# Women in War

## Leaders, Responders, and Potential

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# Executive Summary

In 2022, about 600 million women lived within 50 kilometers (31 miles) of an armed conflict. That's 15% of all women in the world. It's also more than double the level from the 1990s.

Women are the unsung heroes of crisis, yet are grossly overlooked when it comes to dialogue and decision-making. After surveying more than 13,000 women in 15 countries since 2020, CARE found that 91% led or actively participated in community response. Women provide meals and shelter to those fleeing conflict. They become breadwinners for their families. They are advocates and build powerful networks for change. 79% of women are finding ways to make communities safer, 71% are providing health services, and 46% are diversifying incomes to care for their families.

Despite their incredible leadership, women are underrepresented in global discourse. For example, 95% of media coverage of conflicts since 2013 overlooks women, their roles, and their experiences. Less than 4 in 10,000 (0.04%) of those media mentions talk about women leaders.

Those women are leading in the face of barriers, challenges, and horrific experiences. 2023 was the first year that women CARE surveyed reported that safety is one of their top three problems in the world.[i] Women face sexual violence, the loss of incomes and livelihoods, and plummeting healthcare—leading to higher death rates, even from preventable causes. The challenges are real, and we must do more to address them.

One key path to solving this crisis is recognizing and valuing women's leadership in times of conflict and on the path to peace. Women step up to be first responders, to build peace, to support their families and communities. *They are not merely victims. Treating them as invisible at worst, or victims at best, continues and reinforces their trauma.*

Often, armed conflict completely transforms a woman's role in her family and her community, and she takes on leadership no one dreamed was possible for her. She also faces safety risks that will affect her and generations to come. Acknowledging, supporting, and unlocking this leadership is key to better solutions for everyone. We need to create the conditions where women can thrive as leaders, where they have support, and where they are safe speaking up. *We cannot achieve long-lasting peace if we ignore women.*

We must act now. The number of women who live in conflict is skyrocketing. In 2022, about 600 million women lived within 50 kilometers (31 miles) of an armed conflict. That's 15% of all women in the world. It's also more than double the level from the 1990s.[ii]

*Methodology:* Since 2013, CARE has been focusing on women's experience in crisis[iii]—starting with the conflict in Syria.[iv] Our Rapid Gender Analysis and Women Respond[A] paint a unique picture of how women are leading in crisis, what they need, and what we must do to support them.

This report combines surveys, qualitative interviews, and data models using publicly available datasets to understand women's experiences in conflict. It showcases their opinions and their stories to highlight how their leadership is critical to communities surviving crisis. The surveys cover 20,000 people (13,785 women) since 2020. Public datasets and data models build from national-level data about women and women in conflict and draw on articles and expertise from a variety of published sources. The report also includes a media analysis of more than 7.8 million articles published about conflicts between 2013 and 2023 to understand current narratives of conflict.

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A This covers 20,000 people (13,785 women) in 15 countries: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Colombia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Total respondents. Survey timeline: March 2020 to October 2023. The data also reflects 99 Rapid Gender Analyses CARE has conducted since 2013.

# Key Findings

**Women are leading.** 91% of women CARE spoke to said they are actively leading and participating in community groups. 79% are finding ways to improve safety. 71% are actively sharing health information, and 60% are focusing on education.

**Women's basic needs are going unfilled.** Livelihood is women's highest priority. 58% of women CARE spoke to in conflict zones said they need livelihood assistance. 41% of women prioritized food as one of the biggest impacts of conflict.

**Sexual violence is a growing threat.** More than 257 million women were living in countries that had significant or massive reports of sexual violence in conflict in 2021.[B]

**Compromised health services put women and children at severe risk.** One in 4 babies born in 2022 were born within 50 kilometers of a conflict.

One in 2 women who dies during pregnancy or childbirth is in a conflict area. Maternal mortality is more than 40 times higher in fragile contexts than it is in developing countries.[v]

**Formal leadership structures exclude women,** compromising peace and prosperity for everyone.

**Narratives of conflict underrepresent women.** Only 5% of articles about conflict in the last decade focus on women's experiences. Less than 0.3% of articles talk about women in conflict positively.

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B      This data is calculated by using the Women Peace and Security Index to identify women living within 50km of armed conflict, and the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Dataset of any country reporting 2 or 3 on their scale in 2021.

# 91%

of women CARE spoke to are **leading** or participating in community groups that respond to crisis

## Women Are Leaders

Despite the world's persistence in overlooking them—only 1 of 18 peace agreements signed in 2022 included signatures from a women's organization[vi]—women step up as powerful leaders holding lives together during conflict. As one woman in Tigray, Ethiopia, puts it, "Now I am in a position to solve problems."[vii]

**Women are first responders.** When conflict breaks out, women take action. They immediately start organizing responses in their community, without waiting for outside actors. 91% of women CARE spoke to are leading or participating in community groups that respond to crisis. They organize meals, shelter, information, and services for people in their own communities, or for refugees and others who are fleeing conflict. 79% of women are finding ways to make communities safer and 71% are sharing health information with others.

