

TOOLKIT

*Recognition, detection and
referral of signs of sexual
violence in (Ukrainian)
refugees*

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Foreword

On 8 March 2022, in collaboration with other human rights organisations, the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men published an opinion piece focusing on the specific vulnerability of Ukrainian refugees to (sexual) violence and on the need for a specific policy to protect them from it.

In the meantime, various initiatives had already been launched. These not only consisted of campaigns to raise awareness, but also psychosocial and sociocultural projects intended to lend potential victims a listening ear in an extremely accessible, confidential and culturally sensitive way, to make it possible to discuss situations (such as violence) and to detect any need for assistance that may exist.

By means of this toolkit, we aim to provide professionals with a practical source of reference when providing assistance or when referring potential victims of violence (including sexual violence) to other organisations. The toolkit was developed in collaboration with various migrants' organisations with relevant expertise, as well as with Ukrainian refugees themselves. We therefore wish to pass on our heartfelt thanks to those organisations, namely FMDO vzw, *Elles sans frontières asbl*, CIRÉ asbl, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, *La Voix des Femmes* and to the Ukrainian refugees for their important contributions.

The specific psychosocial, *outreach* projects of FMDO vzw, *Elles sans frontières asbl* and *La Voix Des Femmes* referred to in this toolkit are supported by the Flemish Minister for Equal Opportunities, the Brussels State Secretary for Equal Opportunities and the Minister of Equal Opportunities of the French Community.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Belgium has already welcomed a large number of Ukrainian refugees, who have been accommodated either with members of their own family, with host families or in the context of reception initiatives. Refugees, however, are extremely vulnerable to sexual violence, even outside the context of human trafficking. The UN-MENAMAIS study requested by Belspo¹ showed that **84%** of those requesting international protection had already experienced sexual violence and that **61%** of them had experienced such violence during the previous 12 months. At that point in time, the majority of victims were already residing in Belgium. **21.1%** of the total number of rape cases reported and **17.7%** of sexual assaults took place after their arrival in Belgium. Victims **do not however report such types of violence** to the formal authorities and **only seek help in extremely rare cases**. In addition, professionals coming into contact with refugees do not always find it easy to **recognise, detect and make it possible to discuss** signs of potentially violent situations.

For that very reason, the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men developed this **toolkit**, which provides very accessible, practical and culturally sensitive questions that form a **source of inspiration for point-of-contact and first-line professionals²** as a **means of starting up a conversation** with (Ukrainian) refugees³ and as a means of learning how to recognise and detect potentially **problematic or violent situations**. The toolkit also includes a list of practical questions concerning how individuals can be referred to other psychosocial and sociocultural *outreach* initiatives (such as discussion groups and workshops). The aim of those initiatives is to provide an accessible means of creating a climate of trust/a nurturing environment, in order to help victims to get things off their mind, meet others in a similar situation and gather the courage to initiate discussion about situations involving violence. The toolkit was developed in collaboration with partners from a variety of migrants' organisations and with a number of refugees from Ukraine.

At the same time, the toolkit is in keeping with the recommendations published by the Institute concerning initiatives needed in order to protect these vulnerable refugees from violence (or sexual violence).



Important

- Refugees are **additionally vulnerable** to sexual violence.
- **84%** of persons requesting international protection have already experienced sexual violence.
- **61%** experienced that violence during the past 12 months.
- **21.1%** of rape cases reported and **17.7%** of sexual assaults took place after their arrival in Belgium.
- Not a single victim reported these cases to the formal authorities (such as the police).
- Only in extremely rare cases did victims seek professional help.

