

on counselling asylum seeking and refugee  
women victims of gender-based violence

Helping her to reclaim her story



*The handbook is dedicated to  
all refugee women who have  
had the courage to thrive,  
and to all the dedicated  
counsellors working in the  
below mentioned  
organizations assisting  
women to reclaim their story.*

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# Table of contents

## 1 Introduction

How this handbook was developed and how you can use it

European legal framework related to gender-based violence

Forms of gender-based violence

Risk factors of gender-based violence

Consequences of gender-based violence

## 2 Gender-based violence in the refugee context

Gender-based violence as a push factor for forced migration

Continuum of violence

Barriers in reporting crime

The dilemma

### **3 Counselling as a method of assistance**

#### **Resources and structures needed for counselling**

#### **The process of counselling**

- Build trust with her
- Inform her on her rights
- Help her to reclaim her story
- Support her choice

#### **Co-operation with other assistance providers and relevant authorities**

#### **Cross-cutting issues**

- Safety of clients and staff
- Minors and clients with children
- Cultural competence
- Helping the helpers

### **4 Tools for outreach**





chapter

# 1

Introduction



# How this handbook was developed and how you can use it

The purpose of this handbook is to describe a counselling method for assisting refugee women who have been victims of gender-based violence (GBV). The handbook was developed during 2017-2019 in a project titled “Co-creating a counselling method for refugee women GBV victims (CCM-GBV)” funded by the European Commission through the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme.

## Definition of a refugee woman in this handbook

By refugee women we do not refer only to women who have been granted a refugee status based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, but to all women who are in the refugee status determination process (i.e. seeking an asylum), having received international protection (i.e. subsidiary or refugee status) or who are in the deportation process, so having been denied a refugee, subsidiary status or other status.

The discussion for the CCM-GBV project started in the end of 2016 during the increased influx of migrants to Europe. Several NGOs working with (female) asylum seekers across Europe started to take note of the gender-based violence experiences of female refugees. A question on the extent and types of gender-based violence arose, as well as the question how these women could be assisted. The practical experience of the partner NGOs was showcasing that refugee women faced several barriers in receiving assistance they were entitled to as victims of gender-based violence based on EU legislation, in particular the Victims' Rights Directive, and based on international commitments such as the Istanbul Convention. Therefore, a consortium consisting of SOLWODI Germany, Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati, Greek

Council for Refugees, G.I.R.A.F.F.A. Gruppo Indagine Resistenza alla Follia Femminile Italy, Cyprus Refugee Council, Kuopion Setlementti Puijola, Finland, Jesuit Refugee Service Croatia, European Network of Migrant Women and the European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated with the United Nations (HEUNI), representing six EU Member States came together, and applied for funds from the European Commission's REC Programme to develop a counselling method to better assist refugee women who have been victims of gender-based violence.

The project included weekly counselling for refugee women in each of the six Member States. In addition, the project collected data on the counselled women's experiences of violence. HEUNI was responsible for the data collection component in which extensive qualitative and quantitative data was collected on the phenomena of refugee women as victims of gender-based violence and lessons learned in assisting them. This was done through a journal methodology developed particularly for this purpose. The methodology was inspired by the concept of co-creation, which means creation of a service using the knowledge of service-users themselves. Because the service-users in this case were in a very vulnerable position, the co-creation, in other words "the voice of the clients", was heard through the project counsellors' journals.

Thirty counsellors working for the project in the above mentioned organizations wrote weekly counselling journals describing their experiences of the counselling sessions with refugee women. Over 600 journals were written over a period of a year (from March 2018 till March 2019). When these journals were thoroughly analysed some core challenges and lessons learnt in assisting refugee women victims of gender-based violence were discovered. These findings were further debated by the project partners in eight mutual learning workshops and trainings organised during the course of the project. Through this 2-year process, a method for counselling refugee women who have been victims of gender-based violence was created. This method is described in this handbook. The handbook is not an all-encompassing nor detailed description of the work each counsellor or organisation is doing, but it is a collection of lessons learnt by these experienced professionals, gathered and edited in a structured manner into this handbook.

### **Data collection methodologies**

Journal writing was in many ways the corner stone of the project, since this innovatory approach was specifically

designed to give a voice to both to the victims of gender-based violence and to the counsellors who provide services to the victims. The idea was to collect qualitative data on the insights on how counsellors and clients interpret situations and ascribe meaning to action. The journal included three broad themes: 1) challenges, 2) impacts of violence and assistance on victims and 3) lessons learned. Each theme included more specific questions which were designed to help with self-reflection. The counselling journals were sent to HEUNI once a week through an internet platform in English, and the contents of the journals were coded and analysed by using NVivo analyses programme. We collected over 600 journals over a period of a year.

We found many advantages in using journals as a source of data. The journals made it possible to access sensitive information that could not be accessed in other ways. The counsellors were given the possibility to record and explain the issues behind complex social practices in assisting victims of gender-based violence. The data collected via journals did not have to rely on recalling past events as is often the case with interviews. The data was collected on weekly bases for a period of a year, which gave us an extensive amount of data, and an extended time window to observe the work of the counsellors and the situation of the refugee women.

The greatest weakness in the methodology was that it did not give us the first-hand experiences of refugee women themselves, as the experiences were collected through the counsellors, which means that the data already has a layer of interpretation of the situations by the counsellors themselves. Also as counsellors were allowed to discuss either one or several customers each week, sometimes a client appears in a journal, and her case is not followed up, and in other cases a client is discussed several times giving a more nuances picture of this particular case, which means that there is by coincidence more information on certain cases than on others. Also the data does reflect organizational priorities related to e.g. on main target groups, and some of the partner organizations did have a strong focus on human trafficking victims, which is reflected in the data.

The contents of the journals are quoted anonymously and we have removed all means of identification from the data, so that neither the writers, the organization they represent, nor the country in which the counselling took place can be identified. This was done in order to protect the privacy and safety of clients and counsellors.

The second part of the data collection comprised of statistical data collected on the number of counselling sessions, women counselled and background variables (age, country of origin etc.) on the identified victims. The data was originally collected for project monitoring and evaluation purposes, and not designed to be used for other purposes. However, the data quickly started to show patterns of violence and as the amount of data increased the patterns intensified. Therefore, we have

included in this handbook some references to the statistical data to describe the backgrounds of the counselled women and the different forms of violence they have experienced. The forms of violence that were examined were chosen for monitoring purposes and encompassed only the most commonly known forms of violence against women. For instance, trafficking was not divided into sub-forms, which could have given more specific picture statistically on the diverse forms of trafficking, which the data is lacking now. Also the data comprises only victims of violence, as that was the goal of the data collection, to reach as many women victims of GBV to get a diverse picture of their experiences.

This is meant to be a practical handbook for those who work with refugee women. You can be working in an NGO, in a municipality or in a reception centre as a social worker, lawyer, psychologist, health care professional, or similar, giving psycho-social and/or legal assistance to refugee women. We hope that this handbook will give you a better understanding on the causes and consequences of gender-based violence faced by refugee women, and help you to develop new skills as well as motivation to assist these women.

In addition to this handbook, we recommend you to familiarise yourself with the project training manual which can be found in English, Finnish, Greek, Italian, German and Croatian at [www.heuni.fi](http://www.heuni.fi). In an ideal case, all professionals working with refugee women victims of gender-based violence should be trained in gender-based violence and on gender-based violence in the refugee context in particular, in order to better understand the complex situation of the victims. We recommend the project training manual for this purpose.

This handbook is not a legislative guide, but in Chapter 1 the European legal framework for gender-based violence and the key legal definition of gender-based violence are described in brief. This is followed by an introduction to the key risk factors and consequences of gender-based violence, with a particular focus on the vulnerabilities of refugee women. In Chapter 2, a narrative of gender-based violence in the lives of refugee women is described, including gender-based violence as a push factor for women's forced migration, the dangerous journey, and the risk of re-victimisation once in the EU. We introduce the dilemma of seeking asylum while in parallel having to recover from violence as well as discuss the barriers preventing women from reporting crime. Chapter 3 is the core of the handbook in which the co-created counselling method is described in detail. We elaborate

what we mean by counselling, and explain the resources as well as the understanding and skills needed to counsel refugee women who have been victims of violence. Before you can start to counsel women, you naturally need to reach the vulnerable population and identify potential victims among it. Therefore, in Chapter 4 we share lessons learnt in outreach methods.

Sometimes the challenges of assisting refugee women GBV victims seem to be overwhelming. But based on our experience, having an understanding that someone else has also handled similar cases and found solutions is reassuring. Therefore, we hope that during the moments of frustration, this handbook will help you. We also warmly welcome you to contact us (find contact details at the end of the handbook) in case you have any questions or ideas related to this handbook, including reporting back your experiences in using this handbook and the counselling method.

# European legal framework related to gender-based violence

This guidebook is not a legislative guide, but throughout it we refer to the following legal instruments as establishing rights for refugee women. More detailed information on the below mentioned international conventions and EU legislation can be found in the project's training manual.

**UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees** (1951), commonly known as the 1951 Refugee Convention, is the cornerstone of the international refugee law implemented in every EU Member State. The Convention provides a definition of a refugee and defines the rights refugees are entitled to. The Convention established the principle of non-refoulment; the prohibition to return or expel a refugee if it would constitute a threat to the life or freedom of the person.

**UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (CEDAW, 1979): It took until 1979 that discrimination against women was recognised through the CEDAW. However, it took yet more than a decade for gender-based violence to become recognised as a form of discrimination in line with the CEDAW (in 1992). One year later the international community came up with the first internationally agreed-upon definition of violence against women (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 1993). Since then, gender-based violence has become recognised as a violation of women's human rights and the concept of violence has expanded to include different forms. Individuals can file a complaint to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, if they find that a state is in violation of the Convention. Each EU Member State is a party to the Convention.

**The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence** (2014), usually referred to as the Istanbul Convention, is a significant, legally binding instrument tackling violence against women in Europe. The Convention defines gender-based violence



against women as violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. The Istanbul Convention requires states to criminalise the forms of gender-based violence defined in the Convention. The Convention lists several obligations to take action to protect and support female victims of violence, including arranging a variety of services facilitating recovery from violence. The services listed in the Convention include legal and psychological counselling, financial assistance, housing, education, training and assistance in finding employment, access to health care and social services. Part of the obligation to offer these services is to assure that the services are adequately resourced and professionals are trained to assist victims. The Parties to the Convention are among other things required to arrange for in an adequate geographical distribution, immediate, short- and long-term specialist support services to any victims, to set up appropriate, easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers to provide safe accommodation for and to reach out pro-actively to victims. And set up appropriate, easily accessible rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres for victims in sufficient numbers to provide for medical and forensic examination, trauma support and counselling for victims.

**The Qualification Directive** (2011/95/EU) sets down the criteria for recognizing persons in need of international protection in the EU. The Directive has important definitions that play a role in defining of the status of refugee women who have been victims of gender-based violence. The Directive defines acts of gender-specific nature as a form of persecution and it recognises also the conduct of non-state actors (inc. non-state armed groups, or family members) as a form of persecution or as serious harm.

**The Reception Conditions Directive** (2013/33/EU) lays down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection. Among other issues it requires the EU Member States to recognise the situation of vulnerable persons in accommodation centers and to take appropriate measures in preventing gender-based violence and to provide victims access to medical and psychological treatment or care.

**The Victims' Rights Directive** (2012/29/EU) establishes minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and ensures that the people who have fallen victim

to crime are recognised and treated with respect. The Victims' Rights Directive is an excellent legislative tool in helping to ensure that victims of crime have access to protection and support. Victims need support for reporting crime and for going through the criminal proceedings. If they are not assisted, they might not report the crime and the perpetrators will go unpunished. On the other hand, an important aspect of the Directive is that it assures support to victims irrespective of whether the victim reports the crime or not.

The Victims' Rights Directive pays particular attention to vulnerable groups including female victims of gender-based violence, because of the high risk of secondary and repeated victimisation, of intimidation and of retaliation connected with such violence, and because these crimes can cause systematic psychological and physical trauma with severe consequences. The Directive guarantees the victims of gender-based violence the right to specialised support and legal protection. Specialist support services should in particular take into account the specific needs of the victims when supporting them in recovering from harm or trauma and when informing victims about the rights set out in the Directive so that they can take decisions (including whether to report the crime) in a supportive environment.

