

THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

It is essential to understand the specific needs, capacities, and priorities of women, girls, boys, and men in humanitarian settings prior to program planning or decision making. A more gender-responsive approach can facilitate the meaningful participation, engagement, and leadership of women and girls in local decision-making processes, where their voices should be amplified and heard. For women and those in higher risk of marginalization and living under severely vulnerable conditions, targeted actions are needed to honor the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) commitment of leaving no one behind.

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In 2020, it will be 25 years since the Beijing Platform for Action was set out to remove the systemic barriers that hold women back from equal participation in all areas of life, whether in public or private. Despite some progress, meaningful change has been agonizingly slow for the majority of women and girls around the world. Multiple obstacles remain unchanged in law and in culture and unfortunately, women’s work continues to be undervalued; women work more, earn less, have fewer choices, and experience multiple forms of violence at home and in public spaces.¹ UN Women, a member of the United Nations (UN) entity, stands at the center of mobilizing governments and civil society to keep the promises of the Beijing Platform for Action.

One of the areas that systematic barriers are apparent and urgent for women is in conflict and humanitarian settings. The reality of women that have been forced to flee and migrate is often times indescribable. Even if temporary refuge and shelter are provided, food insecurity, fear of an uncertain future, and living conditions far below that of the poverty lines remain unfortunate parts of women’s lives. Moreover, women and girls are more susceptible to abuse and exploitation in conflict settings and are more likely to be forced to engage in sexual transactions for money and access to services.

The 2018 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) report² highlights that conflicts and unstable environments exacerbate pre-existing patterns of discrimination against women and girls, exposing them to heightened risks of human rights violations. Conflicts can also result in the normalization of higher levels of violence against women and girls, including arbitrary killings, torture and mutilation, sexual violence, and forced marriage. To quote UN Secretary-General António Guterres in a recent speech: “Sexual violence in war largely affects women and girls because it is closely linked to broader issues of gender inequality and discrimination,” adding that “prevention” must be based on “promoting women’s rights and gender equality in all areas, before, during and after conflict.”³ As a tactic of war, women and girls are primarily and increasingly targeted by the use of sexual violence. Violence against women and girls also spikes in post-conflict societies, where there is a breakdown of the rule of law and disintegration of social and family structures. As Pramila Patten, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, stated “after a decade of concerted attention and action to deal with this crime ... wars are still being fought on, and over, the bodies of women and girls.”⁴

¹ UN Women, “Beijing +25: Celebrating 25 years of Championing Women’s Rights,” <http://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/beijing-plus-25>

² CEDAW, “Contribution to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in Response to a Call for Inputs by the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF),” 27 April 2018, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CEDAW_INF_8699_E.pdf

³ UN News, “Protect Women’s Rights ‘Before, During and After Conflict’ UN Chief Tells High Level Security Council Debate,” 23 April 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/04/1037151>

⁴ UN News, (2019)

In addition, pre-existing vulnerabilities of all members of the affected population are often aggravated by other factors such as age, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion, particularly during and after conflict.⁵ To respond to this, states that have committed to the SDG should prioritize targeted actions towards those facing more vulnerabilities when funding policies are designed and to honor the SDG commitment on *Leaving No One Behind*,⁶ humanitarian donor policies should emphasize on strengthening gender and intersectionality approaches. In line with the Beijing Platform for Action, SDG commitments and the two Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees.⁷

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This article focuses mainly on how conflict and crisis affect women and girls, and how their needs could be better addressed by governments, donors, and national and international actors in conflict, post-conflict or affected societies. There are many other factors that deserve better attention that are not addressed here and would need an additional or separate article. For example, the role of women in peacemaking and peace-building in post-conflict settings, how children are affected by crisis, and men as victims of sexual violence, to name a few.

Women as Agents of Change

To ensure that all members of the affected society can benefit equally from responses, the first step is to understand the specific needs, priorities, and capacities of women, girls, men, and boys in different age groups. Using gender analysis and assessment to strengthen gender-responsive approach reinforces a more human rights-based approach where the rights and dignities of every individual as a human being are better

⁵ The International Organization for Migration defines vulnerability as “the diminished capacity of an individual or group to have their rights respected, or to cope with, resist or recover from exploitation, or abuse... characterized by the presence or absence of factors or circumstances that increase the risk or exposure to, or protect against, exploitation, or abuse.”

