



MAKING  
AID WORK

FOR DISPLACED  
WOMEN

# Women and girls in conflict and displacement in Muslim settings:

## Call for protection from the spiral continuum of violence

Policy Briefing - August 2025

### Executive summary

- The number of conflict- and climate-induced displaced people has reached unprecedented levels, with many generated by and hosted in Muslim-majority contexts, especially in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region.
- UN Security Council (UNSC) reports record numbers of civilians killed and displaced; unprecedented malnutrition and aid denial; and a documented rise in conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), overwhelmingly affecting women and girls.
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflict and displacement due to pre-existing and conflict-exacerbated inequalities. They experience a spiral continuum<sup>1</sup> of intersecting forms of violence — encompassing direct, structural, cultural, slow violence, gender-based violence and other gendered harms, as seen in the Middle East and Horn of Africa.
- Restricted access to aid has catastrophic consequences on women's well-being, including reproductive violence, starvation, destitution and (often slow) death. 'Violence of aid restrictions' constitutes violence against women.

### Pathways to enhanced protection: Policy recommendations

#### Gulf-based and wider Muslim donors

- Develop and mobilise Islamic social finance tools and mechanisms to provide targeted support for displaced women.
- Pilot and integrate these mechanisms into international humanitarian responses.
- Establish new initiatives and innovative funding mechanisms tailored to provide specialised support for displaced women and girls in conflict and displacement.

#### Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

- Prioritise women's capacities and vulnerabilities in humanitarian diplomacy.
- Adapt the [Women, Peace and Security \(WPS\)](#) and [Youth, Peace and Security \(YPS\) concepts and commitments](#) to local cultures to better reflect local terminologies of safeguarding women's interests, strengthening WPS/YPS agenda legitimacy and

<sup>1</sup> The concept of a *spiral continuum of violence* illustrates how women can become trapped in an unrelenting cycle of violence that grows in complexity and severity. From interpersonal abuse to broader social and structural harms, each form of violence reinforces the next, leaving lasting and accumulative damage. This spiral widens over time—especially during protracted displacement—deepening harm not only for individual survivors but also for their families and communities.

implementation for women and girl's protection and participation by local consultations and collaboration with local leaders especially women leaders.

### International and national humanitarian agencies in the Middle East

- Develop a more focused approach to WPS/YPS to build on regional resources and address specific needs of women in the region and in the other Muslim-majority regions.
- Raise literacy of contextual faith traditions of women's protection to enhance support for displaced women in humanitarian crises.
- Provide culturally sensitive support and build on local community-based capacities and resources to strengthen protection and assistance for displaced women.

## About this briefing

This briefing highlights the gendered impacts of conflict, especially as conflicts increasingly target civilian infrastructure and restrict humanitarian access. It contributes to the ongoing discussions on the Protection of Civilians (PoC) in Armed Conflict, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda that addresses the devastating impacts of war on women and girls globally. This briefing calls all actors to ensure women's dignity, safety and rights are not sidelined in conflict responses, supporting WPS/YPS commitments (e.g. UNSCR Resolution 1310, Resolution 1325, Resolution 2250 and Resolution 2467 among other related UNSC resolutions) to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls in and after conflict, including protection from all forms of violence. It also calls for effective integration of gender perspectives into humanitarian aid.

## The spiral continuum of violence<sup>2</sup>

The number of conflict- and climate-induced displaced people has reached unprecedented levels, reaching over 120 million in 2025, with the majority generated by and hosted in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>3</sup> There is clear evidence that forced migrants experience **intensified and accumulated forms of violence and gendered harms over time and place**, indicating a **spiral continuum of intersecting forms of violence**, including **direct and structural**,<sup>4</sup> **cultural**<sup>5</sup> and **gender-based violence** across the forced migration experience. Direct violence (somatic) focused on anatomy and physiology<sup>6</sup> is often enabled by structural violence (embedded in social structures)<sup>7</sup>, cultural violence (embedded in culture and changing moral character of violent acts leading to normalising violence)<sup>8</sup> and slow violence perpetrated by the state (the everyday harms of destitution and neglect of basic needs).<sup>9,10</sup>

Violence spares no one but women and girls are disproportionately affected, as violence against them in conflict and displacement is intensified and widespread due to conflict-exacerbated gender inequalities. Violence is perpetrated by various actors including the state, police, border guards, coast guards, soldiers, armed groups, traffickers, smugglers, strangers, other refugees and family members.

While there are blurred lines between different incidents of violence,<sup>11</sup> it is well evidenced that conflict-affected displaced women and girls face:

- **Direct violence:** attacks on homes and health facilities, escalated hostilities, rape, denial of water and food and of movement, and increased insecurity around aid distribution points.
- **Structural violence:** denial of shelter, denial of access to safe transportation, work and aid, disruption of essential health-care services, movement restrictions, aid restrictions and severe distress.

