

EMPOWERED AID

USING CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING TO MAKE THE
DELIVERY OF HUMANITARIAN AID SAFER

Contextualizing Empowered Aid findings in Türkiye to better
mitigate risks of sexual exploitation and abuse

Türkiye Results Report
August 2024

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ACRONYMS

AHP	Australian Humanitarian Partnership
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IBC	International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SuTP	Syrians under Temporary Protection
WASH	Water, Sanitation, Hygiene
WVSR	World Vision Syria Response

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Empowered Aid is a multi-country initiative led by the Global Women's Institute (GWI) at the George Washington University, in partnership with local & international aid actors, as well as affected communities in refugee-hosting countries around the world. It is grounded in participatory action research on the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) when accessing aid, and has applied those findings to adapt the design, implementation, and monitoring of aid delivery in 6 countries across 3 regions. The goal of Empowered Aid is to better prevent SEA by developing humanitarian aid delivery models that reduce power disparities and give those most affected by abuse—women and girls—a sustained voice in how aid is delivered.

For Empowered Aid's findings, resources, free online course, and technical helpdesk, visit empoweredaid.gwu.edu.

Applying the Empowered Aid approach in Türkiye

This project was conducted by the Global Women's Institute of the George Washington University, in partnership with World Vision. In-country support for was received from the International Blue Crescent Development Foundation country office, particularly the field teams. This report shares our experience of working in partnership to apply the results of Empowered Aid's participatory action research to humanitarian programming in Türkiye.

The contextualization of SEA risks and mitigation strategies represents the collective expertise of Syrian and Turkish women and girls of host and refugee communities in Nurdağı and İslahiye districts of Gaziantep, as well as boys and men from these communities, who participated in workshops and group discussions to contextualize Empowered Aid's findings. For reasons of confidentiality, they are not named but we anonymously share their voices in this report. It also includes perspectives from other aid recipients and humanitarian stakeholders consulted during monitoring activities, interviews, and group discussions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Empowered Aid initiative, led by the Global Women's Institute (GWI) in collaboration with humanitarian organizations like World Vision, uses participatory methods to identify contextually relevant measures to mitigate risks or sexual abuse and exploitation (SEA) in humanitarian aid delivery. This offers aid actors an accountable, proactive way to prevent abuse from occurring, through models that actively reduce power disparities and give women and girls a sustained voice in how aid is delivered. From 2018-2020, Empowered Aid conducted rigorous and participatory research in Uganda and Lebanon—two of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world—which was further contextualized in Bangladesh, Jordan, Kenya, and now Türkiye, on the ways the delivery of humanitarian aid may increase risks of SEA within affected populations, and how to reduce those risks.

This report shares findings and recommendations from the process of applying the Empowered Aid approach in Türkiye. The approach is grounded in a “contextualization process,” in which participatory workshops with women and girls are held to identify the main SEA risks faced by them and their peers, and their recommendations to address them. These are complimented by participatory discussion groups with men and boys. The findings from these workshops and discussions are then *put into action* by the aid actors involved, in this case World Vision operating through its regional unit, World Vision Syria Response (WVSR) and local partner International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation (IBC). They select several of the recommendations put forward by women and girls to implement within their aid programming, and adapt their program monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools to proactively monitor for the SEA risks identified in the workshops, and to measure how the adaptations are working. They share back the findings and changes they are making with refugee women and girls by inviting them to join Refugee Advisory Groups, who are consulted on a regular basis. This allows for women and girls' SEA risk expertise to be incorporated into how aid programs are designed and monitored, on an ongoing basis.

Contextualization process and community-based recommendations for SEA risk mitigation

In Türkiye, the project focused on earthquake-affected areas and worked with both Syrian refugee and Turkish host community members. It engaged living in Gaziantep, Türkiye. In the contextualization phase, the project team engaged 44 women and girls (9 Syrian refugee women, 12 Syrian refugee girls, 17 Turkish host community women and 6 Turkish host community girls) in contextualization workshops, and 28 men and boys from the same communities (9 Syrian refugee men, 10 Syrian refugee boys, 4 Turkish host community men and 5 Turkish host community boys) in participatory group discussions. Key findings from those discussions on SEA risks are as follows:

- **Insecurity in Container Cities:** Women, girls, boys and men reported feeling unsafe within container cities, noting the ease with which non-residents can enter, and lamenting the loss of familiarity and trust among those living in close proximity. Specifically, Syrian women and girls highlighted the vulnerability imposed by the nylon windows of their containers, citing the ease with which they could be breached. This sentiment was notably absent among members of the Turkish host community, whose container accommodations differ in structure and security features.
- **Movement restrictions:** Security lapses at the container city's perimeters raised parental concerns, particularly for their daughters. These fears lead to girls and women

'We do not want our sisters and mothers to go out in case something happens, when they need something or there is assistance that needs to be fetched, we go instead.'

Syrian Refugee Adolescent Boy

feeling isolated and constrained by restrictions on their movement outside their container, imposed by family members or partners.

- **Risks when accessing basic needs:** All participants, including men and boys, worried about safety risks when leaving container cities to access basic needs, and women and girls specifically noted facing mistreatment and danger during travel outside the container cities. Participants advocated for internal social markets to reduce these risks and enhance their safety.
- **Shared WASH facilities:** Shared bathrooms and laundry facilities presented significant safety concerns. Poor lighting, unreliable locks, and long wait times at laundry areas made these spaces particularly risky for girls and women, especially in Nurdağı Container City.
- **Tensions During Distributions:** Participants described tensions during food distributions, noting spoiled or inadequate items, and how safety concerns led to sending boys to collect supplies instead of women and girls.
- **Educational Disruptions:** Disruptions in education for Syrian girls, primarily due to language barriers and cultural apprehensions, were significant. These disruptions exacerbated the risks of SEA and gender-based violence in the community.
- **Gender-Based Violence:** Instances of domestic violence, stalking, and threats were prevalent in both the refugee and host communities. Participants stressed the need for comprehensive protection strategies to address these ongoing issues.
- **Barriers to Reporting:** Stigma, fear of societal judgment or reputational harm, and a lack of awareness were key barriers to reporting incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). Discussions highlighted fear of repercussions, skepticism, and lack of trust or confidence in existing complaint mechanisms. Participants emphasized that complaints often led to no tangible results and potential denial of assistance.
- **Awareness Gaps:** There were significant gaps in awareness regarding emergency contacts and reporting mechanisms, especially among Syrian refugees. Alongside the barriers to reporting noted above, this perpetuates silence and impunity.

