

Evidence and tools generated to better target specific GBV prevention and response interventions-ESGs
Guidance note on Emotional Support Groups for women and girls in humanitarian settings

**Evidence and Tools Generated to Better Target Specific GBV
Prevention and Response Interventions
Emotional Support Groups – ESGs**

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ACRONYMS

ESG	Emotional Support Group
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender Based Violence
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MoSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
PSS	Psycho-Social Support
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SDC	Social Development Centre
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence

1. Introduction

Wars, crisis, and natural disasters are drivers for individual and group tension. Level of the latter will be on the rise where basic needs become scarce and individuals are deprived of all forms of protection and support. In the case of displaced population, like Syrians fleeing conflict and based in Lebanon, and their host communities, this becomes more evident. A common and grave form of violence and which has been amplified by this complex context is gender based violence (GBV) practiced within the Syrian displaced community, and between this community and local host communities. While GBV is a major problem and serious threat for individuals and groups, it constitutes a major challenge for local non-governmental organizations, international non-governmental organizations, and other service providers.

For Syrians and local host communities, several things have changed since the onset of the crisis as compared to now, at the level of knowledge of risks, needs, basic services, service providers... thus the need that responses and support actions and tools take this new reality into consideration. One general tool used to deal with trauma, and which is customizable to the context of GBV is emotional support group (ESG).

2. Definition of an Emotional Support Group

An Emotional Support Group (hereinafter ESG) is a framework which gathers members sharing the same problems, challenges, suffering and experiences in order to provide them with techniques and coping mechanisms to deal efficiently with stress, and negative feeling. An ESG is a safe space where members get to identify and explore their emotions, develop their relation with oneself, and learn how to care for their wellbeing in function of their available resources, and in the same time how to develop their relation with other people with whom they share experiences, challenges, risks... in this sense, and ESG is a twofold tool i.e. individual and group level, as it helps enhancing group dynamic and interaction through support group members in providing assistance to each other and in providing peer-to-peer support which allows the rebuilding of support networks that are essential for the wellbeing of individuals.

An ESG is a coping mechanism and not a healing tool, as it helps its members to understand their realities, and increase their resilience.

3. Setting the Emotional Support Group

▪ Recruitment

When recruiting members for an ESG, a number of factors must be taken into consideration to ensure a successful and clear promotion, and to avoid the association of this ESG with labeling or stigmatization.

One practical and efficient channel for recruitment is through the services and activities that the NGO/INGO organizing the ESG (hereinafter “service provider”) - as a part of their ongoing safe spaces programming - is already providing to the community. This allows a better understanding of the members’ background, challenges, risks, and needs; and allows a direct and undisclosed contact with them to promote the ESG.

Another channel is through the referral mechanism and case management services that those service providers offer to the community. This mode allows the formation of homogeneous ESG

groups (GBV survivors, single heads of households, child brides...). Referral to an ESG can also be done through community groups gathering women and girls, or by word of mouth. This can be achieved by present or former members of an ESG, service providers' partners and stakeholders i.e. State-run (Ministry of Social Affairs' Social Development Centers – MoSA SDCs) or non-governmental ones. Additionally, this can also be done through phone calls, or other programs that are being run. Another way for recruitment can be the snowballing technique which is based on the suggestion of present ESG members of names of people who are in need for those sessions. This will help creating a databased of possible members who can then be contacted by the service provider.

It is essential when recruiting for an ESG to introduce the nature and objective of the ESG in order to set clear expectations from the onset of the activity, and to avoid misconceptions and fear of stigma (taking the ESGs as a service for individuals with mental problems for instance), and to allow women and girls to decide whether they would like to sign up for this activity or not. These are vital for the success of an ESG, especially in the light of activities fatigue from which beneficiaries might complain, especially in protracted situations.

Understanding the context of those women and girls is equally important especially when it comes to challenges they might face when participating in an ESG e.g. the nature and level of their roles and responsibilities within the family, cost of transportation, restriction on movement... Service providers must always guide the design and implementation of an ESG with the “do no harm principle”.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind when recruiting members for an ESG that there are always people in need for ESG, and that those who might have not heard about it, might be the most in need for it.

▪ Location

The location where the ESG takes place is very essential for encouraging women and girls to participate and be committed to all of its sessions. These locations can be community/social centers managed by service providers, houses of women and girls in the community who offered their house to be a safe space to conduct ESGs, stakeholders' facilities (such as MoSA's SDCs, municipalities, public schools...). All these settings can be considered safe spaces as long as they were identified as “safe spaces” by women and girls in the community.

However, these locations should meet the following criteria:

- Provide a feeling of safety and privacy so members are comfortable in expressing themselves without any fear or concerns over their physical and emotional safety.
- Friendly and wide.
- Accessible to all members; accessibility includes distance, cost, and availability to individuals with disabilities.
- Equipped with secure facilities (locks for latrines, and for lockers if available)
- Child friendly for members with children. It is important that members get to focus on themselves during the ESG, thus the need for child care services provided in parallel with the ESG. This service should be within the ESG location, but in a separate room to avoid any source of distraction of members but especially mothers. It is also important to consider the age of children when recruiting for an ESG to ensure the required needs of the child.

