



**Report Title:** Strategies for accessing adolescent girls who may be victims of trafficking and/or sexual exploitation.

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## Introduction

This query has been submitted by a Iraqi NGO, working in the Iraqi city of Mosul, seeking to assist street children. While the NGO has been able to locate street boys to assist through their project, they have not been able to find street girls. In trying to locate these girls, the NGO has become aware that many girls have been trafficked into informal brothels. Some others are working on the streets, also as victims of sex trafficking and exploitation. These brothels and street operations are reportedly run by “mafia” or “gang”-like groups, who have an interest in preventing their operations from being exposed.

The NGO has requested advice from the GBV AoR Helpdesk on how they can find and access these girls, in order to provide them with assistance – doing so in a way that is safe, both for the girls and their staff. They have asked for information about international practices used to access trafficked women, which might prove useful in this context. Therefore, the focus of this response is on *access*, rather than on the nature of assistance to be provided once access is obtained.

## **The context**

The NGO in question is operating in Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, and the former Iraqi capital of ISIS’s caliphate – a city occupied by ISIS between 2014 and 2017. A major offensive was conducted between October 2016 and July 2017 to liberate the city from ISIS, causing largescale damage across the city – with an estimated 80% of Mosul’s infrastructure left in ruins.

At the heart of the war, almost a million people were displaced from the city, including almost 512,000 children.<sup>1</sup> Since the city’s liberation, people have begun returning to Mosul to try rebuild their lives – including amongst these, large numbers of vulnerable, unaccompanied children. Returnees have come back to a city that lacks basic infrastructure and services – with faltering police services, reduced health and social service systems, and no safe shelters. Many thousands remain displaced and without proper homes. While efforts to rebuild the city are in progress, these have been slow-moving, resulting in challenging conditions for returnees. Non-governemental organizations (NGOs) are providing ad hoc services, but there remain significant gaps in the social safety nets available in Mosul.

Making matters more complicated is the fact that – according to a representative of the NGO – most of the trafficked girls in question are ‘ISIS affiliated women’ – meaning they are ISIS wives, widows or daughters; and/or relatives of ISIS militants who were killed, arrested or have fled. ISIS-affiliated women are a highly stigmatized group, for who little community sympathy exists – and for who few services are available. Thousands of such women and girls, and their children, remain in camps, suffering from wide-spread stigmatization and discrimination. National authorities, including law enforcement actors, have little sympathy for this group, and little interest in helping them – thereby reducing the already-limited options available to assist these girls.

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<sup>1</sup> “Facing destroyed buildings and booby-traps, more than 120,000 children return to Mosul”, Reliefweb, July 16, 2017, available online at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/facing-destroyed-buildings-and-booby-traps-more-120000-children-return-mosul>

## **Methodology**

Research undertaken in order to respond to this query, relied on reports and material produced by international and national organizations working with trafficking victims, as well as media and other documents. Interviews and email correspondence were conducted with trafficking experts, as well as with people working on protection issues in Iraq – and in Mosul specifically – seeking to ensure the recommendations below are tailored to the context. The factual information relied on in this report – about victims, perpetrators and the brothels in question – was collected from representatives of the NGO in two phone calls.

## **The dangers of taking action**

Sex trafficking cases are notoriously dangerous and difficult to resolve. The primary considerations in dealing with these cases are **safety** and **doing no harm**. Assistance for trafficking victims is a sensitive area, where the possibility of inadvertently causing harm is great, and the effects of such harm significant – including serious injury and risk of life. Perpetrators of sex trafficking operations are often armed, professionalized and dangerous – and willing to take violent actions against those seen as threatening their operations.

This understanding must inform any strategies to address the needs of victims of trafficking. No actions should be taken without careful consideration of the risks, and a calculation of whether anticipated benefits outweigh these risks. In determining what course of action is best, the primary interest should be the wellbeing of the victims, with an approach selected that is likely to achieve the best, yet least risky results for the girls in question.

So too, when deciding whether to take action, it will be imperative for an NGO to consider whether they are best placed to carry out an intervention, or whether a better outcome for the girls might be achieved by another actor – perhaps one with greater financial or political resources – including the police or an international agency specialized in assisting victims of trafficking, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

## **Assessments required**

### **Situational assessment**

There remain significant gaps in understanding about the circumstances of the girls the NGO is seeking to help – including the number and locations of the brothels holding them, the types of perpetrators, or the identity, needs and circumstances of the victims. This information will be crucial in determining whether these girls can be safely accessed and what course of action should be pursued. In this high-risk area, before *any* strategy can be selected, a **situational assessment** should be completed, so that all interventions are informed by a clear and detailed understanding of the facts.

