Psychosocial Support to Victims of GBV: ARDD-LA’s Psychosocial Support Service
Background

Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) is a large and continuing problem in Jordan. In March, the Jordan SGBV Sub-Working Group identified domestic violence, early and forced marriages, sexual violence, harassment, and a sense of insecurity as the most important problem areas for Syrian refugees 1.

A comprehensive report published in July 2013 by UN Women identified that 80% of beneficiaries living in Jordan are vulnerable to sexual, physical and psychological abuse 2. The report showed high rates of children who contribute to the household’s income, and high rates of early marriages. The more the situation of displacement is prolonged the greater the likelihood of higher rates early marriage for girls. The Jordan Regional Response Plan 6 Update (May, 2014) acknowledged that while significant advancements have been made in the first part of 2014, and although there are a large number of organizations and systems working in the area of SGBV, there remains a high and continued need for prevention, response, and coordination activities.

ARDD-Legal Aid, Psychosocial Support Unit

ARDD-LA’s Psychosocial Support Service (PSS) has now been established for almost a year, and we like to focus on inter-sectoral work between the legal and psychosocial sectors. We have two full time clinical psychologists (one national – Dr. Lina Darras - and one international – me), and one part-time clinical psychologist (international – Dr. Tamara Marcello), experienced in one on one clinical consultations, research, and policy as well as community based psychosocial support.

We receive referrals from ARDD-LA’s own legal aid lawyers, our community workers, and partner agencies including UNHCR and UNRWA. We work with both local Jordanians and refugees. We attend MHPSS, GBV, SGBV and Protection coordination meetings and we follow international standards and local protection and GBV sector standard operating procedures in our work.

We do four main types of work, and are looking to expand our knowledge and opportunities for further programs in all these areas.

I’ll now explain in more detail the four different areas.

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1 SGBV and Syrian Refugees in Jordan. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Sub-Working Group (March 2014)
2 Un women, “Inter-agency Assessment: Gender-Based Violence and Child protection Among Syrian Refugees in Jordan, with a Focus on Early Marriage” (July 2013).
1. Individual one on one psychosocial work

Women are referred to Dr. Lina from our legal aid unit, who need psychosocial support when going through a legal situation. Working with vulnerable groups taught us that many times mere legal assistance is not enough. We have seen that beneficiaries, especially refugees, children and women, suffer from distress, loss and grief, among other psychological concerns. In particular, those people whose legal cases involve child custody, divorce, GBV and Sharia law often ask for sessions with our psychosocial support officers. In a non-stigmatising, confidential environment, these sessions can help them to understand better their legal situation, and can support them making decisions and choices related to their case or their personal situation.

For example, a Syrian women asked advice to receive child custody since her husband took her 3 year old son back to Iraq and stole her passport so that she couldn’t leave Jordan. The lawyer decided to refer her to Dr. Lina because of the legal complexity, as her child was out of the country, and the woman was distressed and feeling hopeless.

When we receive GBV cases, we always inform people firstly about the procedures of the Family Protection Centre. When clients don’t want to go there, because of fear for stigma and fear for their perpetrators, we help them, mainly with cognitive behavioural therapy and we teach them problem solving, stress management, and communication skills.

For example, one of our recent cases was a Syrian woman who lives in Jordan with a violent husband. She was not ready to go to the Family Protection Centre as she has to accuse her husband when she goes to the centre and she is afraid of his reaction. During the therapy with Dr. Lina she improved her decision making skills and enhanced her self esteem. She worked on a strategy to become less dependent; such as finding a job and a new apartment for herself and her mother. We refer cases when there is need for medication and/ or physical treatment or when there is SGBV, we refer immediately to Family Protection Centre.

2. Provision of training to legal staff in MHPSS issues

We also support the legal team of lawyers here at ARDD-LA to provide them with a better understanding of how to manage clients they see, increasingly more Syrians who are very distressed, and this distress gets in the way of their legal case. Since legal aid lawyers are not directly trained in MHPSS work, they often struggle to know best how to deal with aggressive, self-harming, crying, unfocused, or anxious clients. We train lawyers in managing these kinds of situations, with the aim of ensuring the wellbeing of clients and of enhancing case success likelihood. For example training them how to
identify signs of mental illness, how to listen effectively and how to manage difficult circumstances, such as aggressive, suicidal or distressed clients.

