

GBV AoR HELPDESK

Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies

Research Query: Reducing Risks of Conflict-related Kidnapping / Abduction for Women and Girls in Burkina Faso and West / Central Africa

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Introduction

This annotated bibliography looks at the existing resources available for understanding and responding to the kidnapping / abduction of women and girls in West and Central Africa, specifically relating to the Burkina Faso context. Literature and resources were reviewed to gather information on:

- The types of kidnap / abduction that women and girls face
- What can be learned about potential avenues for GBV risk mitigation relating to abduction
- What lessons have been learned about how to prevent abduction of women and girls and / or support victims of abduction on their return

Terminology and scope

The query originated in Burkina Faso, therefore the scope for this query focuses on this country and the broader West and Central African context.

While abduction and kidnapping may have specific definitions in some legislative frameworks, in the majority of literature and resources they are used interchangeably. For clarity, the term abduction is used throughout this document, as it is the most commonly used of the two terms in the resources reviewed, and has a more specific meaning within a humanitarian framework. Abduction is one of the six grave violations against children monitored by the UN Security Council. (<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/abduction-of-children/>). Abduction is also one of the 15 protection risks monitored by the Protection Analytical Framework. (https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/protection_risk_explanatory_note_1.pdf). The definition from the Protection Analytical Framework is:

This protection risk covers different acts and measures of detention, meaning the state of being deprived of liberty and being detained in a confined space and not being permitted to leave. Abduction and kidnapping

refer to removal, seizure, capture, apprehension, taking or enforced disappearance of a person either temporarily or permanently, without support or acquiescence of the State. In conflicts, when the victims are children, it constitutes a grave violation¹.

The definition above refers to abduction of anyone, by any person, for any purpose. It encompasses abductions by armed actors as well as non-armed groups and individuals, for any length of time.

The query focuses specifically on conflict-related abductions. It does not look at forms of violence outside this such as bride kidnapping, parental abduction, political kidnappings, kidnapping of high-net-worth individuals. This paper does not explore the affiliations of any of the perpetrators of abduction, focusing instead on the effects for those women and girls targeted for conflict-related abduction.

Abduction can also relate to trafficking. Trafficking is a key issue in Burkina Faso, as in the wider region. However, the literature relating to abduction in Burkina Faso does not presently highlight trafficking as a driver of abduction. Similarly, the literature relating to trafficking in Burkina Faso does not focus on abduction.² Therefore for this document trafficking was not further investigated, as the methods for addressing trafficking and the methods for addressing the forms of abduction found in Burkina Faso are not strongly related. Key messaging for communities in humanitarian contexts around trafficking usually relates to understanding the deceptive tactics used by traffickers: deception is not used as a method in conflict-related abductions in Burkina Faso.

Summary of key findings

West and Central Africa as a region has a high level of abduction for adults and children. In contexts such as DRC and Nigeria abduction is used to enable forced recruitment of children to armed groups. This is not currently the case for Burkina Faso, according to the data. It is challenging to find data that can be disaggregated to understand how women and girls are affected by abduction. Existing analysis suggests that children are most likely to be targeted³, and within that girls are more likely to be abducted than boys, especially when abduction is linked to sexual violence. Reasons for abduction include as part of a wider campaign of destabilisation in the community; targeting of specific individuals to interrogate for information related to other armed groups, and as punishment. The existing data focus on short-term abductions. It is not clear whether this is because longer-term abductions are less common in Burkina Faso or that they are not receiving attention. In the broader regional context, especially Nigeria, abduction of children is associated with schools. However, in Burkina Faso this does not seem to be a major site of risk.⁴ Instead, poorer communities with limited access to security infrastructure are more likely to be targeted⁵. Patterns have been identified showing the gathering of food and firewood as a risk factor for women and their children.⁶ While globally there is a link between child abduction as part of parental relationship breakdown, (including GBV, (where one parent takes a child out of the custody of the other parent without agreement or legal right) data were not found suggesting that this is a factor in conflict-related abductions in Burkina Faso.