### **Who should conduct this situational assessment?**

As a starting point, an NGO seeking to work in this area will need to consider whether it is appropriate for them to conduct this situational assessment. The answer to this question will depend on the staff capacity they have available to them. Does an organisation have staff who are trained on research and investigations – and particularly on researching sensitive topics, where there might be danger involved? Do they have personnel who could safely and secretly monitor brothels and track movement in and out of them? Poorly carried out attempts at doing this, in which the researchers become known, could lead to both

researchers and victims being harmed by brothel owners and their affiliates. If an organisation does not have the in-house skills required to do this properly, they could recruit someone to do this for them, or refer the matter onto an agency better placed to carry this out.

#### **How to collect this information:**

The required information can be collected in a number of ways. One aspect would be observation; watching and monitoring buildings believed to be brothels, as well as observing girls who are working on the street – ensuring that these efforts remain discreet. It would also be important to hold discussions with the police (unless there is evidence of police involvement), as well as with other community leaders, to see what information they have about these facilities. Other GBV service providers working in the area – such as those in the Mosul GBV Working Group and the International Organisation for Migration – might also have relevant information, and should be consulted.

#### **What information needs to be collected in a situational assessment:**

The following information should inform decisions on how best to access trafficked women.

- **Information about the brothels:** Where are the brothels located? How many brothels are there? What hours do these facilities operate? Do the girls reside in the same facility in which they work?
- **Information about victims:** How many girls are held in each of these facilities? Who are the girls (ages, nationalities, are they from Mosul, are they internally displaced or returnees)?
- **Information about perpetrators:** Who is running these brothels or street operations? How many people are involved in these operations? Who are the customers who frequent these facilities?
- **Information about affiliates:** Who is supporting the perpetrators? Do these operations have the support of government actors? Do they have support of police and law enforcement?
- **Security and arms:** Who is guarding the brothels? Are there weapons evident?
- **Girls' circumstances:** What is known about the state of the girls (i.e. health, wellbeing)? What are the girl's needs?
- **Leaving the brothels:** Are the girls locked into the brothels all of the time, or do they ever leave (i.e. to work on streets, or to conduct house calls)? Do they leave to access services, and if so, which ones (i.e. health services)? Are they always accompanied when they leave, and by whom? Are they ever left alone outside the brothel? At what times do they leave? What form of transportation do they take?
- **Girls who are 'on the streets':** Are these girls also working in the organized sex trade? Are they guarded? Are there moments when they are left alone by their exploiters?

#### **Risk Assessment**

Once the necessary information has been collected as to the facts, and interventions are being considered, a comprehensive risk assessment is required to determine whether proposed actions might lead to further risk. Only where a risk assessment determines that a risk level is acceptable, and that it would be in the best interests of the girls for specific actions to be taken, should these be carried out. A risk assessment should consider the following:

- **Retaliation against rescued girls:** What is the likelihood that operators of the brothels will retaliate against girls that are rescued / assisted?
- **Retaliation against girls that remain:** What is the likelihood that a mission will worsen the conditions for *other* girls, who are not rescued in an operation?
- **Retaliation against NGO:** What is the likelihood that the operators of brothels will retaliate against an NGO if they interfere with their operations?
- **Corruption:** Which local officials are being paid off by brothel owners? How will this impede efforts to assist these girls?
- **Law enforcement:** What is the capacity and willingness of law enforcement to assist or lead on this matter? Is there evidence of collusion between police and brothel owners?
- **Collaboration or referral:** Are there organizations that could be collaborated with in assisting these girls? Are there organizations better placed to take specific actions to assist these girls, due to their resources, connections or positioning?
- **Projection for victims:** How are victims likely to fare if assisted or rescued? Is there adequate support available for them? Does the strategy include follow up with victims to ensure their continued well-being? What is the likelihood that victims will be re-trafficked? Are there measures in place to ensure victim information will remain secure and confidential?<sup>2</sup>

### Possible approaches

The following are some approaches sometimes used to access trafficking victims.