Syrian refugee women and adolescent girls presented a **comprehensive array of recommendations** aimed at improving safety and access to humanitarian assistance. Key proposals include enhanced lighting and closer WASH Facilities, sex-segregated distribution lines, and the presence of female aid workers. They emphasized the need for financial aid, awareness-raising sessions, dispute resolution mechanisms, and community support for safe housing construction, particularly for vulnerable groups. Refugee adolescent girls highlighted the need for security at distribution points, information sessions on what constitutes SEA/GBV and how to safely access services and/or report incidents, and closer access to humanitarian services. They also called for more female relief workers, transportation support, and privacy measures such as bathrooms in containers. Their priorities included sex-segregated lines, enhanced security in container cities, and empowerment through education and support mechanisms.

Recommendations from host community women and girls echoed those shared above. Host community women prioritized closer supervision of aid distribution processes, structured distribution times to manage overcrowding, and increased representation of female relief workers. They advocated for financial assistance and security presence during distributions, along with improved infrastructure like lighting and wash points. Host community adolescent girls emphasized sex-segregated lines at aid distributions, aid delivery directly to households, and information sessions on GBV/SEA including access to services and reporting mechanisms. They stressed the importance of

revealing perpetrators' identities to encourage reporting and advocated for enhanced security and financial support to all crisis-affected households.

Applying the recommendations to aid programming and monitoring risk and safety using adapted M&E tools

World Vision and IBC, as the operational members of the project team, chose to implement two of the recommendations arising from the contextualization process: door-to-door distribution and the presence of female aid workers. They applied these to a distribution of dignity kits, to enhance the safety and well-being of kit recipients by reducing the need for women and girls to travel to distribution centers or wait in lines. The recommendations aimed at improvements to WASH facilities were noted as important, however fell outside the scope of World Vision and IBC's programming sectors, so they used inter-agency fora to advocate for WASH actors to undertake them.

Monitoring activities prior to and after the implementation of these recommendations allowed World Vision to identify the outcome of each recommendation, with positive results underscoring the need to adapt aid delivery systems to meet the needs of women and girls more effectively, reducing opportunities for SEA perpetration. Two monitoring tools were used:

- **Safety audits:** Safety Audits are an observational tool, which includes a checklist of questions on registration, access, safety, and dignity. It allows for the assessment of the physical environment, visible staff procedures and community interactions. Customized for the Türkiye context, the tool was used in three Safety Audits covering distributions to 1,200 women and girls from refugee and host communities.
- **Household survey:** The survey tool was adapted to assess risks of SEA and focused on key themes such as safety, access, and satisfaction. Staff received comprehensive training and surveys were conducted over the phone with a sample of 103 aid recipients from both refugee (n=52) and host (n=51) communities, all female given the nature of dignity kit targeting.

Findings from the household survey, conducted among Syrian refugees and host community women in Türkiye who received dignity kits, provided information on potential areas of SEA risk including literacy, freedom of movement, and access to services. While 78.6% of respondents were literate in at least one language, a significant literacy gap was observed within the refugee (SuTP) community. Freedom of movement also differed between the two groups, with 32.7% of SuTP women reporting they could only travel when accompanied by a male, compared to none in the host community. Safety concerns, such as fear of theft, kidnapping, and harassment, were particularly high in container cities. One SuTP woman expressed, *"There are incidents of kidnapping of girls inside the container city, which makes me afraid to go out alone or send my children out alone."*

The distribution of dignity kits was widely regarded as fair and effective, with 99% of respondents reporting no incidents of exploitation or abuse. Participants specifically praised the **door-to-door distribution model**, noting that it alleviated safety concerns associated with traveling to centralized distribution points. The **presence of female staff** during the distributions was also highlighted as a significant factor in ensuring comfort and trust among recipients. One woman shared, *"Having female staff at the distribution made me feel safe and respected; I could discuss my needs without feeling embarrassed."* This feedback underscores the importance of adapting distribution methods to enhance safety and dignity for women and girls.

The safety audit of dignity kit distributions noted positive interactions between aid staff and recipients, with all aid workers being female, except for a male driver who remained in the vehicle. However, the presence of a male public authority figure during the distribution was observed to create

discomfort among some recipients, highlighting the need for careful consideration of cultural norms in future distributions. Observations also noted CFRM boxes and informational posters were present, however the effectiveness limited for some individuals due to not containing visual/low-literacy messaging.

Overall, the combination of female staff and door-to-door distribution models contributed to a safer and more dignified environment. There remains a need for better communication around distribution schedules and complaints processes, and more equitable access to WASH facilities.

Recommendations

These recommendations are grounded in the SEA risk mitigation expertise of crisis-affected women and girls. Accountability to affected populations means continuing to meet with and *listen to* them, and incorporate their recommendations into humanitarian policies and practices, on an ongoing basis. In this way, aid actors can share power in designing and delivering responses that are safer and more inclusive.

1. **Ensure and increase the presence of women aid workers throughout all humanitarian aid activities.** For distributions or monitoring conducted at household level, ensure mixed-sex or sex-matched teams. For distributions of sensitive materials (such as dignity kits, which include menstrual health materials) ensure all-women teams. In general, *having women aid workers present was noted by crisis-affected women and girls as key to creating a supportive and secure environment for them to seek assistance and report any concerns without fear of harassment or exploitation*, thus fostering trust and making the aid process more accessible and respectful of their privacy and dignity.
2. **Adapt M&E tools to better monitor for known SEA risks, as well as identify overall perceptions of safety throughout the distribution process, and areas for improvement or reinforcement.** The *Empowered Aid Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Aid Distributions*¹ provides step-by-step guidance on monitoring, evaluating, and responsively adapting distributions or other aid programming, based on feedback from aid recipients and workers. Continuously seeking feedback from those receiving aid and subsequently working to act upon it creates accountability, which fosters trust, which supports help seeking or reporting when an issue arises.
3. **Continue to co-design aid delivery measures with community members, including proactively consulting women and girls.** Maintain “door-to-door” distributions by female aid workers of sensitive items targeting women and girls, such as dignity kits. This modality can also be explored for other types of aid. The piloting results demonstrates how it responds to safety concerns and accessibility issues, particularly for those with mobility challenges or those living in remote areas. It minimizes risks associated with traveling to central distribution points and ensures aid reaches vulnerable individuals directly.
4. **Share information on available complaint mechanisms using methods accessible to marginalized groups**, including children, the elderly, people with low literacy, and minority language speakers. Visual, low-literacy friendly communication methods, such as posters and flyers with pictures and symbols, when combined with closer supervision of distributors and workers, can enhance both accessibility and accountability in aid distribution.