Trafficking in human beings can be considered as a specific form of gender-based violence. Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation affects women more often than men, and it is often migrant women in particular, who become victims. **The Directive (2011/36/EU) on combating and preventing trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims** establishes provisions on victim's protection, assistance and support. The principle of provision of unconditional assistance to victims of trafficking is explicitly set out in the Anti-Trafficking Directive at least for the duration of a reflection period. The reflection period is a period of time granted to victims of trafficking, during which they can recover in order to make an informed decision as to whether or not to cooperate with the authorities (e.g. in order to participate in a criminal process). Victims of trafficking can also receive a residence permit provided that they cooperate with the criminal justice authorities (Directive 2004/81/EC).

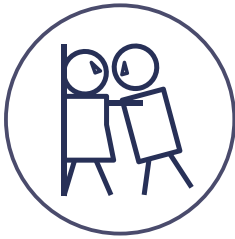
Every time you are assisting a victim of violence you are in practice claiming her right to enjoy the fulfilment of internationally agreed human rights.

# Forms of gender-based violence

“Gender-based violence differs from other types of violence in that the victim’s gender is the primary motive for the acts of violence. Therefore, gender-based violence against women refers to any harm that is perpetrated against a woman, and that is both the cause and the result of unequal power relations, based on perceived differences between women and men, that lead to women’s subordinate status in both the private and public spheres.”

- Istanbul explanatory report

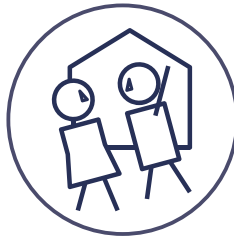
**The following forms of gender-based violence were identified in the project<sup>1</sup>**



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### **Sexual assault, including rape**

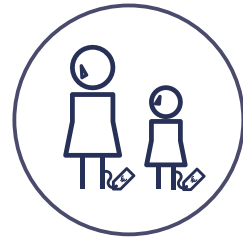
"a. engaging in non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral penetration of a sexual nature of the body of another person with any bodily part or object; b. engaging in other non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a person; c. causing another person to engage in non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a third person. Consent must be given voluntarily as the result of the person's free will assessed in the context of the surrounding circumstances".



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### **Domestic / intimate partner violence**

"all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence, that occur within the family or domestic unit or whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim."



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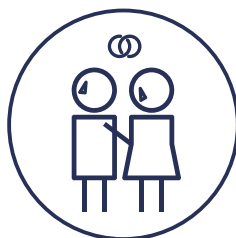
### **Trafficking in human beings**

"the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation". <sup>2</sup>



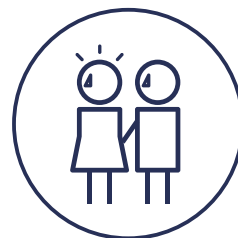
### Female genital mutilation

"a) excising, infibulation or performing any other mutilation to the whole or any part of a woman's labia majora, labia minora or clitoris; b) coercing or procuring a woman to undergo any of the acts listed in point a.; c) inciting, coercing or procuring a girl to undergo any of the acts listed in point a."



### Forced marriage

"forcing an adult or a child to enter in a marriage, including luring an adult or a child to the territory of a State other than the one she or he resides in with the purpose of forcing this adult or child to enter into a marriage".



### Sexual harassment

"any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment".

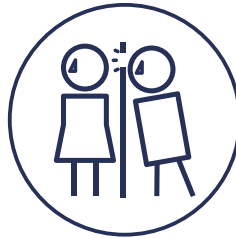
1 - The definitions are from the Istanbul Convention except for the trafficking in human beings which is from the EU trafficking directive

2 - During the course of the project an online training was developed on trafficking. In order to learn more about this particular form of gender-based violence have a look at <http://heuni.education/page3139001.html>



### Honour-based violence

"in any acts of violence mentioned above culture, custom, religion, tradition or so-called "honour" shall not be regarded as justification covering claims that the victim has transgressed cultural, religious, social or traditional norms or customs of appropriate behaviour."



### Stalking

"repeatedly engaging in threatening conduct directed at another person, causing her or him to fear for her or his safety"

**As a counsellor you should recognise different forms of gender-based violence, and how they can manifest in the lives of refugee women.**

# Risk factors of gender-based violence

Refugee women have different backgrounds including different personal qualities, family situations, levels of education and professions. Refugee women do not form a homogenous group, and they definitely should not be seen as uninformed victims. These women have courage and resilience, not the least, because they have decided to leave and embark on a dangerous journey. The gender-based violence they have suffered is not caused by a single factor, but rather by a combination of several factors that increase the risk of becoming a victim of violence.

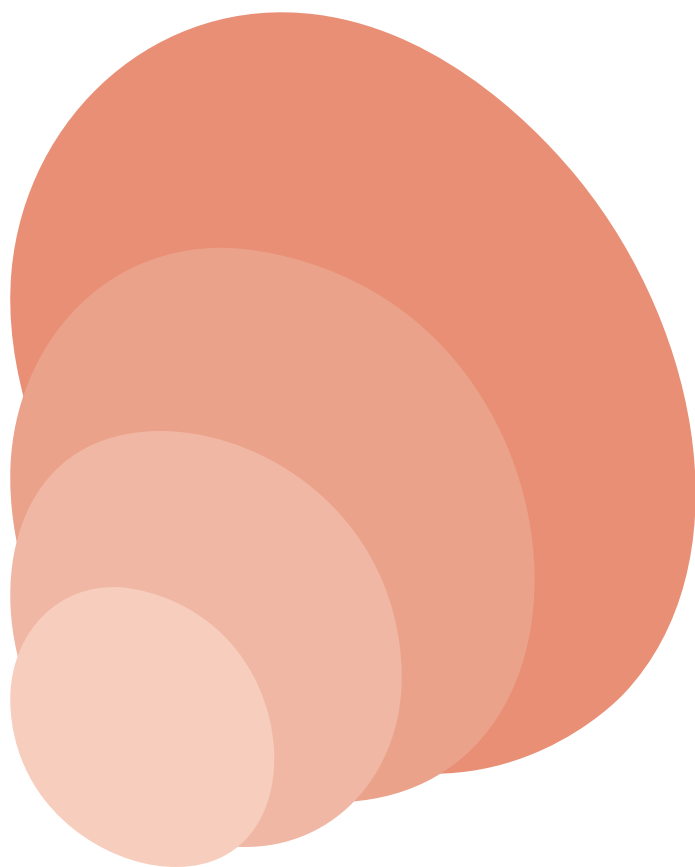
In the CCM-GBV project we used a socio-economic model, developed by the World Health Organisation, to understand the risk factors. The model illustrates different levels of factors that put people at risk of experiencing violence. Based on our understanding of the experiences of the refugee women we added to the model an additional layer; the refugee context. This layer highlights the risks for this particular group of women, although it can be argued that the risk factors related to the refugee context also intersect with the other layers.

the refugee  
situation

socio-economic  
setting

family and close  
relationships

biological and  
personal history





## Risk factors:

### Biological and personal history factors

Biological and personal history factors that increase the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence include e.g. age, education, income, disability and a history of abuse.

*Example from the journals:*

*A majority of the women identified as victims of violence in the project were under 30 years of age. Many of the victims had a history of abuse or neglect as a child. Many had a low level of education, often as a consequence of an early marriage. One fifth of the identified victims were illiterate. A few LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people) persons were identified among the victims. The situation of LGBT people can be complex due to the stigma and fear of discriminatory treatment especially by authorities, and lack of knowledge of their rights. This all makes LGBT people more vulnerable to violence, and afraid to talk about their experiences. In the journals there were surprisingly few mentions of disability, although based on the literature disability is regarded as a vulnerability factor for GBV.*

### Factors related to family and close relationships

A person's closest social circle – peers, partners and family members – influences their behaviour and contributes to their range of experience. Factors contributing to the risk at this level include marital conflict, family dysfunction, male dominance in the family, early marriage or forced marriage, a large number of children and friction over women's empowerment.

*Example from the journals:*

*Family-related risk factors such as having lost family members, forced marriage and/or male dominance in the family were present in the majority of cases identified in the project.*

<- Pic 1.

Risk factors of gender-based violence

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## Socio-economic settings

Socio-economic settings such as schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods. Contributing factors at the community level include poverty, traditional gender roles, the normative use of violence to settle all types of disputes, social norms that restrict women's public visibility, the lack of safety in public spaces, weak community sanctions against gender-based violence and the lack of shelters or other forms of assistance/shelter.

*Example from the journals:*  
*In the journals counsellors described that women spoke about traditional gender norms in their communities, lack of safety in public spaces and weak or no sanctions for violence against women in their communities.*

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## The refugee situation

The process of fleeing creates a situation of power imbalance. There are many points during the journey where women are particularly vulnerable to violence. Crossing borders, including having to use the services of smugglers, creates particular risks for women. The risk of (re)victimisation in the destination country is heightened by the circumstances and processes related to seeking an asylum.

*Example from the journals:*  
*Based on the journal an unclear residence status, including being undocumented, makes asylum seekers vulnerable to work-related and sexual abuse. Crowded accommodation centers, and discrimination increase the risk of sexual harassment and abuse. The migratory situation, the pressures of being on the move, and an uncertain future, also challenge gender roles and heighten tension in families, sometimes leading to violence.*

**Recognising risk factors can help you to offer better assistance. It can also be helpful for the victim to understand that there can be a pattern behind her experience, which can help her to cope with the feelings of shame and self-blame.**

# Consequences of gender-based violence

Gender-based violence causes serious and long-lasting harm on the victim. Violence directly causes acute and chronic physical health issues (chronic pain, memory loss, abdominal pain, gynaecological problems, complications during pregnancy). The consequences of violence often manifest as mental health problems (fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide attempts, loss of sexual desire etc.). Violence can also have an impact on the social life of the victims due to victim-blaming attitudes and stigma causing isolation or revictimization. Also, victims of gender-based violence can have difficulties in trusting people and therefore have problems in forming social relationships. Experiences of violence can also influence a victims' ability to function in a society, such as taking part in the labour market, completing their education or appearing in public.

The counsellors described the physical, psychological, social and economic consequences of violence in the journals. There are many references to physical injuries such as scars, chronic pain, sleeping or eating problems and musculoskeletal injuries. Something that was often mentioned in the journals was pregnancy as a consequence of a rape. Naturally, getting pregnant is a physical consequence, but there is also a great concern of the emotional burden of carrying and caring for a child conceived as a result of sexual violence. HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases as a consequence of GBV were also mentioned in the journals.

A majority of the journals referred to psychological consequences such as low self-esteem, the feeling of being responsible for what happened, lack of trust towards other people, fear and depression. Also panic attacks including uncontrollable and suicidal behaviour are mentioned in the journals. Trauma and the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have a significant impact on the counselling process, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The social consequences reported in the journals were loss of social status, loss of friends and social connections, damage to the relationship with own children or losing contact with them. Also, many of the women have had to leave their children behind in their

countries of origin or are separated from their children for other reasons, which causes considerable suffering and anxiety for the women. If women were housed in a refugee accommodation (including reception centres, detention centres, shared refugee accommodations, private housing) or in women's shelters, contact with outsiders was also sometimes further limited by house rules or for security reasons, further isolating the women. The weakened mental, physical and social capacity of the victims can lead to economic consequences as the women are not able to work, and therefore struggle to obtain money even for their daily needs. Also leaving the perpetrator, even more so for refugee women, might not be an option due to their poor economic situation.

It must be kept in mind that refugee women are not only traumatised by the gender-based violence they have been victims to: being a refugee is traumatising in itself. The women have fled from their homes, they might have lost all their belongings or close family members. They have travelled long distances often in harsh conditions to reach Europe. They might be worried about their children or other family members and friends back home, and are feeling homesick. They are in a foreign country and culture, with no or limited social networks and language skills. In addition, refugees are often hosted in crowded refugee accommodations, where there are few or no meaningful activities, and all they can do is to wait in uncertainty. The anti-immigration sentiments in many European countries may add to the women's experience of alienation and not feeling welcomed. This may increase their level of stress and trauma, in particular if they are themselves subjected to discrimination or harassment in the EU.