#### 1. NGOs entering brothels

Widespread consensus in the field is that it is ***not* a good strategy for NGOs to enter brothels to assist trafficking victims** – be this by force or deception. There are a number of reasons for this: First, this is extremely dangerous and there is much opportunity to do harm; Second, NGO workers tend to not be properly trained and equipped for this. While this strategy is not recommended, it is included in this report in the interest of providing a comprehensive review of approaches.

Experts warn against NGO workers going into brothels pretending to be customers – which has been found, across various contexts, to be a dangerous tactic. Brothels are often regulated by gangs, who tend to be sophisticated in their efforts and ruthless. A trafficking expert put forward the view that in most cases gangs would quickly spot NGO workers, which could lead to danger for them or the girls. This approach might be more likely to work in brothels that have bars, where customers mingle with women, but less likely to work in ‘straight brothels’. In Mosul, alcohol is forbidden, meaning there are unlikely to be bars in the brothels.

There are some international NGOs who do go into brothels. One example is **International Justice Mission (IJM)**. They work alongside law enforcement officials, to conduct raids in brothels in various countries. To do this, IJM first send their own ‘undercover agents’ into brothels to scope out the situation, and to identify and speak to women inside. They pretend

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<sup>2</sup> For information on conducting risk assessments, see, the IOM Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking. (2007). Geneva: International Organization for Migration. (IOM), or [www2.gov.bc.ca](http://www2.gov.bc.ca). (2019). *Be safe when working with trafficked persons*.

to be customers and often record conversations with hidden cameras. Once they have collected enough evidence, they write a report, documenting what they have found, before submitting this to the relevant law enforcement agency, requesting them to complete a rescue mission. These investigatory missions are often followed by police raids, which rely on information they have collected.

IJM's approach has been criticized – and the outcomes, security and effectiveness of these missions questioned. For one thing, many women 'rescued' in their raids have reported not wanted to be rescued. So too, the 'aftercare' they provide has been said to be problematic, with women running away from their rescuers, and 'rescued' girls with no place to go returning to brothels soon after. These raids have often not led to good justice outcomes – with brothel operators frequently released without prosecution. A key problem has been the reliance on evidence obtained in these NGO-incursions – information which is illegally obtained and hence un-useable for the purpose of prosecuting traffickers. A lesson learned here is that it is never ideal to have non-law enforcement entities involved in the collection of evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Some organizations have gone even further, recruiting guards and quasi-military personnel, who go in and conduct raids. The **Agape International Mission** in Cambodia has received special permission from the Cambodian government to operate its own 'SWAT team' to investigate and rescue girls from brothels, working alongside law enforcement teams. Their team is led by a former police officer and is well-coordinated and equipped with guns and bulletproof vests.<sup>4</sup> Agape's motivation for setting up this team was that they had previously faced challenges in mobilizing local police to take actions in rescuing women and in properly gathering evidence. They had also been cases where corruption within the police had led to police tipping off brothel owners before raids, leading them to conclude they needed their own SWAT team. Agape's missions require significant preparation, support and collaboration with law enforcement, as well as with different areas of government. Importantly, their organization also has a full support service set up for women once they are rescued, including shelter, rehabilitation services and training centers, as well as legal teams that help victims through trials.

## 2. Working with law enforcement

The most appropriate actors to enter brothels are police or law enforcement officials. Given the levels of danger, the technical and operational skills required, and the legalities involved (particularly around evidence collection), police are best placed to perform this role.

If an NGO has a good working relationship with local police, one approach might be for them to **work with local police** towards the release of these girls – advocating for girls' release and providing police with information and support required. Immediately following their release, the NGO would work to ensure that victims are provided with proper care and shelter.