3. **Psychosocial service provision in community projects**

We have worked hard over the past year to develop and pilot many types of group sessions, all of which are evidence-based, participatory, and culturally sensitive, and which are broadly aimed at psychosocial empowerment for women.

We cover a wide range, but many of our sessions are broadly aimed at SGBV prevention - awareness raising for women to help with altering social gender norms and to empower women psychologically. For instance, in individual and group sessions we provide specialist support on such issues as:

- helping participants cope with distressing experiences and memories,
- helping participants see the need for non-judgmental, compassionate, non-rejecting approaches to caring for survivors/victims of violence,
- helping women to understand better their own beliefs and to question their beliefs in light of human rights laws, religion, and traditions;
- helping to raise self-esteem by assisting participants to identify things they like about themselves
- encouraging women to take on empowering values which underpin assertiveness – self-respect, recognizing their own needs, ask for what they want, and to not be overly responsible for others, etc.

4. **Integrating psychosocial work and legal rights awareness raising**

Recently, we’ve been conducting research into the benefits of providing psychosocial skills training for women who are also receiving legal awareness raising sessions.

Traditionally, legal rights awareness training has used an ‘information only’ model, where lawyers provide information about legal rights to women. This approach works well in the West where many women have inherent and taken-for-granted skills in assertiveness and their right to equality.

But although there are many organisations that do this kind of work with women here in Jordan, the work does not always reach its goals of helping women to claim their legal rights. In Jordan, as in other countries in the region, there is a very low uptake of women claiming their legal rights, even after learning about what their rights are.

Structural reasons women do not make use of the legal system include the lack of enforcement of laws that are in place, economic inequalities between men and women,
few services to assist women victims of SGBV, and other cultural and social barriers.

One common way to illustrate this problem, is to look at the typical woman who wants to get a divorce, say for instance if she was experiencing domestic violence. Women in Jordan – both Jordanian and Syrian - who get divorced can experience immense psychological pressure. If they decide to use their rights to get divorced, they may lose their only source of income and may lose their children since the parents of the women often put pressure on them to leave children with the husband while they have to move back to their original family. Furthermore, divorced women may be stigmatized and socially ostracized because of accusations of being rebellious and not caring about her family and children.

In particular, discriminatory gender norms are a particular problem in this region, and an important goal for many organizations including ARDD-LA - now is to change these gender norms, to increase gender equality. The lack of gender equality underpins all the problems listed above.

Conclusion

Syrian women are vulnerable to higher rates of domestic violence due to increased family tensions placed on them as a result of war and displacement, and those in women-headed households are vulnerable to harassment, survival sex, and can be tempted to marry their young daughters early in order to provide ‘protection’ for the family, putting their daughters at heightened risk for intra-marriage violence. Rightly, many resources have been directed towards SGBV among Syrian women, with efforts focused on prevention, response, and coordination activities. But we must also realize that in turn, the influx of refugees into Jordan has created tensions in Jordanian communities, leading to heightened vulnerability to domestic violence and SGBV, and heightened psychological symptoms in both men and women in Jordanian communities.

In this time of crisis, we see higher levels of psychological and violence vulnerability not just of those directly involved in the conflict, but also in Jordanian communities that host Syrian refugees. In times of stress, domestic violence and other forms of SGBV are at higher rates for all in the community. There are higher levels of psychological distress during these times. We must also remember that this includes other refugees – Iraqi, Palestinian, Somali, etc – and not ignore their needs during this time.

We would like to monitor developments to make sure the development and protection sectors don’t forget about the needs of Jordanian women and men, and men and women from other refugee communities, who are also affected by the crisis, who also need high levels of ongoing support. We need to continue to support vulnerable Jordanian women and avoid the erosion of the valuable work already done by Women's
Access to Justice and work in by other organizations to improve the protection of severely vulnerable Jordanian women and other refugees.

**Future Directions for the PSS unit**

We are looking forward to continuing our work in the area of the intersection between legal aid, human rights, and psychosocial work.

We would welcome any feedback, advice, or suggestions for future directions in this challenging but important work.