¹ The Global Women's Institute. (2021). *Empowered Aid: Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Aid Distributions*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University. Available at: https://empoweredaid.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs4631/files/2023-03/gwi_empowered-aid-me-for-safer-distributions-toolkit_2021_eng-remed.pdf

5. **Pursue requested improvements to WASH facilities, particularly those in the refugee community, where multiple risks of SEA and other forms of GBV were observed which aligned with those shared by women and girls in contextualization workshops.** Specifically, the proximity of female latrines to male latrines, the absence of locks on latrines, the distance of latrines and other WASH points from residential containers, and inadequate lighting create risks for SEA and other forms of GBV. Adequate lighting minimizes the risk of women and girls traveling through poorly lit areas, which are hotspots for harassment and abuse. Closer WASH points minimize the distance women and girls need to travel, reducing their exposure to potential threats and enhancing the safety and accessibility of essential facilities. In addition, aid actors should advocate for similar infrastructure improvements on a public authority level
6. **Implement sex-segregated lines at distribution points to better prevent harassment and abuse in crowded settings.** By ensuring that women and girls do not have to stand in mixed-sex queues, this measure reduces the risk of their being pushed aside or leaving the line to avoid being touched inappropriately by men, which puts them at risk of targeting by SEA perpetrators who may offer to take them to the front of the line in exchange for their phone number or meeting them later. Sex-segregated lines are easy to implement and create a more secure environment where everyone can receive aid comfortably and safely.
7. **Implement further measures to reduce SEA risk identified in the community consultations, including accompaniment systems for women and girls; and closer supervision of distributors and other aid workers.** Accompaniment systems reduce risks of abuse when traveling to and from aid distribution points or other facilities, and increase women and girls' sense of safety and freedom of movement. Closer supervision creates a safer environment for aid recipients, and should include female supervisors/overseers.
8. **Bolster inclusivity, transparency, and effective communication in community outreach efforts by adapting and refining strategies based on ongoing findings and feedback from women and girls.** This, when combined with awareness-raising sessions to educate the community about SEA/GBV, women's rights, and available support mechanisms, supports those targeted by SEA perpetrators to recognize abuse and be connected with support.
9. **Support GBV service provision and the provision of women's centers by actors with protection and/or GBV programming.** Private spaces for women and girls foster a supportive community where they can freely share experiences, express their concerns and seek support, including confidential care for sensitive concerns like SEA or other forms of GBV.

BACKGROUND

Two major earthquakes, measuring 7.7 and 7.6 on the Richter scale, struck southern Türkiye and northern Syria on February 6, 2023, resulting in devastating consequences. Thousands lost their lives, and millions were displaced across affected regions, including Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Adıyaman, Osmaniye, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Malatya, Diyarbakır, Adana, Kilis, and Elazığ in Türkiye, as well as Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia, Hama, and Tartus in Syria.²

Following the earthquakes, challenging weather conditions exacerbated rescue and aid efforts, causing disruptions and destruction to temporary shelters and tent cities, and displacing over five million people. Container cities³ have emerged as a housing solution, notably in the Islahiye and Nurdağı districts of Gaziantep, for the Turkish and Syrian communities. The earthquake survivors, predominantly reliant on social assistance and donations for basic necessities like food, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), protection, healthcare, and education, face significant challenges. Women and girls, already marginalized due to pre-existing gender inequalities, face increased risks of violence, including domestic abuse, trafficking, and exploitation, as they do not have private physical spaces or secure housing, and struggle to meet essential needs for them and their families.

The Empowered Aid initiative, led by the Global Women's Institute (GWI) in collaboration with humanitarian organizations like World Vision, uses participatory methods to identify contextually relevant measures to mitigate risks or sexual abuse and exploitation (SEA) in humanitarian aid delivery. **Its aim is to embed accountable, proactive ways for aid actors to prevent SEA from occurring, through aid delivery models that actively reduce power disparities and give women and girls a sustained voice in how aid is delivered.** Implementation in Türkiye began in October 2023, and builds on findings from previous research conducted in Uganda and Lebanon, and piloting in Bangladesh, Kenya, and Jordan, on the ways the delivery of humanitarian aid may increase risks of sexual SEA within affected populations, and how to reduce those risks. Empowered Aid was applied to World Vision's response in two districts of Gaziantep, Nurdağı and Islahiye, which were heavily impacted by the February 6 earthquake.

World Vision Syria Response (WVSR) has operated in Türkiye since 2014 and been actively involved in addressing the needs of earthquake-affected communities and refugees. With programming spanning various sectors including livelihoods, WASH, protection, and shelter, World Vision's Earthquake Response provides a range of support to affected populations. The Empowered Aid work also engaged WVSR's partner, the International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation (IBC). Established in 1999, IBC is a NGO that operates both nationally and internationally in humanitarian and development. In Türkiye, IBC provides essential services like nutrition, shelter, water, and sanitation to disaster-affected populations, along with psychosocial support for women and children facing trauma. IBC promotes rural development by enhancing agricultural productivity and social infrastructure, and supports education and health services.

Working in a collaborative partnership, GWI first engaged WV in a co-design workshop held in November 2023. WVSR's Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) was identified as a project that included delivery of aid items, implemented by WV's local partner, IBC, to which the Empowered Aid

² Türkiye Earthquakes Situation Report III (07.03.2023) - Türkiye. (2023). Relief Web. <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/turkiye-earthquakes-situation-report-iii-07032023>

³ Designated areas where earthquake-affected populations reside in individual containers. These areas are under public management and may include common areas such as study rooms and community centers.

approach could be applied. In response to post-earthquake needs, the AHP project provides a suite of protection and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services to community members affected by the earthquakes in Gaziantep (Islahiye, Nurdağı) and Hatay (Antakya) provinces. The overall project outcome is that earthquake-affected girls, boys, women, and men – including those living with a disability – feel protected and safe and have improved wellbeing.

To achieve this, the project works across three outcome areas related to protection, MHPSS, and basic household needs. Activities include distributions of cash and vouchers for food and non-food items (NFI), psychosocial support (PSS) kits targeting Refugee and Host Community Members, and dignity kits targeting 1,200 women and girls of reproductive age, containing feminine hygiene products such as pads, as well as general hygiene products such as soap, toothpaste and underwear. PSS kits are distributed following PSS Sessions, and Dignity Kits delivered following awareness raising and PSS sessions. This was planned to occur in two ways: directly to recipients' homes for those living in container cities and remote villages, and via a distribution center for those living in district centers, with the 1,200 dignity kits distributed to 600 people in Hatay, and 600 people in Islahiye and Nurdağı districts. Following World Vision policy, targeted recipients are 50% Syrians under temporary protection (SuTP) and 50% Host Community members.

Following the co-design process, the joint GWI-WV Empowered Aid team undertook in-depth, participatory community engagement processes to contextualize existing Empowered Aid findings on SEA risks in the Syria Response Region (from Lebanon and Jordan) to this context along the Turkish border. This was done through a series of contextualization workshops with refugee women and girls, and participatory group discussions (PGDs) with host community women and girls, and refugee and host community men and boys. The process of preparing, facilitating, and learning from these workshops and discussions emphasized co-creation and capacity sharing with and among aid actors and community members, to develop SEA risk mitigation measures tailored to local realities.

