

Safeguarding people with multiple impairments

In the Middle East and North Africa: Focus refugees

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, individuals with disabilities face multifaceted challenges that hinder their participation in society. This demographic often faces marginalisation, experiencing exclusion across various social, educational, economic, cultural, and political spaces within their communities. Persons with multiple impairments may require high levels of support from caregivers or others for communication, mobility and personal care, with some requiring 24-hour caregiving; this level of support may lead to persons with multiple impairments being extremely isolated.

People with multiple impairments are at heightened risks of being subjected to safeguarding-related misconduct and Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA). This is especially true for women and girls, and these risks are heightened in times of conflict. This bitesize sets out some of the safeguarding risks and

how civil society organisations (CSOs) and humanitarian organisations can strengthen their safeguarding initiatives with and for people with multiple impairments. This is part of our disability-inclusive safeguarding series.

Safeguarding risks for refugees with multiple impairments

- People with multiple impairments are require support from other people and may not be able to leave a conflict zone on their own. Families or caregivers may not have the strength or the means to assist them. Therefore, they are at risk of being left behind, becoming isolated, and at a high risk of exploitation and abuse.
- People with multiple impairments and their caregivers attempting to flee or relocate very often face difficulties due to disrupted infrastructure, inaccessible

Defining multiple impairments

People with multiple impairments tend to have two or more of the following conditions:

- Sensory impairments such as d/Deafness or hearing loss and/or be blind or have a visual impairment.
- Neurodiverse conditions
- Physical disabilities
- Mental health conditions
- Intellectual disabilities

A person may have related support requirements as well as two or more of the above and it is not uncommon for these categories to cross over and/or intersect.

A person can be born with an impairment(s) or may acquire an impairment following illness or injury, or they may develop with age.

Having multiple impairments often means you experience unique barriers in daily life. It may mean you need high levels of support to communicate, develop new skills and live more independently.

shelters, and transportation routes. For those who have successfully sought refuge in neighbouring countries, barriers to mobility and discrimination based on stigma may hamper their human rights.

- High levels of support from other people for personal care, communication, and/or mobility requirements can put people with multiple impairments at increased risk of SEA and limit their ability to report abuse, or if they do report to be perceived as less credible witnesses.
- People with multiple impairments face negative disability and gender stereotyping such as being nonsexual or hypersexual. They also tend to have reduced knowledge of comprehensive sexuality education, specifically safe sex and sexual rights, putting them at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Barriers in accessing medicines and healthcare services for people with disabilities or chronic illness. The high costs of medicines may put persons with multiple impairments at risk of exploitation and abuse by people distributing medicines.
- As social and community structures break down, people with high support requirements, their families, and caregivers can become isolated. As a result, protection and SEA risks by humanitarian workers can increase.
- The lack of accessible reporting mechanisms for people with multiple impairments and their families and

caregivers may mean that abuse and misconduct go unreported and, in some cases, may become normalised.

- Information on support services for survivors of violence, including SEA, may not be well publicised or accessible, and therefore, people with multiple impairments and their families and caregivers may not have knowledge of or be able to access these services.
- The [Women's Refugee Commission](#) states that women with disabilities are at higher risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in times of humanitarian crisis.
- Refugees with multiple impairments face stigma and discrimination, placing them at higher risk of being left isolated and, therefore, at risk of SEA when seeking safe sanctuary in neighbouring countries.

Steps for improving safeguarding for persons with multiple impairments.

- Review your safeguarding policies and procedures to ensure they recognise and respond to the risks faces by people with multiple impairments.
- Ensure your Code of Conduct references the use of the 'two-adult rule' and guidance on physical contact; both are particularly relevant to people with multiple impairments.
 - 'Two Adult Rule' - this means staff will ensure a second adult is present or within reach¹ at all times.
 - Physical Contact – include a statement that ensures physical

¹ For some CSOs we recognise that the 'two-adult rule' is not always possible, in this case, the policy should include additional guidance e.g. *'where there is limited capacity to ensure the two-adult rule, we will seek informed consent from the individual and their parent/ caregiver prior to providing any physical personal support'*.

contact is appropriate, not an invasion of the individual's privacy, and that this allowance is not misused.

- Use case studies in staff training that include examples of people with multiple impairments to ensure staff are supported to understand their additional requirements and the risks they face.
- Ensure support and referral services for people with multiple impairments are mapped and well understood within the staff team.
- Due to the diverse needs of persons with multiple impairments, multiple confidential reporting pathways should be developed and well communicated, including telephone or text helplines, email, and physical spaces for reporting. Reporting mechanisms aimed at enabling people to report on behalf of others should also be developed.
- Ensure a vetted list of experienced and available support staff is developed and updated for when a safeguarding concern is raised by or on behalf of a person with multiple impairments.