

Supporting young male refugees and migrants who are survivors or at risk of sexual violence

A field guide for
frontline workers
in Europe

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CONTENTS

Aim of the field guide	4
Key considerations	6
Guiding principles and global standards	13
How to support male youth who are survivors or at risk of sexual violence	16
Create an enabling environment	16
Handling disclosures of sexual violence by male youth	25
Prepare	25
Look	27
Listen	28
Link	29
Annexes	33
Annex 1. Potential impacts of sexual violence on men and boys	33
Annex 2. Definitions and terminology	34
Annex 3. Useful resources	35
Endnotes	36

AIM OF THE FIELD GUIDE

This field guide provides tips on how to engage with and support young male refugees and migrants in Europe who are survivors of or at risk of sexual violence. It focuses on male youth: older adolescents (aged 15-17) and young men (aged 18-24). The field guide aims to address current gaps in the provision of support to male youth who are survivors or at risk of sexual violence. It aims to help frontline workers of different organizations and services to integrate protection and support for these young males into existing protection programmes. It includes examples of promising practices from the field.

The field guide focuses on male youth because:

- most refugees and migrants arriving in Europe fall within this age bracket, and
- boys who turn 18 and who are no longer cared for by the child protection system (and are expected to look after themselves on becoming adults) still need support, as they may continue to be at risk of violence and exploitation.

For the purpose of this field guide, 'frontline workers' are staff and volunteers from organizations and state or non-state services who engage directly with young male refugees and migrants in a range of capacities, such as social workers, reception centre staff, outreach workers, medical and mental health providers and cultural mediators, among others.



Key figures on refugee and migrant children arriving in Europe: ¹

- Over the past three years, **children made up around a quarter of the arrivals** to Europe. In 2020, over **70% of asylum applicants in Europe aged 14 to 17 were boys**.
- **In Serbia, boys comprised 73% to 80% of all refugee and migrant children** accommodated in state asylum, reception and transit centres in 2020, and on average, stayed in the country for only about one month before moving on.
- In **Italy, 95%** of the children who arrived between January and June 2020 **were boys, compared to 75% in Bulgaria and 81% in Greece**.
- About **37% of all children** who arrived in Greece, Spain, Italy, Malta, Bulgaria and Cyprus between January and June 2020 **were unaccompanied and separated**.
- **90% of the unaccompanied and separated children arriving in Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Malta** between January and June 2020 **were aged 15 to 17**.



Important: The suggestions provided in this field guide are not exhaustive. This field guide is meant to be a starting point that can be built on over time, based on emerging knowledge and practices.

Evidence base for the field guide

The field guide draws on a review of existing research, literature and guidance materials on gender-based violence, sexual violence against men and boys, violence against children, child protection, and data on male youth within the European response.

It is also informed by consultations with 36 staff from humanitarian and civil society organizations, UN agencies and service providers in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Serbia. Importantly, it has been shaped by focus group discussions (FGDs) with 31 male youth in Bulgaria, Italy and Serbia.



Important: This field guide does not provide guidance on how to prevent and respond to staff of humanitarian organizations who commit sexual exploitation and abuse. All humanitarian agencies must have a 'zero tolerance' approach, with a code of conduct that forbids every form of this crime, as well as specific training for all staff and volunteers. And a reporting and follow-up mechanism must be in place to deal with allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse and any related misconduct.⁴



Violence against women and girls

While this field guide focuses on male youth, women and girls are subjected to widespread gender-based violence (GBV) around the world and bear the brunt of sexual violence during migration and upon arrival in Europe.

Violence against women and girls is driven by systemic inequality between men and women. Men and boys might also experience violence related to their socially determined gender roles and norms, but it is not rooted in the societal-level gender inequality and discrimination faced by women and girls worldwide.

One in every 10 women and girls below age 20 has experienced some form of forced sexual contact, based on global estimates.²

About **1 in every 3 women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence** by an intimate partner, or sexual violence by a non-partner, in their lifetime.³

KEY CONSIDERATIONS⁵

Men and boys are exposed to sexual violence in their countries of origin, during their journeys and in Europe

|| We know that the driver was doing it [rape] to the boy. Some of the other boys were angry and wanted to beat the driver, but they were afraid that it would be done to them, so they did not do anything. ||

(Noor from Afghanistan, aged 18, FGD in Serbia)*

|| They [men and boys] had to do it [commit sexual violence against others, including against men and boys] in order to save their lives. Even if they didn't have tears, they were crying inside. In order to survive, you do anything. ||

(Adama from The Gambia, aged 20, FGD in Italy)

Sexual violence, including sexualized torture, is committed against men and boys in many armed conflicts and also along the different migration routes to Europe, particularly in Libya. Some men and adolescent boys also experience various types of sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, after their arrival in Europe.

The types of sexual violence that male youth report experiencing on their way to Europe include:

- rape and attempted rape
- genital violence (including beatings, mutilation, amputation and electroshock)
- being forced to witness sexual violence against others
- being forced to commit sexual violence against others, and
- the recording of sexual violence by perpetrators as a way to intimidate or blackmail the survivors and/or their relatives.

*Names of all those participating in the focus group discussions have been changed to protect their privacy.



Snapshots from research on sexual violence against men and boys

- A number of studies suggest that the **sexual exploitation of adolescent refugee and migrant boys may be widespread in Europe**.⁶
- [Women's Refugee Commission research](#) found that **sexual violence against men and boys may be commonplace along the central Mediterranean route through Libya into Italy**, and that some male youth are also subjected to **sexual exploitation and abuse in Italy**.⁷
- In a [2020 study](#), **43 out of 55** male migrants who had transited through Libya to Europe since 2017 **reported witnessing sexual violence** and **18.9%** disclosed **that they had experienced sexual violence in Libya**.⁸
- According to a [study](#) by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) at their clinic on **Lesvos, Greece** between September 2017 and January 2018, **28% of survivors of sexual violence** who sought care **were male**.⁹

Some groups of male youth are especially vulnerable to sexual violence, including sexual exploitation

They [young male refugees and migrants] do it [sell sex] because of their economic situation; they do not have stability, neither a guide who can help them find a job.

(Peter from The Gambia, aged 22, FGD in Italy)

Unaccompanied boys are particularly at risk of sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, because they are isolated from social networks and adult protection. In addition, they often have only a limited understanding of their legal rights.

Young men transitioning to adulthood (i.e., those who are 18–21 years old) constitute another vulnerable group in Europe, because they are often no longer eligible for services provided to children (such as accommodation). Both state and non-state service providers often expect them to be independent as they are now considered to be – and are treated as – adults. Finding safe accommodation for this age group is a major challenge throughout the European response to refugees and migrants. Insecure housing makes them more vulnerable to sexual violence, with boys sometimes ending up living on the streets or with employers, or being placed in shelters alongside adult men who may abuse them, or in institutional care, such as a group home. Children living in institutions (both boys and girls) are almost four times more likely to experience sexual abuse than children living in family-based care.¹⁰

Other groups that are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and sexual exploitation include gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer male youth (LGBTIQ*). Boys and men with disabilities are also vulnerable and, like girls and women with disabilities, are often overlooked in humanitarian programming. Children with disabilities are almost three times more likely to experience sexual abuse than children without disabilities.¹¹

Many boys and young men are also under intense pressure to reach their intended destination, earn a living and send money back home. This heightens their vulnerability to sexual exploitation because they are often not legally allowed to work and may not have enough money to reach their destination country and/or support their relatives in their home country. The lack of access to fast procedures of family reunification can lead to risk of sexual exploitation. They may, for example, have to ask smugglers to help them travel onwards, or are preyed upon by traffickers, which puts them at high risk of sexual violence, including exploitation.

*While UNICEF and WRC recognize that the 'L' for lesbian in the LGBTIQ acronym does not apply to the population covered in this field guide (adolescent boys and young men), the acronym is used because it is well known among frontline workers in the European migration context.