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<sup>3</sup> "Thailand's Brothel Busters" MotherJones.com, December 2003, available online at: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2003/11/thailands-brothel-busters/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/reporters-notebook-brothel-raids-missionaries-rescuing-girls-cambodia/story?id=46100713>; <https://agapewebsite.org/what-we-do/rescue/#swat>

Whether working with the police is an option in this case will depend on the attitudes of law enforcement officials in Mosul towards trafficked women – and towards these victims in particular. If it is found that police are in any way complicit with these activities (information that a situational assessment should seek to highlight), this approach will not work. In this case, the fact that the victims are women affiliated with ISIS will likely mean there is less support from the police. It is well documented that law enforcement officials across Iraq have been unsympathetic towards ISIS-affiliated women.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) report that they have had some success in working with the police in Iraq on trafficking cases. Interestingly, they report having had more success with **police negotiations** – as opposed to brothel raids. They have found that brothel owners in Iraq tend to be quite cooperative with the police, and that police have been able to negotiate the return of *some* women – such as girls under the age of 18. Brothels have an incentive to comply with the police in this way, to avoid further trouble. The brothels reportedly do not care enough about individual girls to refuse this – instead, releasing certain girls to prevent larger problems.

Importantly, **such negotiations must be conducted by the police** (or otherwise, lawyers or judges) – and not by an NGO or international organisation. NGOs would then work with the police to find a suitable place for women to be released to, such as an orphanage, shelter or family reunification. It is critical to work out these details first – before any negotiations or raids take place – so that once girls are released there are pre-determined places for them to go to.

If an organisation does not have the necessary relationship with the police, or if their organization does not have sufficient status or clout to achieve this optimally, they could refer the matter to a larger specialist organisation, who could assist with this.

### **3. Referral to a specialised organisation, such as IOM**

Certain larger organisations, who have a particular focus on assisting victims of trafficking, might be better placed to take certain actions to assist trafficked girls – such as those relating to securing girls' release. A good approach might be for an NGO to refer such cases onto a specialist organisation, and to collaborate with them in providing support services to girls once they are released. As an example, IOM Iraq have a unit dedicated to assisting victims of trafficking.

IOM offers assistance to trafficked women and girls, based on the needs and circumstances of each individual case. They have case workers, psychosocial support services and community resource centers available, and are able to provide basic assistance, medical and psych-social care, as well as legal and repatriation support. They have funds set aside to assist in such cases when they are referred to them. Importantly, IOM have local staff who have good connections within the police force, who can either encourage the police to become involved in cases, or can get more insight into the police's position in these. (They have had some success in working with the police towards the release of trafficking victims in Baghdad – many of whom were foreign ISIS affiliated women. IOM's role in these cases was to provide basic assistance, while ICRC and UNICEF assisted with women's repatriation).

#### **4. Support, shelter and assistance**

The area where local NGO's can be of greatest value, is in providing support services to victims once they are out of the brothels. As the sections above explained, the role of getting girls out of brothels is probably better carried out by the police or specialist organisations. However upon their release, local organisation can play a key role in providing culturally appropriate care, support and reintegration.

It is important to remember that if released, girls will need *all* necessary services. It will not be enough for an NGO to provide just partial services. Rather, it will be important to ensure all of victims' essential needs are met (through either service provision or referral). If girls are not sufficiently assisted following release, they might land up back in the sex trade. These needs include the following:

- Shelter
- Food
- Health (including gynecological services)
- Clothing
- Psychological care
- Legal assistance
- Family tracing
- Child care (if they have borne children)
- Repatriation assistance (if they are foreign)

Before getting girls out of brothels, it is critical to identify what assistance and support is available for them outside – a role that an NGO could lead on. For those services that cannot be provided by the NGO themselves, or that are not immediately available, suitable providers must be identified and referrals pre-arrange, before any actions are taken to rescue the girls.

Lining up a full complement of support services is likely to be challenging, due to the shortages of social services available in Mosul. There are few operational orphanages or safe shelters, and those facilities that are available, are inundated by the large numbers of vulnerable children. This problem is likely to be compounded by the fact that the women in question are ISIS-affiliated women, who are often discriminated against by service providers.<sup>5</sup> As such, identifying, arranging and coordinating these services and referrals might be a critical piece of assistance that the NGO could provide.

#### **5. Providing assistance to girls inside the brothel**

Another possible strategy is to support girls inside of the brothels – as a stopgap measure, until a better solution is found. If circumstances allow, it might be an option to negotiate with brothels that basic services be provided to girls inside. These could include medical checks and medicine, gynaecological, as well as psychological assistance. While this is not ideal – and while this raises tricky issues around legitimising girls' continued stay in brothels – this does provide a way in which some basic services can be offered.