⁶ Sustainable Development Goals, “About the Sustainable Development Goals,” *United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

⁷ The United Nations, “Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration,” 30 July 2018, <https://undocs.org/A/CONF.231/3>; The United Nations, “Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,” 2018, https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf

addressed and recognized. This means better access to services for all members of the affected population, particularly those in a more vulnerable position that are in danger of being marginalized and excluded.

In crisis and post-crisis settings, women often find themselves acting as the head of their households due to the separation or loss of male household members. Simultaneously, many women are dealing with limited access to resources and life-saving support. A simple example is when women cannot access a food distribution line because there is no child care assistance, the location is inaccessible or transportation is unsafe. A task that seems to be an easy one for an individual, becomes challenging when accompanied by one or many children. The same applies to people with disabilities, the elderly or those with other vulnerabilities that can limit access to essential services. Consequently, those individuals are more likely to suffer from food insecurity and severe health issues in emergency settings. Girls are more frequently withdrawn from school to help out in the home or forced into early marriage in the hope that they will be provided for and better protected. Pregnancy-related death is the second leading cause of death for women in any context and 60 percent of such deaths occur in crisis settings.⁸

That said, people affected by humanitarian crises should not be seen as victims but rather agents of change. Although women are more likely to experience vulnerability during or after a natural or man-made crisis, women should not be seen only through a lens of victimhood, but as essential agents of change as decision-makers and advocates of their rights. By ensuring the participation and engagement of women in planning and decision making, women are more likely to benefit from humanitarian efforts and eventually be more empowered, resilient, and active participants of the society.

Another point worth mentioning is that global political discourse tends to focus on the negative impact of forced migration, yet, research has shown that with efficient migration management, refugees can positively impact the economy of their hosting society. The establishment of necessary and minimum support systems can further encourage participation and engagement in the economy.

Economic challenges faced by women and men that have had to seek refuge in a third country, during or after conflict settings, also vary significantly. Any measures addressing the economic empowerment, self-reliance or sustainable living conditions of an affected population, must take this difference into account and take action tailored towards different needs. For example, if a female single-headed household has no

⁸ UN Women, "IASC Gender in Humanitarian Action Handbook," <https://www.gihahandbook.org/>

access to support with care work, they are less likely to contribute to the labor market and become self-reliant and economically independent. If society, the neighborhood, and the overall community show resistance towards women's participation in the labor market, it decreases women's chances of contributing to the economy simultaneously as breadwinners and caregivers of the family. Additionally, if the neighborhood or roads to livelihood activities are not accessible or safe, women are less likely to participate in activities or leave their houses, just to give a few examples.

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If barriers are reduced and women are empowered to contribute and participate in the labor market and social life, it can lead to significant change, not only for the family but the overall society. In addition, it can strengthen social cohesion and decrease tension between groups. Furthermore, it can increase the likelihood of female-headed households to be economically self-reliant in the longer term, improving the wellbeing and future opportunities of their families, especially their children.

Turkey Being an Exemplary Host of Refugees

Turkey is and has been a remarkable host of Syrian refugees. To date, the country is the largest host of refugees in the world, providing temporary protection to over 3.6 million Syrians, in addition to around 400,000 asylum seekers and refugees mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Somalia.⁹ Less than four percent of Syrians live in Temporary Accommodation Centers, while 96 percent reside among the host community in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas.¹⁰

No single state can take on such an enormous task and responsibility without the support of the international community. Since 2017, UN Women has been contributing to the Syria response mechanism in Turkey and facilitating discussions on how to strengthen the gender responsiveness of interventions for both refugee and host community women in the country.¹¹ To find ways to support the Turkish government

⁹ DGMM, “Migration Statistics,” http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/migration-statistics_915_1024

¹⁰ “Turkey: 3RP Country Chapter - 2019/2020,” <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/turkey-3rp-country-chapter-20192020-entr>

¹¹ In addition to the Government of Turkey and public actors, both nationally and locally, several UN agencies, International Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society Organization are operating to respond to the Syria Crisis.

and other national actors in ensuring the safety and sustainable living conditions of women and girls, a needs assessment of Syrian women and girls under temporary protection in Turkey was carried out in seven cities in 2017.¹² The aim of the assessment was to amplify voices of the Syrian women and girls and to express their lived experiences and perceptions about the challenges they face, particularly in view of the changing gender roles in Turkey.