¹ GPC (n.d.) Protection Risks Explanatory Note. P4. https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/protection_risk_explanatory_note_1.pdf

² See UNODC (2023) New plan to combat human trafficking launched in Burkina Faso for further information <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2023/May/new-plan-to-combat-human-trafficking-launched-in-burkina-faso.html>

³ See UNSC (2025) in the annotated bibliography

⁴ See Human Rights Watch (2020) in the annotated bibliography

⁵ See Berger (2023) in the annotated bibliography

⁶ See UNSC (2025) in the annotated bibliography

GBV risk mitigation can extend to abduction as a form of violence in its own right and when it is co-occurs with other forms of GBV. Frameworks exist to explore the trends of abduction in specific contexts. Specific areas of inquiry that can be used to assess the risk of abduction in humanitarian action, and suggest key measures to take, are drawn from the IASC GBV Guidelines.⁷ A key factor is gathering and analysing information relating to abductions. It is important to advocate for humanitarian actors and others to incorporate this information into their planning. For example, if a village is not seen as in need of food support because they can gather fruit from the bush, ensure that the risk of abduction for women and girls undertaking this work is incorporated into needs assessments.

This resource review was not able to discover specific promising practices relating to risk mitigation for the types of abduction. Abduction is frequently listed among the GBV risks faced by women and girls in this context, but specific interventions to address abduction are not discussed. Elsewhere, discussion about prevention of abduction focuses on systemic change such as state security capacity building, economic measures and peace processes, which are outside the remit of community-based risk mitigation interventions. Therefore, this review draws out information about key issues that are faced by survivors of abduction that can be used to support measures to respond to their needs on return / upon release, and frameworks that may be useful. There is more concrete information relating to school-related abductions, through the Safe Schools Declaration work. Though school-related abductions are not seen as a key issue for women and girls in Burkina Faso, recommendations are highlighted that may have a wider applicability to the Burkinabe context for abduction.

Key next steps for establishing GBV risk mitigation activities for women and girls at risk of conflict-related abduction in Burkina Faso

- Gather data (in a safe and ethical manner) on how women and girls in all their diversity are affected by abduction, both the incident itself and the aftermath
- Use the data to explore with communities where, when and how women and girls are at risk
- Work with women and girls and their communities to identify key actions that could be taken to reduce the risk of abduction, and to support survivors of abduction on their return, and develop key messages
- Work with other actors to share the key messages and implement these actions, and advocate for broader social change as needed
- Monitor and review the effectiveness of risk mitigation measures selected (including checking for unforeseen consequences) including directly with impacted women and girls
- Work in collaboration with response actors to ensure the safety and dignity of affected women and girls.

GBV risk mitigation is a shared responsibility between humanitarian actors in all sectors. GBV coordinators and specialists may wish to lead the process, however the development of recommendations, the implementation of risk mitigation activity and advocacy with key actors must be a shared activity between all sectors.

⁷ GBV AoR (2015) Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action. <https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2015-IASC-GBV-Guidelines-main-book-without-table-spreads.pdf>

Annotated bibliography

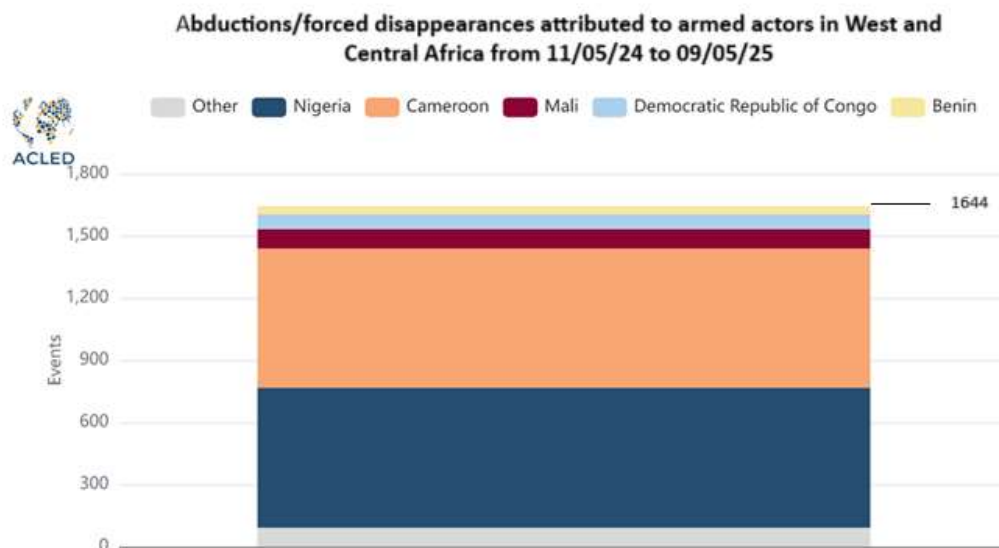
Abduction trends in West and Central Africa

