

Women's Refugee Commission (January 2016) – No Safety on the European Route: Report from the Balkans [ChildHub Summary]

<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/gbv/resources/1265-balkans-2016>

This paper summarises the report on a multi-stage assessment of the needs for protection that women and girls require in the current refugee crisis in Europe. The assessment focused specifically on the conditions in the countries of Serbia and Slovenia and was conducted by Women's Refugee Commission (WRC).

Introduction

During the year of 2015, more than 1 million people who fled from war-torn and conflict filled areas such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, arrived in Europe. This influx of refugees and migrants into Europe is still continuing. In comparison to the data from June 2015, in which only 27% of the travellers were women and children, this percentage has now doubled to 55%. This makes the examination of gender-based differences in the process that refugees go through during their travels even more relevant.

Due to the unparalleled numbers of arriving refugees, both countries of transit and countries of final destination have not been prepared to adequately handle the situation and provide suitable humanitarian response efforts. Though these issues affect all refugees and migrants, they can have further adverse influences on girls and women, due to the gender perceptions.

The assessment conducted by WRC uncovered several findings in regards to gender-specific needs or challenges faced by girls and women in transit sites in Serbia and Slovenia. These will be summarised below.

Findings

1) Lack of gender sensitivity. This was evident through multiple factors.

- **Underexperienced staff:** not all the government authorities, border officials and police officers at the border had experience when it came to dealing with refugees, especially at such a high rate. This caused them to sometimes treat individuals inappropriately, often yelling at refugees and presenting xenophobic and Islamophobic attitudes. Refugee women and girls feel additionally isolated due to these actions, and will not have anyone to turn to in the fact that they want to disclose issues of safety they experienced in their travels.
- **Lack of facilities segregated by sex:** in the transit centres that WRC visited, it was unusual for the showers and toilets to be segregated according to sex. Even though there were certain toilets that were separated by sex, males often used the ones that were meant for women and girls, leading to increased feelings of unsafety amongst them.
- **Lack of shelter segregated by sex:** in the Dobova and Sentilj camps that WRC visited, there were no separated sleeping areas for women and children, and the existing halls were very overcrowded. Such environments lead to increased risk of sexual harassment or assault for women and girls.

- **Insufficient access to dignity kits:** there was a failure to adequately consider the needs of girls and women in relation to for example menstruation. In certain transit sites, dignity kits with menstrual supplies and undergarments were not always available, and in other sites girls and women would need to sign their name to be able to receive them, which could result in feelings of embarrassment.
- **Lack of sexual and reproductive health care:** in addition to lacking appropriate aid and response for the issues that pregnant women may experience, there was also a lack of services addressing prevention and response to instances of sexual violence, or prevention of HIV and STIs. This negatively impacts the dignity and sexual safety of girls and women.

2) Lack of gender-sensitive access to information

Interpreters are crucial in aiding refugees access information and help. However, in addition to a lack of interpreters in general, there was an even more severe lack of female interpreters in the transit sites. This decreases the ability for refugee women and girls to receive essential information or for them to receive help in relation to gender-related issues that they may not want to disclose with male interpreters. Also, considering that lack of information leads to increased vulnerability through potential of receiving misleading information from smugglers and traffickers – to whom girls and women are already especially vulnerable to – it is crucial for there to be female interpreters present. Though certain transit sites had written information in multiple languages, this is not enough, especially considering that some people, including girls and women, could have lower rates of literacy.

3) Lack of gender-based violence (GBV) specific services

At the transit sites assessed by WRC, there was no clinical care provided for sexual assault survivors. Not only was there a lack of pre-positioned post-rape kits, but the workers involved in the refugee transit centres were not aware of the procedure that they should comply with to help girls and women who have been sexually assaulted. There was also a lack of GBV experts and spaces where survivors could feel comfortable talking about their victimisation. Finally, as refugees go from one transit site to the next very quickly, even if they were to receive some help in one site, this does not guarantee that they will in the next. Though there was evidence of some attempt to communicate between sites, it was not sufficient and a more developed system is needed ensure that survivors of GBV, as well as other vulnerable girls and women, are provided with support throughout the whole travel.

4) Underutilisation of local organisations

Even though there are various civil society organisations (CSOs) in Serbia and Slovenia that would want to get involved with helping vulnerable girl and women refugees with support and service provision, they are not able to obtain access to the transit sites due to authorities' restrictions. As can be seen by the findings outlined above, there is already an extensive lack of support and services for women and children. Denying access to CSOs further exacerbates this issue and is unhelpful in helping to mediate the increased risks and issues that refugee girls and women face.

5) Discrimination by nationality

At the end of 2015, certain Balkan countries including Serbia and Slovenia implemented discriminatory practices by not allowing entry to individuals who were not from either Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan. This practice resulted in thousands of refugees, amongst them a large number of girls and women, being abandoned and stranded at various borders. In such a helpless situation of being denied entry into a country, these girls and women from nationalities that are discriminated against are at an even higher risk of being separated from their families, or becoming victims of sexual assault or smuggler activity.

6) Family reunification issues

Currently there is an increased number of women and children making the journey to Europe in an attempt to join their family members who made the journey during the middle of 2015. Due to this there is an increased amount of families, unaccompanied and separated children who are especially vulnerable. The process of reuniting with fathers and husbands who have already settled in Europe is a complex one, there is little information available and a lot of challenges to its implementation. Overall, the process needs urgent improvement for the protection of these unaccompanied children and families.

7) Lack of gender-sensitive access to asylum

Despite having the duty to offer refugees certain rights and protection under the 1951 UN Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Serbia and Slovenia merely see themselves as transit countries and do not always support long-term resettlement inside their own borders. This results in many refugees not knowing their rights nor how to navigate the complex processes involved in seeking asylum in countries that are usually seen as only transit countries. Also, women and children face more additional difficulties in Refugee Status Determination procedures, especially in case of gender-based asylum cases, which may also include domestic violence cases. The condition of the centre for asylum seekers also needs to take into account gender, as the centre that WRC visited did not provide appropriate facilities and help for these vulnerable refugees. This points for the need to have improved policies and processes that enable seeking of asylum in countries that consider themselves to be merely transit countries.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is a very urgent need to improve the manner in which countries in Europe respond to the needs of girl and women seeking asylum. As can be seen, girls and women require distinct services and facilities because of gender, and these need to be provided. They are already at higher risk of sexual assault and exploitation, yet any approaches that could decrease the risks and challenges they face are still not sufficiently implemented.

The summary was prepared by Merili Pullerits for Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, December 2016.