Overview

Due to security concerns and socio-cultural barriers, some female personnel may face challenges when travelling for work or participating in other professional activities. These persistent barriers to full participation in the workforce have resulted in diminished overall response quality and effectiveness, primarily due to fewer women participating in assessments, implementation and monitoring and fewer women being consulted about their needs. Identifying and addressing the barriers that contribute to social exclusion and deprive women of their right to employment will support the humanitarian community to develop more responsive policies for eliminating them.

Among other adaptations to meet the unique challenges facing female personnel required to travel for their work, one potential tool is for women to be supported to travel with a family member as a Mahram. This approach has financial, logistics and response capacity implications but could greatly increase the representation of women in the humanitarian workforce and improve representation of women in assessment results. Women and girls affected by the crisis are often not allowed to speak to male enumerators, particularly about sensitive issues. The involvement of female personnel in humanitarian activities is a key step in ensuring women’s and girls’ views and needs are better heard and understood, and thus inform and shape the humanitarian response.

The ICCT collectively encourages partners to consider adopting consistent, gender-sensitive approaches to the delivery of humanitarian assistance including, where desired by female personnel, the use of Mahrams for in-country travel. One existing example of such a gender-sensitive approach in practice, is the UNHAS policy on flight costs for female passengers. In recognition of the low participation of women in the response, UNHAS offers reduced rates for female passengers participating in the humanitarian response and the opportunity for female caregivers to travel with their child, as needed. This allows additional flexibility for organisations to cover the cost of an accompanying Mahram, whenever requested by the female personnel.

Purpose

The purpose of this guidance note is to facilitate women’s mobility and travel to field sites and to promote secure access to and acceptance by affected communities, specifically through the use of a Mahram. This guidance note is intended to positively impact on women’s participation in need assessments, preparedness, response, monitoring missions, and the general career progression of female personnel in humanitarian organisations, including local and national NGOs. It does not cover all the systematic adaptations needed to support increased participation and more inclusive response but provides a deep dive into the issues related to the use of a Mahram.

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1 When combined with meaningful inclusion of female respondents and sex-disaggregated data during assessments.
Mahrams. The note is subject to change based on the ongoing feedback from Afghan women within the humanitarian community.

By covering the costs of travel for Mahrams, where requested by the female personnel, organisations can contribute to supporting a safe and supportive working environment that is inclusive of women. The use of Mahrams must be voluntary, as defined by the female personnel who would choose to be accompanied by a Mahram and left to the preference of individual women within each organisation. It must be noted that in order for female personnel to make a free and informed choice regarding the accompaniment of a Mahram, a budget and organisational policy must be made available in advance, with communication in the preferred language/s of national female personnel.

Please note that issues related to the full participation of all groups in humanitarian action are varied and cannot be encapsulated in a single guidance note. This guidance note specifically relates to the use of Mahrams to promote gender inclusion. Other guidance notes may be developed by the ICCT to address other known barriers as needed.²

Definition of Mahram

The cultural concept of “Mahram” literally means the existence of “protection” or the realisation of a sense of physical and social security for women. In practice in Afghanistan, this is often achieved by the assigning of a relative to accompany or chaperone a woman when she is travelling or moving outside their home. Traditionally, the role of the Mahrams is taken on by a woman’s husband, father, grandfather, son, grandson, brother, son-in-law, father-in-law, uncle or nephew. However, sometimes this role is also carried out by mothers, grandmothers or older sisters. Not all women feel compelled to utilise a Mahram and not all men insist on their female relatives taking a chaperone. Thus, it should not be assumed that all Afghan women require Mahrams when travelling outside the home. Organisations should consider holding a separate consultation with their female personnel about their preferences on the use of Mahrams and whether this would expand their participation opportunities.

Factors for partners to consider

Mahram Criteria
Each Mahram should meet the following criteria:
- At least 18 years old.
- Physically, mentally prepared and understand the role and obligations of being a Mahram.
- Have the required documentation to facilitate travel (identity docs) and the female personnel should independently confirm their desire to have the person join them in their work.
- Have the relevant training. This includes security awareness, a briefing on humanitarian principles, PSEA and other safeguarding obligations, and a specific briefing of the parameters of the mission, particularly details on activities that would require heightened levels of privacy and confidentially.³
- Consent to undertake the responsibilities of a Mahram.

² Other common barriers include childcare spaces in workplaces (including in national NGOs, international NGOs, Un agencies, government offices, etc).
³ Including, but not limited to, protection activities such as PSS or case management, physical rehabilitation sessions, etc.
Rules to be followed by Mahram - Commitment form

It is recommended that the Mahram be required to sign a commitment form agreeing to abide by the following principles:

- The Mahram should never participate in meetings, seminars and workshops, unless his/her absence would prevent the participation of female personnel.
- The Mahram should observe the organisation’s code of conduct and security measures.
- The Mahram shall not introduce himself/herself as a staff member or affiliate of the organisation.
- The Mahram should not act as the organisation’s representative.
- The Mahram cannot be armed during accompaniment to, during or from, humanitarian activities.
- The Mahram should comply with humanitarian principles, the Joint Operating Principles (JOPs), the Guidance Note on Assessments and the principles set out in the HCT Data Sharing Protocol.
- In case of accidental exposure to confidential information about individuals or organisations, the Mahram should not discuss or disclose that information.
- The Mahram should not otherwise interfere with the integrity of humanitarian work being undertaken.

Organisational policies and budgets

- Organisations should consider providing the option of including a Mahram in official travel plans for female personnel, in line with or complemented by their internal travel, gender and human resources policies.
- The travel and incidental costs for the Mahram should be planned for during proposal development phase and be included in project budgets.
- Each organisation should clearly communicate with personnel which costs they will cover for a Mahram including whether they will pay for/provide:
  - Accommodation
  - Transportation
  - Domestic flight/Car
  - Meals and Incidental
  - PPE for COVID-19 considerations

Administrative procedures

The organisation should have clear administrative procedure for approval. Things to consider include:

- Field/Country level HR/Admin recording the desire of the female personnel to be accompanied Mahram, the agreed name of the personnel’s Mahram and validating the relationship between them. It is recommended that Country Director/Representative approval accompanies HR validation.
- The Mahram should sign any required travel waiver/disclaimer form releasing the organisation from any liability claims related to accidents or security, prior to their travel.
- Clarification of exclusion from medical allowance or health coverage, if applicable.
- Signing of PSEA and Child Safeguarding policies prior to any travel to field locations.