ACLED (2025). ACLED database

<https://acleddata.com/data/>

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) maintains a database of real time data on violent incidents, published on a weekly basis. The data are gathered and verified from traditional and new media; local partner data (such as conflict observatories) and reports.

In the past year ACLED identified 1644 abductions/forced disappearances within West and Central Africa, that were attributed to armed actors. It is not possible to disaggregate these data by gender, however 25 of these abductions were reported in Burkina Faso. This is not prevalence data, rather it is a summary of the abductions that have been reported in media or reports, which may not include those where survivors do not wish to report, or communities that do not have access to reporting mechanisms.



Source: ACLED dataset, accessed 17/05/2025

Berger, Flore (2023). The Silent Threat: Kidnappings in Burkina Faso

<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Flore-Berger-The-silent-threat-Kidnappings-in-Burkina-Faso-GI-TOC-March-2023.pdf> (English)

<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Flore-Berger-La-menace-silencieuse-Les-enle%C3%A8vements-au-Burkina-Faso-GI-TOC-Mars-2023.pdf> (French)

Overall, kidnapping in Burkina Faso and the wider Sahel has targeted local populations since 2017. The types and aims of kidnap are varied. This includes: kidnapping for ransom (financial gain); kidnapping that is related to wider forms of conflict in the area, such as that related to cattle rustling; kidnapping as a tool to increase control over strategic areas through intimidation. There are key differences for targeted victims within Burkina Faso. Wealthy men are most likely to be kidnapped in urban areas, while in rural areas it is more likely to be groups of poorer

women. The incident from January 2023 is thought to have been driven by one armed group from outside the region attempting to destabilise other armed groups local to the women's villages. Berger also notes that women are targeted as intelligence informants, and interrogated about their husband or other key male figures in rival armed groups. Women also report physical and sexual assault during their abductions.

Human Rights Watch (2020) "Their War Against Education" Armed Group Attacks on Teachers, Students, and Schools in Burkina Faso

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/their-war-against-education-armed-group-attacks-teachers-students-and-schools-burkina-faso>

While female teachers and students are affected by the broader hostile environment and attacks on schools, this report found that only male teachers have been abducted or killed in Burkina Faso (as of 2020). This suggests that school is not a major site for abduction of women and girls in Burkina Faso, although other GBV is enacted at or related to schooling, as confirmed by the more recent UN Security Council report.

Kishi, R (2022), "Political violence targeting women in West Africa", West African Papers, No. 34, OECD Publishing, Paris. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/06/political-violence-targeting-women-in-west-africa_969b7382/0b214920-en.pdf

This paper used ACLED data and other sources to look at the gendered nature of political violence in West Africa since 2010. In the region abductions and forced disappearances made up nearly a third of all incidents of political violence that targeted women between 2010 and 2010. Kishi finds this is a disproportionate targeting of women. The data show that in Burkina Faso, in the period 2010-2021, armed actors were the main threat faced by women and girls (not necessarily relating to abduction). Until 2020 the threat was predominantly non-sexual violence; after 2010 sexual violence increased.

United Nations Security Council (2025). Children and armed conflict in Burkina Faso: Report of the Secretary-General. S/2025/101.

