

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONFLICT AND CRISIS

Focus

REFUGEE WOMEN*, GBV AND THE CRISIS OF GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY:

When funding disappears,
Violence expands

 **CONTENT WARNING:** This fact sheet contains descriptions of physical, sexual and psychological violence.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is often regarded as a problem limited to war, displacement or other crisis situations. However, violence against women*¹ and marginalised groups is a persistent issue rooted in societies already marked by structural inequality, institutional failure, deepening poverty, and the denial of safety, autonomy and essential resources for women and girls.

The global humanitarian system faced a wave of funding cuts between 2024 and 2025, amidst a series of intersecting crises that were further exacerbated by resource scarcity. The United States triggered the most significant foreign aid funding cut, **reducing foreign assistance programmes by 80 percent** and cancelling existing aid commitments, which sent immediate shockwaves throughout the sector (OECD, 2025). As humanitarian funding declines globally, refugee and displaced women are left without economic support or essential protections.

The consequences are immediate and severe: shelters close, psychosocial support ends, legal aid disappears and community-based protection mechanisms weaken. Refugee women-led organisations, which often provide frontline services and support, are at risk of collapse. Funding cuts also hit trans and queer refugee groups especially hard; these groups are already chronically underfunded, serve communities facing acute discrimination, and depend heavily on a small pool of foreign donors that are now retreating. In parallel, as funding disappears, the ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making falls by the wayside as refugee women leaders are forced to manage competing priorities.



THE UNITED STATES TRIGGERED THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FOREIGN AID FUNDING CUT, REDUCING FOREIGN ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES BY 80 PERCENT AND CANCELLING EXISTING AID COMMITMENTS.

Ultimately, funding cuts weaken not only the systems meant to protect people, but also the agency of those most affected to influence the decisions that determine their lives. As programmes shut down and activities are suspended, the voices of refugee women are increasingly silenced. This is not merely a gap in support; it constitutes structural violence, exposing vulnerabilities and allowing harm to persist.

¹ In this fact sheet, the term "women" refers to anyone who self-identifies as a woman

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DOES NOT END WHEN CONFLICT ENDS

For refugee and displaced women, violence is a continuous experience that begins before displacement and persists across borders, within refugee camps and in host communities. These women face danger during transit, exploitation at borders, abuse in camps, harassment in host communities, and intimate partner violence exacerbated by poverty and trauma. According to UN data (2024), more than 60 million women and girls who are displaced or stateless and fleeing conflict are exposed to GBV. Displacement magnifies existing inequalities by stripping women of citizenship status, legal rights, housing, mobility, income, and family or community support.

The structural drivers of GBV faced by displaced and refugee women are manifold – including power disparities between men and women in society, a lack of protection systems for those who are forcibly displaced, and climate-related disasters that lead to resource scarcity and poverty. **In the Chad-Sudan border areas, women fleeing the Sudanese conflict have reported rampant cases of rape and sexual assault (Idris, 2025). [AF8.1] Along Mediterranean migration routes, there are likewise multiple reports of sexual violence, slavery and trafficking (UNHCR, 2024).**

In overcrowded camps where basic needs are unmet, women and girls face constant threats. Economic hardship often drives families to arrange early marriages for their daughters, while women excluded from formal employment remain highly vulnerable to trafficking and survival sex. Razia Sultana, leader of the **Rohingya**

Women Welfare Society (RWWS) based in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, noted that funding cuts have led to the **closure of their educational centre and WASH programmes**, which included sanitising and managing separate toilets for women in the camp. This closure has significantly increased security risks at her organisation (New Women Connectors, 2025).

ACCORDING TO UN DATA UN DATA (2024), MORE THAN 60 MILLION WOMEN AND GIRLS WHO ARE DISPLACED OR STATELESS AND FLEEING CONFLICT ARE EXPOSED TO GBV.

LGBTIQ+ refugees also experience targeted violence from armed groups and within their own communities. Doreen Nasaala, an LGBTIQ+ activist, advocate for people living with HIV/AIDS, and representative of the **Minority Defenders Forum** in Kenya, observed that many refugee women in her community have resorted to alcoholism, drug abuse, and in some tragic cases, suicide, as they struggle with depression and hopelessness regarding their future (New Women Connectors, 2025).