Based on these findings, WWSR and IBC made modifications to the way aid activities were implemented in the container cities, and adapted M&E tools to monitor perceptions of safety and risk after the modifications were applied. This report shares findings and recommendations from the process of applying the Empowered Aid approach in Türkiye.

PHASE I: RISK IDENTIFICATION AND PRIORITIZATION

CONTEXTUALIZATION WORKSHOPS & PARTICIPATORY GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Contextualization workshops were conducted using the *Empowered Aid Contextualization Toolkit*,⁴ developed and piloted in three countries previously. These workshops were divided into three sections: the first focused on core concepts related to gender, GBV, and SEA; the second on contextualizing SEA risks; and the third on identifying relevant recommendations to mitigate SEA risks. They utilized participatory tools such as community mapping, open-ended stories, reflection exercises, and group work with visual or drama-based elements.

Participatory group discussions employed the Empowered Aid Participatory Group Discussion (PGD) Tool and centred on SEA risks through exercises like free listing and open-ended storytelling. Notes were taken in Arabic for PGDs with refugees and Turkish for PGDs with host communities, then translated into English by the WVSR team or GWI Consultant, and entered a spreadsheet. The data was analysed thematically to highlight common themes, consistent with methods used by aid actors to analyse qualitative focus group data and following guidance in the Contextualization Toolkit on analysis and reporting templates, as well as guidance in the *Empowered Aid Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Aid Distributions*.⁵

Aid recipients involved in the AHP project were asked if they would like to participate in the workshops and PGDs and engaged in an informed consent process. WVSR staff communicated with adult participants via phone calls, and with adolescent participants by contacting their parents or caregivers to explain the activities and inquire about their interest in participating. Written consent was obtained from each adult participant at the start of the workshop or PGD, while consent from parents or caregivers of adolescent participants was obtained one week before their session. The consent forms, available in Arabic and Turkish, provided details about the Empowered Aid project, the objectives of the workshops/PGDs, voluntary participation, and the right to decline any exercise or question without affecting their access to assistance through the AHP project or otherwise. WVSR retains these forms for five years after the project concludes, storing them securely in MEAL file lockers.

Table (1): Total number of participants by sex, nationality, and location.

	Number of Participants	Nationality	Location
Contextualization workshop with women & girls			
# women (18+)	9	Syrian	Nurdağı
	17	Turkish	Islahiye
# girls (-18)	12	Syrian	Nurdağı
	6	Turkish	Islahiye
Participatory group discussions			
# of men (18+)	9	Syrian	Nurdağı
	4	Turkish	Islahiye
# boys (-18)	10	Syrian	Nurdağı
	5	Turkish	Islahiye

⁴ Forthcoming on the Empowered Aid website, empoweredaid.gwu.edu.

⁵ The Global Women's Institute. (2021). *Empowered Aid: Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Aid Distributions*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University. Available at: https://empoweredaid.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs4631/files/2023-03/gwi_empowered-aid-me-for-safer-distributions-toolkit_2021_eng-remed.pdf

Prior to the training, referral pathways for SEA & GBV were checked to ensure information and contact details were up to date, so that information on services could be shared should any participant seek it, and for the staff to be prepared to facilitate a referral should an individual disclosure come up in the group discussions and/or afterwards. At the beginning of each session, participants were reminded that, as these are group activities, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed and no one would be asked to share personal experiences. However, if they wished to speak to someone privately, they could do so at any time.

Participants were introduced to Empowered Aid recommendations developed in other countries using visual aids of drawings and detailed explanations. They were encouraged to engage with the materials, ask questions, and discuss the recommendations. Following this, they assessed each recommendation's relevance and importance to their context, removing those that weren't relevant and adding new recommendations arising from their outlining of SEA risks. The outcomes of this prioritization process yielded a customized list of recommendations based on local realities and priorities, and led by the contextual safeguarding expertise of crisis-affected women and girls.

FINDINGS ON RISKS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Risks Related to Shelter and Settlements, and Traveling to Access Good and Services

During the contextualization workshops and participatory group discussions (PGDs), participants from both refugee and host communities voiced risks of SEA and other forms of GBV, related to how the container cities are designed, as well as how they must traverse the layout of their physical environment to

"We do not want our sisters and mothers to go out in case something happens. When they need something or there is assistance that needs to be fetched, we go instead."

- Syrian Refugee Adolescent Boy

access essential goods and services. The container city's perimeter security was found to be inadequate given its low walls and gaps allow unauthorized entry by individuals on foot or in vehicles, despite the presence of police and armed forces. The inadequate security measures lead to isolation of women and girls, who are reluctant to spend time outdoors due to perceived dangers. Parental and spousal restrictions meant to protect them from SEA or other forms of abuse can increase this isolation and reduce their access to resources and support, which in turn can make them more targeted by abusers and/or less likely to seek help or file a complaint when abuse occurs.

Both refugee and host communities noted the dangers associated with leaving container cities to access social markets and other essential services. They reported that women and girls face heightened security threats during these trips, including risks of stalking and encounters with strangers. Refugee women and girls also highlighted the discomfort and fear associated with long waits for supplies, which exacerbates their vulnerability. They expressed a strong preference for having basic facilities and services available within the container cities to improve their safety. Participants from both communities recommended establishing social markets within the container cities to reduce these risks.

Risks at WASH Points

In Nurdağı, refugees face significant challenges with communal (shared) latrines, unlike host community members who have private bathrooms. While sex-segregated, the communal facilities designated for women and girls are adjacent to those used by men and boys and suffer from poor

lighting, increasing the risk of SEA. Women report often needing to accompany their daughters to the bathrooms at night due to safety concerns. The shared latrines are also plagued by faulty door locks and theft, further compromising security, privacy and availability of essential WASH facilities. Boys also reported experiencing discomfort and need to be accompanied by peers due to similar issues.

The darkness in the latrines contributes to fear and can prevent women and girls from using the facilities at night, impacting their hygiene and well-being. Additionally, poor hygiene conditions have led to health problems like bladder infections. Women and girls often improvise personal hygiene solutions, which can expose them to further risks. Access to washing facilities is also problematic, with reports of refugees being asked to do laundry for WASH point workers in exchange for access to use the machines. This situation creates power imbalances and exploitation risks, and those controlling these resources may also demand sexual acts in exchange for access.

"It's really dark in here at night, and there are strange men around."

- Host Community Woman

Risks When Accessing Food

Women and girls in Nurdagi face significant barriers in accessing food, impacting their safety and nutrition. Concerns about harassment and stalking discourage them from leaving the container city to reach food distribution points. This fear of encountering danger during trips can lead to isolation, as women and girls might avoid necessary journeys to protect themselves. As noted above, this isolation increases their vulnerability to SEA, in this case because they may seek assistance from strangers or accept risky transportation options to avoid unsafe routes.

"Once, I was followed by a car. He followed me into the container city area. I was really afraid, but I was not sure what I could do."