Specific vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ refugees and migrants¹²

LGBTIQ refugees and migrants are considered to be particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, whether in their countries of origin, during their journey or upon their arrival in Europe. They often flee discrimination and persecution in their home countries only to face further homophobia/transphobia, discrimination, stigma and sometimes violence from other refugees and migrants, and from members of the host community, as well as from staff of organizations that are supposed to assist and protect them. This means that LGBTIQ refugees and migrants may be excluded from essential protections and services, like shelter, livelihoods opportunities or health services, with this exclusion increasing their vulnerability to sexual exploitation by men and sometimes women.



Promising practices to protect male refugee and migrant youth from sexual exploitation

To protect male youth from sexual exploitation, **programmes to support them should look at their needs in a comprehensive way and target the different risk factors that affect them.**

Examples include the following:

- **Programmes that combine cash transfers with life-skills education and support services** have been shown to reduce vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Male youth who have cash may be less susceptible to being sexually exploited, and linking cash transfers to life-skills education can help to equip them with knowledge and skills that can reduce their vulnerability.¹³
- **Providing safe shelter**, especially for unaccompanied boys and young men who have recently turned 18 and can no longer benefit from shelters for minors, may also be an effective intervention to protect male youth from sexual exploitation so that they don't have to endure exploitative relationships or sell sex in exchange for shelter.¹⁴
- **Mentoring and guardianship programmes** may protect male youth from sexual exploitation as they are better able to meet their own needs if they have support from a mentor or guardian.¹⁵



Examples of promising practice

- In Greece, **CARE** and its local partner **PRAKSIS** have established a shelter for young refugee men aged 18 to 22 travelling alone.
- The non-governmental organization **INTERSOS** operates a mobile unit in Rome, Italy. The unit includes cultural mediators, and a psychologist who provides life-skills education and awareness-raising about sexual violence and who interacts with many young men who live on the streets, as well as a mobile health clinic for medical check-ups and mental-health counselling for refugees and migrants.

Male youth are not perceived as being vulnerable to sexual violence

|| Maybe they [the male survivors] are afraid if they talk to their friend about what happened, especially if it happened several times, that the other people would think they liked it and that they wanted it to be done to them. ||

(Mohammad from Afghanistan, aged 18, FGD in Serbia)

According to the literature review and consultations with organizations, frontline workers are rarely aware that male youth are at risk of sexual violence and exploitation. On the contrary: male youth are often perceived as a threat to women and girls as a result of racist, gendered stereotypes. Anti-immigrant sentiments and fears of terrorism have led to perceptions of male refugees and migrants as a threat, while their own vulnerability to sexual violence is often overlooked.

Such negative attitudes and misconceptions, combined with limited knowledge about how men and boys experience sexual violence, can prevent frontline staff from supporting male youth and helping survivors to access life-saving services. A failure to acknowledge that male youth are vulnerable to sexual violence may mean that they are not targeted by service providers for awareness-raising efforts about the services available to them, and result in the creation of services related to sexual violence that are not adapted to or appropriate for male survivors.

The impacts of sexual violence are significant and wide-ranging

|| His [the survivor's] personality has completely changed: from being a quiet and humble person, he became aggressive. ||

(Abdoulaye from Guinea, aged 27, FGD in Italy)

To support male youth, service providers must understand the impacts that sexual violence has on this vulnerable group. The impacts of all forms of sexual violence – including witnessing sexual violence – can be severe, not only for the survivors, but also for their families and communities. Sexual violence has many different short- and long-term consequences – psychological, physical, social and economic (see Annex 1 – Potential impacts of sexual violence on men and boys).

Each survivor of sexual violence is affected differently and there is no standard way to react. Many factors – such as the survivor's own resources, coping strategies and personal history – will influence how they react to such a traumatic experience. People often expect survivors to be more quiet, sad and socially withdrawn, but some become loud and aggressive as a reaction to sexual violence.²⁴



Important: Despite the severe impacts of sexual violence, many male survivors are resilient and can recover from their experiences if they have adequate support and care. Such support should identify and build on the survivor's strengths, enhance their positive coping mechanisms and foster their resilience.



Myths about sexual violence and men and boys

- ✗ **MYTH** Boy survivors of sexual violence are likely to turn into perpetrators.

✓ **FACT** Research shows that most boys who have been sexually abused DO NOT become violent as adults and DO NOT abuse children themselves.¹⁶ This assumption is very stigmatizing for male survivors as they themselves are often afraid of becoming perpetrators.
- ✗ **MYTH** Men and boys who have had an erection during sexual violence must have enjoyed it.

✓ **FACT** Men and boys can sometimes experience an unwanted erection during sexual violence (including the forced witnessing of violence). This is a physical reaction that they CANNOT control. It does not mean that they wanted the sexual violence or that they enjoyed it.¹⁷
- ✗ **MYTH** Sexual abuse by men causes straight boys and young men to become gay.

✓ **FACT** Sexual violence, especially rape by a male perpetrator, can leave a heterosexual male survivor feeling confused about his sexual orientation and fearing that the experience has 'turned him gay' or that he is no longer a 'real' man. Sexual violence does NOT define a boy's or young man's sexuality or change their sexual orientation.¹⁸
- ✗ **MYTH** Sexual abuse of boys by women is not sexual violence.

✓ **FACT** Sexual violence by ANY perpetrator is harmful. Even if sexual violence by women is far less common, the violence they commit is still harmful. Sexual abuse of boys by women is often joked about by others, seen as a sexual learning experience or glorified as something positive.¹⁹ Such attitudes can lead to male survivors feeling ashamed, confused and reluctant to disclose violence perpetrated by a woman.
- ✗ **MYTH** Adolescent boys can consent to sell sex.

✓ **FACT** ANY person under 18 who sells sex is a victim of sexual exploitation, as stated in the [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Service providers sometimes believe that adolescent boys 'voluntarily' or 'willingly' sell sex and do not perceive it as sexual violence. This attitude contributes to sexual exploitation against boys being overlooked and not taken seriously.²⁰
- ✗ **MYTH** Since some societies 'allow' sexual contact between an adult man and a minor in their culture, it is not really sexual violence.

✓ **FACT** According to the [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), ANY sexual contact between an adult and a child is sexual violence, even if the survivor does not think he has been abused. Survivors and service providers may trivialize the issue as a part of a cultural tradition that prevails in a boy's country of origin. For example, *bacha bazi* ('boy for play') is common in some parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Service providers can fail to recognize this as sexual violence and should learn how to respond appropriately when they encounter such a case.²¹
- ✗ **MYTH** Gay male youth like having sex with men so they can't be raped.

✓ **FACT** LGBTIQ youth and men may blame themselves if they experience sexual violence, feel self-hatred and believe that they deserve it as a punishment for not conforming to societies' expectations. Some service providers share these harmful beliefs.²² Any sexual act against a person's will is sexual violence, REGARDLESS of the survivor's sexual orientation.
- ✗ **MYTH** Male youth should be strong enough to fight off a perpetrator.

✓ **FACT** Male survivors often blame themselves for not having defended themselves or others against sexual violence, even in situations where there was a threat to their life. This assumption is based on the harmful gender stereotype that men and boys are always strong and able to fight.²³ ANYONE can become a victim of sexual violence, and the victim is NEVER to blame.

Programmes and service providers need help to support male survivors and link them to appropriate services

Much of the refugee and migrant programming in the European response is geared towards young men and boys, given that they account for most arrivals. There are drop-in centres, community outreach programmes, education programmes and more for male youth, including unaccompanied boys. However, few of these programmes support or identify survivors of sexual violence or those at risk of such violence. Frontline workers may be unaware that sexual violence can be

used against men and boys and often underestimate the vulnerability of male youth. When they are confronted with a male survivor, they may not know how to respond or where to refer him for care.

There is, at present, little information on effective interventions for young male survivors or those at risk, as there are very few programmes for their support in the European context.



Important: Approaches and services for male survivors of sexual violence should, where possible and appropriate, be distinct from those available to women and girls. When trying to improve access to services and protection for male survivors of sexual violence, it is important that this should not compromise spaces and services dedicated to female survivors. If, for example, male survivors approach women-friendly spaces in the absence of any other options, these spaces may no longer feel safe to women and girls. There needs to be careful assessment of the entry points male youth feel are safe and appropriate, and how these might then be promoted to refugee and migrant communities.