**It is not useful to label some consequences of violence as more damaging than others. Instead, it is important that you try to understand how a particular woman experiences the consequences of violence in order to provide her with individually tailored assistance.**

chapter

# 2

**Gender-based violence in  
the refugee context**

In this Chapter, by combining the stories of over 1000 asylum seeking women identified as victims of gender-based violence in the counselling sessions, we draw “a metanarrative” i.e. an overarching storyline of gender-based violence in the refugee context. The narrative showcases how gender-based violence is forcing women to migrate. It shows their dangerous journey to Europe and their victimisation in the EU. The Chapter ends with the introduction of what we call the dilemma of simultaneously trying to access your rights as an asylum seeker and as a victim of crime. We will start this chapter by presenting the story of a woman, referred to as “B”. Her story includes all the components of the metanarrative. She also in the end, at least partly, “reclaims her story”. B escapes gender-based violence in her country of origin, faces further violence during her journey and also in the EU. But, B is an exceptional case in that sense, that she is aware of the importance of telling her story of violence in the asylum interview, and she also reported the violence she encountered in the EU to the police, which is very rare, as we will soon find out.

### The story of B:

“She told me that she was forced to marry when she was very young: upon the death of her mother, her stepmother decided that she should marry and forced her to marry a man she did not like and did not even know. B could not oppose her stepmother's decision and had to marry. At the time of the wedding, she was 14 years old. The girl reported that in her country it is very common for women to be forced to marry at an early age, because they are an economic burden to their families. B reports that her married life was not quiet and – after many problems with her husband – she decided to leave home.

However, she couldn't return to her family, because they would have forced her to return to her husband. So in order to earn a living, she was forced into prostitution. After some time, her exploiters decided to take her to Europe. At a certain point of the trip, they arrived in Libya where she stayed for about 3 months (even there, B was forced into prostitution). Then she arrived by sea at [an European port], where she applied for international protection.

Once in Europe, the irony of fate, when it seemed that she was finally safe, she was assaulted and raped, which she reported to the police. Incidentally, last but not least, we have been told from the centre that the girl is probably still continuing with prostitution.

She is afraid that the [body responsible for reviewing asylum claims] will not grant her a refugee status, and she is very concerned about this. The girl began the meeting by openly showing all her fragilities and worries and opened completely by telling her terrible story. This state of uncertainty about her still pending status and her concern not to obtain international protection is also delaying the possibility of her proper integration and her regaining of the serenity that was taken away from her when she was little more than a child. The girl seemed to me to be very heartened and showed that she understood the importance of having referred all her personal experiences to [the body responsible for reviewing the application] and of having reported the violence she had suffered in [the destination country] to the police”.

# Gender-based violence as a push factor for forced migration

An all-encompassing push factor for migration is naturally poverty. However, poverty has different consequences for men and women. The women described in the journals had had little economic power in the family or in the society in general. In the most drastic cases total poverty had led girls and women to resort to "survival sex", meaning that women were forced to sell sexual services in exchange for money, food or services in order to survive. We identified the lack of opportunities for women as a risk factor in particular for trafficking for sexual exploitation. A typical case followed a certain pattern: a woman is lured by false promises to travel to Europe to work, but in reality, she is forced into prostitution, in one of the transit countries, in the destination country or both.

Based on the journal data impunity of sexual violence as well as shame related to it were also push factors for women to seek international protection in the EU. There were few cases in the journals where female genital mutilation was specifically mentioned as a factor in the decision to seek refuge in Europe. In these cases, either the women themselves were afraid of being circumcised or they wanted to save their daughter from the procedure.

An often-mentioned gendered push factor was forced marriage. A large proportion of the women who were identified as victims of this type of violence were either escaping the threat of forced marriage or violence in a forced marriage. Some were also escaping the threat of honour-based violence following a refusal to marry. Forced marriage was not always the triggering factor for the decision to migrate, but it was often the starting point of a continuum of violence where one form of violence led to another until the situation became unbearable. Women who had been forced to marry became victims of (sometimes very harsh) domestic violence, and after their decision to escape, they became victims of different forms of exploitation during their journey to Europe, and even in the EU.

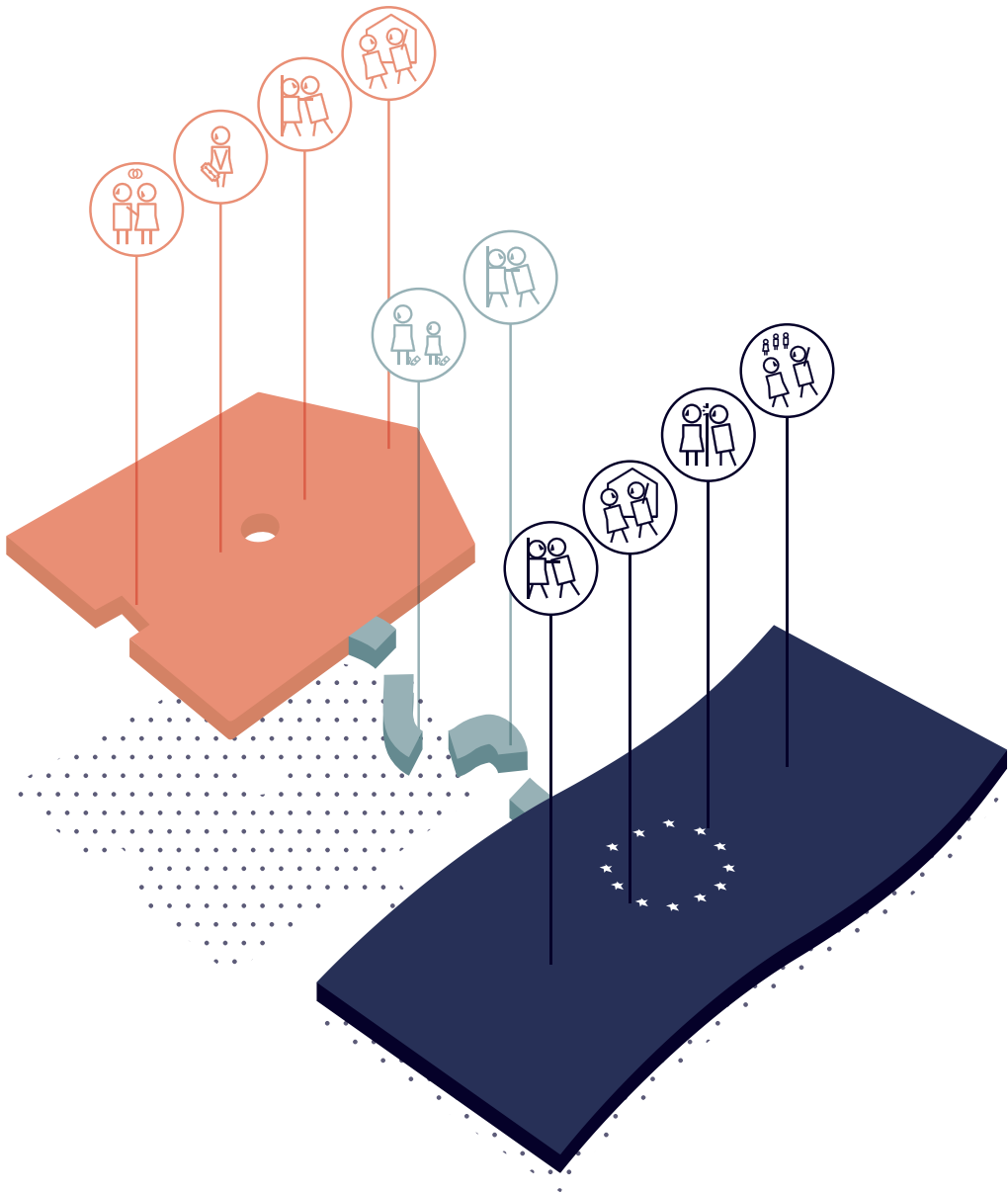


# Continuum of violence

Refugee women who are fleeing gender-based violence usually have few resources for the journey. They might be fleeing from their families, which amounts to having no social networks or support from home, having escaped with no funds (or documents) as well as coping with past experiences of abuse. All of these factors make the women vulnerable to further abuse during the journey. Based on the journal data, many of the women fleeing violence at home end up being sexually exploited and/or trafficked during the journey to Europe. Crossing borders and having to use the services of smugglers creates particular risks for women.

The project data reveals that violence against women does not stop at the EU border. Quite the opposite: one fifth of the women identified in the project as victims of violence had been victimised within the EU. The risk of (re)victimisation in the destination country is heightened by the circumstances and processes related to seeking asylum. Unclear residence status, including being undocumented, makes female refugees vulnerable to, in particular sexual abuse and trafficking. Sexual harassment and stalking, in particular of single women in the reception centres, and in the streets, including some rape cases, were mentioned in the journals. Selling sex for goods or for money in the refugee camps and reception centres has also been identified by the counsellors. The counsellors have encountered cases of forced prostitution in the refugee accommodation centres, but women are very reluctant to reveal this due to lack of other options, fear of being punished or that reporting might affect their asylum claim.

The most common form of gender-based violence within the EU identified in the project was domestic violence. One recurring theme seems to be that the mental pressure of being on the refuge; the loss of home and relatives as well as a feeling of belonging and having experienced a wide range of abuses during the journey, can cause conflict and aggression within the family. Often the perpetrators are male relatives such as husbands or partners, fathers, uncles, brothers, but also in some cases female



members of the family. A difficult situation is naturally not an excuse for violence, but the refugee context can be a triggering factor, which should be recognised. Domestic violence within refugee population should not be labelled or explained as "being part of the culture", but should instead be properly addressed, especially considering that our evidence suggests that the refugee situation as such can be a triggering factor for domestic violence.

Many of the families arriving to Europe also do have a background of forced marriage, unequal power relationships in the family, and in many instances also a history of domestic violence. So, the violence is definitely not always triggered by the circumstances of being a refugee. In some cases it seemed that the empowerment (due to information and/or assistance given) of a wife leads to further friction within the family, which can escalate to a situation of violence. In some cases, where women decided to leave their marriage after arriving to Europe, their decision triggered honour-based violence by the husband or other family members/members of the community, including both those in the destination country as well as those in the country of origin.

<- Pic. 2

*Violence experienced by  
refugee women form a  
continuum from the country of  
origin to the EU*

# Barriers in reporting crime

Less than 10% of the victims identified in the project had reported their case to the police. Naturally, many of the counselled women had been victims of violence in the country of origin or during the journey, and therefore authorities in the EU are not able to conduct the investigations. Furthermore, The Victims' Rights Directive only applies to crimes committed within the European Union, which in the case of refugee women is an artificial limitation; the victims suffer the consequences of violence irrespective of which side of the border the violence took place.

However, the most important background factor for low reporting rates seems to be that refugee women do not consider reporting crime as their utmost concern. Other barriers to reporting crime are poor language skills, lack of trust and fear of authorities, emotional and economic dependency on the perpetrator, fear of revenge by the perpetrator or pressure from the family or the community. Also authorities' non-sensitive attitudes and processes might deter victims from reporting crime, or lead to re-traumatisation of the victim during the criminal justice process. Many of these barriers can be overcome, but resolving the root cause, namely, that refugee women do not see the benefit or need to report crime, would be important.

Gender-based violence remains a private and sensitive issue, and many of the forms of gender-based violence are not considered as crimes by the refugee women themselves. Feelings of guilt and self-blame prevent victims from reporting. Victims can also be afraid of the reaction of the perpetrator or the community. An important hindrance to reporting is attitudes within a family or in a community e.g. blaming a wife for being a "bad wife" if she considers leaving a violent relationship or shaming a victim of sexual violence. Sometimes communities even pressure a victim to stay silent. Within a community there can also be misconceptions related to reporting crime, such as that if you report crime, authorities will take away your children. Some victims also have unfounded feelings of fear related to

their past traumatic experiences, including believing in the harmful effects of traditional beliefs such as voodoo/juju.

Victims can be emotionally attached to a perpetrator. This so-called traumatic bonding occurs when a person develops positive feelings towards the perpetrator. This typically occurs when e.g. a trafficked person has been isolated and controlled by a trafficker or other abuser, feels threatened or unable to escape, or has experienced sporadic acts of kindness from the trafficker. Trauma bonding may result in the victim trying to appease their trafficker. Leaving the perpetrator, in particular, if he is a family member, can be a huge decision. Leaving an abusive relationship is a difficult process, especially for someone who is not used to taking decisions on her own. Often the victims of domestic violence want to change the situation but do not want to have a direct confrontation with the perpetrator or do not want their husbands or/and the fathers of their children to end up in prison. The decision is also made more difficult if a woman's residence permit is tied to that of the husband and/or if the woman is economically dependent on the husband. The decision to leave also increases the risk of violence. Often the women are more concerned about processing family law issues such as custody of children or filing a divorce than reporting an offense to the police. An additional concern for many women are religious rules and procedures such as obtaining an Islamic divorce.

