



Job Mainye/CARE

Frontline Voices: Women's Leadership and Health Challenges in Crisis

Overview

In 2023, humanitarian needs surged to a record 339 million people, up from 274 million in 2022, driven by increasingly complex and long-term crises. Conflict zones disproportionately impact over 600 million women and girls, who face heightened risks of violence, reduced livelihoods, and limited decision-making roles. Despite the urgent need for assistance, there is a \$43 billion funding gap, the largest ever recorded. This has put a strain on health services for women and men.

Over 20,000 women in 15 conflict-affected countries have played vital roles in providing essential services and advocating for change, yet their contributions are often overlooked in global discussions and media coverage. Women frontline health workers are especially critical, keeping health services running, even in the worst crisis.

Methodology: CARE's initiatives, including the Women Respond program, have gathered insights from 38,000 respondents across 27 countries since 2020, highlighting women's critical leadership in crisis response. **This brief was based on the [HER VOICE](#) and [Women in War](#)**

"I help mothers to have safe and clean deliveries at my home and keep them there for four hours to ensure that both mothers and their babies are in good health before letting them go home. Most of the time, I provide my services for free as most of the pregnant woman are very poor and do not have money to pay me."

Woman, Sudan

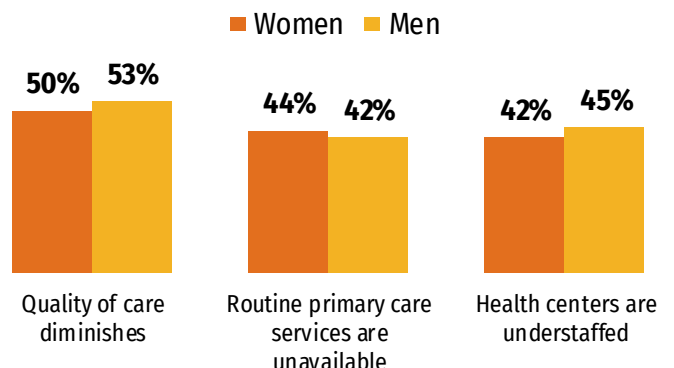
Crises are affecting everyone everywhere

Crises have significantly impacted health services across different countries and sexes:

By country

- In **Burundi** (71%), **Colombia** (66%) and **Mali** (51%) report diminished quality of care.
- In **Colombia** (67%), **Ethiopia** (58%) and **Vietnam** (44%) face cuts or unavailability of routine primary care services.

By sex



Yet women are leading the healthy way, everywhere

In a world where women's contributions are often overlooked in peace processes—evidenced by only one out of 18 peace deals in 2022 including women's organizations—women emerge as crucial leaders, anchoring their communities amid conflict. CARE's findings reveal that 91% of women are actively involved in or lead local crisis response groups, providing essential services such as food, shelter, and vital health information. Additionally, 71% of these women focus on enhancing community safety and sharing health insights. Women are pivotal in health and caregiving roles, whether paid or unpaid, and in conflict zones, they are frontline responders. For instance, in Mali, 44% of women and in Sudan, 24% are engaged in caregiving, while in Tigray, women spend about 11 hours daily on unpaid care work. In Gaza, women make up 70% of frontline health workers and 60% of caregivers, highlighting their critical role in healthcare and support during crises.

“Women at the community level are volunteering, providing services, being nurses, being teachers, moms at home, teachers at home.”

Woman, Ukraine

What are women saying and experiencing?

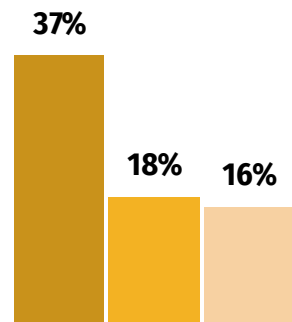
The *HER VOICE* report gathered data from female respondents who ranked the top three health services most affected by crises. The findings are illustrated in the graph at the right. Meanwhile, the *Women in War* report offers insights into the experiences of women facing crises during pregnancy.



- **25%** of babies born in 2022 were born within 50 km of a conflict
- **50%** of women who die during pregnancy or childbirth is in a conflict area
- Maternal mortality in these contexts is **40x** higher than in low-income countries

Most significant

- Routine primary care services are cut or are unavailable
- Health centers are short staffed or staff become overwhelmed
- Quality of care diminishes



The ranking displays female and male respondents' top three priorities. This ranking reflects specific priorities rather than overall responses.