Refugee and migrant youth face many barriers to accessing services²⁵

Young male refugees and migrants who have survived violence face barriers to accessing services, some of which are similar – and some different – to those faced by refugee and migrant women and girls. These barriers include the following.

- **Negative attitudes and practices from service providers**, including discrimination (e.g., based on racism, homophobia, transphobia or xenophobia), disbelief, lack of empathy and humiliating comments.
- **Limited training for staff**, including on the specific risks and needs of male survivors and how to support them in a survivor-centred manner.
- **Limited entry points for male survivors**, as care for survivors may be linked to women-oriented services (e.g., women-friendly and girl-friendly spaces or sexual and reproductive health services), which could deter male survivors from using them, or present a challenge to women and girl survivors if male survivors do use them.
- **Weak or non-existent referral systems**, which may mean that survivors are not referred to further care. They may be reluctant to report their experiences if they know that they will need to re-tell their story multiple times to different people.
- **Lack of knowledge of available services** and the benefits of seeking care (for example to prevent or treat sexually transmitted infections), as well as the benefits of mental health care.
- **Fear of legal consequences** related, for example, to mandatory reporting requirements, asylum claims, criminal charges for having been forced to commit sexual violence, or prosecution for same-sex sexual activity.
- **Fear of 'getting stuck'** in a transit country by accessing response services.
- **Insufficient funds** to pay for medical services (as many countries do not have free healthcare).
- **Communication barriers** as a result of the lack of linguistic and cultural mediators/interpreters at service points.
- **Limited opening hours of services**, especially for male youth who work.
- **Lack of familiarity** with health and social welfare systems in the host country.
- **Distrust** that services will be confidential, non-judgemental or safe. Mental health services, in particular, are often feared by refugee and migrant communities, so they may prefer to seek support from traditional healers, religious leaders or community members.



Male youth who have experienced or are experiencing sexual violence (including sexual exploitation):

- may fear that confidentiality will be breached, and that family and community members (including those in their country of origin) will find out about the sexual violence
- may fear that they and/or their family will be excluded or face discrimination in the host country and their country of origin
- may fear revictimization or retaliation by the perpetrator(s) (against themselves, but also against their family and friends) in the host country and country of origin
- may feel shame, guilt and blame themselves for 'allowing' the violence to happen
- may fear that they will not be believed, will be judged or will be laughed at
- may worry about the loss of their masculinity or 'no longer being seen as a man' or, for straight survivors, being perceived to be gay, and
- may fear being 'outed' against their will to their families or communities by frontline workers if they belong to the LGBTIQ community.

|| Even if I don't have a problem with it [sexual violence] and only want to know more, if people around me hear me asking questions maybe they will think that it happened to me. ||

(Milad from Afghanistan, aged 18, FGD in Serbia)

|| If someone tells what he experienced to someone else, then this will not be a secret anymore and there is the risk that other people will make fun of him, and that person will be isolated from the community. ||

(Adama from The Gambia, aged 20, FGD in Italy)

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND GLOBAL STANDARDS

Adherence to guiding principles that already exist is crucial for the provision of effective support to survivors and to avoid doing harm. The following key principles should drive all work with survivors of sexual violence.

Guiding principle: Do no harm²⁶

Frontline workers and service providers must take every measure necessary to avoid exposing people to further harm as a result of their actions. For example, survivors should never be pushed to disclose or discuss sexual violence if they do not want to.

Guiding principles for a survivor-centred approach²⁷

All work with survivors should be guided by the survivor-centred approach, which consists of the four guiding principles outlined below. These guiding principles must be followed in every interaction between frontline workers and survivors – regardless of the specific role of the frontline worker. These principles also provide a foundation for all humanitarian actors for any programming related to sexual violence.

- » **Principle 1: Safety.** Safety refers not only to physical security, but also to a sense of psychological and emotional safety. It is important to consider the safety and security needs of each survivor, their family members and those providing them with care and support. Every person has the right to be protected from further violence.
- » **Principle 2: Confidentiality.** Confidentiality promotes safety, trust and empowerment. It reflects the belief that people have the right to choose whether or not they will tell their story, and to whom. Maintaining confidentiality means that frontline workers do not disclose any

information at any time to anyone without the informed consent of the person concerned. There are exceptions to confidentiality,²⁸ and it is very important that staff are familiar with them.

- » **Principle 3: Respect.** All those who come into contact with a survivor have a role to play in supporting that person's dignity, self-determination and empowerment. Failing to respect their dignity, wishes and rights can increase their feelings of helplessness and shame, reduce the effectiveness of interventions and cause revictimization and further harm.
- » **Principle 4: Non-discrimination.** All people have the right to the best possible assistance without discrimination on the basis of their sex, gender, age, disability, race, colour, language, religious or political beliefs, sexual orientation, status, social class or any other characteristic.

A **survivor-centred approach** aims to create a supportive environment in which the rights of every survivor are respected and in which every survivor is treated with dignity. A survivor-centred approach recognizes that every survivor:

- has equal rights to care and support
- is unique
- will react differently to their experience of sexual violence
- has different strengths, capacities, resources and needs
- has the right, appropriate to their age and circumstances, to decide who should know about what has happened to them and what should happen next, and
- should be believed and be treated with respect, kindness and empathy.

Guiding principles for working with child survivors of sexual abuse²⁹

- » **Promote the best interests of the child.** Prioritizing a child's best interest is central to their care. One crucial consideration in safeguarding their best interest is to secure their physical and emotional safety. Frontline workers and service providers must evaluate the positive and negative consequences of any actions with full participation from the child and their caregivers (as appropriate). The least harmful course of action is always preferred. All actions should ensure that the child's rights to safety and their ongoing development are never compromised.
 - » **Ensure the safety of the child.** Ensuring the physical and emotional safety of children is critical. All actions taken on behalf of a child must safeguard their physical and emotional well-being in both the short and long term.
 - » **Comfort the child.** A child who discloses sexual abuse needs comfort, encouragement and support. This means that frontline workers and service providers must be trained to handle a disclosure of sexual abuse. They should believe children who disclose sexual abuse and never blame them in any way for what they have experienced. One fundamental responsibility for frontline workers and service providers is to make children feel safe and cared for as they receive support and services.
 - » **Ensure appropriate confidentiality.** Information about a child's experience of abuse should be collected, used, shared and stored in a confidential manner. This means ensuring: the confidential collection of information; the sharing of that information in line with local laws and policies and on a need-to-know basis, and only with the permission of the child and/or caregiver; and the secure storage of case information. In some places where frontline workers and/or service providers are required under local law to report child abuse to the local authorities,
- children and their caregivers need to be made aware of these mandatory reporting procedures from the outset. There are some limits to confidentiality in situations where a child's health or safety is at risk, in order to protect the child.³⁰
- » **Involve the child in decision-making.** Every child has the right to participate in decisions that have implications for their lives. The level of a child's participation in decision-making should be appropriate to their maturity and age. Listening to their ideas and opinions should not interfere with the rights and responsibilities of caregivers to express their views on matters affecting their children. While frontline workers and service providers may not always be able to follow the child's wishes (based on best interest considerations), they should always support children, responding to them with transparency and maximum respect. In cases where a child's wishes cannot be prioritized, the reasons should be explained to the child.
 - » **Treat every child fairly and equally (principle of non-discrimination and inclusiveness).** All children should be offered the same high-quality care and treatment, regardless of their race, religion, gender, family situation or the status of their caregivers, cultural background, financial situation, or unique abilities or disabilities. They should be given every opportunity to reach their maximum potential and no child should be treated unfairly for any reason.
 - » **Strengthen the child's resilience.** Each child has unique capacities and strengths and possesses the capacity to recover. It is the responsibility of frontline workers and service providers to identify and build upon the natural strengths of the child and family as part of recovery and healing processes. Children who have caring relationships and opportunities for meaningful participation in family and community life and who see themselves as strong are more likely to recover and heal.