<https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/101>

Children are increasingly targeted in Burkina Faso. In the inquiry period from July 2022 to June 2023 abduction was the second most verified grave violation of children, after killing and maiming. The UN reports that overall girls are more likely to be abducted and boys (313 girls and 261 boys abducted during the period, along with 18 whose gender was unknown). The paper finds that abduction and sexual assault of girls is also linked with collecting firewood and water. This conflict-related sexual violence is likely under reported, related to stigma, fear of reprisals and lack of services and support for survivors. While the purpose of most abductions is unknown, the report to the UN Security Council highlights abduction for recruitment and use, including interrogation, and as punishment for not complying with armed groups (or for perceived collaboration with other groups).

Various (2023). News articles relating to the mass abduction and later rescue of 27 women and 39 children in Burkina Faso

<https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230120-military-frees-abducted-women-and-children-in-burkina-faso-says-state-tv>

<https://www.africanews.com/2023/01/16/burkina-faso-some-50-women-kidnapped-in-the-north-by-suspected-jihadists/>

In an incident in January 2023 27 women and 39 children were kidnapped by armed groups (described as jihadists) while collecting fruit and leaves in the bush outside their villages. They were rescued by state security after eight

days held in the neighbouring province. The local communities say that collecting these fruits and other foodstuffs in the bush makes them vulnerable to attack/abduction, however these fruits and other foodstuffs form a key part of their community's diet in the context of food shortages. At the time this large-scale kidnap was described as "unprecedented".

GBV risk mitigation

Bell, Emma (2022) Research Guidance Related to Participation and Inclusion in Response Programming & GBV Risk Mitigation: An Annotated Bibliography of Recommended Resources. GBV AoR Helpdesk.

https://sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/Annotated%20bibliography%20-%20inclusion%20in%20GBV%20-%20FINAL%20-%20002032022%20%28Formatted%2023.06%29_0.pdf

It is important to explore risk mitigation approaches with diverse women and girls to fully understand how different groups are affected by the risk of abduction, and to ensure that suggested measures will be suitable. This paper brings together different resources that can support inclusion of diverse women and girls in risk mitigation, including adolescent girls, people with disabilities, younger girls, and people with diverse SOGIESC.

GBV AoR (2015) Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action.

https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2015_IASC_Gender-based_Violence_Guidelines_full-res.pdf

The IASC GBV guidelines explain that

"Mitigation refers to reducing the risk of exposure to GBV (e.g. ensuring that reports of 'hot spots' are immediately addressed through risk-reduction strategies; ensuring sufficient lighting and security patrols are in place from the onset of establishing displacement camps; etc.)." (IASC, 2015, P1).

Risk mitigation addresses the immediate risks of an event happening, not only the longer-term prevention measures. The general approach to risk mitigation is to identify the risk factors, gather qualitative information about when and how it happens, what drives it, who is at risk, and use this information to support the affected communities to devise and implement strategies that could reduce this risk. Where humanitarian actors are operating they have a duty to integrate GBV risk mitigation strategies into their programmatic work.

Abduction is highlighted in the GBV Guidelines as a key risk that women and girls may face, in and of itself and related to other forms of GBV such as sexual assault. Abduction is explicitly included in possible areas of inquiry in the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) and Shelter, Settlement and Recovery chapters. Suggested questions include:

- Do women, girls and other at-risk groups face risks of harassment, sexual assault, kidnapping or other forms of violence when accessing water, fuel or distribution sites?
 - Do security personnel regularly patrol the site, including water and fuel collection areas?
 - Are both women and men represented in the security patrols?
 - Do security patrol personnel receive GBV prevention and response training?
- Do registration/greeting/transit centres (in both natural disaster and conflict settings) have separate spaces for confidentially speaking with those who may be at particular risk of GBV (e.g. persons separated from families or without identification who may be at heightened risk of abduction and trafficking) or those who have disclosed violence?

- Do women, girls and other at-risk groups have to travel long distances to obtain fuel (placing them at risk of sexual assault, kidnappings, abuse, etc.)?

While the trends in Burkina Faso enumerated above suggest that abductions are not taking place in camp settings or other humanitarian actor-supported sites, these areas of inquiry could be explored with communities to better understand what measures are or could be put in place.

