

Prevention of and response to gender-based violence (GBV) in the drought crisis in the Horn of Africa

During drought crises, humanitarian actors tend to focus on what is considered “life-saving” child survival interventions, often at the expense of providing critical protection to children and women from life-threatening protection concerns, including gender-based violence, especially sexual violence.

Major lessons learned from past emergencies reveal, however, that incidents of gender-based violence, especially sexual violence, increase dramatically as a by-product of the collapse of the social order and the related breakdown of community and traditional protection mechanisms. Sexual violence during crisis happens randomly, for example as displaced populations are in transit, or re-settle in insecure environments, as well as opportunistically, for example through transactional sex, as a means to an end when vulnerabilities are exploited in the context of meeting basic needs. The random and opportunistic use of sexual violence is of significant concern and must be acknowledged and acted upon in the current disaster context of the Horn of Africa. Within conflict-affected countries currently experiencing severe drought, sexual violence is also likely to happen systematically with the aim of perpetuating maximum humiliation and shame for survivors and their families.

Children in emergencies may be at particular risk of GBV given their level of dependence, their limited ability to protect themselves, and their limited power and participation in decision-making processes. Because they have had relatively little experience of life, children are also more easily exploited, tricked and coerced than adults. Depending on their level of development, they may not fully comprehend the sexual nature of certain behaviours, and they are unable to give informed consent. In the region, young people make up a significant proportion of the population (e.g. in Somalia are 31% of population, Kenya 33%, and Ethiopia 33%). Adolescents and young people are also well placed to articulate the risks they face and should be supported with the space and opportunities to express these.

UNICEF and all humanitarian partners should assume that GBV is taking place and that it is a serious and life-threatening protection issue, regardless of the presence or absence of concrete and reliable evidence. *Guidelines for Gender Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings, IASC 2005*

Food insecurity puts women and children at increased risk of harm through:

- **Harmful coping mechanisms:**
 - Lack of livelihoods options and economic hardships are key risk factors **for sexual exploitation and transactional sex.**
 - As parents face difficulties to feed their children, the crisis could result in an increase of harmful practices such as **early/forced marriages.**
- **Increased tensions between communities** as conflict over scarce resource generates violence, including GBV, between host and displaced communities.
- **Increased exposure to sexual violence and abuse**, as women and children have walk long distances to find food and water.
- **All of these put women and children at increased risk of HIV.**

Key actions to take:

- **Identify high-risk areas where GBV incidents occur, where women and girls perceive safety risks, etc.**
- **Identify risk factors for sexual exploitation and transactional sex (e.g. economic hardship, separation of families and social groups, and lack of law and order, etc.).**
- **Ensure the participation of women and girls in food security and nutrition decisions to minimise sexual exploitation and abuse.**
- **Ensure that all staff and volunteers understand that there is ZERO TOLERANCE for sexual exploitation and abuse. Awareness-raising to affected population should reinforce the message that *All humanitarian aid is FREE!***

- Ensure access to health services for care and support for incidents of sexual violence, including the provision of PEP to prevent HIV infection, and ensure that all actors and target populations know how, when and where to access services. All information should be available in the local level.
- Engage vulnerable women and girls (both GBV survivors and those at risk of future abuse) to identify viable livelihood options for themselves.
- Consider implementing agricultural income generating activities traditionally controlled by women and with quick growth rate (e.g. small-scale animal production such as poultry and small ruminants, home gardens).
- Ensure that adolescents and young people are engaged in programming that meets their unique needs and utilizes their capacities as this can go a long way in promoting their protection. For example, provide safe spaces specifically for adolescents and young people which provides age appropriate services, programming, information and support.
- Engage young people, including adolescents in income generating and livelihood activities and in age-appropriate programming. This will help to protect women, girls and young people and help to prevent gender-based violence, including sexual violence within the communities.