

THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICTS ON GENDER INEQUALITY

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Over the last two decades, armed conflicts have become a permanent component of the global landscape, giving rise to increasingly fragile States and more vulnerable populations. Since 2021 and before the beginning of the most overwhelming refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, UNHCR estimated **that 84 million people have been forcibly displaced within or outside their countries as a result of conflict**¹. More than half of these people remain in their countries of origin facing every day the effects of conflict².

The effects of armed conflict are not uniform on the affected populations, but rather entail significant differences **between genders**. While the mortality rate during war mainly covers men due to their direct participation in conflict, children and women make up most of the forcibly displaced and refugee populations³.

Women who are directly involved in armed conflicts or who are victims of forced displacement, suffer multiple types of violations, which deepen and perpetuate existing gender inequalities. In contexts of fragility and conflict women (and also men, although to a lesser extent) suffer high rates of **sexual violence, or other forms of violence, sexual slavery, forced pregnancies and/or abortions, forced marriage, forced prostitution, among others**. For example, the insurgency of armed groups in the Central African Republic after the presidential and legislative elections of 2021 doubled (to 706 women and girls) the rate of cases of sexual violence linked to conflict compared to the previous⁴ year.

In addition, it is important not only to understand the magnitude of the problem, but also to adapt the design of humanitarian policies to avoid perpetuating these problems. For example, the conflict in the region of Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) in 2021 led to multiple cases of sexual violence against forcibly displaced women assaulted by political leaders of their community in the process to obtain humanitarian aid⁵. This occurs because community leaders are directly involved in providing humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable populations.

To have a more global perspective on the impact of conflict in women, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security developed the Women's Peace and Security Index (WPSI)⁶. This systematically seeks to trace the factors that contribute to the marginalization of women from multiple perspectives in more than 170 countries. The latest results of the index reveal that countries such as Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Ethiopia, women in situations of forced displacement suffer from an average disadvantage of 24 per cent compared to women who do not suffer from direct consequences of conflict⁷.

In line with WPSI, it is important to stress other violations, apart from those stated above, such as the **economic and financial marginalization** that derives from conflict. In fact, it is necessary to highlight (1) for the current lack of studies, research and publications and programming of humanitarian aid of the impact of conflict on **women's economic empowerment** and (2) emphasize that it is in these contexts where the economic and social marginalization of women, like that of their families, is most compromised.

In episodes of conflict families tend to separate and thus the livelihoods upon which they depend. In most cases, women become head of family in new countries or regions and have to face added difficulties at the institutional and cultural levels.

Access to employment in the formal sector of the economy tends to be limited for displaced persons and refugees due to the existence of regulatory obstacles and/or discrimination that in practice affect their labour participation in the host country. These limitations negatively affect their well-being, and also represent significant losses for the economic development of recipient countries or regions.

1. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/mid-year-trends.html>

2. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/5fc504d44/mid-year-trends-2020.html>

3. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/16326/wps6371.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

4. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/auto-draft/SG-Report2021for-web.pdf>

5. <https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/solutions-to-forced-displacement-arent-complete-without-gender-dimensions/>

6. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index/>

7. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/A-New-Lens-on-Forced-Displacement.pdf>

8. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Unlocking-Refugee-Womens-Potential.pdf>

In a study of several refugee receiving countries conducted by Kabir and Klugman (2019), they show that refugee women are less likely to find paid employment than their non-refugee counterparts, and also than refugee men⁹. As shown in Table 1, in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan, generally forced displaced women accumulate lower employment rates and access to finance than non-refugees.

There are also other significant differences between displaced and non-displaced women in their educational levels and access to productive lands. As a result there are also significant differences in the type of work that they acquire, and it is more common for displaced women to have informal work⁹.

TABLE 1. Gender disadvantages and forced displacement in terms of employment and financial inclusion, in percentages.

Country	Employment				Financial inclusion			
	Displaced women	Displaced men	Host women	Host men	Displaced women	Displaced men	Host women	Host men
Ethiopia	6,5	14,6	8,2	23,9	2,3	2,8	27,4	26,6
Nigeria	14,5	36,2	14,8	39,2	23,9	24,2	40,1	41,2
Somalia	5,3	6,9	5,8	6,1	57,8	59,1	72,9	73,6
South Sudan	6,8	7,5	6,8	8,5	-	-	-	-
Sudan	7,0	7,5	7,9	8,1	7,2	7,0	11,2	11,4

Source: Klugman (2021)

The *Women Now for Development* report sets out the difficulties of Syrian refugee women in obtaining the professional qualifications and skills necessary to compete in the country's labour market (i.e. Turkey). For example, they describe a lack of digital skills, level of English or local language, and therefore limitations in the capacity to develop an adequate process to search for decent employment¹⁰.