- Syrian Refugee Adolescent Girl

Mistreatment by workers at distribution points adds to their vulnerability. Reports of unkind behavior and shouting exacerbate feelings of helplessness and fear. The physical danger of crossing hazardous highways to access social markets, now relocated outside the container city, further heightens their risk. These risks open opportunities for exploitation by individuals who offer transport help, or faster access to food aid at the distribution point.

Disputes over food distribution, including complaints about spoiled or expired items and unfair allocation, contribute to tensions and insecurity. Systemic issues with food service and unequal distribution exacerbate women and girls' sense of desperation, making them more reliant on others and more susceptible to exploitation. This dependence also impacts refugee boys, who navigate the physical environment instead to fetch items for their families.

Risks when Accessing Education

Workshop participants shared the profound disruption in education wrought by the earthquake and prevailing circumstances. Notably, none of the Syrian girls participating in the workshops were found to be attending school. This observation underscores the persistent challenge faced by refugees, who

"In many situations, our families decide instead of us, like in marriage or not going to school out of fear for our safety."

- Syrian Refugee Adolescent Girl

encounter critical language barriers compounded by limited opportunities for formal education and social integration, particularly in acquiring proficiency in Turkish. The absence of educational opportunities and language proficiency exacerbates risks of SEA and other forms of

GBV, which may be perpetrated by those offering educational access, or due to poverty and isolation by refugee girls and boys being kept out of education. Girl facing further risks of being kept home due to safety risks, and being married early in lieu of getting to pursue their education.

Many refugee participants lacked awareness of public hotline numbers for emergencies or avenues for lodging complaints in Arabic. Despite aid actors providing informational materials in their project implementation areas, low literacy levels among the target audience may not allow for sufficient comprehension. Concerns were also raised by host community members regarding inconsistencies in school bus services, with instances reported of buses failing to pick up students from their residences or leaving them stranded at school, thereby posing risks, particularly for younger children.

Barriers and Facilitators to Reporting or Seeking Support for SEA

Participants identified significant barriers to seeking help or filing complaints if abuse occurs, including insecurity, lack of trust, fear of stigmatization or damage to one's reputation, and/or losing access to aid. Both Syrian and Turkish women and girls highlighted victim shaming and the potential repercussions on one's social standing or reputation as key factors contributing to survivors' silence. Syrian women and girls, in particular, expressed

"Men get emotionally close for exploitation. They approach girls and tell them they like them and then they trick them into intercourse. Some girls are threatened by their 'boyfriends,' they tell the girls that if they do not have intercourse with them, they would break up. Feeling desperate, a lot of girls are manipulated to stay in such relationships, as the boys/men may threaten them."

- Host Community Adolescent Girl

fear of aid-related repercussions if they reported SEA, leading to reluctance in seeking help. Host community members also reported concerns about domestic violence following SEA incidents. All expressed a need for better awareness and more accessible, confidential reporting mechanisms to better support survivors and hold perpetrators accountable.

"These kind of processes wear out the survivors. A friend of mine complained but it took years before the issue could be addressed."

- Host Community Adolescent Girl

"We are learning a lot today and socializing at the same time, it is not the same when this information is delivered to us on a paper."

- Host Community Woman

Women and girls from both refugee and host communities expressed reservations regarding their trust in existing mechanisms for reporting grievances and seeking recourse. Within the Syrian community, there is a prevailing fear that filing a complaint may jeopardize their Temporary IDs or lead to repercussions that affect their access to aid and services, instilling reluctance to utilize such avenues for redress. This also heightens their risk for SEA, as potential abusers are likely aware of these fears and less likely to fear survivors reporting them.

Recommendations from women and girls

After surfacing and reflecting on these risks, women and girls in the Contextualization Workshops put forward the following prioritized list of recommendations to mitigate risks of SEA throughout aid distribution processes:

Table 2: *Prioritized SEA risk mitigation recommendations*

1	Sex-segregated lines at aid distributions and service points, to avoid women and girls being pushed out of line, harassed, or targeted.
2	Providing assistance at household level (“door to door”) , with at least two aid workers in mixed-sex or all-female teams.
3	More female security guards/personnel (government or NGO) at distribution points.
4	Increased presence of female aid workers throughout aid delivery mechanisms and service points, including food distributions.
5	Closer supervision of distributors/aid workers , including filing and follow up of complaints .
6	Pre-determined, assigned times for groups of families to collect distributions, to avoid women/girls/boys having to travel alone.
7	Better lighting and closer WASH points, as well as sex-segregated and lockable latrines , to reduce the risks posed by inadequate lighting, far distances, and the absence of locks on latrines or insufficient sex-segregation.
8	Sessions for community sensitization on GBV/SEA and better knowledge and communication on SEA complaint on reporting mechanisms.
9	Formal or informal accompanying systems when women and girls collect/receive aid, and information sharing on moving in groups.
10	Dispute resolution sessions with the host community to reduce tensions around access to aid.
11	Closer distribution points and/or transportation support to collect or access humanitarian aid, especially for marginalized groups.
12	Financial assistance through cash assistance (or vouchers that can be flexibly used at multiple vendors/locations) to reduce known SEA-related vulnerabilities women and girls face.
13	Support women and girls to organize response mechanisms to assist each other when they feel unsafe or at risk (sounding an “alarm”).
14	Sessions on withdrawing money safely and securely from cash points, and/or feedback sessions on issues when using vouchers and dedicated, time-bound support to address them.
15	More community and individual support to construct or repair shelters safely , especially for marginalized groups.

PHASE II: APPLYING WOMEN & GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDUCING SEA RISKS TO AID PROGRAMS & MEASURING HOW THEY WORK

WVSR and IBC selected several of the recommendations from the “menu” above to implement within their programming, specifically to a dignity kit distribution for 600 women and girls of reproductive age from host and refugee communities. This activity was selected due to factors like timing and alignment with project goals, as well as the tie-in with existing educational sessions on GBV and women's rights provided by the implementing organization (IBC). The two recommendations applied were:

- 1) Providing assistance at household level (“door to door”), with at least two aid workers in mixed-sex or all-female teams.
- 2) Increased presence of female aid workers.

The registration process for aid distributions is managed by the IBC outreach teams in Nurdağı and Islahiye. The teams comprised 14 staff members, 8 females and 6 males, with outreach for the dignity kit distribution made by female staff. Registration and information sharing were conducted door-to-door with household members aged 18 and above, ensuring communication with adult heads of households or with their consent. IBC teams communicated the criteria for receiving dignity kits (female or reproductive age) and provided further information upon request. As can be seen in Figure 2, roughly the same number or household members registered to receive dignity kits among refugee and host community households.

This section demonstrates how routine program monitoring (M&E) can be used, with a few light-touch adaptations, to proactively monitor for SEA risks and feelings of safety on an ongoing basis, and to take preventive action when risks are identified.



