



## Forced migration and sexual and gender-based violence

### Executive summary

**More than 114 million individuals have been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations by 2024**, around half being female.

Women, girls and LGBTQI+ communities face specific vulnerabilities in forced migration including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Men and boys can also be victims. **The exact proportion of forced migrants experiencing SGBV is unknown but thought to exceed 50%.**

Over 300 survivors and service providers were interviewed for the SEREDA project. The project sheds light upon forced migrants' experiences of SGBV and the actions needed to protect forced migrants and to aid their recovery.

Multiple types of violence in addition to SGBV were evident at different stages of forced migration along a continuum of violence. These included **restriction of movement, physical and verbal abuse, humiliation, torture, starvation, human organ trafficking and slavery, sexual violence, labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, blackmailing, being thrown into the sea (or threat of), deprivation of possessions including medicines and official papers, or being left in the desert.**

**Incidents of SGBV took place in the country of origin, transit countries, during the journey and/ or in the UK.** Most perpetrators were men, often connected to state security apparatus or in smuggling gangs or as partners or family. Some respondents reported an intensification of intimate partner violence (IPV) post-conflict. Some individuals encountered multiple forms of violence over time and place and at the hands of different perpetrators.

**Lengthy and gender-insensitive asylum and immigration systems exacerbated existing trauma, generated new trauma and sometimes increased victims' vulnerability to further SGBV.** Immigration systems encouraged violent dependency of victims on perpetrators who threatened them with deportation if they were not obedient. LGBTQI+ populations faced homophobic and transphobic abuse from both residents and staff in the asylum system.

**Unstable and unsafe mixed-gender housing, and lack of or inappropriate, shelter increased risks of SGBV.** Fear of deportation back to harms including honour-based violence intensified trauma. The absence of suitable care for traumatised forced migrants left some to self-harm or attempt suicide. Lack of permission to work or learn left victims isolated, impoverished and more vulnerable to exploitation.

### Policy recommendations

1. Recognise that violence extends beyond conflict into flight and refuge and introduce appropriate mechanisms to protect forced migrants when they reach the UK.
2. Ensure SGBV victims are not further harmed in the UK - appoint an entity to oversee their treatment in UK immigration and asylum systems.
3. Increase SGBV and trauma sensitivity - train all professionals working with victims, including within immigration and health services to identify SGBV victimisation and to treat victims appropriately.
4. Facilitate victim-centred and proactive service delivery – services must focus on the needs of forced migrant victims including their protection from further abuse.

5. Use a non-discriminatory approach to forced migrant SGBV victims – ensure they receive the same protections as all people resident in the UK.

### About the research

The Sexual and gender-based violence in the refugee crisis: from displacement to arrival (SEREDA) project interviewed over 100 forced migrant SGBV victims, and over 50 service providers working with victims in the UK, between 2018 and 2024. Three online workshops were held with practitioners to co-produce recommendations focussing on improving the lives of UK-resident forced migrant SGBV victims.

The research highlighted key challenges created by the UK immigration system faced by forced migrants SGBV victims:

- **Violent dependency was encouraged.** Forced migrant women who joined husbands with refugee status on a spousal visa had No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and lived with the threat of deportation if the marriage broke down. LGBTQI+ victims felt compelled to be in relationships in order to prove their sexual diversity. Refused asylum seekers not in receipt of housing or support relied on exploitative relationships for survival while others engaged in transactional sex to survive, especially LGBTQI+ victims.
- **The asylum process was traumatic.** Lengthy waits, sometimes of many years, for a decision on their asylum case and inability to work or study while waiting exacerbated psychological distress. Many respondents lacked day to day distractions which could provide relief from living in fear of being returned to persecution. Gender insensitive asylum interviews by male caseworkers and/or with male interpreters prevented women victims from disclosing SGBV experiences. Some groups were found to encounter increased risks of vulnerability

and discrimination during asylum interviews, for example LGBTQI+ victims.

- **Housing was risky and unstable.** Given that many victims had experienced SGBV at the hands of men, being housed in mixed gender accommodation was problematic. LGBTQI+ victims also needed access to safe, specialist housing to avoid SGBV from co-ethnic communities. Many spoke of bathrooms and bedrooms without locks, abusive staff who walked in unannounced, and sexual harassment. Dispersal and re-dispersal away from support networks undermined psychological wellbeing and important connections with friends, NGOs and/or healthcare providers.

[See the full report here.](#)

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