In this regard, **education is a key determinant** in obtaining future income for the youngest persons. In situations of conflict, the right to education, and especially for girls, is significantly violated. In **Afghanistan**, only in 2021, the United Nations estimated **more than 100 armed attacks on schools** and health centres, generating insecurity in the country which since 2010 forced the close of more than 1500 schools¹¹. In addition, **the entry of the Taliban government has completely limited access to education for girls and women**¹².

Women forcibly displaced not only have more limited access to employment, but they also earn on average less than other forcibly displaced families headed by men. A review of Syrian refugees literature indicates that families headed by women tend to earn \$22 less a month compared to their male counterparts¹³.

The implications of high barriers to employment and education show that they correspond to a greater risk of poverty. The women forcibly displaced or refugees tend to have a greater probability of being at risk of poverty than families headed by men.

Specifically, a World Bank study found that gender has a high explanatory capacity on the risk of poverty of displaced families, especially those where the mother is head of family and is responsible for family care responsibilities¹⁴.

It is also relevant to address the existence of dimensions of inequality, in terms of **ethnicity, race or social status**, for example, which magnify the marginalization of women in situations of forced displacement. In fact, more than 50 years of armed conflict in **Colombia** has significantly affected women, who are used as weapons of war. They also suffered a wide lack of recognition of their rights as a woman, with their lands being taken from them as a consequence¹⁵. In the case of indigenous women, the levels of internal displacement were even more significant, and they experienced severe difficulties in rebuilding their livelihoods (i.e. many are not fluent in Spanish)¹⁶.

9. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/754711638209414704/pdf/Forced-Displacement-Gender-and-Livelihoods-Refugees-in-Ethiopia.pdf>

10. <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/overview/forcibly-displaced-syrian-women-need-urgent-support>

11. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-right-millions-girls-education-must-be-respected>

12. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/04/talibans-ban-girls-education-afghanistan>

13. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33900/Addressing-Employment-Obstacles-for-Young-Syrian-Refugee-Women.pdf>

14. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/african/want-keep-internally-displaced-people-somalia-out-poverty-increase-womens-economic>

15. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2010.01151.x?casa_token

16. <https://books.google.es/books?hl=ca&lr=&id=pXZqDgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA160&ots#v=onepage&q&f=false>

However, it is important to recognize that **women also play a key role in the direct development of armed conflicts**. In Latin America it is estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of the members of the gangs are women¹⁷. In the case of **Salvadoran** gangs, or specifically called “**Maras**”, women are usually responsible for activities that directly contribute to the economic and political stability of the gang. For example, they participate in the transport of weapons and drugs, are involved in smuggling drugs and mobile phones into prisons or taking part in kidnappings by deceiving victims. In all cases, they are activities where the woman is found to have a more friendly and harmless appearance, and they have less harsh sentences compared to male gang¹⁸ members. This is why the search for effective solutions that eradicate the negative effects of gangs on Salvadoran society, and other regions in Latin America, must incorporate the active experiences and roles of women in the conflict.

To finish and to understand the variety of obstacles that prevent women an integral empowerment of women in situations of conflict we must look to research and strategies which consider the possible adverse effects on the effectiveness of humanitarian aid that mitigate the effects of future conflicts.

In this regard, the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in **Ukraine** brings us to seek responses for the development of opportunities for women and their families. So far, **it is estimated that 54 per cent of the people who need humanitarian aid are women**¹⁹, and two thirds of the more than 5 million Ukrainian refugees are women and children²⁰. At GATE Center, we will address the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on women and the creation of sustainable livelihoods for their families in a forthcoming GATE Center webinar.

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17. <https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida48600en-maras-and-gangs-community-and-police-in-central-america.pdf>

18. <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.641/>

19. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/03/in-focus-war-in-ukraine-is-a-crisis-for-women-and-girls>

20. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/over-15-million-people-flee-ukraine-women-and-children-increased-risk-exploitation>