Global standards to strengthen accountability on violence against children

- The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* affirms that girls and boys have the **right to protection from all forms of violence**.³¹ Its *Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography* provides further **guidance on ending the sexual exploitation and abuse of children**.³²
- Several targets in the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) focus on **ending violence or harmful practices against girls and boys**. Target 16.2, in particular, aims to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children.³³
- Standard 9 of the *Minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action* addresses sexual violence and states that “Girls and boys are **protected from sexual violence**, and survivors of sexual violence have **access to age-appropriate information** as well as a **safe, responsive and holistic response**.”³⁴

HOW TO SUPPORT MALE YOUTH WHO ARE SURVIVORS OR AT RISK OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Create an enabling environment

This section provides an overview of male youth' needs and provides tips for frontline workers on how to create an enabling environment, i.e., an environment

where male youth can disclose experiences of sexual violence if they wish to do so.



A word of caution on encouraging disclosure³⁵

Disclosure is not always the best option for a survivor, nor is it always necessary for recovery. It can sometimes do more harm than good for survivors to talk about the violence that they have experienced. Refugees and migrants may not feel safe enough to disclose sexual violence when they are in transit, as they may not be ready to confront their experiences and instead wish to focus on securing their immediate needs. Their capacity to deal with the past and plan for the future is also limited as they do not feel settled yet and may be trying to move on to another place. Therapeutic interventions for survivors are unlikely to succeed when they do not feel physically and emotionally safe and when they do not have enough energy, motivation and time to manage their emotions.

As a frontline worker, your aim should be to create a safe and enabling environment that facilitates disclosure, where non-judgemental and caring people are available to provide support if and when survivors want to talk about what has happened to them.

Build trust

TRUST is crucial for the creation of an enabling environment where male youth feel comfortable enough to disclose sexual violence.³⁶ When adolescent boys and young men can develop trusting relationships with someone who is respectful and supportive, they are more willing to discuss difficult experiences such as sexual violence. Existing literature (see endnotes), interviews with key informants and discussions with young male refugees and migrants

all point to a lack of trust as a major factor in the reluctance of male survivors to disclose sexual violence.

Despite their resilience, male youth who are survivors or at risk of sexual violence often feel upset, lonely and scared. They are often under intense pressure (particularly if they have not yet reached their destination country). They want to feel a sense of safety and need support and positive role models, such as guardians, mentors and cultural mediators/ interpreters.³⁸



What would refugee and migrant children do?³⁷

A [2019 poll](#) with refugee and migrant girls and boys in Italy asked them how they would deal with sexual violence. Their answers were as follows:

- About **50%** of all respondents **would ask for professional help**
- About **20%** **would try to deal with it on their own**
- **13%** of boys **would tell friends or family**, and
- **15%** of boys **would try to ignore the problem.**

In addition to linguistic and cultural mediators, trained and supervised guardians can become trusted figures for unaccompanied boys, and mentors – ideally other male refugees and migrants – can provide the same support for young men. Guardians and mentors can support male youth, including survivors of sexual violence, by providing information and helping them navigate an unfamiliar context and overcome barriers (such as language) to seek care. This support helps to facilitate trust and can create a safe space for disclosure, if that is what the survivor wants. As a frontline worker, you have a pivotal part to play as a role model.

It can be challenging to build trusting relationships with male youth – particularly with those who are still on the move. Gaining trust depends first and foremost on your attitude and behaviour, as this will determine the quality of the relationship. To help build a trusting relationship with male youth, it is important to:

- show a genuine interest in them
- treat them with respect (this includes respecting the preferred names and pronouns of LGBTIQ

youth and not asking probing questions about sexual orientation and gender identity)

- show empathy and acceptance of, for example, their sexual orientation and gender identity or choices
- ensure confidentiality, and keep reassuring male youth that confidentiality will be maintained (many times if necessary)
- create a sense of safety
- be reliable, present and available, and
- be honest about what you can and cannot do to support the adolescent boy or young man.

Many of the reasons why young male survivors do not disclose sexual violence relate to their lack of trust that frontline workers will respect confidentiality and react in an accepting and empathetic way to a disclosure. You can ease these fears and build trust by always adhering to the principles of the survivor-centred approach (safety, respect, confidentiality and non-discrimination).

Implementing the survivor-centred approach is fundamental for building trust. By doing so, you can build a relationship that allows the survivor to move at their own pace and decide whether or not to disclose.



Important: To be able to create an enabling environment that is conducive to disclosure, frontline workers need knowledge about sexual violence against men and boys and training on the **principles of the survivor-centred approach** and its application in practice. Such training should pay particular attention to myths and assumptions related to sexual violence against men and boys (as well as women and girls) and confront any negative perceptions of and attitudes towards male survivors, including towards those who belong to the LGBTIQ community.



The importance of cultural mediators/interpreters³⁹

- Cultural mediators/interpreters, who are usually migrant and refugees themselves, facilitate understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds, including refugees, migrants and service providers. They play a key role in forging connections among refugees, migrants and frontline workers, helping to build relationships based on trust.
- They serve as role models for male youth, as they have managed to overcome the hardships that they have also experienced as refugees and migrants.
- Given the sensitive nature of working with survivors of sexual violence, as well as the need to ensure both safety and confidentiality, cultural mediators/interpreters must be well trained on the survivor-centred approach, its guiding principles and the principles of working with child survivors. It is strongly recommended, therefore, that organizations and services use only well-trained cultural mediators/interpreters who commit to safeguard confidentiality, impartiality and non-discrimination to minimize any further harm for survivors of sexual violence.
- The UNICEF gender-based violence in emergencies (GBViE) Helpdesk document [Working with mediators and translators](#) (2018) provides an overview of existing guidance, including training materials for cultural mediators/interpreters on GBV and how to support child and adult survivors.

|| They [cultural mediators interpreters] are a model because even if they went through difficult experiences, they managed to do a 'prestigious' job, overcoming difficulties. Psychologically, the fact of seeing a person who is similar to you helps to build trust and to open up. In many centres, there are no linguistic and cultural mediators, and this is a serious problem. ||

(Abdoulaye from Guinea, aged 27, FGD in Italy)



Examples of promising practice

- **WRC and UNICEF** have developed a [training curriculum for cultural mediators/interpreters \(2021\)](#) that includes modules on how to appropriately receive and manage disclosures of sexual violence by survivors of different genders and how to provide them with information on sensitized service providers.
- The NGO **Faros** has started a mentoring programme in its shelter for unaccompanied refugee boys in Athens, Greece. Staff – typically cultural mediators – mentor three or four boys in so-called 'family groups' to create a welcoming space where they can discuss their issues.

Say what you will do, and do what you say

Another important way in which you can build trust is by being reliable, spending time with male youth and giving them confidence that you will be there on a regular basis. By following up on the things you have agreed to do, and by not letting young people down, you will demonstrate that you take them seriously. Spending consistent and frequent time with male youth will also help you get to know them individually and provide a much-needed sense of continuity and safety.

Reliability also includes being honest and transparent about the limitations of the relationship and the support that you can – and cannot – provide to male youth, as well as sharing information on mandatory reporting requirements (if applicable). In contrast, making false promises, or failing to deliver on what has been agreed, can undermine trust and damage relationships.

It is easier for me to trust someone who is coming to camp every day, like our social worker, than someone who only visits from time to time. To trust someone, I need to know that that person understands the situation in the camp and is available to offer advice or help.

(Milad from Afghanistan, aged 18, FGD in Serbia)

Consider the setting with male youth

The setting in which adolescent boys and young men interact with frontline workers also matters for the development of trusting relationships. Ask male youth which setting they prefer and try to adapt to their needs where appropriate and feasible. They may prefer informal and casual settings to talk about difficult experiences, and they value having a range of ways to communicate with you. These can include face-to-face contact, helplines and online options such as email, websites, messaging applications and social media platforms.

It is important to offer spaces where male youth feel safe, can receive practical support to meet their basic needs, socialize and participate in age-appropriate educational and recreational activities that they enjoy. This helps to create settings where they feel comfortable and respected. Such settings make it easier to build a rapport with male youth and offer a good starting point for discussions about their concerns, including sexual violence. Mobile spaces and outreach services are also good options to reach male youth who are on the move. Whatever the setting, one key consideration is the need for a private space where conversations cannot be overheard.



Example of promising practice

The **Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA)**, a Serbian NGO, uses an adapted van to provide a mobile safe space and workshops on gender for boys on the move. This enables ADRA to reach multiple locations and provide a secure, private space where boys can get information on gender-related topics, and seek support if desired.