GBVIMS Steering Committee (n.d.) GBVIMS User Guide: Chapter 4: The Intake and Consent Forms.

https://gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/Ch4_Feb2011.pdf

The GBVIMS intake form includes questions to track abductions within GBV incidents. Where GBV service providers are operating in areas with a risk of abduction, it can be possible to use GBVIMS to understand trends in the data that survivors choose to report. Working with service providers to integrate abduction into forms (while supporting case managers and other actors to respond to survivors of abduction) can support risk mitigation activities. The specific question within the intake form covers “whether the incident was perpetrated while the survivor was: a) being forcibly transported (trafficked); b) being forced to join an armed group (forced conscription); c) held against her/his will, abducted or kidnapped”(P3.17), and can also be used to track trends relating to trafficking.

Office of The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2022). Guidance Note on Abduction

https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/22-00040_Abduction-Guidance-for-CAAC_FINAL_WEB-1.pdf

This guidance note sets out the definition of abduction, what information to gather relating to monitoring and reporting the abduction of children, how UN and other international actors can advocate with parties to conflict, and include prevention of abduction in peace processes. This note may support with compiling information about abduction to enable contextualised risk mitigation approaches. It also expands on the relationship between abduction and sexual violence, highlighting that both grave violations may be present in an incident of abduction. The note cautions that this combination may make it challenging for survivors to report and receive help, because of stigmatisation, cultural norms and fear of reprisals among other issues.

Addressing abduction – potential preventive measures and effects on survivors

ERICC Helpdesk (2024). Improving Resilience and Reintegration for School Kidnap Victims and their School Communities in Northern Nigeria

<https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/FINAL%20%20ERICC%20Helpdesk%20%20Nigeria%20Response%20Report%20%20Resilience-Reintegration-School-Kidnapping-Northern-Nigeria.pdf>

This report is a summary of literature that reviews the effects on children who have been abducted in Northern Nigeria, and what support is available to them. It finds that hospitals are often the only form of support that is offered to children who have been kidnapped for ransom (or reasons other than forcible recruitment). This support does not adequately address the survivors’ psychosocial health needs. The report calls for reintegration into communities, not only return. It is additionally important to understand the specific experiences survivors of different kinds of abduction will have had, for example programmes that are designed to support children kidnapped for forced recruitment/ideological purposes may not meet the needs of those who were kidnapped for ransom.

The Global Coalition to Protection Education from Attack (2018). What can be done to better protect women and girls from attacks on education and military use of educational institutions?

<https://www.ungei.org/publication/what-can-be-done-better-protect-women-and-girls-attacks-education-and-military-use>

This resource draws on the Safe Schools Declaration interventions. The Safe Schools Declaration was developed in 2015 and to date has 121 government signatories around the world, of which Burkina Faso is one. The SSD highlights that students, teachers and academics have faced risks from armed forces, including abduction from or on the way to school. This specific resource looks at how to best support women and girls within this framework. The recommendations that could inform a similar approach to conflict-related abduction outside schools, include:

- Safely and ethically collect data, including on sexual violence, and identify when abductions at or related to school and other educational institutions happen, where these occur, and when this abduction involved GBV.
- Relevant institutions should investigate attacks on education, including abductions, and support access to justice for those who have been abducted.
- Relevant actors, (such as, for example, GBV Specialists) provide assistance to victims of abduction, including psychosocial support, and ensure that staff have adequate training to understand these needs.
- Strengthen the physical security of the environment where there is a risk of abduction, in a context-specific manner.
- Maintain national and international focus on the issue through mechanisms such as the Safe Schools Declaration.

The Global Coalition to Protection Education from Attack (2019). “It is very painful to talk about” Impact of Attacks on Education on Women and Girls

<https://protectingeducation.org/publication/it-is-very-painful-to-talk-about-the-impact-of-attacks-on-education-on-women-and-girls/>

This report draws on the experience of women and girls who have been affected by attacks on education, including abductions, across the world. There is particular focus on Nigeria relating to the Boko Haram kidnaps. Long term consequences of these attacks, which include abduction and sexual violence, were identified, including:

- Lost education
- Child marriage and early pregnancy
- Stigma, social exclusion and long-term impact on mental health (including rejection by husbands and other family members)
- Health consequences of violence and abuse

Stigma was particularly cited for survivors of abduction. Girls reported being isolated, bullied or taunted at school and by community members, family and friends, for their perceived connection with the armed group. Where sexual assault had also occurred relating to the abduction, this compounded the stigma. Stigma also contributes to longer term mental health consequences including ongoing feelings of insecurity.