The findings, published in 2018 revealed that many Syrian women live below poverty and hunger thresholds, isolated from the host community and unable to engage with economic life due to family burdens, language barriers, and lack of employability skills. The study found that 70 percent of Syrian women did not speak Turkish, being a significant hindrance to accessing rights and services. Only 15 percent of women reported to have an income-generating job, 36 percent of women described their housing or shelter conditions as “bad” or “very bad,” and 17 percent claimed to live in sub-standard accommodations such as basements with no sunlight and poor ventilation. Overcrowding was a chronic problem, with multiple families living in one household, putting additional care burdens on women and generally increasing the risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Moreover, only 23 percent of 15 to 17-year-old girls indicated they attended school; the main reasons given were early and/or forced marriage, family pressure, and work or household and care responsibilities. During focus group discussions, some women specifically raised the importance of language courses and the provision of childcare services to help them continue their education and to attend vocational training.

Climate Change, Human Trafficking, and Forced Migration

When addressing gender in relation to humanitarian action and forced migration from a global perspective, there are two factors that should receive more attention. One is the linkage between forced migration and human trafficking and the second is climate change and how it is likely to exacerbate forced migration.

Forced migration increases the risk for human trafficking¹³ and the gender aspect is clear: women and girls account for 71 percent of all trafficked victims globally and young girls represent almost three-quarters of child trafficking victims.¹⁴ People in need of international protection due to forced migration are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked and may have limited resources or options in seeking assistance to escape exploitation. Lack of viable employment opportunities, lack of control

¹² ASAM & UN WOMEN, “Needs Assessment of Syrian Women and Girls Under Temporary Protection Status in Turkey,” June 2008, http://sgdd.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/The_Needs_Assessment_ENG_WEB.pdf

¹³ Annie Wilson, “Trafficking Risk for Refugees,” *Scholarly Commons*, 2012, <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1055&context=swb>

¹⁴ ICAT, “The Gender Dimensions of Human Trafficking,” September 2017, <http://icat.network/sites/default/files/publications/documents/ICAT-IB-04-V.1.pdf>

over financial resources, and limited access to education are all factors that can exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking.

Lastly, but more importantly, where gender is a critical factor, there is rising concern on how climate change will further exacerbate forced migration. One example worth mentioning is gender differences related to health risks. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), natural disasters such as droughts, floods, and storms kill more women than men, particularly younger women.¹⁵ In addition, the gender-gap effects on life expectancy tend to be greater in disasters where the socioeconomic status of women are already lower than the global average.

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The Solution: Gender Mainstreaming Refugee Response

It is essential to understand the specific needs, capacities, and priorities of women and girls to better organize planning or decision making in humanitarian action and refugee response. And to be able to facilitate active participation and leadership of women and girls in humanitarian responses, gender must be integrated throughout a program cycle. In 2018, The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)¹⁶ published a revised version of the Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action. First published in 2006, the handbook aims to ensure collective efforts among humanitarian actors in strengthening gender equality in humanitarian programming. With training, both online and in practice, donors or actors have access to substantive guidance and tools on how to carry out gender analysis and how the needs, priorities, and capacities of women, girls, men, and boys can be considered in all aspects of humanitarian responses. The handbook also addresses how to mitigate and prevent protection risks and how to ensure that adequate responses are provided. Since 2018, UN Women in Turkey has been offering and providing support to national and international actors in using the tools of the Gender Handbook.

¹⁵ World Health Organization, “Gender, Climate Change and Health,” <https://www.who.int/globalchange/GenderClimateChangeHealthfinal.pdf>

¹⁶ (IASC) is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance. It is a unique forum involving the key UN and non-UN humanitarian partners. The IASC was established in June 1992 in response to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 on the strengthening of humanitarian assistance.

Through evidence-based assessment and gender analysis, actors and agencies must identify the specific protection and assistance needs of individuals or groups within an affected population. In order for women to benefit equally from interventions, targeted actions for women and girls need a different approach. In the case of Turkey, there is a tailored coordination mechanism in response to the Syrian crisis; a regional Refugee and Resilience Plan¹⁷ (3RP) is developed and revised each year, with active participation of 46 institutions and organizations under the leadership of the Government of Turkey.¹⁸ UN Women has in recent years contributed to the coordination mechanism by enhancing and strengthening the overall gender responsiveness.

In addition to the response mechanisms in place, targeted actions are needed for those who are more vulnerable to exploitation. A more gender-sensitive humanitarian response will empower women who are, in return, more likely to contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of their family and community.

¹⁷ UNHCR, (2019/2020)

¹⁸ “Turkey: 3RP Country Chapter - 2019/2020,”: <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/turkey-3rp-country-chapter-20192020-entr>