Build on existing programmes and approaches

Activities can be implemented through existing programmes to help create an enabling environment to build trust with male youth, while increasing their awareness and knowledge of sexual violence. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, any programme that works with male youth should tailor its approach to their diverse needs – including adapting its activities for different ages, different sexual and gender identities, and for different abilities.

The mix and types of activities in each setting depends on the context and available resources, but a participative assessment of the needs and circumstances of male youth is always essential, in accordance with humanitarian best practice. It is essential to actively engage with male youth about their ideas, needs and interests, and to integrate their inputs into programmes, as appropriate and feasible. All activities should be interactive to keep adolescent boys and young men engaged, and some should be short enough to cater to male youth who are on the move.



Examples of promising practice

- **The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF** have adapted the life-skills curriculum, [Boys on the Move](#), which has been rolled out successfully in Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, to target older male adolescents and young men. [Boys on the Move for Older Boys and Young Men](#) provides young men and boys with potentially life-saving information on sexual violence.
- As part of a mobile unit operating in Rome, Italy, the NGO **INTERSOS** offers life-skills education to refugees and migrants that includes awareness-raising about sexual violence.
- The NGO **Diotima** in Greece conducts creative writing workshops on consent and gender stereotypes with male youth and teaches them how to make music focused on these topics for an internet radio programme.
- In Serbia, the NGO **InfoPark** holds 'Boys Days' for adolescent refugee boys once a week. Life-skills sessions are offered, together with food and a recreational activity, such as going to the cinema. The goal is to create a safe space to discuss gender equality and violence while engaging with boys in an informal way.
- **CivicoZero Onlus**, an Italian NGO, operates a drop-in day centre for youth below 19 years of age in Rome and other cities in Italy, and is supported by **Save the Children**. In these centres, the NGO conducts sessions on the experiences of young men and boys along the migration routes in game form. This encourages participants to talk about their experiences and also serves to convey information to them on rights, options and available services.

Type of activity	Examples of activities	Creating an enabling environment
Educational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language courses Literacy/numeracy classes Financial literacy courses Training on CV writing Interview training Computer skills Sexual education, health and hygiene sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of sexual violence can be increased during discussions of related topics (e.g., gender equality, masculinity, human rights) in language courses. Skills training in areas that are important to male youth is an opportunity to build trust and discuss gender roles. Discussions on sexual education, health and hygiene with male youth provide them with important information on how their bodies work, help them learn about sexuality and health risks (such as HIV), offer space to discuss sexual violence and can help to break down the stigma surrounding these topics.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information sessions on the labour market (locally and in their destination country) Workshops on social norms in the current location and in destination countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information sessions and workshops on the realities and norms in their current location and in their destination countries offer space to discuss topics related to gender and rights. These include sexual violence and differences in gender roles and expectations between the societies in the country of origin and the host society.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life-skills programming with a focus on gender norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life-skills programming can be used to raise awareness of sexual violence, discuss gender perceptions, stereotypes and biases, address risks faced by male youth and provide information on available services. Such programmes can also provide an opportunity to create a trusting environment and support peer-to-peer social support if they take place in small groups.
Recreational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workshops on areas of interest to male youth (e.g., creative writing, music, drawing, theatre or dance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of sexual violence can be raised (and misconceptions addressed) during discussions on human rights, gender equality, violence and related topics in workshops. This could include, for example, discussing gender equality and then encouraging male youth to brainstorm and write out the benefits of gender equality or helping them to develop a theatre play to perform for the community. Workshops can help facilitate trust and offer space for discussions about difficult life experiences (e.g., male youth could draw or write songs about their life experiences and then discuss these).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sports (such as soccer, frisbee, volleyball or basketball) Games (such as bowling, board games, darts or billiards) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recreational activities and activities outside services and facilities can help make male youth feel at ease and help them gain a sense of normalcy and safety, while also giving them a positive outlet for their energy. Such activities also offer frontline workers the chance to build trust by spending time with male youth and engaging with them in a fun and informal way. Taking time for activities in an informal setting can help male youth talk about difficult life experiences, such as sexual violence. Awareness of sexual violence and related topics can be raised by discussing the interactions that take place outside services/facilities (including the way in which the host community interacts with refugees and migrants) or by discussions that are held as part of the activity (such as discussions on gender roles in a movie that you have watched together).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities outside services/facilities (such as going to town, to a cinema, for a walk, to a coffee shop, for something to eat or to a swimming pool) 	

Provide information and raise awareness

“For example, if I go for registration with the police or to register for the camp ID card, there should be someone to tell me: there is this office, or this organization, or this person, where you can get help or talk about sexual violence.”

(Ghulam from Afghanistan, aged 18, FGD in Serbia)

“If you have a project and you want other people to participate, you have to collaborate with someone who is a [informal] focal point for the community.”

(Abdoulaye from Guinea, aged 27, FGD in Italy)

Providing information on sexual violence and available services creates space for disclosure.⁴⁰

Because sexual violence against male youth often goes unaddressed, it is important to target male youth in awareness-raising. In general, they lack a clear understanding of sexual violence (including sexual exploitation) and may assume that it is only experienced by women and girls. They might not disclose experiences of sexual violence because they do not recognize themselves as victims/survivors. They may not have the words to describe their experience and may feel that they have nothing to disclose. They might also believe that their experience is unique, which makes them even more afraid to disclose, as they are unaware that sexual violence is happening to other males. They tend to be unaware of where and to whom they can turn for assistance because they have not been given information on available support and services. They may not know that their wounds – emotional as well as physical – can be treated, and may not understand the benefits of accessing care or even believe that someone can help them.

As part of your efforts to create an enabling environment for male youth, you can help to increase their awareness of:

- what constitutes sexual violence

- the fact that it happens to men and boys as well as women and girls
- its effects and the treatment available
- the availability of services for male survivors and how to access them
- the importance of accessing services, and
- the possible consequences of disclosing sexual violence and accessing services.

This knowledge allows a survivor to make an informed decision about whether or not to disclose their experiences.

While male youth often have strong feelings of fear, shame or discomfort when it comes to talking about sexual violence, the main source of information on this topic and on available support and services is often their peers. This makes it crucial to raise awareness among male youth, as this can ensure that survivors know that support is available for them. It is also important to increase awareness among the broader refugee and migrant community, as this helps to fight shame, stigma and victim-blaming, while also helping survivors to access the services and care they need.

To raise community awareness, you may consider collaborating with formal and informal community focal points and leaders, as they are highly influential and often hear about cases of sexual violence. Awareness-raising sessions should pay particular attention to negative assumptions about the sexual violence experienced by men and boys and confront perceptions of and attitudes towards male survivors, including those who belong to the LGBTIQ community.

To be effective in raising awareness about sexual violence, health and sexuality, you may need to overcome your own discomfort about discussing these topics with male youth and the larger community. Training exercises can help you to practice this skill. This is vital, because if male youth cannot talk to you about these issues, they are likely to turn to the internet, where they may well find inaccurate information and depictions of sexual relations that are unrealistic, violent and degrading (e.g., from pornography).



Important: Ensure that key information on sexual violence (including sexual exploitation) is provided in each session or activity, such as life-skills session or educational activities, to reach male youth on the move who might only attend once.



Key considerations for the provision of information on sexual violence

- Ensure that materials discussing sexual violence acknowledge that it can happen to anyone: men, women, boys, girls and those who identify as non-binary.
- Ensure that information is available in different languages, and in the formats and channels used regularly by male youth to increase accessibility, such as posters, brochures, leaflets/flyers, social media posts, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and short videos (with subtitles for the hearing impaired).
- Ensure that the materials are inclusive of different languages, literacy levels, ethnicities, gender identities and sexual orientations.
- Use information and education materials (including case studies during training sessions) that depict and include male survivors to make them relatable for male youth and show that men and boys can also be victimized.
- Be aware of cultural sensitivities around, for example, the use of words such as 'sex' or 'rape', as they may be taboo and may make male youth disengage, particularly if used in public.
- Always highlight the importance of accessing medical care within 72 hours of rape to minimize HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as this is information that could save lives.
- Provide information (such as posters, brochures, leaflets/flyers, videos or voice messages) in key locations, such as male bathrooms, information desks for newly arrived refugees and migrants, registration desks, classrooms and spaces for male youth, including in the places that refugees and migrants go to immediately upon their arrival in the country.
- Include information on common physical and psychological responses to sexual violence and how to manage emotions and behaviour to help normalize survivors' responses and reduce stigma and fears.
- Provide cross-border information on available services for male youth who are on the move.