International Crisis Group (2018). Preventing Boko Haram Abductions of Schoolchildren in Nigeria
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/b137-preventing-boko-haram-abductions-schoolchildren-nigeria>

This report focuses on the actions that the government should take that could prevent the abductions of school children. This includes

- Improve state security support
- Carry out investigations of abductions to understand how the state could have prevented them.
- Recommit to the Safe Schools Initiative, including financing.
- Take action to end the conflict.
- Maintain international support

Regarding the improvement of security support, the paper recommends refocusing this support to smaller towns that are more vulnerable to attack. The paper recommends including women in this security support to better build trust with affected communities. These are actions that are more aimed at long term prevention than immediate risk reduction. Accordingly, they may not be actionable by the communities that are affected by conflict-related abductions themselves. However, they may be points for advocacy work.

Kasherwa, Amani; Kapalata, Murhala & Twikirize, Janestic Mwende (2024) Ubuntu-informed approaches for addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV): Scope, rationale, and implications for Social Work.
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4753200

This paper discusses the need for culturally appropriate interventions for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, and highlights the African concept of Ubuntu as an underlying principle for supporting survivors in a relationship-driven, holistic concept that involves community support with reintegration, and can build better future resilience. It may be useful for exploring ways to support survivors of abduction in reintegration with their communities, and to support communities to better understand survivors' needs.

Yakasai, Bashir Adam; Ayinla, Hafiz & Yakasai, Hassana Bashir (2022). Psychological Impact of Kidnapping on Mental Health and Wellbeing of Abductees: A Study of Abducted School Children in Kaduna State, Nigeria
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365922967_Psychological_Impact_of_Kidnapping_on_Mental_Health_and_Well-being_of_Abductees_A_Study_of_Abducted_School_Children_in_Kaduna_State_Nigeria

This research interviewed 24 students who had been abducted and later released, as well as key informants from their schools and communities. The authors talked to the children to better understand their experiences, and made recommendations around preventative measures that could be taken to prevent further abductions, and ways to better support abductees after their return to the community. In common with other studies they found no psychotic results, but agreed that PTSD was common, irrespective of the duration of captivity, that there was a likelihood of depression, anxiety, physical injury, disturbed sleep, and issues relating to trust and insecurity. The children reported that others in the community didn't understand their mental health issues. All children had been taken to hospital to be checked, but had not received further care. The authors recommend the introduction of better psychosocial support in schools, and an establishment of a reintegration programme that could go beyond only physical health. They cited the following preventive measures that could mitigate future abduction:

- Good fencing
- CCTV for both deterrent and capture of perpetrators
- State support for a counter surveillance programme

- Build the capacity of children to take preventive measures [however, it was not clear what these measures are or how children could avoid being abducted]
- Build relationships with host communities to enable early warning systems

Annex

Resources in English were discovered through online searches using the following search terms, as well as through examination of resource bibliographies:

- Women+abduction+burkina+faso
- Girls+abduction+burkina+faso
- Trafficking+abduction+burkina+faso
- Anti-abduction+west+africa
- Risk+mitigation+abduction+Africa
- GBV+abduction+Africa

Resources were excluded that focused exclusively on kidnap of internationals or high net worth individuals, abductions not related to conflict.

The GBV AoR Help Desk

The GBV AoR Helpdesk is a unique research and technical advice service which aims to inspire and support humanitarian actors to help prevent, mitigate and respond to violence against women and girls in emergencies. Managed by Social Development Direct, the GBV AoR Helpdesk is staffed by a global roster of senior Gender and GBV Experts who are on standby to help guide frontline humanitarian actors on GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response measures in line with international standards, guidelines and best practice. Views or opinions expressed in GBV AoR Helpdesk Products do not necessarily reflect those of all members of the GBV AoR, nor of all the experts of SDDirect's Helpdesk roster.

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