- "We welcome people coming from Khartoum, who … come exhausted due to the long journey and tough route. Some get robbed on their way. They are suffering from a lack of food and water. … We provide a ready-made meal first upon their arrival, anytime morning, evening, or night."
—Woman, Sudan[viii]

- "We played a key role in supporting hundreds of households. Thanks to our groups, distressed families who had lost everything and fled the conflict now have access to food. We didn't wait, we made sure we provided support right away. If we had waited, some of these displaced people would not have survived."
—Woman, Mali[ix]

> **"Women at the community level are volunteering, providing services, being nurses, being teachers, moms at home, teachers at home." —Woman, Ukraine[x]**

- "We are women leaders in the emergency … we have the capacity to say: I have a voice and a vote, I am not going to stay stagnant … to be able to say that I have my skills and knowledge and that at any time I can go anywhere to participate because we have the capacity to work for gender equality."
—Woman, Colombia[xi]

**Women become breadwinners and lead their families.** Women step into the role of breadwinner and head of the family as conflict takes men away from their traditional duties—either because men are part of the conflict, or because they migrate to earn an income or travel to avoid conscription or being killed in the conflict. Sometimes, women are the ones who flee with their families, often without their husbands. In those cases, women take on new burdens without extra support in the workloads they had already. In 2023, 46% of the women CARE spoke to in conflict countries diversified their income, 43% took care of their families, and 40% used their savings to cushion shocks.[xii]

This can also open new spaces for women to have control and ownership they could not access before the conflict. For example, when conflict broke out in Yemen in 2015, women said they had more joint ownership of houses and livestock than they had before the conflict. [xiii] In Somalia, women reported more influence in decisions and more ability to participate beyond strictly traditional roles, especially as the women were increasingly earning income to support the family.[xiv]

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**Community Support**

Dunia, a mother of three, is a teacher in one of Yemen's schools. Her school was close to the front lines and was destroyed in the fighting. Dunia and her colleagues worked hard to relocate the students from their damaged school to another nearby school to study in the afternoons so they wouldn't miss out on an education.

- "Before the crisis, my husband and I used to make decisions together, but now I am the sole decision maker because he is away from home most of the time."
  —Woman, Syria[xv]

- "… Women are fulfilling the role men used to perform in the past." —Woman, Somalia[xvi]

- "I decided to find an additional means of income—I joined with the village women in savings groups … The capital helped me to achieve additional profits, so I was able to pay off my debts and began paying the loan and I am committed to paying it off."
  —Woman, Syria[xvii]

- "It is no longer shameful for women to go to work or to seek food assistance from neighbors or to borrow money."
  —Woman, Yemen[xviii]

These shifts come at immense costs to women, men, and the whole community. These new opportunities for women's leadership and equality do not always last after the conflict ends.

### Women support their communities.

Women build powerful networks of solidarity to support each other in conflict, and they deploy those networks to support whole communities. 40% of women are using savings to help others. In Yemen, 89% of women in savings groups used some of their savings to help people outside their own group.[xix]

- "Even if we have nothing to eat in our home, we ask [savings group] members to share what they have. We learned that our [savings group] members are our friends, our families, our back stoppers during this hard time."
  —Woman, Ethiopia[xx]

- "During the conflict … we were even lending money to the rich people in our village because they could not get their own money out of the bank. So we gave them loans, but we did not charge interest on those loans."
  —Woman, Ethiopia[xxi]

- "There was an accident in the community. It was very serious and the VSLAs wanted to support it even though it affected people not in the VSLA group. They wanted to feel like their association could provide something for the wider community, not just themselves."
  —CARE team member, Yemen[xxii]

- "The group considered it Zakat (charity) and it was spent by us to help poor families outside of the group." —Woman, Syria[xxiii]

- "In the face of threat and scarcity, **I found strength in solidarity.** With no money but a determination to help, I built a network of women who believe in sharing what we have. From baby kits to essentials, we redistribute aid not just among ourselves, but to other woman-headed households that we know couldn't access aid when distributed."
  —Woman, Gaza

### Women provide health and care services.

Women are serving as the front lines of health and care response, whether that is formal or informal, paid or unpaid. Women are key to ensuring that health systems have some resilience in conflict.[xxiv] Since CARE started surveying women in conflict zones, 71% of women have been active in healthcare, especially in sharing health information with others.