<sup>2</sup> Pertek, S. (forthcoming) Violence against women, displacement, and religion: Rethinking humanitarianism. OUP.

<sup>3</sup> Pertek, S. (2024) Prioritising protection and inclusion of conflict-affected displaced women and girls in Muslim-majority contexts. Policy brief. University of Birmingham.

<sup>4</sup> Galtung, J. (1969) Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6 (3): 167–191.

<sup>5</sup> Galtung, J. (1990) Cultural Violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27 (3): 291–305. doi:[10.1177/0022343390027003005](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343390027003005).

<sup>6</sup> Direct violence can also manifest in 'desocialisation', 'resocialisation', 'detention' and 'expulsion'.

<sup>7</sup> Structural violence manifests in denial of protection and basic assistance, creating conditions in which conflict-affected and forced migrants cannot move on with their lives (no shelter, no right to work, no public support, forcing people to depend on charity to access food and hygiene items, etc.).

<sup>8</sup> Cultural violence is embedded into a culture and enables direct and structural violence in accumulating or 'wearing out' ways in the long term. Cultural violence operates in ways that can change the moral character of an act, making exploitation appear normal. It can be carried by 'ideology', 'religion', 'language', 'art' and 'empirical and formal science'.

<sup>9</sup> Mayblin, L., Wake, M. and Kazemi, M. (2019) Necropolitics and the Slow Violence of the Everyday: Asylum Seeker Welfare in the Postcolonial Present. *Sociology*, 54 (1): 107–123. doi:[10.1177/0038038519862124](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519862124).

<sup>10</sup> Slow violence is the everyday harms of destitution by the state and neglecting forced migrant needs (Mayblin et al., 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Gray, H. (2019) The 'war'/'not-war' divide: Domestic violence in the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 21, 189–206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148118802470>.

- **Cultural violence:** social values normalising violence, policies that reinforce exclusion, and lack of physical safety.
- **Slow violence:** deprivation of basic needs and depletion of essential supplies (including food, medicines, hygiene products, and supplies) leading to starvation, malnutrition, increased food insecurity, reproductive injustice, maternal mortality and deteriorating mental health and psychosocial well-being, inflicting dependency on aid to survive.
- **Gender-based violence:** conflict-related sexual violence, domestic abuse, increased reliance on negative coping mechanisms, such as child marriage and some forms of transactional sex, and denial of access to services and food by a partner or family member.

### *Violence of aid restrictions as violence against women and girls*

While sexual violence is a frequent gendered tactic of war and rape is recognised as a ‘weapon of war’, ‘violence of aid restrictions’ is a less known form of violence against women and girls. It refers to an attack on the physiology of oppressed groups (e.g. through denial of water and food<sup>12</sup>), as recorded in numerous conflict zones where humanitarian access is denied. ‘Violence of aid restrictions’ as a conceptual extension of structural and slow violence today includes both weaponised aid denial and deliberate neglect of women’s health. Restricted access to aid leads to deprivation and starvation, and, often to a slow death, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.

Increasingly politicised denial of humanitarian aid renders catastrophic consequences on women’s lives. For example, UN Women estimates that nearly one million women and girls are among the more than 1.9 million people — 85% of Gaza’s population — who have been displaced. With the blockade ongoing, Gaza’s most vulnerable — pregnant women, new mothers and young children — face worsening crisis. For example, in a study of six Gaza clinics, an average of 27% of pregnant and lactating women

were malnourished, with some clinics reporting rates as high as 42% for pregnant and 34% for lactating women.<sup>13</sup> Every day of delayed aid increases the scale of untreated medical emergencies, malnutrition and starvation. In turn, rising food insecurity heightens community tensions, and cash shortages continue to hinder the use of Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA), among other negative impacts.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, women and girls account for 5.8 million (54%) of Sudan’s internally displaced population. Among them, three million girls under the age of 18 face elevated protection risks, while 1.63 million women and girls of reproductive age are in urgent need of health-care services.<sup>15</sup> With 80% of hospitals in conflict-affected areas non-operational, maternal deaths have risen sharply, and access to sexual and reproductive health care for women has been severely restricted. Rape survivors are unable to access abortion medication or post-exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV, while pregnant women are forced to give birth without medical assistance or with unsterilised equipment.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, 80% of displaced women lack access to clean water, hindered by cost, safety concerns and distance.<sup>17</sup> In less than two years in Sudan, the number of people at risk of gender-based violence has tripled to over 12 million. Cases of conflict-related sexual violence remain hugely under-reported but evidence points to its systematic and varied<sup>18</sup> use as a weapon of war.<sup>19</sup>

Catastrophic consequences of displacement on women are also evident among refugee populations in other regions. For instance, Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh continue to have one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world - double the rate of other citizens of both Myanmar and Bangladesh, due to unsanitary conditions and restrictive gender norms within refugee camps.<sup>20</sup>

These and other gendered harms in conflict remain under-prioritised in both humanitarian practice and diplomatic negotiations. New developments in modern warfare, including the deployment of new military technologies, cyber operations and the increasing prevalence of misinformation and disinformation, contribute to restricting aid access as part of military

<sup>12</sup> Galtung, no 1.