Figure 1: Dignity kits contain items to support women and girls' hygiene and dignity, including menstrual hygiene products.

In addition to door-to-door outreach, female IBC case workers contacted GBV survivors they were already working with, as part of continued follow-up, to schedule a time for them to receive the kit. In this way, survivors were included in the distribution without their identity as a survivor being known by anyone other than the case worker they were already receiving services from. As a prerequisite, all dignity kit recipients attended sessions on GBV and Women's Rights facilitated by IBC.

Distributions took place in the early afternoon, between 2-4 pm, over 15 days. Monitoring took place both during and after implementation, using two tools—the safety audit and household survey—adapted from the *Empowered Aid Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Distributions*. This allowed for capturing changes attributable to implementing these SEA risk mitigation measures. It also demonstrates how routine

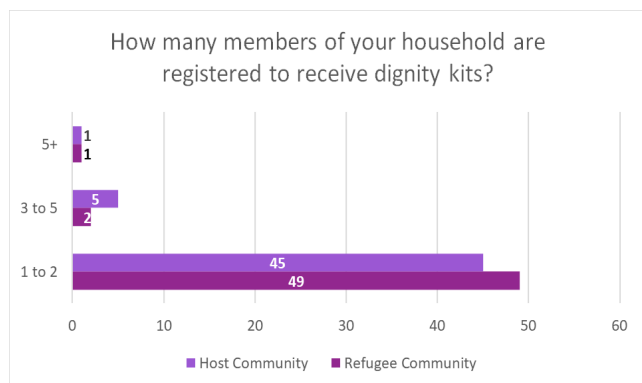


Figure 2: Number of household members registered

program monitoring (M&E) can be used, with a few light-touch adaptations, to proactively monitor for SEA risks and feelings of safety on an ongoing basis, and to take preventive action when risks are identified.

SAFETY AUDITS

GWI and WVSR worked collaboratively to adapt the Empowered Aid [safety audit tool](#) using the findings from the contextualization process. The safety audit is an observational tool that provides a systematic way in which to record structured observations related to access, safety, dignity, and equity, with considerations for marginalized groups. It can be adapted to a specific activity or sector – in this case it was customized in consultation with the MEAL Team and translated into Turkish.

The tool includes checklists to evaluate physical environments, staff procedures, and interactions between staff and community members to identify vulnerabilities that could expose recipients to harm. It also assesses safeguarding measures like policies, training programs, supervision plans, and reporting systems. Given the SEA risk posed by lack of female aid workers, the safety audit includes space to note observations regarding sex and age breakdowns of staff, volunteers, guards, and aid recipients. **For those wishing to use and adapt these tools, the above [Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Distributions](#) and a companion [Safety Audit Tip Sheet](#) are available, as well as [Tip Sheets for the other M&E tools included in the Toolkit](#).**

GWI trained WVSR staff on how to safely and systematically conduct safety audits. Three Safety Audits were carried out: two in host communities and one in a refugee community. These audits, monitored jointly by GWI and WVSR teams, assessed risks of SEA and feelings of safety among dignity kit recipients during the distribution. As the audits were conducted after implementing the above recommendations—delivering aid at household level, and increasing the presence of female aid workers in the distribution—the findings also reflect the outcomes of taking proactive steps to mitigate SEA risk.

HOUSEHOLD SURVEY

As with the safety audit, GWI and WVSR worked collaboratively to adapt the Empowered Aid [household survey tool](#) using the findings from the contextualization process. The tool includes questions designed to assess the acceptability, quality, and usage of the distributed items and to evaluate potential risks of SEA throughout the distribution process. The household survey was conducted immediately post-distribution.

The sampling approach for the survey allowed for understanding the distribution process among different community groups, with 50% of the sample drawn from SuTP dignity kit recipients and 50% from host community dignity kit recipients. Due to local regulations prohibiting door-to-door surveys, the method was adapted to telephone interviews and administered using Kobo Toolbox, with versions in Arabic, Turkish, and English to accommodate diverse linguistic needs. Comprehensive training was provided to the MEAL Officer, Project Officer, and enumerators to conduct household surveys. Over one month, 103 surveys were conducted, capturing demographic data, literacy levels, freedom of movement, access to services, registration and satisfaction with distribution, and perceptions of safety.

MONITORING FINDINGS

Registration and Communication Mechanisms

Pre-distribution procedures showed efforts to address diverse needs, specifically for persons living with disabilities (PwD) and GBV survivors. Staff inquired about PwD in households to arrange for additional support if needed, and dedicated female case workers were available to support anyone disclosing violence or requesting referral support. Distributions coincided with a local election period, prompting IBC Management to not wear IBC visibility during distributions due to safety concerns. Despite this, recipients seemed to recognize the aid workers when they visited their homes.

During the safety audit, it was observed that the presence of a male public authority figure accompanying the local partner's female outreach staff during the distribution to refugee households led to noticeable discomfort among some of the Syrian women and girls receiving the aid. The discomfort stemmed from the nature of the dignity kits, which included feminine hygiene items. Within the household survey, 2 refugee women expressed dissatisfaction with the distribution due to this issue, which when combined with feeling they were not given adequate notice on the time of visit, left them feeling uncomfortable that their daughters were home alone when the kit was distributed.

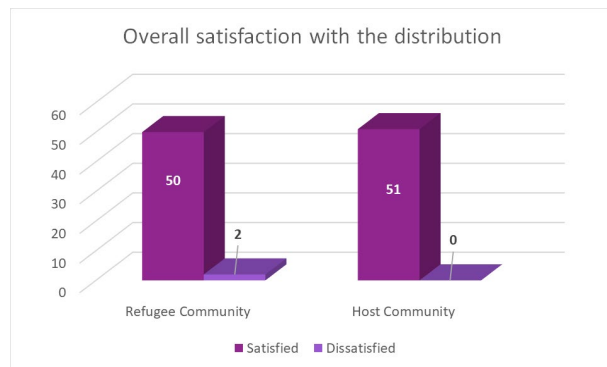


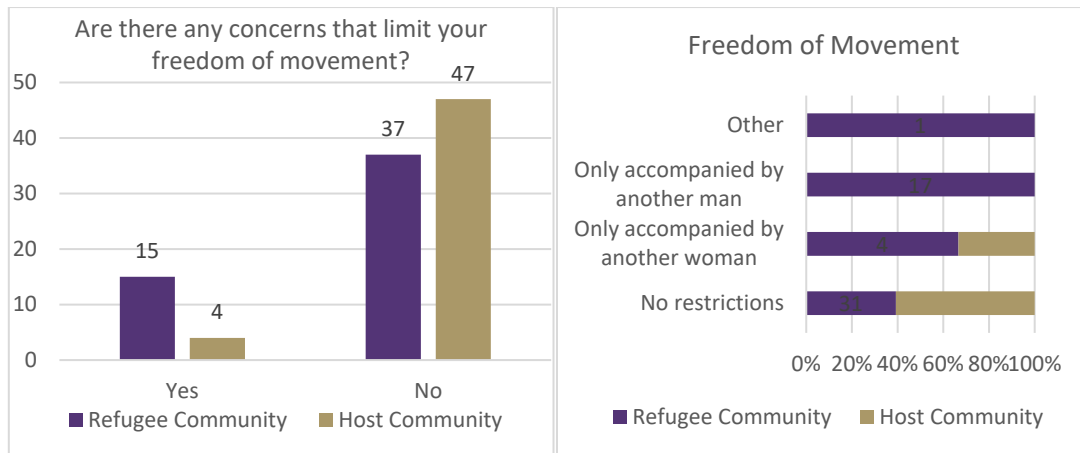
Figure 3: Overall satisfaction (Household survey)