One reason why refugee women do not feel comfortable in reporting to the police or to other officials is lack of trust towards authorities. Mistrust can be a consequence of very unpleasant experiences with authorities in the countries of origin, including corruption, violence by authorities or a total lack of respect for women's rights. Detention-like experiences in the destination countries' asylum system are also not ideal for creating a relationship of trust towards authorities.

A lack of gender-sensitive and culturally appropriate reporting process can also deter reporting. Based on the experiences of the counsellors, the police does not always take reports of domestic violence or harassment towards refugee women seriously, and non-respectful attitudes and processes might cause the victim to change her mind about filing a case. In one extreme case, recorded in one of the journals, a victim of trafficking was accompanied by a counsellor to report the trafficking crime, and as a consequence, the client was taken into custody by the police in order to be deported.

A police officer might not have the skills and time to collect the story of a traumatised victim, including using a foreign language or an interpreter in the process. A victim of gender-based violence often does not feel comfortable telling her story to a male police officer, if a female officer is not available. The feeling of disrespectfulness can also be partly caused by the nature of criminal investigations: while the police needs to concentrate on information that is relevant for building a case or catching a perpetrator, a victim might feel that her story is not believed because the police officer has to questions it in order to assure that there are reasonable grounds to believe that a crime has taken place.

Sometimes it can be impossible to investigate a case due to procedural reasons e.g. a victim or a witness is not ready to give evidence e.g. due to a lack of witness and victim protection programmer or the crime has taken place outside the EU or the identity or whereabouts of the perpetrators are unknown. If a case is reported and later the investigation or prosecution is interrupted, due to e.g. lack of evidence, it is very difficult for the victim to understand that the closure of the investigation does not mean that the violence was justified.

# The dilemma

There are two systems aimed at protecting and upholding the human rights for asylum seeking victims of violence; the asylum system, which is aimed at protecting those in danger of persecution or serious harm, and the victims' rights regime, which seeks to ensure protection for victims of crime. Most asylum seeking women could, in theory, claim rights from either one, or both, of these systems, because they need protection from persecution in their home countries, and protection from violence in the EU. But these systems seem to operate in silos, and do not correspond to the realities of the refugee women.

Many refugee women are traumatised by the past or recurring violent crime, but these incidents are not of their utmost concern while they are in the refugee status determination process. Their foremost concern is their and their children's future i.e. to receive an assurance that they can stay in a safe country. A dilemma is that in order to be able to build a future, and to recover from violence, the women would need asylum; but to receive asylum they need to concentrate on and emphasize the most intimate and shameful incidents of their life.

In order to receive asylum a person has to go through an interview in which she needs to tell her life story highlighting the most negative and traumatic experiences. Also the claimant needs to tell about her experiences in a manner that corresponds to the institutional expectations. To meet the institutional expectations asylum seekers need to be aware of what kinds of experiences are considered relevant in the context of an asylum claim. Furthermore, an applicant needs to be able to explain the individual basis for a claim and give detailed information on concrete incidents of persecution.

This can be very demanding. The women may not understand that gender-based violence is a relevant experience in this context and they are usually deeply traumatised, ashamed and afraid to talk about their experiences. The trauma caused by violence can also manifest itself in psychological conditions such as memory loss, blackouts and lack of concentration, which makes it very

difficult to present a coherent narrative as required by the system. Post traumatic disorder, very prevalent in this population, also involves avoidance, which is a survival mechanism traumatised individuals use in order to relieve themselves from the pain of the trauma. This means that victims have learned to avoid talking/ thinking about what happened, and sometimes without realizing it they skip the traumatic parts of their story.

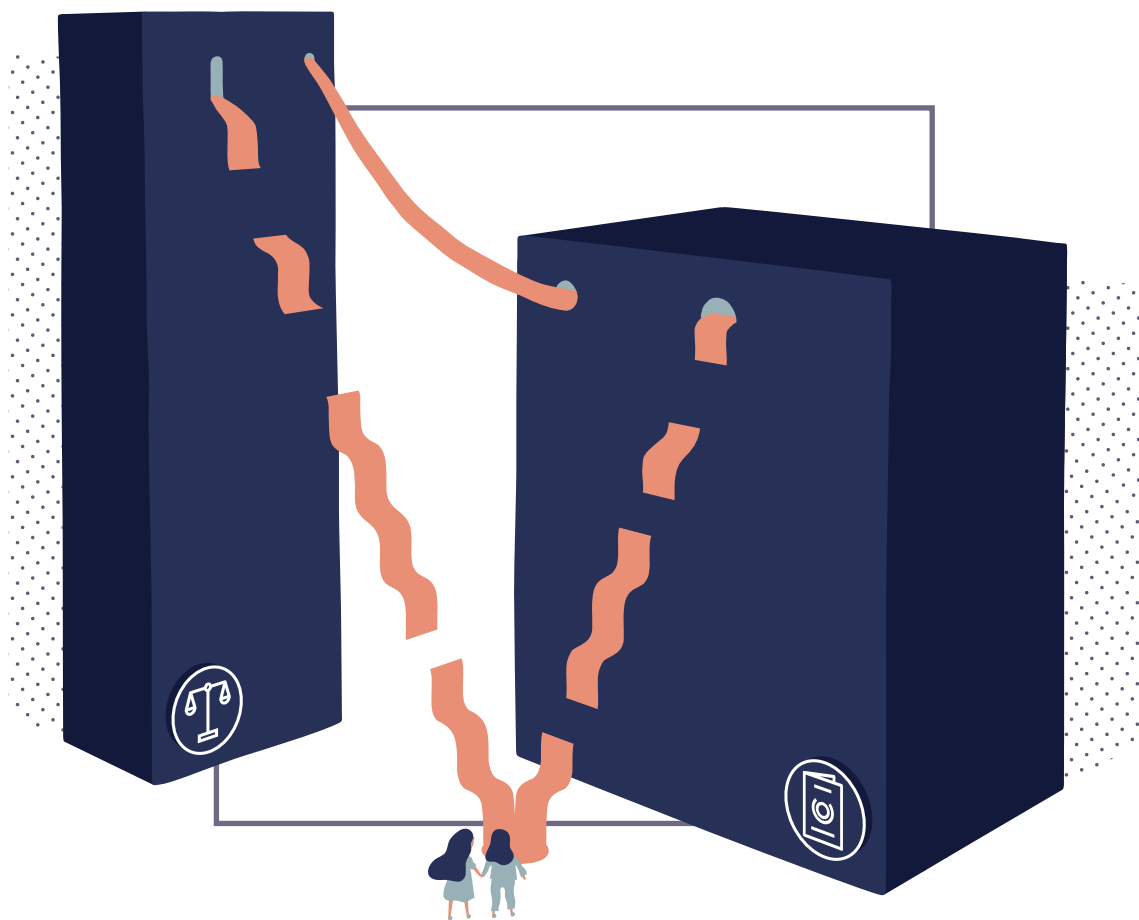
Two important practises in counselling, which can help in overcoming the dilemma are; 1) informing women on their procedural rights, such as a right to an individual interview and confidentiality of the interview and 2) mentally supporting women to tell their story of violence highlighting the issues that are relevant for the claim. These will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Furthermore, it seems that the criminal justice system has “nothing to offer” to refugee women, so it is of secondary concern to the women. We have been asking ourselves what could be the arguments to justify to the women the importance of reporting crime. Of course the aim of reporting to police is to stop the violence, and to ensure that the perpetrator cannot do further harm to the victim or to others. However, the system leans to protect the rights of the accused, and therefore, it is only in exceptional circumstance that the perpetrator would actually be immediately “locked up”. Another argument is that in order to maintain the credibility of the criminal justice system all serious crimes should be investigated and prosecuted. If violence against refugee women is not processed by the criminal justice system, impunity for violence against refugee women prevails. However, it is a lot to ask from an individual to go through the criminal process in which a victim is once again asked to reveal all the painful memories and revisit them in detail. We claim that in order to have the mental resources to be able to seek retribution via the criminal process these women would need asylum, which grants them time to recover, and access to long-term support, which in the long run can increase the willingness to leave an abusive relationship or to cooperate with the criminal justice authorities.

Pic. 3 ->

*The expectations of the asylum system and the criminal justice system do not correspond to the realities of the refugee women*





Refugee women's experiences of violence form a continuum over time and geography. There is a great risk of revictimisation for refugee women who arrive to the EU with a history of abuse. Reporting gender-based violence incidents to the police is not a primary concern for the refugee women. In order to recover and gather courage to report, these women would need asylum, but in order to receive asylum, they need to tell their story of abuse. This dilemma creates a vicious circle for many of the refugee women.

In order to find out more about the dilemmas we recommend to read a publication written based on the project findings. The publication can be found at [www.heuni.fi](http://www.heuni.fi).

**chapter**

# **3**

**Counselling as a method  
of assistance**



# Resources and structures needed for counselling

Counselling is a multidisciplinary approach in which refugee women who have been victims of gender-based violence are offered a multitude of support, including psycho-social counselling, information on their rights and assistance in fulfilling their everyday needs. The aim of counselling is to support clients in different areas of life, not just with incidents connected with gender-based violence. The counselling process can take months or even years and it intersects with several other processes to which asylum seekers and victims of violence can be part of: the asylum process, criminal process and civil law processes such as divorce, family unification or custody of children.

Counselling is in practice a series of one-on-one sessions where refugee women are given an opportunity to be heard and to tell their story. Together with the counsellor a spectrum of opportunities are jointly discovered. Women are informed about their rights as victims of crime and as asylum seekers. Their practical needs such as sustenance, housing and medical needs are mapped and, when needed, they are referred to other service providers. At a more in-depth level, counsellors describe counselling as a process of moving from shame, fear and self-blame to building confidence, empowerment and integration.

<- Pic. 4

*A metaphor of the counselling process: a path towards empowerment and integration is demanding and full of pitfalls*

## Resources and structures needed for successful counselling

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### A safe space

A safe space is a prerequisite for confidential counselling discussions. It is preferable to organise counselling sessions outside a camp/ an accommodation centre whenever possible. It is important to have a private and safe place where confidentiality is guaranteed, the women feel comfortable and no-one will interrupt the counselling session. You also need to consider how the refugee women can reach the location.

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### A multidisciplinary team

Our evidence suggests that a multidisciplinary team, including a psychologist, a lawyer/ legal advisor and a social worker, is the most efficient in tackling the challenges female refugee victims of gender-based violence face. Teamwork improves the quality of counselling because in a team professionals can exchange opinions and support each other. If working as a team, it is a good practise to assign a case manager to each client. A case manager is a person who is taking care of a case from the beginning till the client does not need assistance anymore. A case manager connects the different professionals together and is often the person of trust for the client. Also a single counsellor can do successful counselling, if she has the necessary skills and networks. It is preferred to have female counsellors to counsel women.

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### Supervision

Even the most skilled and dedicated counsellors cannot succeed without solid support from the management. All counsellors should be provided with supervision, debriefing opportunities and peer-support to emotionally recover from the counselling sessions and to be able to efficiently assist clients. It is necessary to have organisational structures and resources available for the supervision and for debriefing. Counsellors can also use different self-care tools, which will be discussed in Chapter 3 to recover from the emotional burden of work.

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### **Organisational commitment**

Based on our experience, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can be in a better position to reach and identify potential clients than authorities. Many asylum seekers have experiences of authorities being corrupt and inefficient, even abusive. The clients perceive NGO counsellors as more neutral, and a relationship of trust, a requisite for counselling, can be more easily formed. An organisation providing counselling should, however, have strong networks with different authorities and other assistance providers in order to be able to correspond to the multitude of needs the clients have. In addition, in order to achieve the wanted results of counselling, an organisation needs to have a long-term commitment to the counselling work. Vulnerable clients are left in limbo if counselling is offered on and off e.g. based on the funding situation of the organisation. More harm than good is done by starting counselling processes with vulnerable clients if there are no follow-ups.

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## **Interpretation**

If you and your client don't have a common language, arranging interpretation for the counselling session is crucial. It is important to have a professional interpreter who is bound by ethical guidelines, one that the victim feels she can work with, one who stays throughout the case and has personal qualities that help the victim feel safe to disclose sensitive materials.