ESGs organized for women and girls at risk or survivors of GBV should be held in a service location that is identified as safe by women and girls and which meet strict confidentiality, and safety conditions.¹

▪ Session length

The majority of ESG members have family responsibilities – as per their perception – e.g. caretaking for children and the home, and/or work. Thus the need to consider the length of the session with designing an ESG to avoid this being seen as an obstacle to their participation and commitment. Yet in the same time, a session should be long enough to allow the achievement of its objective.

The length of an ESG sessions also depends on and affects the overall length of the ESG cycle. A classical ESG session is of 90 continuous minutes. In case of time limitation on the overall length of the ESG cycle sessions' length can be 180 minutes with a break. Yet this should be determined in function of the identity of members and their availability.

Location, length and timing are critical to ensure members' commitment to ESG, and to maximize their benefits out of it.

▪ Number of ESG members

6 to 8 members in order to allow for a full and effective participation of each member.

▪ Understanding the members of the group and the groups' dynamics

Preserving and enhancing the pace the dynamics of an ESG is a challenging task, but key to is success. This is affected by a number of factors:

- Age of members.
- Their experiences.
- Their social and geographic background.
- The time they have spent in Lebanon since the onset of the Syrian crisis.
- The time they have spent in the location where they are living at present.

The more ESG members have these in common, the better the dynamics of the ESG will be.

The ESG facilitator plays a major role in shaping the dynamics of the group through choosing the right approaches and techniques that are adequate with members' profiles. This requires a good understanding of their context, concerns, challenges, needs, and expectations from the ESG. The more an ESG is run in an adequate and smooth manner, the more members engage with each other and the facilitator.

¹ It is very important to start trust building activities with women and girls (non-focused Psychosocial Support - PSS) activities and to ask women and girls to identify a space that they consider safe for them to conduct these activities. It's also recommended to ask women and girls about their availability (sate and time) in order to ensure that the activities are tailored to them and they respond to their needs and that they address their needs including location and timing.

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When composing the group, the facilitator should also look at the personal dynamics or relations among its members (family relation, living at proximity, same social network) as these might be blockers (fear of stigma, safety concerns...) or facilitators.

It is recommended, if the setting and the context of the ESG allows, to have 2 facilitators, one to run it, and the other to take notes and follow up on members' interaction and dynamics. ESG dynamics should be captured within a specific tool, especially with the lack of research (mainly due to fund) and this affects ESGs design, implementation, evaluation, lessons learned...

4. The facilitator

ESG settings are not always comfortable and quite, for they gather members with different levels of stress and/or trauma, and who are from different cultural and social backgrounds, and with uncommon habits and customs. Therefore, the facilitator should be well equipped to manage all those elements in addition to the group dynamics, within the ESG. Thus, it is recommended to apply a rigorous attitude scale when choosing a facilitator/frontline worker.

ESG facilitators can be consultants recruited externally, or internally from the service provider staff. However, it is recommended to have the frontline workers from the staff as it allows better support and supervision of the staff and therefore a better quality service to women and girls.

Facilitators should be well trained on the ESG curriculum on an *ad hoc* basis especially if they are recruited externally, and part of an ongoing capacity building program if they are recruited internally. One good practice, as part of facilitators' training are simulations/roleplays, where they get to put to practice their knowledge and skills and test their command of the curriculum, before taking in charge real ESGs.

Within the context of an ESG for women and girls at risk or survivors of GBV, it is recommended that the facilitator be a woman, without ruling out the possibility of having a man facilitator; this will be determined according according to the level of sensitivity of topics that are identified for discussions.

Facilitators should be able to relate to the context of the ESG members, through the language they (facilitators) use, the examples they give... they should be also able to identify cases which needs individual counselling or referral.

In all cases they should meet the following criteria as their way of managing and ESG is crucial to the mental and physical well-being of its members:

- Knowledge

An ESG facilitator needs not to be a GBV expert, or clinical psychologist or have an extensive knowledge of referral systems. However, a solid knowledge in gender based violence, protection, social work and mental health is required. Additionally, an ESG facilitator should keep abreast of the day-to-day developments (legal, social, economic, cultural...) within the areas where members live and where the ESG is held, in order to be able to properly refer women and girls to specific services they identify as needed.

▪ Experience

ESG facilitators should have an extensive experience in GBV case management, social work, or are psychologists. In spite of their experiences, it is recommended that they are shadowed during the first and second session, to make sure they are capable of handling the group and implementing the ESG without major challenges. In the case of an unexperienced facilitator, it is better the shadow him/her throughout the whole ESG cycle.

▪ Skills

- Unprejudiced.
- Patient.
- Positive.
- Understanding.
- Friendly.
- Confidential.
- Unconditional.
- Group management.
- Excellent communication skills.
- Calm body language.

Excellent interpersonal skills are essential to ensure a positive relation between ESG members, and between them and the facilitator and to ensure a smooth flow of ESG sessions and activities.