44% of women in Mali and 24% in Sudan are caretaking as one of the ways they lead in crisis.[xxv] In Tigray, women spend 11 hours a day in unpaid care work.[xxvi] In Gaza, women are 70% of frontline health workers. Women in Gaza are also 60% of caregivers.[xxvii]

- "… What I am witnessing as a doctor after the earthquakes is something I have never seen before. I came back to work right after the earthquakes. We immediately started receiving pregnant patients who had pre-scheduled appointments and others who came because they were now facing complications due to the shock they had undergone because of the earthquakes."
  —Woman, Syria [xxviii]

- "When it comes to the humanitarian needs of [internally displaced persons], locals, and households, women do most of the work—they drive, they provide hospitals and locals with medication and food, [and] they care for their disabled relatives and children."
  —Woman, Ukraine[xxix]

# 89%
of women in Yemen savings groups used some of their savings to help people outside of their own group.

- "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 is to use my skills to relieve pain for a scared and exhausted woman delivering [a baby]." —Woman, Gaza

**Women provide protection, work to keep people safe, and build peace.** Women work to protect people at risk. Women leaders in Gaza are establishing early warning systems and raising awareness to prevent violence against women and girls, provide mental health support for those who need it, and build connections with health providers for those who suffered gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual violence. In Niger and Burkina Faso, local organizations are nearly twice as likely to report increased caseloads in GBV compared with international organizations, which shows that women are more likely to report their struggles to local women's organizations.[xxx]

Women also build peace in their communities and nations. In Sudan, women point out that savings groups help them reduce conflict because they bring together women from different backgrounds to establish social and economic interdependence, which helps them build trust and learn to accept each other.[xxxi] South Sudanese refugee women in Uganda build conflict resolution mechanisms across traditionally opposed ethnic groups so they can work together to meet their goals.[xxxii]

In Colombia, Women Lead groups actively rolled out measures against xenophobia toward Venezuelan migrants, improving relations at the community level as well as with local authorities.[xxxiii]

**Women advocate for change.** For women leaders, one of their key priorities is advocating for change in the systems around them. That includes asking humanitarian actors to shift their planning, getting local governments to shift services, and pushing for improved access to health, water, food, and education.

In Uganda, South Sudanese women fleeing conflict found a solution to advocate for food distribution closer to home that was safer for everyone, and more accessible for women and people with disabilities than the original distribution point.[xxxiv] In Niger, 69% of women say they are very likely to work with other women to benefit their communities as part of their leadership training.[xxxv]

- "I was able to overcome my silence and I was the first to mobilize the women. Our voices were heard by the authorities, who agreed to patrol every night to prevent men from entering our houses. This was my greatest achievement; I was not afraid or slowed down by anyone. I spoke in public and in front of everyone in order to defend our rights." —Woman, Niger[xxxvi]

- "The water point in the camp is the result of a fight that the women had led and that [the men] were not able to lead. And it's the only water point for a thousand people. It's a success! The women are proud that they were able to succeed at something that meant so much, not just to their group, but to their whole community."
  —Village chief, Niger[xxxvii]

- "I never had the chance to go to school. In my village, women weren't allowed to get an education. It is important for a woman to be educated, for herself and for her

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# 69%

of women in Niger say they are very likely to work with other women to benefit their communities as part of their leadership training.

children. Every woman should be educated. Thankfully, *the role of women is changing in the community.* When I learned how to read my daughter's name, it was the happiest moment of my life. I am proud I can read. And I am proud of my children, as they motivated me to get an education." —Woman, Syria[xxxviii]

- "Once we realized that GBV was rampant, it helped us compose songs and dramas and we perform these for the community members. Now GBV has greatly reduced in our community." —Woman, Uganda[xxxix]

- In Colombia, women said, "Before … there was no group working with women to defend their rights." Now, several women's groups have been officially certified as foundations or women's entrepreneurial associations. That means they can independently apply for funds, implement projects and fund spaces to meet, and organize collectively.

## Women Lead Despite Overwhelming Obstacles

While everyone suffers in a conflict, women bear extreme burdens. They face high rates of violence, especially sexual violence. They are more likely to eat less, or not at all. They bear the burden of caring for children, sick people, the wounded, and the elderly. As services shut down and travel becomes unsafe, women are often the first to lose access to services and the ability to leave their homes. On top of that, women also pick up the duties men traditionally carried as men are pulled into conflict, flee forced conscription, migrate, or lose their jobs and their land.

**Women CARE spoke to in 2023 from conflict countries said the top 4 impacts they experience are:**

**Livelihoods**

**Food**

**Safety**

**Education**

# "I'm having nightmares about being able to find enough to feed my children from one day to the next..."
## —Woman, Burundi

**Livelihood.** "Our husbands no longer have the financial means to feed us. In the village, we are sent with part of the harvest to sell at the market so my husband can provide for the family."
—Woman, Democratic Republic of Congo[xl]

58% of women CARE spoke to in conflict zones said that livelihood support is one of their most urgent needs right now. Over the years CARE has been asking women about their most urgent needs, food and livelihood have both risen since 2020.