The training and code of conduct for interpreters varies from country to country. In some countries interpreter's professional conduct is to only interpret word for word. In other countries, it is part of the interpreter's work to also assist to understand other cultures and explain meanings that have a cultural layer. In these countries, interpreters can be very crucial in creating a trustful relationship between a counsellor and a client.

Most counsellors prefer to use female interpreters because they have had experiences of women not feeling comfortable talking about gender-based violence experiences or e.g. gynaecological needs with a male interpreter. Also some of the male interpreters, based on our experience, do not feel comfortable themselves in interpreting these topics, and there is a risk that a male interpreter expresses his own feelings and attitudes related to the topics discussed. In one case described in the journals, the interpreter left in the middle of the counselling session, because he could not personally accept a wife leaving an abusive marriage.

In an ideal case, a training or briefing is organised for the interpreter before a counselling session. In the briefing, it can be explained, what is going to happen in the counselling session and what kind of issues are discussed, including giving the interpreter some basic understanding of gender-based violence and the necessary vocabulary to discuss it. Some NGOs also organise debriefing for interpreters, because there is a risk of secondary traumatising also for them.

Using a volunteer to translate can be a solution if qualified interpreters are not available, but it should be carefully considered. A volunteer acting as an interpreter can have the additional benefit that a volunteer can also act as a support person. However, a volunteer or "a friend" might share a language with the client, but does not equal to a professional translator: volunteers acting as translators might lack particular vocabulary (related to legal processes, health conditions etc.), and more importantly have their own, perhaps traumatic experiences, their opinions and emotions, which might affect the interpretation. However, as discussed above, this might be an issue with professional translators, too. Confidentiality needs to be always considered. This is the case in particular when volunteers act as interpreters, because there might be close connections between the victim's and the interpreter's community.

Sometimes phone interpreting or other technical tools can be used as a solution when there simply are no interpreters available. A lack of resources for interpreting can lead to innovative, though not ideal, solutions, such as using Google translation or pictures as a common language.

It is important to make sure that the refugee women have qualified, experienced, preferably female, interpreters also when dealing with the authorities, whether it is related to the criminal proceedings, asylum or other legal processes.



# The process of counselling

## Build trust with her

“I think the biggest impact and my goal in the beginning is to inform the ladies about what I do, about the groups and about the possibility to be able to meet me one-on-one. Already this gives them something to look forward to. They seem to be really taken on that I give them time, attention, I’m there and I’m not there on a pedestal but meeting them eye to eye. The way I work is maybe a little different from what they are used to and what they were expecting. Now we are building trust, getting to know each other and finding out together what we will want to do. I think with this already they feel themselves special.”

Building trust with the client is crucial for the counselling to be successful. When dealing with traumatised people, establishing a relationship of trust takes time and patience. Group activities organised either by the counsellors themselves, or other staff of the organisation, are important in creating a trustful environment. These group activities, including for example field trips (like visiting a museum, theatre or an exhibition), give some meaningfulness in the midst of waiting, but also create a momentum for more in-depth discussion. Some organisations have volunteers who have the role of bridging language and cultural barriers via joint activities.

In the first meeting, take the attitude that you truly believe everything that is told to you by the client. It might sometimes be difficult for you to believe a story because it is so messy, it might seem to be made up, or sometimes a story is just so horrific, that you do not want to believe it. The client will sense whether you believe her story or not and this will make her either open up or to shut down. Later in the counselling sessions it is naturally important to reveal as many detailed facts as possible to be used in the asylum claim and/or in the criminal proceedings. But in the beginning consider it as a luxury that you as a counsellor do not need to judge what is right or wrong – you can just listen. Many officials will not be able to do this, as their task is to consider all the statements of a victim in light of some formal criteria or legal requirement.



CASE 1 - During our last counselling sessions we have gone through difficult subjects and she has been talking about her experiences for the first time in her life. She has been showing strong symptoms of PTSD and hasn't been feeling good. I thought we do something relaxing so I prepared some painting and music for us. We were sitting in a quiet room with meditation music with nature sounds playing and totally concentrating on a shared experience of making art. We painted line by line. I started with my line and she continued with hers. It became a perfect co-creation and she seemed to be taken by the moment and enjoyed it. It is good for all of us to get little moments when you are concentrating so hard on something peaceful that maybe for a minute you get peace from things going through your mind”.

Always move with a speed that the client is ready for. Assistance cannot be pushed and change cannot be expected to happen very quickly. You probably first need to care for some practical needs of the client such as a medical examination. Letting a client see that you are in charge of her problems and that you are concretely working on solving them, can be a key to gain her trust; e.g. making some phone calls in front of her to demonstrate the next steps in the counselling process.

Some clients come to counselling with high expectations and are disappointed, if the counselling cannot offer all the answers. It is important to be clear from the beginning and inform her on what you can offer and assist in. Do not promise something, you cannot deliver! It is very important to keep any given commitments, because if trust is lost, it is very difficult to regain it.

### **CHECKLIST 1 - BASIC THINGS TO START WITH**

#### ☐ **Be present**

You can start a session by reminding the client that: You are there for her, she can tell you anything in confidence and she does not need to speak if she is not ready for it.

#### ☐ **Listen**

Listen in a non-judgemental and supportive manner. Instead of asking a lot of questions to encourage her to talk about her situation, first simply make her feel comfortable and supported.

#### ☐ **Pause**

It is important to have pauses or to stop the session, if needed. Continue later or in the next session giving the client time to process the information given and her options.

#### ☐ **Activities**

You can use different tools to assist her to express her feeling without talking. Using picture cards (see tools in Chapter 4) or art can be useful. You can be innovative and do something together that you both enjoy, and through this connect at a personal level.

## Inform her on her rights

**“Counselling sessions are not just providing legal information and telling victims which rights and possibilities they have. It’s accompanying them, giving them support, empowering them in every possible way. Then they are more willing to participate in the procedure and claim for their rights.”**

When we advise to “inform her on her right” we do not refer to a counsellor reading a proclamation of rights to a client. Instead, we refer to a process between a client and a counsellor in which a variety of choices given by the law are explored and discussed. The process can start by first assisting a client to recognise the forms of violence she has been victim to. This can be demanding because many of the forms of gender-based violence are not considered crimes in the countries of origin, such as forced marriage or marital rape. Therefore, refugee women often do not consider themselves as victims of crime. The lack of understanding of what violence is could also be linked to denial or to be a defence mode to traumatic experiences. After you have jointly with a client recognized forms of gender-based violence you can continue to discuss the rights and service a victim of gender-based violence is entitled to.

Familiarise yourself with what kind of assistance a victim of crime can receive in your country, and when needed refer the client to specialised victim support organisation (in a suspected trafficking case to a national trafficking victim support system) or to a (public) legal aid provider. The Victim’s Rights Directive and the Istanbul Convention both impose an obligation to ensure access to legal aid for victims of crime. The conditions and procedural rules related to receiving legal aid is determined by national law. Also find out about the tools available for protecting the client from the perpetrator including a protection order and/or placement in a safe shelter (read more under security).

You also need to familiarise yourself with the basics of the asylum process, because the clients will ask for your advice related to it. Based on EU level legislation asylum applicants are entitled to free legal assistance in the appeals phase only. At first instance (first application and interview) there is an obligation to provide legal and

procedural information free of charge, but there is no binding EU level obligation to offer legal assistance. Nevertheless, an applicant has the right to access legal assistance at her own cost in every phase of the procedure. Legal assistance is very important during the asylum-seeking process. A lawyer can monitor the interview procedure and make sure that the procedural rights of the applicant will be adhered to. (S)he can inform an interviewer about the vulnerability of a client in order for the interviewer to be able to take into consideration e.g. the impact of trauma in the narration. A lawyer can make objections if there was a violation of the applicant's rights during the interview or pose additional questions at the end of the interview to the client in order to support her claim. Find out who can give legal assistance in filing and processing an asylum claim if it is not within your or your organisation's competence. The applicant has also a right to interpretation during the interview. Find out about the national practises related to providing interpretation.

Women often also require information related to family law issues, such as filing for a divorce or claiming the custody of children, as well as information related to their rights to social and health care services. Some of the family law cases can be very complex due to their transnational nature or because of special issues such as polygamy. Therefore, it is best to consult a legal specialist in these cases.

Understanding legal concepts and terminology as well as adhering to administrative processes can be difficult for anyone. When explaining rules and processes to a client, you need to take into consideration her level of understanding. Is she literate? What level of education does she have? What is the level of her cognitive skills? Is she in a psychological state in which she is able to receive information? What about her language skills? You need to also take into consideration that the client might be used to a totally different service provision system or to a lack of one in her country of origin.

Legal information needs to be given in a very simple and concrete manner. Be sure to use very simple language and vocabulary. Plan a concise presentations with the purpose of clarifying the step by step process for legal protection. Be prepared to explain again (and again) in even more simple terms. One fifth of the refugee women assisted in the CCM-GBV project were illiterate. It was one of the objectives of the project to target these illiterate refugee women and enable them to also equally receive

information on their rights. Therefore we used pictograms to describe the forms of gender-based violence, which proved successful in reaching out to these refugee women (see Chapter 1). Also make sure that the interpreter uses right terms and is able to find corresponding words to explain an abstract concept, which might have a totally different connotation for the customer, as in the below case example.

**CASE 2 - “She is currently in the process of assigning of a legal guardian considering the fact that she is a minor. She did not understand the term of guardian so I explained to her the purpose and position of role of the guardian and what kind of value it has for her. Here it is important to emphasize, that I used very simplified examples considering the fact that her English is not so proficient, and that she lacks the knowledge about the legal system in general. In the beginning of the conversation, she was very confused and scared so she asked me if this guardian is something like “madam from brothel”.**

As a counsellor, you can assist the client in understanding her rights and the legal processes and support the client in dealing with the authorities, but naturally you cannot control the outcome of these processes. When informing a client on her rights, you need to make sure not to promise something that is beyond your control, such as that the perpetrator will be punished or that will be granted an asylum. Explaining about rights can be an empowering process in itself and it can boost the woman’s personal development and empowerment. However, there are still many reasons why most women decide not to claim their rights as a victim of crime.

Trafficking victims have particular rights based on the Trafficking Directive. Therefore, it is important to identify suspected trafficking victims, and to inform them of their particular options. To find out more about the indicators of trafficking have a look at the project’s online training on trafficking <http://heuni.education/page3139001.html#rec59295556>. For information on indicators for other forms of gender-based violence refer to the project training manual.

## Help her to reclaim her story

**“I very often have the feeling that the women sometimes really want to tell their story. They tell me sometimes that at some places, the people don't even care what happened to them and they tell them what to do, but are not interested in their story. It shows me, that telling the story is sometimes really important for building trust. And it shows the women that we care for them. Of course, it's important, to explain a lot, why we need to hear their story, why it is important, that they tell us. So they understand what we will do with the information.”**

After the trust-building and information-giving phase, you can start to work with the client to build a coherent story of what has happened to her. A coherent story of the traumatic experience is very important for the victim, not only because it will help her in claiming asylum and/or in the criminal process, but also because it will help her to minimize psychological symptoms. A traumatised person tends to forget details, because the brain is "stuck" on the part of the story that created the most intense feeling, which is usually fear. Therefore, the rest of the story can be distorted. Assisting a client to tell her story in a chronological order, can help her to separate the feeling from the memory and as a result the memory is not as painful and does not trigger the symptoms anymore.

As a counsellor you can understand why it is so difficult to present a coherent story, but an asylum interviewer or a police officer may not have the skills and time to collect the story of a victim piece by piece. Authorities need to concentrate on information that is relevant for building a case or catching a perpetrator, though the women might have a need to tell something else – something that is important for them. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that you give every client a chance to recollect her full story. You can tell the woman that you as a counsellor understand the emotional challenges in telling the story, and that your approach is not investigative. Some of the women might have already told their story several times to different assistance providers and are tired of repeating it. In these cases, it is important to explain why you need to know about her story in order to be able to assist, and that she can tell her story when she is ready for it.

**CASE 3 - “From my experience it is normal for a client when there is a huge trauma to not want to discuss about it and ignore it instead, wishing that by with time the wound will heal automatically, but unfortunately in reality this is not the**



case. I always try in the first sessions to be more psycho-educative and tell my clients that psychotherapy will help them feel better in the long-run and although it may seem difficult to talk about traumatic experiences it can be cathartic too. It is more productive to work with clients that are not in crisis and under current pressure. They can look back to what happened and think on the situation. They can discuss and investigate the probable causes and outcomes. My concern not only with domestic violence cases but with all kind of GBV incidents is that the victim has the tendency to get into the same situation that she was used to. That is why it is very important to analyze the situation with the victim. It's important for the client to understand why everything happened in order not to repeat the past."

