of the key activities for humanitarian and donor agencies is to advocate with states to ensure more protective legal frameworks and adequate response services for survivors of SGBV. As for the support that aid

organizations can provide to prevent and respond to SGBV, there is no one-size-fits-all model. They must strive to find context-specific solutions. To do so, it is crucial that they do not just see affected people as persons with vulnerabilities, but also take into account their many strengths and resources. By seeing these persons as the experts of their own situation and engaging them meaningfully in humanitarian response, aid agencies can ensure that prevention and response efforts are tailored to affected persons' needs. This is key to ensuring safe, accessible and adequate support for all. Common measures undertaken to work on SGBV are: conducting assessments with communities on the availability and accessibility of SGBV services; ensuring survivors' access to medical, psychosocial, legal, livelihoods, and safety services; prevention activities such as awareness raising campaigns to address the root causes of SGBV; and working on aid workers' attitudes, knowledge and skills related to SGBV through capacity building.



Nepal: Street drama organized by Nepal Red Cross Society on drunkenness, family disputes over land, sexual violence and caste discrimination in Godawari. Photo: IFRC

Switzerland's engagement

The above are some of the activities I have been directly involved in through my work as a member of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA). SGBV is considered a priority of Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, as outlined in its 'Strategy on gender equality and women's rights' and the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC)/ SHA's Operational Concept 2017-2020. SDC has substantive bilateral programmes on SGBV which are complemented by the engagement of the SHA through working with organizations that implement SGBV-specific programming; integrating SGBV aspects into SHA actions to minimize

risks; training of personnel; and policy and advocacy interventions at national and international level. The secondment of SHA members like me to partner agencies is another way of working on SGBV (FDFA 2017, FDFA Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Rights; Swiss Humanitarian Aid Department (2016), Operational Concept Sexual and Gender-based Violence).

Some key challenges and successes

There are many challenges in SGBV prevention and response work. The root causes of SGBV are gender inequality and gender discrimination, which remain common (WEF (2018), The Global Gender Gap Report 2018; IASC (2015), Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action). Furthermore, the lack of legal accountability for perpetrators of SGBV, leading to widespread impunity, is another big challenge (Equality Now (2017), The World's Shame - The Global Rape Epidemic). Other issues requiring more attention are the stigmatization and discrimination of survivors, and finally, there is a shortage of age and gender appropriate response services that cater to the different needs of survivors.



Uganda: IFRC and Uganda Red Cross talking with South Sudanese refugees in Bidibidi camp. Photo: Catherine Gearing/IFRC

Despite the multitude of challenges, it is important to highlight that positive change is happening. The abolishment of legal provisions enabling perpetrators to evade punishment if they marry the woman they raped is an example of successful campaigning against SGBV in

various Middle Eastern countries. At a personal level, I have experienced many successes when working on SGBV issues, such as the time when a young man from a refugee community explained to his community leaders in an awareness raising session why child marriage should no longer be practiced; or the time a survivor of SGBV was able to start her own business through a livelihoods project, allowing her to become economically independent and empowering her.

More change is needed

Despite political commitments made to prevent and respond to SGBV in humanitarian settings, such as the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, funding for SGBV work remains scarce. Between 2016-2018, SGBV services for women and girls only accounted for 0.12% of the total humanitarian funding (International Rescue Committee (2019). *Where's the Money?*). SGBV needs to be treated as life-threatening human rights issue, and efforts to address it have to be increased. This primarily requires action from states on promoting gender equality and ensuring availability of SGBV services and justice for survivors. Additionally, donors need to provide adequate funding so that aid organizations can support survivors in accessing the care they need. Only by putting commitments into action and working closely with communities can we end SGBV.

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