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) cannot be separated from these broader realities. CRSV is not confined to battlefields – it extends through displacement routes, detention centres, camps and exploitative labour systems. Existing data show that CRSV remains widespread and disproportionately affects women and girls. In 2024, more than 4,600 verified cases were reported globally, and field evidence from Sudan shows thousands of women and girls affected in displacement and camp settings. **In Darfur, Sudan, Médecins Sans Frontières reported that refugee camps have become hotspots of sexual violence, where women and girls make up 97 percent of the survivors and victims.**

Violence against displaced women is interconnected across every stage of a crisis. Pramila Patten, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, highlighted that despite the escalating risks faced by women and girls fleeing conflict, **women-led frontline organisations in countries like Haiti, Somalia and South Sudan have gone from being “underfunded to unfunded” (UN, 2025).**



REFUGEE WOMEN-LED ORGANISATIONS ARE THE REAL FRONTLINE RESPONDERS

Even before accessing the services and support of international agencies, refugee women have always self-organised and built networks of care and resilience. Refugee women-led organisations' (WLOs) proximity to communities and holistic, context-specific programming distinguish them from other actors and make them indispensable to an effective, legitimate refugee response. As such, they are central to GBV prevention and response, drawing directly on lived experience. They possess critical knowledge about the **dangers and risks women face, hidden exploitation routes, and barriers – such as stigma, legal status or fear – that conceal violence.** For instance, **Refugiados Unidos**, a refugee WLO in Colombia, provides psycho-social support as a core essential service because they know that approximately **70 percent of refugee women**, if not more, experience trauma before, during and after their migratory journeys (New Women Connectors, 2025).

Despite their crucial work in providing safety nets for their communities, refugee WLOs encounter profound systemic exclusion. Many are unable to formally register their organisations due to restrictive national laws that prevent refugees (or non-nationals) from doing so. **This lack of legal recognition is a major structural barrier across much of Southeast Asia, where many states are not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention.**



FUNDING MECHANISMS CONTINUE TO FAVOUR INTERNATIONAL INTERMEDIARIES OVER LOCAL, GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS LIKE REFUGEE WLOs.

Nimo Ahmed, founder of **The Sisterhood Foundation** in Indonesia, shared that her organisation must legally register through Indonesian citizens, as refugee-led groups cannot obtain independent legal registration in the country (New Women Connectors, 2025). Others are denied donor funding simply because they lack the requisite bureaucratic infrastructure.

Despite current rhetoric within the humanitarian ecosystem to support “localisation” priorities, **funding mechanisms continue to favour international intermediaries over local, grassroots organisations like refugee WLOs** (European Commission, 2024). This contradiction highlights that grassroots efforts to provide essential protection receive the least stable support; this lack of sustainable resources directly exacerbates existing risks.

LACK OF LEGAL RECOGNITION IS A MAJOR STRUCTURAL BARRIER ACROSS MUCH OF SOUTHEAST ASIA, WHERE MANY STATES ARE NOT PARTY TO THE 1951 REFUGEE CONVENTION.

GBV AS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE: A COL

A structural perspective is key to understanding gender-based violence (GBV). GBV is not limited to isolated, individual acts, but is deeply linked to historical and economic systems that control bodies, labour, movement and survival. A colonial-capitalist lens reveals how today's inequalities are rooted in the past and continue to shape the lives of refugee and displaced women.

Colonialism fundamentally altered gender relations within colonised societies, entrenching social, political and economic inequalities that further disenfranchised women. Colonial powers imposed **RIGID PATRIARCHAL SYSTEMS, DISMANTLED COMMUNITY-BASED POWER STRUCTURES, AND NORMALISED THE CONTROL AND EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN'S BODIES.** Hand in hand with this, violence was institutionalised through extractivism, slavery, occupation and imperial domination.

These colonial hierarchies persist today in our neoliberal and hyper-capitalist world, as evident through current destructive systems of economic exploitation, militarisation and border violence. The dynamics are inseparable from broader systems of power. GBV is closely linked to racism, class, heteropatriarchy and migration control. An intersectional approach demonstrates how violence is shaped by race, class, sexuality, disability, legal status and geography. For example, a queer, undocumented woman of colour may face distinct risks that standard humanitarian responses often completely overlook.