Building the story might take several sessions and you need to concentrate on listening. Refrain as much as possible from taking notes as this will interrupt your presence. Listen without judgement. You can use some of the tools such as picture cards, mentioned in Chapter 4 to assist women to start to reveal their story and to organise their memories into a coherent story.

At a later stage it is important to prepare the women mentally to the asylum interview or for reporting a crime. It is important to emphasise the importance of the interview and to explain what will happen in the interview or hearing. You can practise the interview situation with the client in order to prepare her to tell her story in a confident manner, focusing on the gender-based violence episodes. The interviewer expects to hear a coherent story with no contradictions and the events following each other in a timeline. Whenever possible, accompany the client to the interview. If you are not allowed to take part in the interview, giving mental support by travelling with her and maybe waiting within the premises, can in itself be meaningful.

**CASE 4 -** "The lady came to the NGO counselling center one day before the interview. I spoke with her about the opportunities for our support. For example, we could ask for a female translator and for a special trained interviewer. And that it is her right to say no to a male translator and a standard interviewer. So we applied for these things. I introduced her in the process and the questions of the hearing. Furthermore I told her, that the interviewer won't ask in detail, so it's her task to say there is something more she wants to say. It's her right! During this conversation she felt more safe and told me her story. Speaking about the experiences once before the interview has also impact on the women. I was able to give her a confident and safe feeling for the next day and she made the impression to be empowered and encouraged."

## Support her choice

**“In our last session, the woman was asking me again what she should do, and what's best for her, and I had again to try to explain to her, that it is her choice.”**

There is a delicate balance between encouraging a client to take certain decisions, but not to push her too much. If a client is not ready to take a step (e.g. report a crime), pushing her decision, will most likely result in a backlash; the client might stop coming to counselling sessions, cut all ties with the counsellor and/or return to an abusive situation. It can be frustrating to see that a client is in need of assistance, but she is not able to commit to plans made in order to assist her. Clients might not act as rationally and coherently as is often expected of them. Providing a safe and supportive environment, being patient, and accepting the fact that everyone moves forward according to their own ability, is important. Understanding the different forms of power and control can also help you to understand why other victims are more willing to accept assistance than others.

### Power and control

In trafficking cases the power and control can be asserted in many ways over the victim. Trafficking victims may often be indebted, either in reality or as made up by the traffickers. The debts can be so high that they are impossible to pay back, which is a way of maintaining power and control over the victim. Traffickers/madams might mimic familial relationships which reinforce loyalty, and the psychological ties between the trafficker and victim become harder to break. Voodoo/Juju can be used to control and assert power over victims. Counsellors have used videos, e.g. where spiritual authorities/traditional healers cancel juju rites done by other traditional healers. For some clients this has had positive outcomes. However, each region has its own juju priests and some of the women do not believe that any other persons can revoke the rites. Beliefs can sometimes be so deeply rooted that regardless of revoking curses, the victims still don't consider themselves free. The fear of consequences from juju are so strong that victims fear talking to the counsellors. When financial and emotional debt become paired with threats of abuse and/or fear of what might happen to family members, it becomes increasingly difficult to cut ties with the traffickers. The traffickers/madams have methods to maintain influence over victims even after their entry to the assistance services. In particular, if there is a short time from leaving the abuse, there is a danger of falling back in to the influence of the abuser.

Power and control are present also in cases of domestic violence. One widely used tool to explain male violence against women is the Power and Control wheel (see project training manual for more information) which depicts the main abusive behaviours experienced by women living with men who batter. The wheel helps to show that domestic violence is often part of a pattern of behaviour rather than isolated incidents or cyclical explosions of pent-up anger, frustration or painful feelings. The wheel incorporates eight nonphysical abusive behaviours often used by men who batter: 1) coercion and threats, 2) intimidation, 3) emotional abuse, 4) isolation, 5) minimizing, denying and blaming, 6) using children (as a means to harass or threaten the woman), 7) using male privilege (i.e. not allowing the woman to make her own decisions), and 8) economic abuse. The wheel has also been further developed and adapted to the situation of battered immigrant women. The modified wheel includes e.g. threats to denounce the woman to the immigration authorities or isolating her from learning the language and making friends.

Each case must be treated respecting a client's characteristics and the individual assistance needs she has. Try to refrain from making assumptions and jumping to conclusions regarding clients' needs without asking them directly how they feel, how an incident has impacted their well-being and how they would like their situation to be improved. You can calmly explain the various actions and the assistance that can be provided. Though, it might be better to let the client express her needs first. Because if you start by presenting particular steps and services that you would propose, the client might stick to these, though she might actually need something else. Jointly create an individual plan of assistance. Mark down your joint action plan clearly and follow it up in the coming counselling sessions.

**“I was thinking about my ability to just listen and reflect with the client without making any interventions. Most of the session focused on the client's stories or feelings about situations and best response from me was to give empathy and listen. I found that I rush to think of an intervention and have difficulty holding "the moment" so that the person will process on its own.”**

Do not underestimate the clients and do not consider them merely as victims. Many of the women have made bold choices, and long, risky journeys and survived. You can help the client to see these strengths and the resources she has. It is important to give a client tasks and to let her do things on her own. But be careful not to overstrain a client too soon with too many or too

demanding tasks or decisions. If a person has never made decisions or has not had a chance to influence her own life, how could she suddenly make huge decisions? It can sometimes be tempting to do some tasks for the client which she might be capable of doing herself because you could do them more quickly or correctly; but doing things on her own will give her skills and confidence, which she will need in the future. If a client succeeds in the things you ask her to do, it is a sense of achievement for her. If she fails, it might be a step backwards in her recovery. It is important to find a balance.

# Co-operation with other assistance providers and relevant authorities

Refugee women who have been victims of violence need a variety of services. Therefore, numerous professionals and service providers need to be engaged in each client's case. You yourself also need to be flexible in your professional approach and open to out-of-the-box solutions as reflected in the below case:

**CASE 5 - "In this line of work you cannot just be a psychologist with the traditional sense. You need to be a motivator, a coach and a social worker, sometimes. There is a lot of trauma in these women and traditional psychological interventions don't always work. You also have to sometimes go out of your way and talk to other people involved with the case, like social workers, landlords or officials. This brings internal conflicts to a psychologist, who has gotten used to only work in his/her office. I went through this conflict some time ago and realized that my goal is to help the person get well psychologically no matter what technique or intervention is needed. So a psychologist, who works with this population, needs to be ready to learn many interventions and also get out of her/his comfort zone."**

When several actors are cooperating with the victim, it is challenging to make sure that the same quality of support extends throughout the chain of assistance. All it requires is one negative encounter, which might change the attitude of the victim towards assistance. All professionals should respect the consent of the victim and not to force them in doing actions without their own willingness. In an ideal case, all professionals working with refugee women victims of gender-based violence would be trained in gender-based violence in order to better understand the complex situation of the victims. We recommend the project training manual for this purpose.

When you start to work as a counsellor, map your most important local, national and international partners. These could be: refugee accommodation centres, women's shelters, interpreters, legal aid providers, police, prosecution, immigration authority, court of minors, municipal social service, hospitals, healthcare providers, psychologists, a national anti-trafficking

agency and trafficking victim assistance system, schools, kindergartens, the municipal welfare office, embassies, national and international (family) mediation centres, border authorities, court of appeal, magistrate, prenatal clinics, family centres, churches, or other religious establishments, etc. Next, we will discuss some of these partners, and what you might need to take into consideration when collaborating with them.

### **Accommodation providers**

There are different accommodation options for women during the refugee status determination process, after having received a particular status or when in the deportation process. The rights and duties related to accommodation also depend on national legislation. In any case an important co-operation partner for you is the refugee accommodation operator housing your client, whether it is a reception centre, deportation centre, transit-centre or other.

A common concern is that conditions in refugee accommodations are not accommodating for single women, for mothers with small children or for sexual minorities. Crowded centres cause additional stress and anxiety for many clients and make them vulnerable to further harassment and abuse.



This is in particular the case if separate accommodation for men and women is not provided. Also if a perpetrator is a family member, it can be in practice very difficult to arrange separate accommodation. Possibilities for other types of accommodation vary depending on e.g.

the type of residence status a woman has as well as on the level and type of accommodation services provided in different countries. Find out about the options and limitations in your country. We have also noticed that refugee accommodation operators and staff might not have the expertise to assist victims of gender-based violence, and among other things more training would be needed to improve the services for victims of violence by accommodation provider.

Clients can be moved from one accommodation to another during different phases of the asylum determination process. Moving can be destabilising for a client as it also means losing contact with service providers. It would be good to have at least communication channels with the accommodation provider's staff in order to be aware of changes in the client's situation and to be able to prepare the client for the move, if it is not possible to influence the actual move. Sometimes a move to another

location or even to another country, can also be a safety procedure meant to move the victim away from the perpetrator.

Accommodation in a women's shelter meant specifically for gender-based violence victims could be the most beneficial option for most women. One of the most often mentioned challenges by counsellors was lack of shelter places for refugee women. Refugee women were sometimes also refused a place in a shelter due to their residence obligation, due to lack of funding for accommodating refugee women, language issues or because a shelter was not able to accommodate children. It is important to have good networks with shelters locally and nationally to have many options at your disposal. On the other hand, a counsellor described situations in which women were not willing to be accommodated in a women's shelter because they did not want to be housed with other women in the same situation, because they found it retraumatizing.

### Medical services

Victims of gender-based violence often have physical injuries or medical conditions due to the violence they have suffered. These might include complications due to genital mutilation and sexual violence, including sexually transmitted diseases, which need specialised medical attention. Clients might be pregnant or have just given birth and need pre- and post-natal care. Lack of common language with medical service providers can make it challenging for refugee women to receive proper medical support. Most women prefer to talk about their medical issues to a female doctor. Specialised assistance providers, if available, are in a better position to assist specific groups such as HIV positive persons, persons with disabilities, victims of torture or LGBT persons.

Women are sometimes scared to visit a doctor, in particular a gynaecologists. The fear can be to some extent overcome by explaining to the client what is going to happen during an appointment and by informing the medical personnel about some of the background factors of gender-based violence. If a client is very hesitant to visit a doctor, consider accompanying her. Take into consideration that a statement from a physician or psychologist could be also used as evidence in an asylum application or in criminal proceedings. Find out to which medical services your client is entitled to and which programmes are available to cover the costs for different examinations or treatments.



Most often clients will refer to physical consequences of violence or to concrete medical needs, and undermine, or do not recognise, the psychological consequences of violence. In fact there are many "basic things" that have to be addressed before a client has the energy to benefit from therapy. Sometimes the best way is to work with somatic issues such as sleeping problems or pain first, and to propose therapy only later, when a client is ready for it. An often mentioned challenge was that psychologists are hesitant to offer therapy in a foreign language or with interpretation. Additional challenge hindering access to therapy is that medical programmes or social welfare benefits for asylum seekers might not cover the costs of therapy.

### **Legal aid providers**

Clients usually have several legal aid needs. Clients most often need assistance in filing an asylum application, for applying or renewing some other type of residence permit or for appealing an asylum decision. If your organisation does not have a legal expert, you can, when applicable, request public legal aid, network with NGOs/programmes/pro-bono advocates providing legal support or arrange for paid legal assistance from a private lawyer. Many counsellors also themselves proactively communicate with e.g. migration authorities on behalf of the client or together with the client. Often it is calming for the client to know as much as possible about the progress and the schedule of the decision. Clients might also need assistance in reclaiming missing documents, claiming social benefits as well as in family law related issues such as family reunification, divorce or custody of children.



### **Criminal justice authorities**

Assisting a victim of crime based on her own needs, not for building a criminal case, should be your priority. But on the other hand, if victims of gender-based violence are not supported in their decision to report, impunity for gender-based violence continues. When supporting a victim in her decision on whether to report or not, you must be open about the pros and cons of reporting. A possible negative outcome of reporting is that it can cause safety risks for the victim. Leaving an abusive relationship and/or reporting it can also cause rejection by the victim's community, and heighten the risk of honour-based violence.



You need to explain clearly to the client what is expected of her in the process of reporting, in the possible criminal investigations and in trial. Ask advice from a victim support organisation, from legal aid provider or from the local police, in order for you to have a clear understanding of the process. Whenever possible accompany the client to the police station, not only for the first interview, but also to the possible follow-up interviews or refer her to an organisations giving this kind of support. Make sure that there is a competent interpreter taking part in the hearings.