<sup>13</sup> Project Hope (2025) [Gaza: Pregnant women and children going hungry](#). ReliefWeb. Accessed 28 May 2025.

<sup>14</sup> UN OCHA (2024) [Gaza Humanitarian Response Update: 30 September – 13 October 2024](#). Accessed 28 May 2025.

<sup>15</sup> International Rescue Committee (IRC) (2025). [Inside the daily life of an IRC medical team responding to the urgent needs of Sudanese women and girls](#). Accessed 28 May 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Betteridge-Moes, M. and Nazir, R., 2024. [Health services non-functional as women bear the brunt of Sudan’s war](#). The New Humanitarian.

<sup>17</sup> UN Women (2025) [Two years of relentless conflict in Sudan have triggered the world’s worst humanitarian crisis for 6 million displaced women and girls](#). Accessed 28 May 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Nordås, R. and Cohen, K.D. (2021) Conflict-related sexual violence, *Annual Review of Political Science* 24: 193–211.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Agarwal, A., Surti, V., & Terry, M. A. (2024). Recommendations to improve maternal mortality among Rohingya women in Bangladeshi refugee camps. *Health Care for Women International*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2024.2349820>

strategy, posing risks to all civilians, including women, as well as humanitarian personnel.<sup>21</sup>

In terms of Muslim women, not all women experience violence because they are women or because they are Muslim. Some face intensified violence because they are women, Muslim and from marginalised racial and minority backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> For instance, Bosnian Muslim women with certain 'ethnoreligious identity' were more targeted than other women, as were seen to represent national cultural symbols in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in other settings, such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone and East Timor, women from specific ethnic groups were subjected to rape as an instrument of genocide and ethnic cleansing, through the killing of men and impregnation of women.<sup>24</sup>

Muslim women and girls are often mischaracterised as a monolithic group — oppressed and voiceless — while, in reality, they are highly diverse and heterogeneous. The rights of many Muslim refugee women and girls are not upheld — and the abuse of those rights has in effect become a normalised strategy of war itself.<sup>25</sup> Also, anti-Muslim and anti-black racism sentiments in the Global North shape increasingly restrictive asylum policies<sup>26</sup> and the allocation of foreign aid. The dehumanisation and objectification of Muslim displaced women reinforces their vulnerability to gendered harms, exploitation and neglect — especially in camps, border zones and informal settlements. In response, Muslim aid agencies and donors might mobilise additional efforts to address the specific challenges these women face, as they are disproportionately affected in many crisis settings.

### *Calls for enhanced protection of women civilians*

Protection from the spiral continuum of violence means not only saving lives but enabling lives with dignity, by preventing, mitigating and responding to all types of violence. Calls by the international community for enhanced protection in armed conflict and other disasters would be strengthened by greater recognition of the gendered impact of aid restrictions and funding cuts. For instance, women's organisations — often the first responders to crises affecting women — are increasingly under threat due to these cuts. A

global survey conducted by UN Women in March 2025 across 44 countries, involving 411 such organisations, found that nearly half feared closure within six months due to impending aid cuts.<sup>27</sup>

## About the research and methods

The research project on 'Protection of forcibly displaced women in the Muslim world' is part of the [Making aid work for displaced women](https://www.makingaidwork.org) initiative which is developing a new evidence base, conceptual resources, and recommendations to put the inclusion and protection of forcibly displaced women high on the humanitarian agenda by leveraging Islamic philanthropy in the international humanitarian sector. Methods include interdisciplinary academic and grey literature reviews on gender, violence, displacement and recent humanitarian crises.

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<sup>21</sup> Security Council Report 'Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Open Debate'. Accessed 3 June 2025.

<sup>22</sup> Elmadmad, K. (1998) Chapter 15: The Human Rights of Refugees with Special Reference to Muslim Refugee Women, in Indra, D (ed.): *Engendering Forced Migration*. Berghahn Books, pp. 261–271.

<sup>23</sup> Carpenter, R.C. (2009) 'Orphaned Again? Children Born of Wartime Rape as a Non-Issue for the Human Rights Movement', in Bob, C. (ed.) *The International Struggle for New Human Rights*. University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 14–29.

<sup>24</sup> Pittaway, E. and Bartolomei, L. (2001) Refugees, Race, and Gender: The Multiple Discrimination against Refugee Women. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 19 (6).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Canning, V. (2017) *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System*. Routledge Studies in Criminal Justice, Borders and Citizenship. London: Routledge.

<sup>27</sup> UN Women (2025) [At a Breaking Point: The Impact of Foreign Aid Cuts on Women's Organizations in Humanitarian Crises Worldwide](https://www.makingaidwork.org). Accessed 28 May 2025.

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