Echoes of Resilience: The Voices of Women in Crisis

“We want more midwives and another health center. Because men, they are able to go to the health center. But we can't!”

Woman, Sudan

“It was very difficult to give birth in a combat zone. She was born in the basement of the maternity hospital. No diapers or formula for feeding.”

Woman, Ukraine

“As a woman doctor in Gaza, I open my tent to offer practical support to delivering women in need. In a situation of danger and uncertainty, I wish I can provide a safe space for healing and empowerment, but the least I can do it to use my skills to relieve pain for a scared and exhausted woman delivering [a baby].”

Woman, Gaza



CARE / Agency Ostkreuz Johanna Maria Fritz

“Reliable birth control is what the women here need most”

Khaton, Iraq

Conflict Intensifies Gender Inequality in Healthcare

In conflict zones, women face severe challenges, including increased violence, especially sexual violence, and heavy caregiving burdens for children, the sick, and the elderly, often at their own expense. As essential services collapse and safety declines, women lose access to crucial resources and mobility, taking on roles usually filled by men who are absent due to conflict or displacement. CARE's 2023 findings highlight health as a top challenge for these women. Healthcare access is critically compromised. For instance, in Gaza, only 10 of 36 hospitals are partially operational, making medical services scarce. Mobility restrictions, financial constraints, and childcare duties further limit women's access to care. In 2022, about 35 million women gave birth in conflict zones, often receiving inadequate care, resulting in maternal mortality rates over 40 times higher than in developing countries. Even when services are available, women's health is often deprioritized due to resource and triage constraints.

The intersection of gender inequality and healthcare challenges is evident in several countries in crisis. [Thirty percent](#) of women and men believe that ensuring safety for families and addressing gender-based violence (GBV) are urgent priorities. GBV and violence are worsening mental health issues for women and girls, but support services remain inadequate.

[In conflict zones](#) such as **Sudan, Somalia, Gaza, the DRC, and Ukraine**, there is a severe shortage of sexual and

reproductive health (SRH) services and mental health support, exacerbating the challenges faced by violence survivors.

GBV rates surged by 70% in [Yemen](#) during the first six months of conflict.

In [Gaza](#), 60% of people felt unsafe at home in 2021, leading to extended hours for GBV hotlines. Additionally, gender barriers, like needing male permission to access health facilities, further restrict women's access to essential services.

[Niger](#): After the 2023 coup, 37% of women reported a shortage of health workers, worsened by a lack of female staff due to cultural norms that limit women's access to male health professionals.

[Afghanistan](#): Women's access to healthcare is hindered by the absence of female medical professionals, with 81% of district health centers lacking women nurses and 71% lacking women doctors. Cultural norms require women to be accompanied by a male relative when consulting male medical staff, reducing access. Safety concerns and curfews further restrict their ability to seek care, with access decreasing from 51% to 39% by February 2022.

[Syria](#): In refugee camps, 64% of women report a need for better healthcare access, as transportation to health centers is often unavailable. The situation is particularly dire in Afghanistan, highlighting the urgent need for systemic improvements in healthcare accessibility and support for women in conflict-affected areas.



CARE / Agency Ostkreuz Johanna Maria Fritz

"To me, it has always been especially important to help refugee women and girls to understand their bodies and to take care of their hygiene. Women and girls are on their period every month, despite the many difficulties they face while being a refugee. I am very proud that I can support them and at the same time can also help my family with this income."

Shorash, Iraq

Drive Change in Crisis = Listen to Women

Women play a crucial role in driving resilience and providing essential health services during crises, showcasing exceptional bravery and leadership. Yet, despite constituting most of the frontline health workforce, only [25%](#) hold leadership positions. Women need more support, recognition, and empowerment to strengthen their vital roles. Media should prioritize amplifying women's voices in conflict, while donors should fund and hold accountable women leaders and their organizations. Humanitarian actors must ensure safe participation, uphold gender priorities, and boost funding for gender equality. Actively supporting and recognizing women as leaders is crucial for fostering recovery and positive change in conflict-affected communities.