The criminal process might take years and this must be explained to the client, so that it does not come as a surprise. Prepare the client for the court sessions by telling as much as possible about the practicalities such as who will be present, who will speak and where different parties will be seated in the courtroom. Make sure that she is informed of her procedural rights and that they are adhered to. Based on the Victims' Rights Directive, a victim is entitled to understandable information, which means in practise that the authorities must inform the victim in a simple and accessible language about her rights and about the procedure. A victim has a right to receive upon request interpretation free of charge, at least during any questioning. A victim has the right to be heard during the trial, and has the right to legal support. Also a victim is entitled to procedural safeguards such as right to be heard in safe premises, to be interviewed by a person of the same sex or by a person with specialized training. Most importantly a victim has the right to receive support services free of charge.

In order to create in the long run supportive conditions for reporting gender-based violence, income generating opportunities should be developed for refugee women, so that they are not economically dependent on the perpetrator or on the community, which may hinder reporting. You can also consider working with men and with communities to inform them on the legal consequences of violence and the rights of victims. Peer support, as described in the below case, can also be a good tool in enhancing emotional resources for reporting.

**CASE 6 -** "I noticed that especially women that have been trafficked feel very lonely and suspicious when they arrive at the destination country. They have the sense that nobody can understand how traumatic and difficult things they have lived. But once they meet with other girls that have been through the same experiences, they feel better. They are not so ashamed to tell what exactly happened during their journey and they feel less guilty to report the crime."

## Transnational co-operation

Your client might receive a decision that she will be returned to another EU country based on the so called Dublin Regulations. In these cases the best possible scenario is that you can refer the client to an assistance provider in the destination country and brief the receiving organisation on her case. This kind of transnational assistance networks were formed in the CCM-GBV project as described in the following case.



**CASE 7 -** “I received an e-mail from a counsellor asking for help for a Nigerian woman being returned to [my country]. I received some of her documents and the notes the counsellor had taken from their discussions with the woman. I also received a phone number of hers and was able to contact her immediately when she arrived. It was good that I had the copies of her documents, because the originals were taken away from her by the police at the airport. During the coming weeks, I was able to by her request send her papers to the reception center where she was first taken to. When reading her story and talking with her, I noticed that her case was a clear human trafficking case. I told her about our human trafficking victims assistance system. We went through what they offer and what it means if you get accepted in to the system. She decided to apply. I contacted the assistance system and we sent her papers. It happened fast that we got a call from them that her case was clear and she was accepted for the system and transferred to another reception center where the assistance system is located. During the first time she was here and gave her interview at the migration office, she was too afraid to talk about anything that had happened to her. Now with the help of the other counsellor, the papers from x country could be delivered for the migration office and she didn’t have to tell all from the beginning or have to fight the fear of talking.”

# Cross-cutting issues

## **Safety of clients and staff**

The safety of victims and the counselling staff must be considered throughout the counselling process. Based on our experience it is better to meet and counsel women in the premises of your organisation as this makes discreet participation possible, and other people will not be able to interrupt the session. Consider advertising counselling neutrally as sessions to discuss “women’s issues” or similar, because advertising counselling for victims of violence might prevent some women from attending either because they do not identify themselves as victims or because their family members, including the possible perpetrator, do not want them to take part in counselling.

Make sure that the space for counselling, as well as your office space in general, has several exit routes and locks that can be locked from inside. Make sure that you have emergency numbers saved on the staff phones and/or clearly visible next to phones. It is good to have a contact person at the nearest police station in order to make sure that they understand the severity of the situation/the power dynamics of abusive relationships your clients face.

Often a women’s shelter would be the best immediate option to guarantee the safety of a victim. Women’s shelters have different safety rules and the clients must be informed of these. For some clients, strict rules, including having to report their movements, can be difficult due to their history of abuse with severe limitations of freedom. A safety measure is to inform clients that they should take precautions when contacting relatives/friends, including not to inform even close family members on the whereabouts of a shelter. An important safety measure is to advise clients to use unknown phone numbers and to make sure that they switch off the location tracker on smartphones. When informing the woman on the importance of sticking to safety measures it is good to keep in mind the power and control dynamics discussed earlier. The woman might

relapse back to the abusive relationship due to the underlying power dynamics and risk her own safety. The safety of children needs to be also considered, especially in domestic violence cases, as the perpetrator might want to harm the woman by harming the children.

There are legal measures that can be taken to protect a client. She can apply for a protection order to assure immediate reaction by the authorities in case of a threat from the perpetrator. This can include for example an order restricting the perpetrator from entering a joint domicile. Victims who benefit from a national protection order could also, at least in theory, apply for an European protection order to enforce the protection to cover also other EU Member States. It might be nationally possible to apply for an administrative order of non-disclosure of personal information, which can be used to keep confidential e.g. client's social- and healthcare documents. However, all of the above mentioned measures are made in practise more complicated by the residence status of the refugee women, including the fact that a client is usually assigned to be accommodated in a refugee accommodation centre.

### **Minors and clients with children**

When counselling minors, you need to consider the need to assign a legal guardian and/or the obligation to contact child protection services as required by national legislation. It is good to have an organizational child protection policy in place and signed by everyone in the organisation in contact with minors. A child protection policy should ensure an environment in which children are respected and protected making sure that counselling does not cause children any additional harm and assuring that minors are being guided to services that meet their needs. Minors might also have different right to access medical services and/ or schooling compared to adult asylum seekers.

Almost two thirds of the women counselled in the CCM-GBV project were mothers with small children which makes their situation even more vulnerable and precarious. In addition to looking after themselves and getting through the trauma caused by violence, they have children to look after. Psychological problems caused by the violence and trauma can have an effect on the ability to care for a child or makes the women feel insecure of their ability to care for a child. Women might also have left their children in their country of origin, in the care of relatives,

causing constant worry over the children left behind.

On the other hand children can be an important protective factor and the main motivation to seek help. E.g. worrying about the safety of children can be the main motivator in a decision to leave an abusive relationship or to report a crime. Though for others children might be the reason to stay, because women are afraid that their children might be taken away as part of the process of seeking help. Custody of children is naturally a very important issue for the women, and needs to be discussed in counselling, including referring a client to a legal aid provider, who can support her in a possible custody case.

Children also affect the practical set up of counselling. Preferably counselling sessions should be organised without children, so that the client can concentrate on her own needs as well as to be able to discuss issues that are not suitable for children to hear. Your organisation can consider organising babysitting or activities for children, for example by volunteers, in order for the women to be able to take part in counselling. In any case it would be good to have counselling facilities that cater for caring for small infants and for breastfeeding. It can be also considered whether children (in particular girls) also need counselling simultaneously to the mother's session.

### **Cultural competence**

Many cultural aspects can influence counselling and it is important to recognise these aspects in order to find a culturally sensitive way of working. Cultural differences can manifest in very practical issues such as differences in respecting schedules or different holidays in different cultures/religions, which might impact the counselling schedule. However, most of the cultural barriers are at a more abstract level.

Your own perceptions and level of knowledge of different countries and cultures can affect how you approach a client. It is important that you recognize your own stereotypes. You should be particularly careful of not naming or blaming some cultures as particularly violent, which will increase stereotypes. As discussed earlier there are social settings or factors, which create a climate in which gender-based violence is not condemned, or is even encouraged. However, culture does not itself carry out violence, violence is always done by people to other people.

It is useful to know some basic facts about the countries of

origin e.g. about religious practises, gender equality and opportunities for women. When trying to identify whether a client has been a victim of certain form of violence, it can be also useful to know something on the prevalence of certain forms of violence in the country of origin. Having more knowledge on the background factors will give you a fuller picture of the situation of a client, like in the following case:

**CASE 8 - “My previous experience and knowledge on how LGBT persons are treated in a specific country in Africa helped me realize why my client was so reluctant in sharing this specific detail with me. Having an overall knowledge of what difficulties or challenges people have from specific countries is very helpful for the counsellor.”**

Each client is an individual with her life story, but counsellors also recognised some common nominators or challenges in building trust with women from certain countries/cultures/religions. When a victim comes from a country where violence in a family, or in society as a whole, is very prevalent, women from these societies might have most difficulties in recognising violence as something worth mentioning in the counselling sessions. Counsellors also mention the difficulty of women to stand for their rights, if they come from a culture where women are expected to stay silent.

The dilemma of “emancipation” is a very much discussed topic in the journals. Many of the women are strained between different expectations: the values they have been thought and the expectations of their families and communities, and the new rights and expectations of the host country. Some have left in order to be able to live based on their own values and beliefs, but are still struggling to come to terms with the consequences this has had e.g. on their relationship with their families. Others become aware of their rights and potential only once in Europe, and the emancipation can create further friction in the family.

**CASE 9 - “There is a clash of culture and her ideas about life. She wanted to be independent and live on her own without arranged marriage. She was prepared for this, she basically came to Europe by her own. She was raised in a very traditional family, where sexual freedom is a taboo. She went through female genital mutilation at a very early age. She often speaks about women from her community that cheated husbands and were punished by the society. She is traumatized by the rules considering the women and**

sexuality. She, on the one hand feels indignation towards her family, but on the other hand she is deeply hurt because they don't want to communicate with her, especially her sisters. This mixture of feelings is creating anxiety for her. In the counselling sessions we tried to focus on creation of her own new values that will lead her in life. Some ground floor on how she will approach different issues in life and not feel bad about it. Dealing with guilt was also very important part of counselling.”

Immediate empowerment cannot be expected. Sometimes counsellors described frustration that the women (and/or families) are given so many resources, and are still “sticking to the old ways”. Be prepared that your own ideas and values in particular related to female-male relationship, gender equality and family-life, will be challenged in the counselling sessions. It can be particularly difficult to understand how important family ties and duties can be in some cultures. You might also encounter different beliefs related to what affects wellbeing (in particular related to mental health) and even superstitious beliefs can affect the counselling.

One practical solution for increasing cultural competence is to work with cultural interpreters or with volunteers who have the same background as the client. It is important also to involve families, men and communities in discussion on social norms related to gender equality and the rights of women.

### Helping the helpers

“I am so exhausted, like somebody cut me and took some piece of my body. It is unbelievable how the value of life in some part of this planet is low. I honestly don't know how to deal with all this negative emotions that I have after these sessions. I am so happy when I see that sessions are helpful and recovering for the clients, but I don't know what to do with all the burden that stay with me afterwards.”

In the journals counsellors very openly describe the difficulties of coping with their workload and emotions. Counselling persons in precarious situations, including grief, loss and suffering, is psychologically very consuming. Not the least because meaningful counselling requires empathy and creating human to human relationships, which also makes it more difficult to distance oneself from client's emotions and suffering. The combination of listening to inhumane stories day after day and struggling to

solve a variety of barriers hindering assistance, creates a risk of developing a cynical worldview, compassion fatigue, burn out or secondary traumatic stress. Taking care of your own wellbeing, and knowing your limits in practical and emotional level, is very important. You can only assist the clients if you will assist yourself to manage the mental burden of the work.

**“If you are restless and stressed yourself, because you want to mentor and support a large number of clients, you can't really help at some point. You need stability, calmness and concentration yourself.”**

A lot can be done at the organisational level to support counsellors' wellbeing. An organization should have an organisational occupational health/staff care plan and resources for its implementation. The importance of supervision cannot be emphasised enough. It is the employing organisation's responsibility to offer counsellors continuous support and an opportunity to receive professional supervision, and to reserve the necessary resources for it. Work with victims of violence is psychologically very demanding and the efficiency and motivation of the staff cannot be maintained without proper support. In addition, organizing debriefing and working in teams, which allows sharing with colleagues, is a good way to reduce mental burden.

Counsellors often report being overwhelmed by the sheer number of cases or not having enough time for assisting each case. As discussed several times earlier in this handbook counselling refugee victims of violence requires a lot of time. Time might become an issue because too much of it is spent on responding to emergency needs. This could be solved, at least to certain extend, by creating clear protocols for responding to emergency cases preferably in co-operation with other assistance providers. Due to the mentally demanding substance of the sessions counsellors must have enough time to “breathe” between sessions in order to process the previous session before moving ahead with the next case. Furthermore, counsellors need to have enough days off in order to fully recover and rest. Also there is a limit on how much you can assist each case; being honest and open with your clients on the services that you can provide will also protect you.