Examples of promising practice

- [A campaign](#) by the **UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** in Italy works to inform male survivors about their rights and how to get help.
- **UNICEF** in Italy has used [U-report on the move](#), an online platform, to share simple information about sexual violence, including through a peer-to-peer approach via youth-led videos.
- In 2017, Médecins Sans Frontières (**MSF**) started awareness-raising activities on sexual violence against men and boys (and women and girls) on board the Aquarius search-and-rescue ship in the Mediterranean. These included information on the different types of sexual violence men and boys experience and the benefits to survivors of receiving medical care. As a result, the proportion of male survivors who came forward to access medical care increased significantly: from 3% in 2017 to 33% in 2018.⁴¹
- The **Center Nadja Foundation** in Bulgaria is a national coordinator for the [Miniila app](#) developed by Missing Children Europe (MCE). The Miniila app is a phone application for unaccompanied minors on the move that provides them with information on available services in different European countries.
- **Faros**, a Greek NGO, has made a video called [StaySafe](#) (available in different languages) focused on sexual exploitation specifically for refugee and migrant boys.

HANDLING DISCLOSURES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE BY MALE YOUTH⁴²

Anyone who works with male youth might receive a disclosure of sexual violence. All staff and volunteers should, therefore, be trained in the guiding principles of the survivor-centred approach and in psychological first aid (PFA) so that they can respond effectively to a disclosure. PFA uses four actions: **Prepare, Look, Listen and Link**. While formal training on PFA is not

an absolute requirement to support survivors, it is strongly recommended.

PFA is particularly useful in relation to disclosures of sexual violence (including sexual exploitation) that happened in the past, e.g., in the survivor's country of origin or during their journey to Europe, and for cases where the abuse is recent or ongoing.



For more detailed guidance on PFA consult the ['How to support survivors of gender-based violence when a GBV actor is not available in your area: A step-by-step guide for humanitarian practitioners'](#) and download the app.

Prepare⁴³

Preparation is vital for the effective handling of disclosures.

Ideally, the following preparations should be undertaken from the outset when setting up a programme that will work with male youth, so that you and all other staff are ready to receive a disclosure of sexual violence. If this has not yet happened in your specific context, with the support of your organization, advocate for it to happen as soon as possible in coordination with relevant specialists in the area (such as GBV and child protection professionals). It is important to ensure that information on available services is always up to date.

Know the referral pathways for male youth who are survivors of sexual violence (including sexual exploitation) and the key referral points for case management and coordination.⁴⁴ A mapping of existing referral pathways and GBV organizations, including child protection, refugee and migrant protection, and health and mental health services, should be undertaken. This must be completed before you start awareness-raising or the provision of services begins, as the information will help you to link male

survivors to the available services. Check with your supervisor to find out if a referral pathway that includes male survivors of sexual violence already exists in your area and, if not, advocate for its establishment.

It may be that the referral pathway is not functioning in your area, or that there are no safe, confidential and effective services for male survivors (including for LGBTIQ survivors, young men selling sex and male adolescents who are sexually exploited in the context

of selling sex). In such cases, with the support of your organization, look for other services that might be able to support young male survivors, such as psychosocial services, medical clinics, services for victims of trafficking or victims of torture, services for LGBTIQ people, HIV clinics, local sex-work organizations, civil-society organizations, public-private partnerships, online services and more. It is important to think outside the box and look at all the potential options!

Identify gaps in essential services. It is important to be aware of any gaps in, for example, health, psychosocial support, safety and security, and legal assistance for young male survivors. These may include a lack of safe shelters, insufficient capacity of service providers to care for male survivors (including LGBTIQ survivors) or a lack of trained cultural mediators/ interpreters.

Alert your organization or service to any gaps and advocate for critical gaps to be filled, e.g., by working to strengthen the capacity of existing service providers and non-traditional actors, providing increased resources, adapting existing services where possible and safe to do so, and advocating to the national government for adherence to and implementation of existing standards and principles (such as the OHCHR [Recommended principles to guide actions concerning children on the move and other children affected by migration](#)⁴⁵).

Engage male youth and other service providers to identify and address barriers to accessing services through, for example, training and awareness-raising.



Important: Your organization or service should have up-to-date cross-border referral information available and know how to make referrals or provide information about other services or organizations in transit or destination countries.



Example of promising practice

In Serbia, the **GBV Working Group members, together with a consultant engaged by UNFPA**, developed an annex document ([Additional section on prevention and protection of adolescent boys and men from GBV](#)) to the [Serbian GBV Standard Operating Procedures](#). This additional section highlights existing gaps in responding to male survivors of sexual violence and proposes ways to address these gaps.

Look⁴⁶

Looking – paying close attention to the male youth you work with – will help you to be ready to offer support when needed.

Be particularly attentive to male youth who might need support, such as those with disabilities or those belonging to the LGBTIQ community. Respectfully and discreetly reach out to those who may require support or may be struggling. **Remember that your role is not to seek out survivors of sexual violence, but to be available and equipped in case someone discloses.**

There is no rule about whether male survivors prefer to disclose to a man or a woman. Each survivor will have their own preferences, which should be respected. Some boys and men might prefer to talk to a woman about their experiences, while others will choose to disclose to a man – it is all a matter of whom they trust. Service providers should, however, ensure a gender balance when hiring or selecting people who work with male youth. They should have trained and empathetic female and male staff/volunteers, cultural mediators/interpreters, guardians and more who can interact with male youth and build trusting relationships with them.

Many frontline workers say that disclosures often happen during break times or after life-skills and other educational sessions. If you are facilitating such sessions, make sure that you let participants know that you are available for chats during breaks or after sessions, and try to engage with those who stay behind or have lot of questions.

Disclosure is a process.⁴⁷ Disclosing sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, often takes time. Survivors might provide hints or ask questions about something they “heard happened to someone else/a good friend” to test the reaction of the person they are trying to talk to about their experience.

Survivors may not disclose directly. They may say “I can’t tell you what happened” or “there are awful things happening to boys”. This may not be because they are unwilling to talk about it, but because they feel unable to put their experience into words. They may not know how to categorize the experience (they may, for example, be unsure if it was sexual violence, or be unaware that men and boys can also experience such violence) or they feel too ashamed or overwhelmed to talk about it. Some men and boys prefer to talk about being tortured, without

mentioning sexual violence explicitly. Note that torture often involves sexual components.

Adolescent boy survivors rarely disclose sexual violence explicitly. Instead, they may use statements and euphemisms to describe what happened to them. Statements and euphemisms mentioned by service providers include: “they gave me a pain that I can’t forget”, “I was humiliated in the most personal way”, “I was treated like a woman”, “they did something to me that I didn’t want”, “they did something that a man would do to his wife on the first night of marriage”, “he was too nice/ too friendly/ too attentive to me”, “he decided to go on my back”, or “I met a man, and we went to his home”. They may talk about a “friend’s” experience. But they may provide specific details, such as where the sexual exploitation took place, the amount of money exchanged and whether condoms were used. This could signal that they are, in fact, talking about their own experience.

Likewise, if a young man or a boy suddenly has more money, better clothes or new things such as cell phones and shoes, without any obvious explanation of how he obtained them, this may also indicate sexual exploitation (but not necessarily so).

Male survivors might mention certain physical or mental health issues. Be aware that bodily complaints (such as back pain, abdominal pain, and bodily pains that cannot be explained) may be related to sexual violence. Some survivors may exhibit intense anger or homophobia, or complain about “feeling crazy” or other psychological issues. As a frontline worker, you should be aware of behaviours, expressions and complaints that might indicate that a boy or man has been exposed to sexual violence. If male youth mention any physical pain, offer to get them checked by a doctor.



