

3 - Ethical and intercultural issues to be aware of when working with refugees

Aim: To raise volunteers' awareness of issues relating to refugees' background and some of the sensitivities that can arise.

Introduction

It is important to avoid raising issues that could distress members of your group or make them feel uncomfortable. If sensitive issues are raised they may give rise to conflicts within the group and cause individuals to withdraw from language support activities (see also Tool 4 *Responding appropriately to cultural difference and managing intercultural communication*).

Some topics that are commonly addressed in an open way in European societies may be considered taboo in non-European cultures. Others may be avoided or at least not discussed in public, including:

- Family status: in some cultures, being an orphan, or a single woman after a certain age, or a widow without family is considered unusual and something to be ashamed of; also, in some contexts polygamous families are accepted but family members may prefer not to talk about their situation.
- Sexual orientation is not something people are expected to talk about.
- Discussing illness or handicap, including mental disabilities, is often sensitive.

European and non-European societies may have different perceptions of gender roles and relationships within the family. For example, where extended families are the norm and there is a recognized head of the family, that person may be considered the highest authority, taking decisions for family members or expecting to be consulted before family members themselves take decisions. Also, the social status of siblings may be determined by their age and gender, and this may be reflected in the order in which they speak in a public setting or are expected to benefit from external support (see also Tool 14 *Diversity in working groups*).

Recommendations

It is advisable not to ask personal questions about refugees' situation in their country of origin or the experiences they have had travelling to Europe (see also Tool 1 *The geopolitical context of migration*). Such questions can be painful for refugees who have lost their family or a good situation in their country of origin. You should aim to create an atmosphere in which refugees feel able to express themselves and to share whatever information about themselves they consider appropriate, but expect different members of the group to behave differently. If one person talks about a lost relative or her life in her country of origin, that does not mean that all group members will be prepared to do the same.

You should not ask the refugees you are working with to talk about traumatic experiences they may have had before or after leaving their country of origin (see also Tool 24 *Identifying refugees' most urgent needs*). While travelling, circumstances may have led them to do things they are ashamed of; they may have been detained; or they may have seen such things happening to other group members. If you feel that some individuals are still suffering as a result of these experiences, the best option is to encourage

them to get help from a psychologist. When encouraging them to seek such help, you should explain the rules of confidentiality that apply in such situations.

If a refugee tells you about something illegal that happened on the road, the best option is to avoid discussing it. But you should alert the law enforcement authorities to any illegal behaviour that threatens the safety or rights of others in the group – e.g. pressure from organised crime networks, acts of revenge or conflicts that have their origin in the home country or on the road.

In Europe one is considered a child up to the age of 18, but in other contexts teenagers may be considered adults, are expected to care for themselves and establish a family as early as the age of 14. Young people aged 16–17 may tell the authorities that they are alone, even though they have relatives or family in the area, because they know that institutions in Europe provide additional support for unaccompanied minors.

In language support activities, avoid drawing attention to the literacy level of participants or their proficiency in the host country language or other languages (see also Tool 34 *Handling initial meetings with refugees: some guidelines*).

When refugees willingly talk about their country of origin or the route they took on the journey to Europe, try to avoid misunderstandings due to the spelling or pronunciation of place names. Countries, cities, rivers, seas, etc. may have different names in the refugees' own language, and refugees may not be familiar with the names used in your language. Also, they may not know how to spell European place names. Bear in mind that, if they have limited knowledge of geography, they may be more likely to say: "I went towards the north for five days, arrived in a large city and crossed the sea" than: "I travelled north 200 km, crossed the border of country X, arrived in city Y and crossed the Z Sea." If you need to elicit additional information to make sense of their accounts, try to do so without putting them in an uncomfortable position.

From what some refugees tell you in the context of language support you may conclude that they are unlikely to be granted refugee status. However, this is a matter for the relevant authorities and you should not express an opinion to individuals or other group members, even if they ask you.

Always respect the privacy of the people you are working with, but never accept practices that are contrary to human rights, the rule of law and equality between human beings.