Counselling might feel particularly tiring when your work is hindered by factors outside of your control. It seems to be particularly frustrating when one is not able to help a client due



to lack of resources or services or due to structural or organisational dysfunctions or attitudes in the asylum /criminal justice/ social- and health care systems. One solution to resource and structural issues is creating new and more intense networks with other assistance providers in order to jointly assist victims. A solution to non-responsive attitudes could be to offer training on gender-based violence.

Sometimes the frustration can be caused by a client's unresponsiveness or unwillingness to be assisted, which irritates or even makes you angry. It is good to admit also these feelings to yourself. In general it is extremely important to reflect on your own emotions and reactions. Processing one's personal sore points is crucial in order to be able to thoroughly listen, to be present and to create a safe counselling relationship. Hiding your emotions or reactions is a great risk. People who have gone through traumatic experiences quickly pick up on everything "hanging in the air". A client can e.g. easily interpret that your reactions was caused by something "wrong" they did or said. Therefore, a counsellor trying to hide her own emotions might cause a fracture in the relationship of trust, and that is why self-reflection and knowledge of practical tools on how to do it are extremely important to you.

The biggest source of motivation for counsellors was clients' empowerment or being able to assist a client in a concrete manner. Counsellors also felt good about their work when they had used problem-solving skills or made an extra effort in assisting a particular client, and succeeded in it. This is also known in theory as compassion satisfaction. The feeling of being able to help can be very motivating and professionally satisfactory. Counsellors also mentioned that sometimes it is necessary to lower expectations, and rejoice the small steps.

*"I sometimes have the feeling that I have done nothing or only a little and the client is so thankful and received help in her opinion. So there is a different perception of what help means. Maybe I have to lower my requirements."*

It is important to develop a self-care plan. A good way to start is to do a self-reflection test on mental burden for example at [https://proqol.org/ProQol\\_Test.html](https://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html). On the page there are also a lot of other useful resources and links related to the topic of compassion fatigue and self-care.

An effective small step is to start to pay attention to mental hygiene between sessions. You can develop “mental cleaning routines” such as taking a walk or having a cup of water before the next session.

A form of self-care is to continuously develop new skills through trainings and self-study, including reading materials related to gender-based violence, on different counselling methods, learn more about relevant legislation and processes or find out about the culture and situation of the countries of origin of your clients.

Some of the counsellors felt that the weekly obligatory self-reflection in a form of a structured journal worked as a self-care tool. In particular if a counsellor was able to give herself positive feedback in the journal, the journal writing had a positive impact on the wellbeing of a counsellor. This worked in a way as a gratitude journal which is used to concentrate on things you are grateful for.

To learn more on self-care tools you could have a look at an online course on mindfulness-based stress reduction at <https://palousemindfulness.com/> or have a look at the resources on psychoeducation and relaxation techniques available in several languages at <https://www.mielenterveysseurat.fi/turku/materiaalit/serenen-materiaalit/>. For more information on self-care see also the project training manual.

### **CHECKLIST 2 - COPING WITH WORKLOAD**

☐ **Time**

Reasonable case load per counsellor and enough time for each case.

☐ **Supervision**

Offer supervision and debriefing opportunities for counsellors. Work in teams and support each other.

☐ **Rejoice**

Be aware of your own limits. Take note of the success stories and rejoice them.

☐ **Rest and recover**

Take enough time to recover, reflect and to learn new skills.

### **POCKET CARD - CARING FOR YOURSELF IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULT WORK**

Our work can be overwhelming. Our challenge is to maintain our resilience so that we can keep doing the work with care, energy, and compassion.<sup>3</sup>

#### **10 things to do each day**

1. Get enough sleep.
2. Get enough to eat.
3. Do some light exercise.
4. Vary the work that you do.
5. Do something pleasurable.
6. Focus on what you did well.
7. Learn from your mistakes.
8. Share a private joke.
9. Pray, meditate or relax.
10. Support a colleague.

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3 - For more Information see your supervisor and visit [www.psychosocial.org](http://www.psychosocial.org) or [www.proqol.org](http://www.proqol.org) Beth Hudnall Stamm, Ph.D., ProQOL.org and Idaho State University, Craig Higson-Smith, M.A., South African Institute of Traumatic Stress, Amy C. Hudnall, M.A., ProQOL.org and Appalachian State University, Henry E. Stamm, Ph.D., ProQOL.org

**chapter**

# **4**

**Tools for outreach**

# Tools for outreach

It is important to inform asylum-seeking women on their rights as soon as possible upon their arrival. Based on our experience some women seek help only after they have received a negative decision on their asylum claim and it is very difficult to provide any relevant assistance at that stage. Also because victims of gender-based violence are vulnerable to further abuse it would be important to reach them as soon as possible to prevent revictimization.

Some organisations might receive a steady flow of asylum seeking women asking for assistance and possible gender-based violence victims should be identified among them. In other organisations more active outreach work might be needed. In this Chapter we describe several outreach methods developed in the CCM-GBV project that have proven to be successful in both situations.

In order to raise awareness flyers and posters can be distributed in refugee accommodations and in other places where refugee women visit. In our project we prepared flyers and posters in the most relevant languages within the refugee population: Amharic, Arabic, Farsi/Dari, French, Kurdish-Sorani, Kurmanji, Lingala, Oromo, Pashtu, Somali, Tigrinya, Turkish and Urdu. The flyers and posters can be downloaded at [www.heuni.fi](http://www.heuni.fi)

Info cafés developed and used in the project are facilitated group meetings aiming to give refugee women an opportunity to learn and discuss gender-based violence in a relaxed informal atmosphere. Info cafés are a great tool to inform women on GBV and an opportunity to make women aware of the possibility of individual counselling. Info cafés can also be a way to create peer to peer support. Gender-based violence is a sensitive topic and talking about experiences, or even expressing opinions, on the topic can feel uncomfortable, even retraumatizing. Discussion on gender-based violence cannot be forced, but as the group gains trust with the facilitator and each other, also sensitive topics can often be discussed.

## Here are some steps you can follow when organizing your own info café:

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**1**

Consider how to advertise the info cafés. Co-operate with other actors in order to distribute information about the info cafés. Frame the info cafés in a neutral manner such as “meetings on women’s issues”. Consider how to motivate women to take part.

Also think about, how to inform men about the aims of the info cafés.

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**2**

Consider whether the women would prefer to travel to your premises and would feel more open to discuss on a neutral ground. Naturally, travel arrangements would then need to be made. Be flexible about the timing of the info café. Try to find the most convenient hour for women to attend (when they do not have other activities, children’s needs to attend to etc.).

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**3**

If there are children around, it might be difficult to address the most sensitive topics. However, for many of the women it is not possible to attend if they do not bring the children along. Children can also be icebreakers, but if possible, arrange for childcare. Finding volunteers to attend children is an option.

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**4**

If the session is attended by different language groups, interpreting can become an issue. One solution is to arrange separate groups for each language. However, it might be more enriching to have women from different countries in the same group. Sometimes there is no common language, but you can be creative and use non-verbal communication. See below for some examples on methods that can be used even with limited language skills.

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**5**

Always consider the safety of clients and staff participating in the sessions. Irrespective of the location, make sure that you have a comfortable place where discussion will not be interrupted. It is recommended that the space should be more like a home, and it would be best to have a women-only space.

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**6**

The room can be set up in a manner which invites discussion. Leaflets about sexuality, GBV, birth control, sexual diseases etc. could be left on the tables or put on the walls, giving the message that the participants are allowed to talk about these subjects. Prepare tea and cake for the session (or together with the participants) to create a friendly informal atmosphere.

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**7**

Start the info cafés by emphasizing that you as a facilitator are bound by confidentiality. Some counsellors also prefer to emphasize their role as NGO workers. Set rules together with the group. It is important to agree as a group that what is said in the info café stays within the room. Also, rules such as “all opinions are allowed and respected” or “speak with respect to others” can be conducive to an open discussion.

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**8**

Try to understand the level of knowledge in the group by starting with more generic topics such as discussion on the differences between everyday practicalities in the country of origin and in the reception country. Based on our experience it is important to allow people to talk about their personal experiences but at the same time not to force them to speak about GBV.

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**1**

Investigating pictures of women in the media; in magazines, music videos, advertisements, and think together what kind of image and expectations women these pictures present.

**2**

Set up chairs designating different opinions. The chairs could be labelled as "I agree", "I disagree" and "I don't have an opinion" or "yes", "no", "maybe". Then present claims that can be answered by moving to a chair like "In a relationship a person is allowed to decide whether she wants to have sex?". If you don't want to move around, you could share red, green and orange pieces of paper for everyone. This is a good technique, if people do not have words for GBV.

**3**

3 chairs: chair 1 is the past, chair 2 is the present and chair 3 is the future. All the women sit in each of the chairs and, in chair 1 share something about the past and say goodbye to all memories or hardships they do not wish to continue carrying anymore. Chair 2 is for thinking about the present and for voicing gratitude for all the good things you have now. Chair 3 is for the future, where the women can imagine what they want to have in the future.

**4**

Together, create a character with a name and identity. Processing GBV through a character enables the women to distance themselves from their own experiences. Then go through cases through the character. For example: "What could she do if she is forced by her husband to stay at home?"

**5**

Drawing whatever you want about your life. One counsellor reports that every time she uses drawing, it opens the door for talking about personal experiences.

**6**

Investigating the history of women's rights can create room for discussion, and build knowledge on rights in the destination country. "I showed a video about women's rights. What has happened during the last 150 years. Then we had great discussions on differences between all of our home countries in these issues. Whether rape in a relationship is criminalised, whether there have been female ministers and prime ministers etc."

**7**

Making a dictionary together with pictures of the body parts, genitals, menstruation, clothes, make-up etc. This idea came from the refugee women themselves as they wanted words to be able to go to the doctor, buying a bra etc. without an interpreter.

**8**

Invite a person for example an expert on GBV to talk and to ask questions from. Or invite a peer survivor who is ready to share her own story. This person doesn't necessarily need to be a survivor of violence, but a woman open to talk about women's rights, family life, reproductive health etc. If you are going to invite a survivor, make sure you are inviting somebody who has really gotten over the traumatic experiences and can speak from the point of view of a survivor, not that of a victim!"

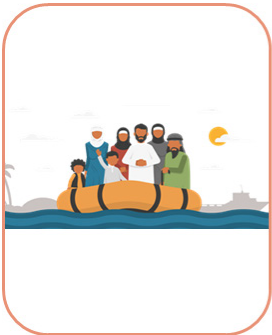
## **Illustrated cards**

Illustrated cards can be used as discussion openers in a group situation or in one-on-one counselling. The cards can be used also when there is no common language. There are several readymade stacks of cards such as the Cope cards and the Tandoo cards, which can be bought online. You can also prepare your own set of cards by collecting postcards and/or print pictures.

The cards can be used by spreading them on a table so that everyone can see them well. Then ask a question such as “How do you feel right now?” and ask the participants to pick a card. Leave enough time for choosing a card. If in a group, take turns so that everyone can explain why they chose that particular card. Make sure to also pick a card yourself and tell openly about your feelings when it is your turn to share. This demonstrates that you are part of the group, not an outsider. If someone is uncertain about sharing, do not force them, but you can return back to the person later if they then feel more comfortable in sharing. Non-verbal communication, if there is a lack of common language, can express surprisingly many things.

Think carefully about the question you pose. An easy starter is to ask a question about the present moment – which allows to leave past painful emotions outside, if wanted. You can also ask the participants to pick 3 cards (one for past, present and future). This option works well also without a common language. It also gives the possibility to choose what you want to share. You could also ask participants to pick up a card they like and a card they do not like. You could also use questions such as “What type of woman would I like to be in the future?”

You can also place 4 cards on the table and ask “what did you experience in your life”? Then you open the card up and ask what person sees in the card. If nothing comes to the mind of the client, you change the card. You can also ask the clients to tell their life story with the help of the cards. Sometimes the first round can be very light discussion and then suddenly people start to talk. Based on the counsellors’ experience, people have always shared something with the cards or it has been a platform for something else. You can consider whether to use the cards in the beginning of the session or at the end of the session as a closing activity.



## NOTES

Feel free to use these pages for your notes and insights

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We hope that you have found this handbook useful and have started to use the counselling method or some aspects of it in your own work.

We are very keen to hear about your experiences on counselling refugee women victims of gender-based violence and using this methodology.

Please, drop us a line.

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