▪ Psycho-social well-being

Facilitators should be self-aware of their mental well-being and the risk of burnout. Service providers are also responsible for their well-being as well, through flagging risks, fatigue and offering support services.

5. Emotional Support Group Sessions

An ESG curriculum should be flexible enough (as per structure and content) to answer the needs of its members, especially that the context of Syrian women and girls, and host communities is constantly evolving. As a result, some topics, areas of focus or knowledge might have become less relevant to members while new ones have emerged as a need. In all cases, it is recommended that the last session be dedicated to referrals, hotline and emergency contacts/numbers, services and service providers, as these constitute the “toolkit” for members, once the ESG has come to an end. Thus the need for a flexible format, and for looking into specific activities/areas/needs that are relevant to the complexities of the present context and the intersectionality of services that are being provided.

Given the objective of an ESG i.e. coping and not therapeutic, GBV experts, social workers and psychologist must work closely and cooperate over the design of ESGs to ensure its efficiency within the limits of its definition and objectives.

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- Number of sessions

8 to 12, depending on the dynamics of the group and their identified needs.

A follow up session is recommended after a reasonable time (4 to 6 weeks to allow ESG members to put to practice the knowledge/skills/mechanisms they acquired into practice) in order to capture the change that ESG members have experienced.

- Planning a session

While the ESG session structure is known (opening ritual, discussion, activity, discussion, closing ritual) the areas/topics the sessions and their content must be flexible enough to answer the needs of the groups' members. It is also recommended to introduce artistic and hand-craft activities to ESG, as a tool for learning and expression at the same time. Thus, the facilitator must identify those needs in cooperation with the ESG members, and set with them the priorities which might lead to reducing the margin for one activity or topic over the other, or completely remove it if not needed.

While looking at recurrent themes and needs e.g. PTSD, self-image, communication, anxiety, trust, anger management, social isolation, protection and safety, sexual and reproductive health, sexual violence... facilitators should look for specific vulnerabilities e.g. restriction on movement, illiteracy, poor health conditions, high/imminent risks of GBV...

As this preparatory phase is essential for the cycle of the ESG, it is important to allow adequate time for achieving it. Sometimes, this should be raised with donors, and partners especially within short term projects and funding.

- Rituals

Rituals are important as they help creating a bond between ESG members, and makes them feel they share something special which gives them an identity as a group.

- Individual case management services

Individual case management services are a path to ESGs, or a result of these. Facilitators should be able to handle the disclosures that take place in the ESG to in order to refer ethically and safely women in need for individual case management services.

It is also important that case workers/social workers and psychologists and therapists who are working within a service provision setting, coordinate with each other to avoid challenges and conflict of competencies and *modus operandi* when identifying cases in need of individual case management.

- Monitoring & Evaluation tools

In order to maximize the efficiency and quality of ESGs, it is important to conduct an overall evaluation of the ESG, and regular evaluation of each session. This will help inform and advise future ESGs, and issue short guides on best practices and learned lessons by the service provider for facilitators and staff as well.

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It is also important that the ESG evaluation is done separately from the overall evaluation of services and activities that the service provider is implementing in order to fully capture all relevant and needed information. In some cases, the ESG evaluation is part of a regular general one (quarterly for instance) and might not capture or cover the totality of the ESG (as if it might coincide with the first or second session of the ESG for example).

It is recommended that M&E GBV toolkit is unified and standardized (as much as possible) and used by all ESG implementers to facilitate data collection and maximize its use for learning and informing future ESGs design and implementation. Different tools can be used or adapted for this purpose, yet, what matters is that they be comprehensive and standardized (among service providers) to allow consistency in documentation and patterns of analysis:

- Initial assessment at the beginning of the ESG through a brief questionnaire, and a final one through an extended questionnaire.
- Pre and post tests are recommended in each session, however, these can be done in an innovative way (such as drawing, and especially in the case of illiterate members) to make them “less” formal, and more engaging.
- Focus Group Discussion (SGBV M&E toolkit).
- Anonymous Quality surveys.
- Phone calls according to random sampling.

ESG members should feel at ease and relaxed when conducting an evaluation, and made aware that their opinion will not block their access to ESGs or to any other service but will allow for better designs of ESGs and will enhance the quality of the service.

As the dynamics of change differs from one individual to another, and from one group to another, it is important that facilitators monitor when change does occur in the group they are facilitating. Usually change is noticeable around the 8th out of 12th session. It is recommended in this case to run an evaluation to understand the nature of this change, its scope and ramification, to be able to invest better in the remaining sessions of the ESG.

Other tools can be used as well, such as focus group discussions, but in this case to advise on the service as a whole (structure, length, best practices, future steps for ESG members once it is over...).

Part of monitoring and evaluation is to make available a complaint mechanism for ESG members. These should be put in a visible location, outside the group room and accessible outside the hours of sessions, in order to ensure secrecy. Furthermore, it is recommended to have a complaint desk or officer, with whom ESG members can share with concerns, without the need to pass by the facilitator, especially in cases where they have a problem with her/him.