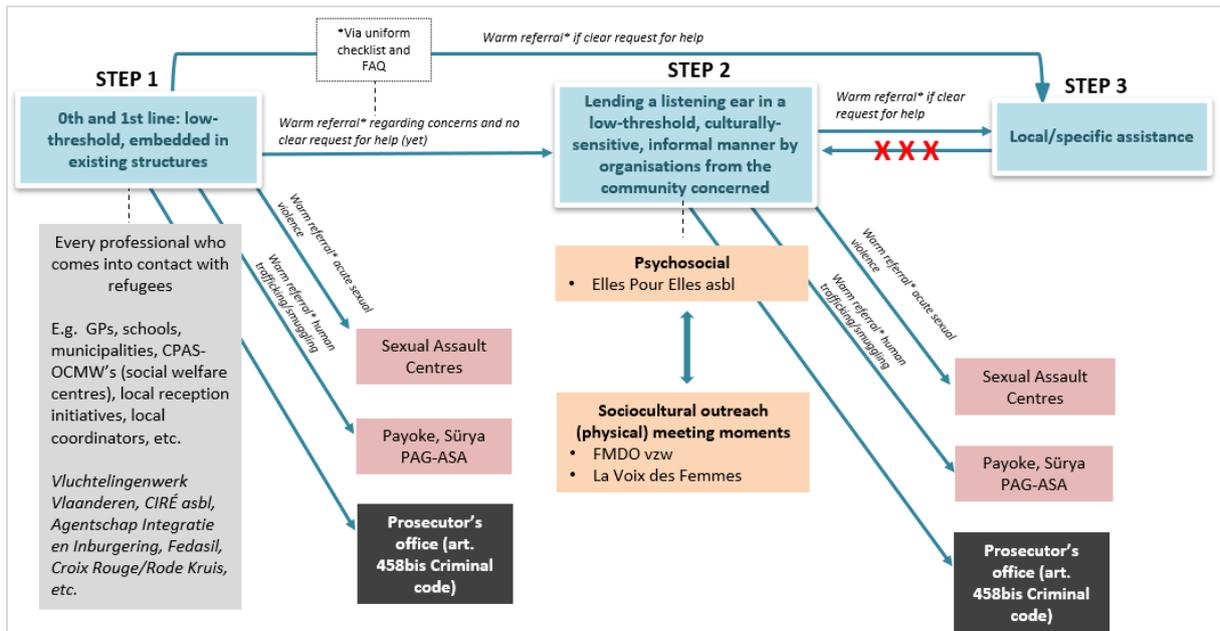
¹ BRAIN-be. (2021). UN-MENAMAIS: Understanding the mechanisms, nature, magnitude and impact of sexual violence in Belgium.

² Though it is intended for first-line professionals, this toolkit can also serve as a guide for others closely connected to this target group, such as teachers, buddies, host families and so on.

³ This toolkit was developed in the context of various policy initiatives being taken in connection with the war in Ukraine, but it can also be used by any professional who may come into contact with a refugee who (potentially) was a victim of violence (or sexual violence).

I. Referral procedure

In the recommendations published by the Institute, the procedure concerning the possible referral options to protect vulnerable Ukrainian refugees from sexual violence are illustrated by means of the *infographic* below. Each step is explained individually and accompanied by a number of examples, in Section 2.



A visual presentation of the possible referral options for the purpose of protecting Ukrainian refugees.

II. Toolkit

STEP 1. Intake via preliminary and first-line services

A. Beforehand

- You will have an **initial conversation (by telephone or in person)**. This may take place in the context of your work within a Public Centre for Social Welfare, as a doctor (or general practitioner), as an employee of the information line operated by Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, of the Red Cross, CIRÉ asbl, as a teacher, etc.
- The person will contact you with **all manner of questions and concerns** (such as questions regarding accommodation, legal issues, questions about their children, car problems and so on).
- You must be attentive at all times to (possible) **situations of victimhood** affecting the person in question and/or their children (if any).

- A few tips:



General tips when involved in a discussion (see section ‘B. Possible questions’ in this document’):

- Use culturally sensitive and gender-neutral language (avoid speaking in terms of ‘we’ and ‘they’).
- Avoid language that is stigmatising or insulting.
- Avoid words such as ‘victim’, ‘perpetrator’ and ‘(sexual) violence’. ‘Victims’ often find it difficult to identify themselves as such. Terms of that type are often felt to be of ‘too great a magnitude’ as a means of describing how ‘victims’ view the situation.
- Start off by asking general questions (such as a few icebreakers, some examples can be found in Section B of this document). Depending on how the conversation progresses, you can go on to ask more specific questions.
- Create an atmosphere of trust and emphasise the confidential nature of the relationship.



Tips when using an interpreter⁴

If a person has recourse to an interpreter, it is important that the person concerned is an officially registered interpreter who has a command of the spoken language and is familiar with the taboos surrounding sexual violence, sexuality and so on within the culture of the person concerned. In ideal situation, the interpreter will also be familiar with the use of sensitive wordings, terminology and non-verbal communication within the culture concerned.



Tip: Allow the person concerned to stay in control

Refugees have experienced traumatic events. They have lost their ability to influence and control the situation they find themselves in. A situation of violence is always an extremely far-reaching, traumatic event, in which the person loses control over the situation.

For that reason, you must reassure the person and avoid minimising their situation. Always allow the person to control the situation. Give him/her the choice to determine whether assistance is desirable (unless situations of the type referred to in Article 458bis are involved; see below).

⁴ Though these tips have been applied here when using an interpreter, culturally sensitive communication of this type is also important in the case of other types of professions who come into contact with asylum seekers and refugees.