Experts warn that there is a risk here in “creating dependency”. They warn against providing *regular* food deliveries or prescription medicines, as in effect this would be taking over the

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<sup>5</sup> Research suggests that there is an orphanage for ISIS-affiliated children currently operating in Mosul, so the NGO might reach out to them to see if they are available to assist these girls.

brothel's 'responsibility' to feed and care for its women – creating ethical problems. To avoid this, a careful risk analysis is required before this approach is taken.

As above, it will be important to think about who should negotiate this. NGOs dedicated to supporting trafficked women might be more successful – and might better ensure the safety of their staff – if a larger international organisation or the police, take a lead in negotiating this arrangement, with the NGO then providing the actual services.

#### **6. Providing girls with information:**

Another means to assist trafficked women is to provide them with information about the support services available to them, should they ever require these. This can be useful to victims, as many might be staying where they are as they have been led to believe that there is no one outside who would help them, and that they would be in more trouble outside. As such, providing victims with clear information about the fact that this is not the case can be helpful to them.

Information that women might need include; information about their rights and about any assistance organizations that are available, as well as telephone numbers of organizations they can call for help. Materials should be written in languages that girls will understand and could include pictures for girls who cannot read.

#### **7. Reaching girls outside of the brothel**

If girls ever leave the brothels, or if they are working on the streets, this provides additional opportunities to access them. Trafficked women might leave brothels for medical appointments, childcare, immigration matters, travel to hotels or other work engagements, or to engage with clients on the streets.

Detailed information would need to be recorded on when they leave, where they go, if there is any routine or regularity in their movement, who they travel with and who they are guarded by. All of this could inform a strategy on how to access these girls – seeking to find an opportunity when girls can be safely approached. An approach would need to be carefully tailored and planned, after a thorough study of women's movements – and not spontaneously conducted. If such a contact moment was identified, an organisation could use this opportunity to gain the attention of victims and to deliver them important information.

**Indirect access:** Where directly approaching women is not possible, organizations abroad have come up with interesting ways of reaching them indirectly with information, while they are outside of brothels. This has been done this by putting up posters, cards, pamphlets or brochures in visible spaces where girls might be – including on doors and walls of washrooms in medical centers, hotels, or community centers.

Some organizations have been quite creative in placing information in formats that are more easily hidden and passed on to victims, including matchbooks, lighters, make-up cases, sticks of gum, bookmarks, bracelets, religious cards, incense sticks and condoms.

## 8. Hotline

One of the most commonly used tools to access victims of trafficking are hotlines. Hotlines allows victims to identify themselves and provide information to operators, which can facilitate them being assisted. These also allow witnesses to confidentially provide information they may have about trafficking rings and brothels. Trafficking hotline services have been used successfully in countries like USA, Serbia and Turkey.<sup>6</sup>

An NGO could create a dedicated and manned 24-hour phone number, to serve as a hotline that girls can call – with its number shared through the outreach means described above, as well as through the media. An organisation doing this should be mindful that girls calling a hotline are likely to be afraid and mistrusting. It has been noted by some organizations that female victims are more receptive to female voices, and hence female phone operators should be used for this purpose.<sup>7</sup> If they choose to operate their own phone line, an NGO must ensure that all victim information is kept secret, that trained and competent personnel are available 24-hours a day to take these calls, and that information received is always acted upon in the most appropriate way.

### Conclusions

The sections above have described a range of approaches that might be available to access trafficked girls. The approach selected will depend largely on the facts – and as a clear starting point further information will need to be collected, to see which approaches are viable. Taking any actions before comprehensive information is known about the girls and their captors, will be dangerous, posing the risk of harm to the girls and the NGO's staff alike.