Important: As a frontline worker, **be attentive to these issues, statements and euphemisms**, so that you do not miss indications or disclosures of sexual violence by male youth. However, be careful not to assume anything, and be aware that there could be other explanations for the person’s behaviour. **NEVER pressure the person to disclose** sexual violence or tell you more than they feel comfortable with sharing, as this **may cause serious harm**.

Listen⁴⁸

Stay calm, be supportive and listen to the survivor, without judgement or probing.

If a survivor discloses to you, do not press him for details about the incident and do not provide advice on what he should or should not do. **Let the survivor tell his own story and do not interrupt.** How he tells his story may be confusing and may not make complete sense to you, but allow him to talk. You can sensitively ask a few questions afterwards to clarify what happened. **But you do not need a lot of details and it is not your job to 'discover the truth'.**

In cases where mandatory reporting applies, you may need to stop survivors from telling you everything until they understand this. Treat all information shared by the survivor with confidentiality, but also be clear on the limits of confidentiality in your context. See the box on the '*Mandatory reporting of sexual violence*' on page 32 for more details.



Important: Remember to **DO NO HARM!** Only qualified professionals should provide counselling to survivors.

Your reaction to a disclosure can have a big impact on the survivor's recovery. A supportive response can help to facilitate the recovery and healing process, while a negative, dismissive or unsupportive response can be deeply harmful. It is important to always use a **survivor-centred approach** when interacting with the survivor (see section on '*Guiding principles*' on page 13) and use healing statements (see below) when they have finished speaking. You should:

- **reassure the survivor that you believe him** and that his feelings (e.g., "going crazy", feeling guilty or ashamed) and reactions (e.g., anger, fear, having nightmares, feeling inexplicable pain), are normal responses to sexual violence
- **use healing statements** such as "I believe you", "I am sorry this happened to you", "this was not your fault", and "I am glad that you told me"
- emphasize that what happened **was not his fault** and that he is not "less of a man/boy" because of it
- support him by **highlighting his courage** for having disclosed the incident and his resilience and strength to cope with this experience (he may be young, but has already experienced a lot and may well show incredible resilience and maturity)
- stress **that this experience does not define him** by reminding him that he is the same person as he was before the incident and that while this experience is now part of his life and he cannot change this, he can overcome it
- mention that **many other men and boys have gone through similar experiences** (he is not alone), and that many of them have found ways of coping and have gone on to lead successful lives
- explain to the survivor that confidential, non-judgemental **support is available** (where appropriate), and
- clarify that accessing response services **does not mean that he cannot continue his journey** afterwards.



For more detailed guidance on how to respond to disclosures, including guidance on confidentiality and consent for adolescents, please refer to the sections 'Listen' and 'Supporting children and adolescents under 18 years' in the [GBV Pocket Guide](#) (available in PDF and as a smartphone application).

Link⁴⁹

When supporting a survivor, encourage him to make his own decisions about the next steps, who to consult and when and why to do so.

It is **NOT YOUR JOB TO GIVE ADVICE** (e.g., your opinion or suggestions on what the survivor should do or not do). But it is your responsibility to provide accurate information on available services and support, while also being clear about mandatory reporting requirements where they exist (see box on 'Mandatory reporting of sexual violence' on page 32). Always ask the survivor (or his non-offending caregiver, if appropriate) for consent before referring him to anyone else. Respect his wishes at all times and do not pressure him to access services or support if he does not want them or is not ready for this. Explain that he can also access services at a later point.

Information about services should be given to all survivors in a language and manner that they understand (including verbal information, written information, pictures, sign language, and more), and in an age- and development-appropriate way.⁵⁰

Survivors of sexual violence often need different types of services to support their recovery process and reduce the risks of any further violence. Referral pathways should contain any available services in the following sectors.

Health

Sexual violence, especially rape, is a **medical emergency** requiring treatment as soon as possible, ideally within 72 hours of the incident to minimize HIV transmission (post-exposure prophylaxis or PEP), to treat potential sexually-transmittable infections, to address any other injuries, and to collect forensic evidence for judicial processes, if desired. For transgender men and transgender adolescent boys, emergency contraception is essential to prevent pregnancy.

Mental health and psychosocial support

Crisis support is needed, as well as longer-term emotional and practical support, to assist the survivor (and his family, where applicable) in the recovery process.

Safety and security

Protection is needed for survivors (and their family, where applicable) who are at risk of further violence. This could include relocation, the provision of safe shelters and care arrangements, or support from the police.

Legal assistance

Support from legal or law enforcement services is needed to assist survivors to claim legal rights and protections, e.g., through criminal investigation and prosecution.



Important: If the survivor's experience matches the definition of torture, referral to specialized services for victims of torture should be considered, and specific available legal options should be explored.



For more detailed guidance on the provision of multisectoral services for men, boy, and LGBTIQ survivors, please refer to WRC's [Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and LGBTIQ+ Persons in Humanitarian Settings: A Field-friendly Guidance Note by Sector](#).

Your organization or service should identify and provide information on education and livelihood opportunities to support survivors (and their family, where applicable) in living independently, safely and in dignity. It should also provide information on durable solutions (e.g., on the asylum process, including resettlement, local

integration or repatriation, and assistance in obtaining documentation) where available.

After you have made a referral, the service provider concerned should let you know that the referral has been received.



Important: Once you have referred a survivor, **DO NOT** follow up with him to find out how the referral went (e.g., by calling or messaging him). This is strongly discouraged, as it could put the survivor at risk of further harm – be it physical or psychological – from the perpetrator(s) or others who might find out about the sexual violence. If you are not the case manager, you should also not expect any information from the service providers you referred the survivor to, other than a confirmation that the referral has been received.



For more detailed guidance on how to link survivors to multisectoral services, including guidance on confidentiality and consent for adolescents, please refer to the sections 'Link' and 'Supporting children and adolescents under 18 years' in the [GBV Pocket Guide](#) (available in PDF and as a smartphone application).



Supporting young male survivors in transit⁵¹

When you are supporting young male survivors who consider themselves as being in transit, your **key actions** are to:

- **create a sense of safety** for survivors in their current location
- **provide psychological first aid (PFA)** to them, including healing statements and information on positive coping strategies and on how to manage trauma-related symptoms such as acute distress and self-harming behaviour, and
- **help survivors access relevant services** by giving them (or their family, if appropriate) information on available services and support in their current location as well as in other transit and destination countries.

If a young male survivor consents to being referred to another service or organization in another transit country or his destination country, you can follow these basic steps:

- **contact the focal person** of the service or organization **by phone**
- **provide them with the relevant information** on the case, and
- **ask the survivor if you can also share the information in writing** (e.g., by email) with the focal person of the other organization or service.



For more detailed guidance on cross-border care, safety and risk mitigation, consult the GBV AoR Helpdesk resource [Cross-Border Care, Safety and Risk Mitigation for Child and Adolescent Survivors on the Move: Practical Guidance for Frontline Services and Workers](#).



Important: You and your colleagues may feel discouraged by not being able to provide longer-term support for young male refugees and migrants because they are on the move. But it is important to remember that **every bit of support you can provide counts**.



Example of promising practice

In Greece, Médecins Sans Frontières (**MSF**) offers a comprehensive care package, including vaccination, prophylaxis to prevent sexually-transmitted infections and mental health support for survivors of sexual violence (maximum 6 sessions). The package gives them tips on how to manage their symptoms, including during their journey, and how to mitigate further risk. Any medicines required are provided for several months if needed to ensure that survivors who have started a medical treatment can continue it while on the move. MSF also provides survivors with an information booklet for safe travels (when applicable) and places to find free care in Europe.⁵²

A note on engaging parents, caregivers or guardians⁵³

A child's non-offending family, caregiver or guardian can play a key role in a survivor's recovery from sexual violence and it is, therefore, important to engage them. Parents and legally appointed caregivers and guardians also have the right to make decisions about the care provided to the child until the child reaches the legal age of consent and/or adulthood, according to local laws.

When engaging with parents, caregivers or legally appointed guardians in responding to a disclosure of sexual violence by a child, every action should be shaped by the guiding principle of the best interest of the child.