Yet these realities are frequently insufficiently addressed in prevailing humanitarian frameworks. Mainstream GBV interventions often prioritise criminal justice or emergency responses while neglecting the underlying structural causes of violence. A transformative feminist response must extend beyond these limited approaches.

VENEZUELA

Restrictive visa policies force women onto dangerous migration pathways and irregular crossings. In Latin America, Venezuelan women searching for security, safety from violence, and better economic opportunities for themselves and their families face persistent harassment, traffickers, and smugglers on their migratory journeys. In 2025 alone, six women died along the Bolivian-Chilean border, demonstrating how the risks they face can become deadly (ONU Noticias, 2025).

COLONIAL AND CAPITALIST CONTINUUM

EUROPE

In Europe, border regimes criminalise the movement of migrants, which inevitably leads to an increase in trafficking. Women and girls make up the majority of trafficking survivors in the EU, particularly amongst asylum seekers, as dangerous routes – such as land crossings through the Balkan route (from the Western Balkans to Italy) and sea crossings on the Mediterranean (from Libya, Algeria or Tunisia to Spain or Italy) – are highly controlled by traffickers and smugglers (ECRE, 2025; Freedom United, 2025).

AFGHANISTAN

For displaced women, these overlapping systems compound vulnerability and directly shape survivors' immediate experiences. Displacement driven by climate disasters, combined with economic dependence, can trap survivors in cycles of violence. In Afghanistan, a country where 80 percent of the population depends on agriculture, climate degradation severely impacts livelihoods and acts as an aggravating factor for different forms of GBV, including forced or early marriage, domestic violence and trafficking. Girls as young as two years old are being sold into marriage because families can no longer afford to care for them (ActionAid, 2021).

BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, garment factory workers manufacturing clothes for fast fashion companies are primarily women from rural areas. It is well documented that despite their enormous contributions to the country's export earnings, such workers continue to experience severe challenges, including wage theft, inhumane work environments, GBV, and sexual and psychological harassment (Akbar, 2025).

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Similarly, resource wars, extractive industries, climate disasters, land grabs and exploitative labour all push women and Indigenous communities from their homes or subject them to senseless sexual violence. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the mining of resources and minerals like gold, cobalt and coltan displaces women and Indigenous communities, while armed groups use sexual violence as a weapon of war. Data from 2016 show that women experience sexual violence at a rate of close to 74 percent in artisanal mining communities. Often, women miners and those living in these areas have little choice but to engage in "transactional sex" simply to access mines and sustain their livelihoods (El Meouchi et al., 2023).

SURVIVOR-CENTRED CARE

WHAT IT IS:

The core principles of survivor-centred care – safety, confidentiality, non-discrimination and respect – create a supportive environment where survivors' rights and wishes are respected, their safety is ensured, and they are treated with dignity and respect. The individual who has experienced violence remains the primary actor and decision-maker throughout the entire process. Regrettably, this approach is being profoundly undermined as frontline refugee WLOs face severe financial strain.

WHAT IT IS NOT:

Humanitarian responses grounded in charity rather than rights, justice and structural change expose the limitations of approaches based on pity or on treating women solely as passive victims and beneficiaries. A feminist critique must therefore examine the politics of charity, since such frameworks risk reinforcing colonial power structures. Feminist and postcolonial scholars frequently warn against "saviour" approaches that prioritise charity over transformative change and fail to address the systemic conditions that perpetuate violence against women. For refugee women facing GBV, survival cannot depend on charity alone.

FUNDING CUTS ARE EXACERBATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Funding cuts escalate GBV through a devastating ripple effect across already weakened protection systems. These reductions:

- Shutter emergency shelters, trapping survivors with their abusers
- End psycho-social support, deepening untreated trauma
- Eliminate livelihoods, increasing a reliance on harmful coping strategies
- Weaken prevention, enabling trafficking and exploitation
- Defund refugee WLOs, eroding trusted, community-led protection mechanisms

This crisis is particularly severe in conflict and post-conflict zones, where militarisation, displacement and economic collapse already heighten the risk of violence. According to UN Women (2024), **150 million women and girls are currently caught in humanitarian crises globally. Across Ukraine, Sudan, Afghanistan, Palestine, Syria, Myanmar and beyond, these figures are only increasing as geopolitical conflicts intensify.** Climate change is also projected to impact approximately 236 million women and girls – a figure twice as high as the projected impact on men. Against this backdrop, the expectation that refugee women will simply endure worsening conditions reveals how "resilience" is too often invoked to mask systemic neglect.