B. Possible questions that can be used to start off a discussion and to detect signs of violence

➤ A few examples of possible icebreakers:

- How are you? How is your health overall?
- Do you feel OK talking to me today?
- What is your family situation like at the moment?

>>> *Examples of more detailed questions that can then be used:*

- Did you come to Belgium on your own or did other members of your family come with you?
 - If the children also came along, you may wish to ask questions such as the following:
 - How are your children/other family members (such as grandparents)?
 - How do your children/other family members feel about being here?
 - Are your children going to school here?
 - How are things going at school?
- How did you travel to Belgium?
 - >>> *Examples of more detailed questions that can then be used:*
 - When travelling to Belgium, did you also travel through any other countries?
- When did you arrive in Belgium?
- Do you have a place here in Belgium where you feel safe?
- Do you have any hobbies that you do here or other opportunities to take part in leisure activities?
- Do you have any people here with whom you 'can have a chat with'?
 - Is there someone you can speak to in confidence in your own language?
 - Do you know any other people here who are in the same situation as you?



Important

When asking questions of this type, it is important to put the person at his/her ease. He/she may, for example, be afraid of losing his/her place with a host family or in accommodation for asylum seekers or refugees.

➤ Examples of specific questions:

- Questions relating to a person's living situation:
 - Where/in what way are you living here?
 - For example, are you living with a host family?
 - >>> *If yes, → ask questions such as the following:*
 - How many family members are there?
 - For example, is it a single person?
 - How are things going within the host family?
 - Do you have enough space to do 'your own thing'?
 - For example, do you have sufficient privacy (such as a separate room to sleep in)?

- Have the rules within your host family changed since you arrived?
 - Is your freedom restricted or has someone threatened to restrict your freedom?
 - Do you sometimes get the feeling that you're being watched?
- Are there tensions within the host family at times?
 - In what way?
- Do you feel safe in your host family?
 - Have you ever felt unsafe or afraid?
- To what extent do you feel safe and/or sufficiently confident to state your own boundaries?
- Are there certain types of behaviour that are rather unusual?
 - If so, what are they?
- Do you sometimes question or are you sometimes shocked by certain behaviours within your host family or by certain members of that family?
 - What types of behaviour are involved?
 - For example, you could gauge whether the person is required to carry out household tasks and how he/she feels about this; how often that is the case and so on.
 - You could also elicit whether the person has sufficient privacy (for activities such as changing their clothing, showering, a separate (sleeping) room);
 - You could also elicit whether the person has ever been threatened with losing his/her accommodation with a host family or in a centre for refugees or asylum seekers.

- You could also ask whether the person is living in a reception centre (such as a hotel or centre for asylum seekers or refugees).

>>> *If yes, → ask questions such as the following:*

- How are things going at the reception centre?
- Are there sometimes tensions?
 - In what way?
- Have you ever felt unsafe or afraid there?
- Do you sometimes question or are you sometimes shocked by the behaviour of other people at the reception centre?

- Have you ever been shocked by certain behaviours of or requests by people around you or by people in Belgium?
- Have you ever been shocked by certain behaviours of or requests by people around you while fleeing from your home country?

C. Possible outcomes of the discussion

You have no suspicions.

You have a good discussion with the person concerned. You have no suspicions that any violence or transgressive behaviour has taken place.

If you have your suspicions, but are in doubt.

! Be alert to the following signs:

- The person states that he/she does not feel OK or feel safe to talk. For example, in his/her responses, the person is doubtful about the questions being asked or is reticent whenever questions are asked.
- The person shows signs of tensions or of feeling unsafe within the host family or in the reception centre.
- The person makes it known that he/she has little or no privacy (for example, he/she sleeps in a room with a member of the family and has no privacy when getting dressed or undressed).
- The person reveals signs of controlling behaviour within the host family (e.g. not being allowed to go shopping on their own).
- You have a 'gut feeling that something isn't right'.
- Alternatively, the person may themselves state that they have a further need for a discussion (such as about psychosocial aspects) or for a social activity.

⇒ In such cases, you should refer the person to the organisations listed under 'Step 2' by means of a warm referral:

- Or you can yourself give the presumed victim the contact details of a person within the organisation concerned
- Or you can ask for permission from the presumed victim to share his/her contact details with a contact within the organisation concerned.