Important: Only **non-offending caregivers** should be involved in decision-making, and only if this is in the child's best interest.



For detailed guidance on how to handle disclosures from children and adolescents, refer to the section 'Supporting children and adolescents under 18 years' in the [GBV Pocket Guide](#) (available in PDF and as a smartphone application).



Mandatory reporting of sexual violence⁵⁴

- Mandatory reporting **refers to state laws and policies that oblige specific agencies and/or professionals** (e.g., health personnel) **to report actual or suspected cases of sexual violence** to law enforcement authorities or child protection services, even without the consent of the survivor.
- Mandatory reporting requirements for cases of sexual violence, especially those involving adult survivors, **can undermine the survivor-centred approach** as reporting may violate confidentiality and the principle of informed consent and may not respect the wishes, rights and dignity of the survivor.
- Mandatory reporting also **has a range of potential negative consequences for survivors** that include deterring survivors from disclosing sexual violence or accessing services and exposing them to further violence and harm.
- **Frontline staff should be familiar with the mandatory reporting requirements** for sexual violence against adult and child survivors, as well as the reporting procedures in their context, and **explain these clearly to survivors**.
- While **national laws regarding mandatory reporting should be followed**, it is **important to highlight that mandatory reporting may not always be in the survivor's best interest** and **might even place them in danger** if there are insufficient or no measures in place to guarantee their safety and dignity. As a result, **frontline staff should report cases of sexual violence to their supervisor** and check the appropriate course of action with them. For mandatory reporting of cases involving **child survivors, the best interest of the child should always be the primary consideration**.

ANNEXES

Annex 1. Potential impacts of sexual violence on men and boys⁵⁵

- Physical**
- Sexually-transmitted infections, including HIV
 - Damage (including scars) to genitals and rectum
 - Other physical injuries
 - Damage to reproductive capacity
 - Problems urinating or defecating
 - Chronic pain (e.g., back pain, headaches)
 - Sexual dysfunction
 - For transgender men and adolescent boys: pregnancy

- Psychological**
- Feelings of shame, guilt, fear, anger, humiliation, powerlessness, hopelessness and confusion
 - Anxiety
 - Depression
 - Suicidal thoughts
 - Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
 - Self-harming behaviour (e.g., substance abuse)
 - Mood swings
 - Nightmares
 - Insomnia
 - Flashbacks
 - Loss of concentration
 - Auditory and visual hallucinations
 - Loss of self-esteem
 - Feeling numb
 - Fear of certain people who remind the survivor of the perpetrator(s)
 - Attention problems
 - Eating problems (such as binge eating or loss of appetite)
 - Lack of personal care
 - Dissociation and derealization

- Social**
- Difficulties in maintaining relationships
 - Marital and family problems
 - Stigma
 - Blame
 - Ridicule and humiliation
 - Ostracism
 - Death threats
 - Violence from family and community members
 - Violent behaviour towards others
 - Aggressive outbursts
 - Aversion to being touched
 - Withdrawal
 - Isolation
 - Delinquency
 - Conduct problems
 - Disobeying or disrespecting authority
 - Running away from institution/home

- Economic**
- Inability to work
 - Loss of livelihood
 - Changes in performance at school and work
 - Increased absence from school, work or services
 - Dropping out of school or services (such as accommodation)

Annex 2. Definitions and terminology

- Child sexual abuse** refers to “any form of sexual activity with a child by an adult or by another child who has power over the child.” By this definition, it is possible for a child to be sexually abused by another child. Child sexual abuse often involves body contact. This could include sexual kissing, touching and oral, anal or vaginal sex. Not all sexual abuse involves body contact, however. Forcing a child to witness rape and/or other acts of sexual violence, forcing children to watch pornography or show their private parts, showing a child private parts (“flashing”), verbally pressuring a child for sex and exploiting children as prostitutes or for pornography are also acts of sexual abuse.”⁵⁶
- Gender-based violence (GBV)** describes “an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between males and females. The term ‘gender-based violence’ is primarily used to underscore the fact that structural, gender-based power differentials between males and females around the world place females at risk for multiple forms of violence. As agreed in the [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#) (1993), this includes acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”⁵⁷
- LGBTIQ** is the acronym used in this field guide to refer to gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer persons. While UNICEF and WRC recognize that the ‘L’ for *lesbian* in the LGBTIQ acronym does not apply to the population covered in this field guide (adolescent boys and young men), the acronym is used because it is well known among frontline workers in the European migration context. *Transgender* is “an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation.”⁵⁸ *Intersex* is a term that refers to a wide range of natural bodily variations that differ from culturally established standards of maleness and femaleness. While some of these traits are visible (e.g., some variations of the genitalia), others may not be visible at all (e.g., variations of chromosomes).⁵⁹ The term *queer* refers to people with fluid gender identities and sexual orientations.⁶⁰ *Non-binary* refers to “an adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary people do.”⁶¹
- Male youth** is the term used in this field guide to refer to male refugee and migrant youth. The United Nations defines youth as the period between 15 and 24 years of age. It comprises, therefore, older male adolescents (15–17) – who are minors and therefore entitled to protection under the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) – and young men (18–24).⁶²
- A **migrant** is defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.”⁶³
- Rape** is defined as “physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration – even if slight – of the vagina, anus, or mouth with a penis or other body part. It also includes penetration of the vagina or anus with an object. Rape includes marital rape and anal rape/sodomy.”⁶⁴
- Refugee** is a term that describes “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” Refugees are protected under the 1951 [Refugee Convention](#) and its 1967 [Protocol](#).⁶⁵
- Sexual exploitation** refers to “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes. This includes profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another person. Some types of forced/coerced prostitution call fall under this category.”⁶⁶
- Sexual exploitation of children** includes the exploitative use of children in prostitution, defined under Article 2 of the [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) as “the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration.”⁶⁷

- **Sexual violence** refers to “at least, rape/attempted rape, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Sexual violence is *any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic a person’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless or relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.* Sexual violence takes many forms, including rape, sexual slavery and/or trafficking, forced pregnancy, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and/or abuse, and forced abortion.”⁶⁸
- **Survivor** describes a person who has experienced gender-based violence or sexual violence. The term reinforces the person’s resilience and is, therefore, preferred to the term “*victim*” in the psychological and social support sectors.⁶⁹
- **Torture** refers to “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.” In some instances, sexual violence against men and boys in the context of migration may amount to torture.⁷⁰
- **Unaccompanied boys** are minors who are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.⁷¹
- **Young people who sell sex** is a term recommended by the World Health Organization when referring to people aged 10 to 24, including children aged 10 to 17, who are sexually exploited, and young adults aged 18 to 24 who are sex workers.⁷² In this field guide, the phrase “**male adolescents who are sexually exploited in the context of selling sex**” is used when referring to minors.

Annex 3. Useful resources

- [Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and LGBTQI+ Persons in Humanitarian Settings: A Field-friendly Guidance Note by Sector](#) (Women’s Refugee Commission, 2021)
- [Boys on the move: A trainer’s handbook for implementation of a Life Skills Programme for Unaccompanied Male Adolescents](#) (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2019)
- [Boys on the move: A trainer’s handbook for implementation of a Life Skills Programme for Unaccompanied Adolescents Boys and Young Men](#) (UNFPA and UNICEF, 2019)
- [Cross-Border Care, Safety and Risk Mitigation for Child and Adolescent Survivors on the Move: Practical Guidance for Frontline Services and Workers](#) (GBV AoR, 2020)
- [GBV Pocket Guide](#) (GBV Guidelines and GBV AoR, 2018)
- [GBV Constant Companion](#) (Shelter Cluster, 2019)
- [Need to Know Guidance: Working with Men and Boy Survivors of Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Forced Displacement](#) (UNHCR, 2012)
- [Supporting Survivors of Violence: The role of linguistic and cultural mediators. A training curriculum with a focus on gender-based violence and sexual violence against men and boys](#) (Women’s Refugee Commission and UNICEF, 2021)
- [10 Insights from Discussions with Boys and Young Men Traveling to Italy on Sexual Violence](#) (Women’s Refugee Commission and UNICEF, 2019)
- [12 Questions and Answers About Sexual Violence](#) (UNICEF 2018)

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