AS GOVERNMENTS INVEST RECORD SUMS IN MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND BORDER SECURITISATION REFUGEE WOMEN AND GIRLS FACE SHRINKING ACCESS TO PROTECTION SYSTEMS DESPITE HEIGHTENED RISKS OF VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED REGIONS.

As states continue to pour funds into militarised borders, surveillance systems and distorted geopolitical priorities, the protection of women and girls is framed as contingent on scarce resources. This stark, contrasting reality reveals a dark political choice rather than an economic inevitability. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Liang et al., 2025) highlights that **global military spending crossed the US\$2.7 trillion threshold** in 2024, a record-breaking amount. Unsurprisingly, the countries with the highest military expenditure are the USA, China, Russia, Germany and India. Similarly, the European Union has exponentially increased its expenditure on border security over the last two decades – surging from 6 million euros in 2005 to 1.1 billion euros in 2025 (Genovese & Vasques, 2025). This reflects a deliberate political choice to invest in a **highly militarised approach to migration**, making it increasingly dangerous for migrants to seek asylum within the bloc.

REFUGEE WOMEN

ARE NOT PASSIVE VICTIMS

Despite the dire conditions faced by displaced and refugee women, they are far from being passive victims. With the collapse of external assistance and the withdrawal of large organisations from multiple countries, refugee women leaders have increasingly turned to their own communities to sustain themselves and find solutions.

Services provided by refugee WLOs:

- Community-led support for essential services like childcare and food banks
- Self-organising to develop collective advocacy
- Provision of listening and emotional support through online platforms
- Financial assistance to women facing homelessness and urgent shelter needs

Barriers they face:

- Funding cuts that reduce field engagement and mobility
- Strained transport budgets that limit in-person support
- Lack of core, flexible and sustainable funding
- Limited or no access to decision-making spaces

Additional burdens:

- Burn-out, exhaustion, and firsthand or secondary trauma
- Juggling multiple economic activities in order to sustain minimal services
- Structural racism and legal barriers
- Pressure to keep communities safe with ever-shrinking resources

A FEMINIST FUTURE REQUIRES POLITICAL COURAGE

The humanitarian system now stands at a crossroads. It can either continue decades-long practices that marginalise refugee women, deprioritise their protection and undermine their leadership; or it can drive a movement for systemic change and a genuine shift in power by embracing a feminist response grounded in equity, partnership, solidarity and accountability. As refugee women-led organisations recommend, our response – rooted in a decolonial and intersectional feminist lens – demands action across three critical areas:

- A. Earmark funding that is core, flexible and multi-year for refugee WLOs:** Funding must shift away from short-term, restrictive projects towards flexible, long-term support that allows refugee women-led organisations to set their own strategic priorities. Furthermore, application and reporting processes must be simplified to ease heavy administrative burdens.
- B. Centre the meaningful participation of refugee women in decision-making processes:** This means moving beyond tokenism to ensure genuine inclusion in decision-making and policy spaces. Refugee women are too often spoken for, rather than given direct opportunities to represent themselves and shape agendas. Humanitarian actors must establish formal mechanisms, such as dedicated seats and long-term advisory roles, to guarantee meaningful participation.
- C. Address legal and structural obstacles:** Funding and partnership strategies must explicitly recognise local constraints and prioritise direct legal support for refugee women. Concurrently, robust advocacy for gender-responsive asylum laws and safe, legal pathways is essential to ensure refugee women can securely access services, protection and civic participation.

Above all, the world must recognise that violence against displaced women is a defining feature of crisis – not a secondary effect. When funding is stripped away, when legal protections are insufficient, and when refugee women are excluded from decision-making, the risk and prevalence of GBV increase.

The courage of refugee women is unquestioned. The real issue is whether governments, donors and international institutions will finally acknowledge their own role in placing these women at risk. Until accountability is established, each funding cut represents a political decision about whose lives are valued.

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DISCLAIMER:

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