The person reveals signs of violence (see Step 3 in this document)

- Ascertain whether this involves an offence as defined in **Article 458bis** of the Belgian Criminal Code*.
- **Refer the person to existing forms of assistance**, including (but not limited to):
 - Cases of acute sexual violence: Sexual Assault Centres (SAC's) (within a month after the violence occurred)
 - Cases involving human trafficking: Payoke, PAG-ASA, Sürya
 - Cases involving other forms of violence: e.g. Centre for general welfare work (CAW), Centre for mental health care (CGG);
 - In cases of unwanted pregnancy following events such as rape: abortion centres (Luna, *Centre de Planning Familial*, Zanzu, etc.);



***In cases involving an offence as defined in Article 458bis of the Belgian Criminal Code⁵:**

- Care providers, doctors, confidential counsellors are bound to the rules governing the **professional duty of confidentiality**. If, however, they learn of serious and threatening acts of sexual violence as defined in Article 458bis of the Belgian Criminal Code involving minors or vulnerable persons, an exception to that duty of confidentiality will, in principle, apply.
- If you are informed of sexual violence of that type committed against minors or vulnerable persons and you are of the opinion that the case involves:
 - severe violence or an imminent threat to the safety and integrity of the victim, or
 - if the victim is psychologically incapable of managing the situation, or
 - if sexual violence may possibly have been committed against other victims, you may consider setting aside your duty of professional confidentiality and acting in accordance with the statutory duty to provide assistance.
- ⇒ You must then contact the Public Prosecutor.⁶

STEP 2. Tips when referring people to psychosocial and/or sociocultural initiatives

- You have already completed an **initial conversation (by telephone or in person)** and are now in **the amber phase**:
 - You have your suspicions that the person may be a victim, but are still in doubt.
 - In such cases, you can refer the victim to:
 - (1) psychosocial and/or;
 - (2) sociocultural initiatives.
- The objective is to create an intermediate stage that precedes the actual provision of assistance, during which a nurturing environment can be created in which by lending victims a listening ear and providing them with social activities (such as workshops), they will gain sufficient confidence to initiate discussions about any situations of violence that may exist.

A. Psychosocial initiatives

For example, Elles sans frontières (Elles Pour Elles) asbl

You notice that the presumed victim needs a listening ear and is suffering from stress, worries and so on.

Possible examples of a referral:

- "I notice that [what you feel, for example, the person is reticent or stressed] ... If you would like to discuss this without any obligation, I would be happy to give you the contact details of ... so that you can talk about it in your own language."
- "Would it do you good to be able to talk about this in your own language with someone who will listen to what you have to say?"
- "Would you like an opportunity to talk about this (without obligation) with ...?"

⁵ For more information, see pages 17-20 of the 'Handleiding bij de meldcode seksueel geweld voor artsen en zorgverleners' (Manual for doctors and care providers relating to the code for the reporting of sexual violence).

⁶ For the relevant contact details, please visit <https://www.om-mp.be/nl/contacten>.

B. Sociocultural initiatives

For example, La Voix des Femmes, FMDO vzw

You have doubts or a gut feeling 'that something isn't right' and have noticed that the presumed victim needs to have a good chat and/or needs an opportunity to take their mind off the situation, to take part in social activities and leisure activities and so on.

In such cases, you refer them to organisations in Step 2, in order to create a nurturing environment in which the victim will be able to bring up any possible issues (or situations involving violence).

Possible examples of a referral:

- For example. "I have noticed that [what you feel, for example, the person is reticent or in need of social contact] ... If you would like to [take part in an activity (such as at the X workshop)/arrange to meet other people in the same situation/do something to take your mind off things] without any obligation, I would be happy to give you the contact details of ..."
- "I've noticed that you haven't yet got any way of taking your mind off things. What type of leisure activity would you like to do?"
- "I notice that you may welcome a chance to take your mind off things. I thought you might like to take part in [activity]. Might you be interested in taking part in that?"
- "Would it do you good to take part in a few social activities with other people in the same situation?"
- "Would you like to get to know more people and take part in [activity]?"
- Would you like to talk to ... [for example, by meeting in person]?"

STEP 3. Referral to standard forms of assistance

- You can **refer a person** to the organisations in Step 3 if the victim discloses violence and expresses a wish for assistance:
 - Or you can yourself give the presumed victim the contact details of a person within the organisation concerned.
 - Or you can ask for permission from the presumed victim to share his/her contact details with a contact within the organisation concerned.



Please note, that in such cases, it is important not to oblige the victim to follow a particular course of action. Always leave the control in the hands of victim.

Contact details

Elles sans frontières asbl

Avenue Brugmann 164

B-1190 Brussels

+32 (0)466 901 702*

*available on Friday afternoons from 2 to 4pm for a warm referral in Ukrainian

epe.bruksela@gmail.com

FMDO vzw

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Colophon

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