For the host community, all aid recipients and aid workers were women and girls, except for one male driver who remained in the car and had no contact with the recipients. This setup made the aid recipients comfortable, as they had indicated during contextualization workshops.

Some aid recipients were illiterate or unable to read Turkish or Arabic. For instance, a recipient in the host community requested help reading her ID number. Written IEC and CFRM leaflets were provided with explanations, however this finding highlights a gap in accessibility for non-literate recipients.

Safety and Security

Although distributions were door-to-door, safety audits assessed public WASH facilities due to their relation to SEA risks. For the host community, where bathrooms are within containers, questions about latrines were not applicable. In contrast, refugee community latrines were poorly lit, distant, and mixed gender, all factors which were noted by women and girls during the contextualization workshops as making them feel unsafe.



Figures 4 and 5: Freedom of movement

The household survey contained several questions related to freedom of movement, as this was an identified SEA risk factor. Concerns about movement within container cities differed between refugees and the host community. While most participants (82%) reported no movement restrictions, 18% did, with refugee women and girls being particularly affected. About one-third (33%) of refugee respondents stated they could only move when accompanied by a male, a situation not reported by the host community. Other factors, like cultural constraints and unspecified issues, also contribute to limited mobility, especially among refugees.

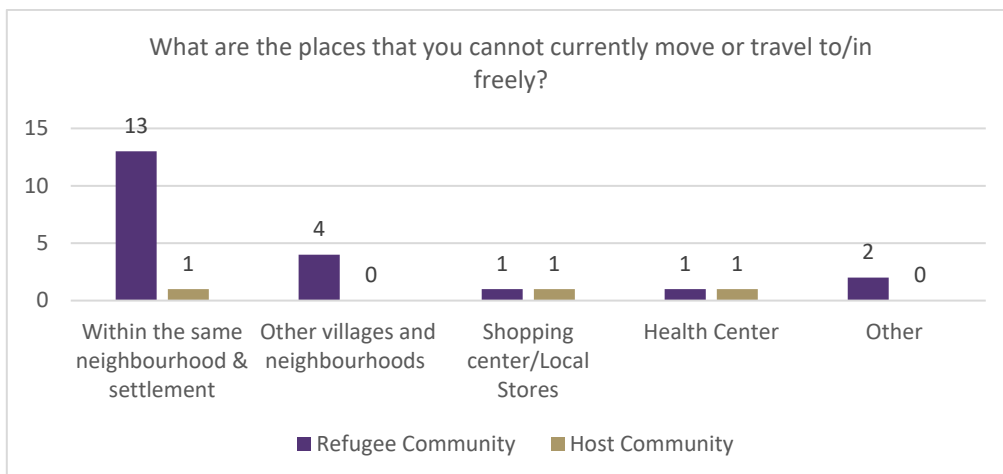


Figure 6: Places respondents cannot move to/in freely

This data indicates that refugee women and girls, in particular, face substantial mobility restrictions within their neighborhoods and settlements, as well as when trying to access essential services like grocery stores and health centers. These restrictions are influenced by security concerns, social norms, and other factors. Their responses highlight the impact the location of and distance to essential services may have on women's ability to access them, given constraints on their moving freely and safely within their environments.

Perceived GBV/SEA Risk

No SEA incidents were observed, and active measures to prevent and mitigate GBV/SEA observed included the presence of female staff, and clear information on feedback and complaint mechanisms.

Written materials with visual aids were also present to mitigate GBV/SEA risks. The distribution process was observed as being respectful toward aid recipients, for example no yelling was observed. Questions from the household survey that speak to aid recipients' experience and perception of SEA/GBV risks are summarized below.

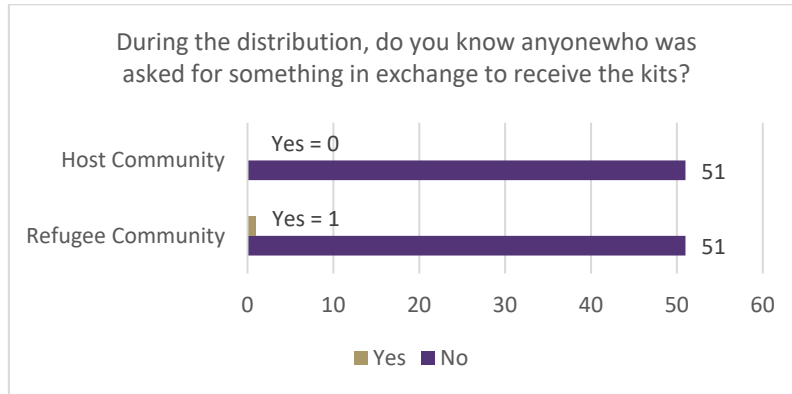


Figure 7: Feeling of safety and security during the distribution

One refugee woman reported that a friend was asked for money in exchange for receiving aid, indicating the importance of continuous monitoring and follow-up actions for misconduct. When asked, “Did something happen during the distribution that made you feel insecure?”, one refugee woman expressed discomfort and shame due to male staff handling women’s personal items.

Complaints, Feedback, and Response Mechanisms

Household survey data on communication preferences for raising GBV or SEA-related concerns showed the largest number of both refugee and host communities favoring direct, personal interactions for addressing GBV or SEA concerns, or phone communication. Differences between the two groups highlight the need for communication strategies that cater to the preferences of each community to ensure support channels are effective and perceived as safe.

“In case you need to raise GBV or SEA related concerns or complaints, which one of the options will you be comfortable to use?”		
Method	Refugee Community	Host Community
Face-to-face with IBC staff	22	17
Face-to-face with World Vision staff	21	17
Phone number	19	23
Camp management	10	3
WhatsApp/Other social media	9	12
Suggestion boxes	0	2
Help desk	0	1

Figure 8: Channels aid recipients prefer for GBV-SEA related concerns

Safety audit teams observed CFRM boxes and posters with feedback and information on complaint mechanisms at IBC Community Centers in Arabic and Turkish. These resources emphasized confidentiality and provided hotline contact details. However, individuals with low literacy might struggle to understand the purpose or use of these resources, underscoring the need for continued GBV/SEA awareness sessions.