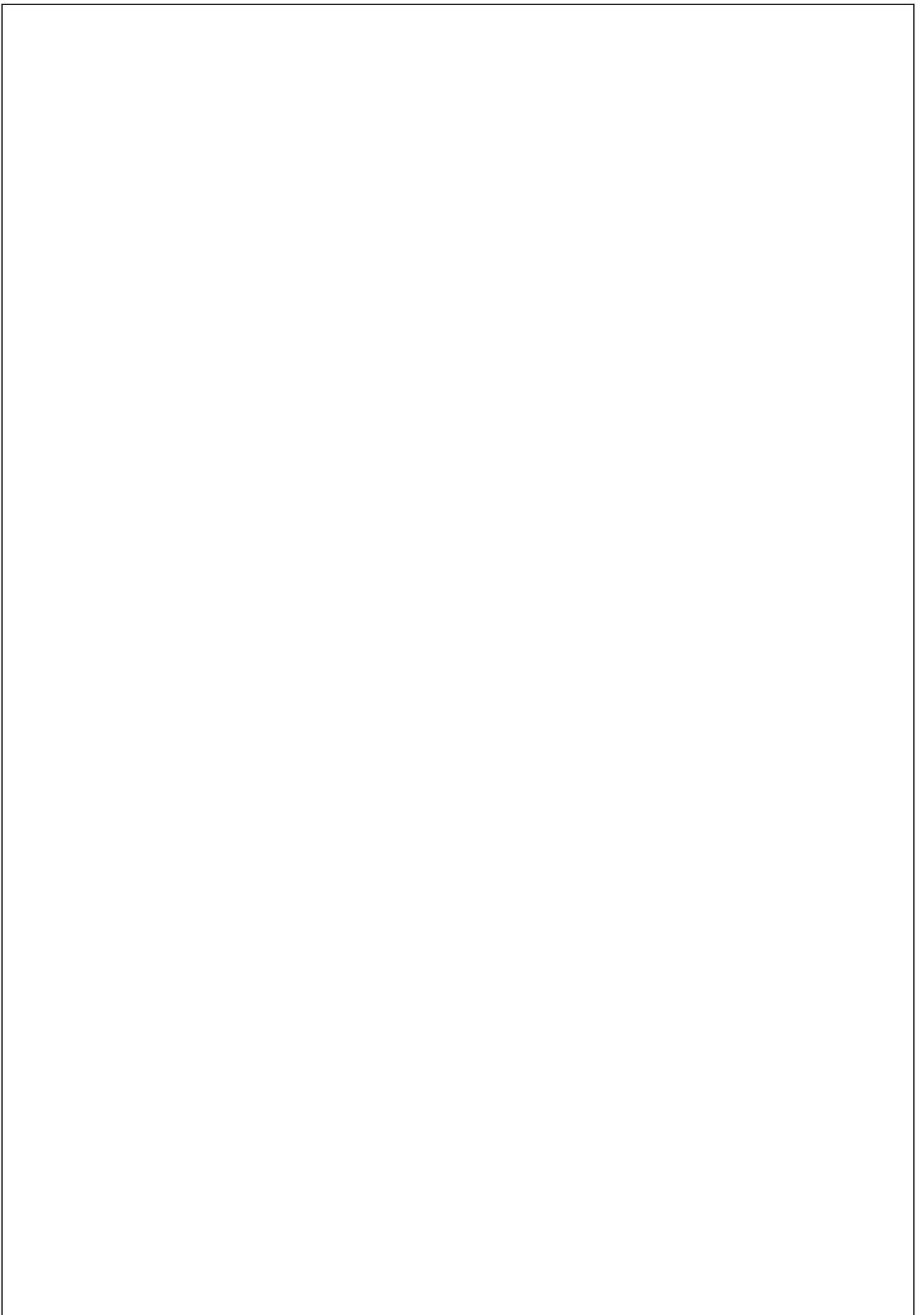
An additional important step will be for any NGO to consider whether they are the appropriate actor to carry out specific actions, or whether victims might receive better outcomes through referrals. It is clear that going into brothels and rescuing girls is not something that should be undertaken by an NGO. Rather larger specialist organisations, working together with the police, might be the more appropriate actors for securing girls' release. Then, the role of local organisations would be to work alongside them, providing culturally appropriate care, support and reintegration – roles that local organisations are best placed to provide.

Trafficking and exploitation of girls by gangs is a highly sensitive area – with numerous risks and barriers to action. These challenges are compounded in the Mosul context, and even more so when working with the highly stigmatized group of ISIS affiliated women. It is hoped that this report has provided some avenues that could be considered, as means towards assisting this exploited group.

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<sup>6</sup> 100 Best Practices in Combating Trafficking in Persons: The Role of Civil Society", The Protection Project at The Johns Hopkins University, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work-old/capacity-building/thb-and-related-forms-of-exploitation/publications/listening-to-victims-experiences-of-identification-return-and-assistance-in-south-eastern-europe/>



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The GBViE Helpdesk is available 09.30- 17.30 GMT, Monday to Friday.