CONCLUSION

The catastrophic earthquakes that struck southern Türkiye and northern Syria in February 2023 impacted Turkish host communities as well as refugees from Syria, who had already been forced to flee the violence of their country's civil war. Women and girls living within host and refugee communities, already burdened by pre-existing gender inequalities, found themselves disproportionately affected, facing heightened risks of violence, exploitation, and displacement.

Despite commendable efforts, numerous challenges persist in the post-earthquake landscape. Tensions exacerbated by the displacement crisis pose significant obstacles to community cohesion and recovery efforts. Additionally, the heightened risks of gender-based violence, including abuse and exploitation, continue to threaten the safety and well-being of women and girls in affected areas. Barriers to education and livelihood opportunities persist for refugee women and girls, further perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and marginalization. These barriers force many women and girls into dependency situations where they may be exploited by those offering assistance or employment. Addressing SEA requires targeted interventions to mitigate these specific risks, ensuring that protective measures are in place to prevent exploitation by those who control access to essential resources.

The Empowered Aid approach offers a participatory, practical way to address risks for SEA that exist within every humanitarian context. Through research and field-testing with humanitarian organizations like World Vision Syria Response, GWI has developed a suite of tools and guidance designed to fit into humanitarian program management cycles, including needs assessment and M&E processes. Together, these processes and tools aim to mitigate the risks of sexual abuse and exploitation in the delivery of aid, ensuring that the voices and concerns of affected communities, especially women and girls, are central to the development of SEA prevention and response strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations provided by refugee and host community women and adolescent girls (**see Table 2**) offer valuable insights into the specific needs and challenges faced by women and girls in refugee camps and host communities. By incorporating these recommendations into humanitarian policies and practices, stakeholders can create safer and more inclusive environments, ultimately advancing the well-being and resilience of women and girls in these settings.

Accountability to affected populations means continuing to meet with and *listen to* them, and incorporate their recommendations into humanitarian policies and practices, on an ongoing basis. In this way, aid actors can share power in designing and delivering responses that are safer and more inclusive. We strongly encourage all aid actors to:

1. **Ensure and increase the presence of women aid workers throughout all humanitarian aid activities.** For distributions or monitoring conducted at household level, ensure mixed-sex or sex-matched teams. For distributions of sensitive materials (such as dignity kits, which include menstrual health materials) ensure all-women teams. In general, *having women aid workers present was noted by crisis-affected women and girls as key to creating a supportive and secure environment for them to seek assistance and report any concerns without fear of harassment or exploitation*, thus fostering trust and making the aid process more accessible and respectful of their privacy and dignity.

2. **Adapt M&E tools to better monitor for known SEA risks, as well as identify overall perceptions of safety throughout the distribution process, and areas for improvement or reinforcement.** The *Empowered Aid Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Aid Distributions*⁶ provides step-by-step guidance on monitoring, evaluating, and responsively adapting distributions or other aid programming, based on feedback from aid recipients and workers. Continuously seeking feedback from those receiving aid and subsequently working to act upon it creates accountability, which fosters trust, which supports help seeking or reporting when an issue arises.
3. **Continue to co-design aid delivery measures with community members, including proactively consulting women and girls.** For example, learning from this project strongly supports maintaining “door-to-door” distributions by female aid workers of sensitive items targeting women and girls, such as dignity kits. This modality can also be explored for other types of aid. The M&E results shared above demonstrate how it responds to safety concerns and accessibility issues, particularly for those with mobility challenges or living in remote areas. It minimizes risks associated with traveling to central distribution points and ensures aid reaches vulnerable individuals directly.
4. **Share information on available complaint mechanisms using methods accessible to marginalized groups,** including children, the elderly, people with low literacy, and minority language speakers. Visual, low-literacy friendly communication methods, such as posters and flyers with pictures and symbols, when combined with closer supervision of distributors and workers, can enhance both accessibility and accountability in aid distribution.
5. **Pursue requested improvements to WASH facilities, particularly those in the refugee community, where multiple risks of SEA and other forms of GBV were observed which aligned with those shared by women and girls in contextualization workshops.** Specifically, the proximity of female latrines to male latrines, the absence of locks on latrines, the distance of latrines and other WASH points from residential containers, and inadequate lighting create risks for SEA and other forms of GBV. Adequate lighting minimizes the risk of women and girls traveling through poorly lit areas, which are hotspots for harassment and abuse. Closer WASH points minimize the distance women and girls need to travel, reducing their exposure to potential threats and enhancing the safety and accessibility of essential facilities. In addition, aid actors should advocate for similar infrastructure improvements on a public authority level.
6. **Implement sex-segregated lines at distribution points to better prevent harassment and abuse in crowded settings.** By ensuring that women and girls do not have to stand in mixed-sex queues, this measure reduces the risk of their being pushed aside or leaving the line to avoid being touched inappropriately by men, which puts them at risk of targeting by SEA perpetrators who may offer to take them to the front of the line in exchange for their phone number or meeting them later. Sex-segregated lines are easy to implement and create a more secure environment where everyone can receive aid comfortably and safely.

⁶ The Global Women's Institute. (2021). *Empowered Aid: Toolkit for Planning and Monitoring Safer Aid Distributions*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University. Available at: https://empoweredaid.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs4631/files/2023-03/gwi_empowered-aid-me-for-safer-distributions-toolkit_2021_eng-remed.pdf

7. **Implement further measures to reduce SEA risk identified in the community consultations, including accompaniment systems for women and girls; and closer supervision of distributors and other aid workers.** Accompaniment systems reduce risks of abuse when traveling to and from aid distribution points or other facilities, and increase women and girls' sense of safety and freedom of movement. Closer supervision creates a safer environment for aid recipients, and should include female supervisors/overseers.
8. **Bolster inclusivity, transparency, and effective communication in community outreach efforts by adapting and refining strategies based on ongoing findings and feedback from women and girls.** This, when combined with awareness-raising sessions to educate the community about SEA/GBV, women's rights, and available support mechanisms, supports those targeted by SEA perpetrators to recognize abuse and be connected with support.
9. **Support GBV service provision and the provision of women's centers by actors with protection and/or GBV programming.** Private spaces for women and girls foster a supportive community where they can freely share experiences, express their concerns and seek support, including confidential care for sensitive concerns like SEA or other forms of GBV.

WVSR commits to working, in collaboration with IBC and the wider aid network, to implement these SEA risk mitigation practices in their programming, from design through implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. By not only listening to women and girls, but actively incorporating their feedback and proactively monitoring for SEA risks, humanitarian aid actors can hold themselves and each other more accountable to creating robust, gender-responsive SEA prevention strategies grounded in local realities and expertise.