Conflict can destroy the livelihoods of millions of women, even when they are not in the immediate hotspot. "The war next door in the DRC severely restricts trade between us and our Congolese neighbors, which means the cross-border trade I used to do a few years ago is limited now, further limiting my source of income." —Woman, Burundi[xli]

"There is no work. We used to trade in the market, but that is over. We have no place, no goods—we have nothing left."
—Woman, Ukraine[xlii]

In CARE's research, livelihood has always been one of women's top two concerns in conflict. They want to ensure that they can find immediate ways to support their families and communities as risks grow. In July 2021, 55% of women in Afghanistan said they needed cash, compared with 87% in February 2022.[xliii] In Ethiopia in 2023, 35% of women said livelihood was their most urgent need.[xliv]

Women in Niger saw the same effect after the coup in 2023. The proportion of Nigerian women citing income or livelihood as their most urgent personal need surged from 42.97% in 2020 to over 87% in 2023.[xlv]

Women lose access to livelihoods during a conflict at the same time they are forced to step up and take on more responsibility for providing food and money at home. This puts huge pressure on them, forces them to travel—often at high risk—to find income or access markets, and increases their risk of violence at home as stress rises. "A woman faces a lot of pressure inside and outside the home. Sometimes she has to accept an unsuitable job to provide for her family. She may even be forced to accept assault or violence in the workplace to keep her job."
—Woman, Syria[xlvi]

**Food.** "I'm having nightmares about being able to find enough to feed my children from one day to the next. I used to feed my household three times a day, but at the moment, we only eat once, usually in the evening after the children get home from school—the whole situation is stressful, and it affects my mental health. … I've had to do without certain things, such as changing my eating habits, and this has certainly had an impact on my physical health."
—Woman, Burundi

36% of the women in conflict zones CARE has spoken to say food is one of the most important needs.[xlvii]

Food has consistently been one of the top two concerns of women in conflict zones in CARE's research, and the need is getting worse. In Syria in 2022, 100% of women said they needed food, compared with 84% in 2021.[xlviii, xlix] In Afghanistan, 58% of women said they needed food in July 2021, which jumped to 87% by February 2022.[l]

Women are usually the first to reduce how much they are eating and usually eat less than the men in their lives when conflict hits.[li] In Ethiopia, women say, "But the truth is, I am not even sure I will have something to eat tomorrow

let alone worry about how nutritious it is."[lii]

For many women, the concern about food overrides even their concern about conflict and safety. "It is no longer very scary whether a rocket will arrive or not from the sea. But it is scary that we will die of starvation."
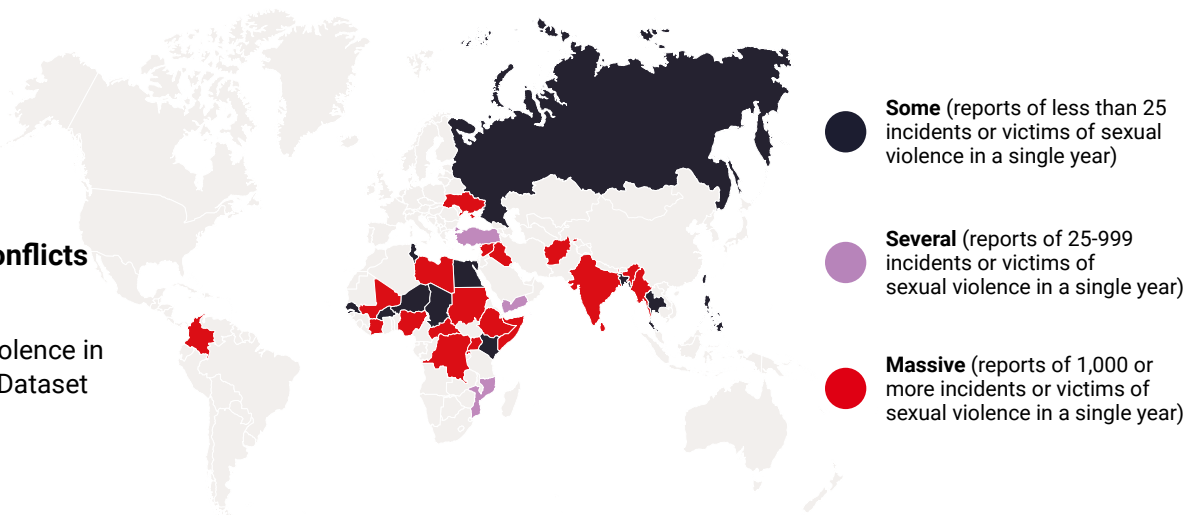—Woman, Ukraine[liii]

**Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.** Women are often a target for sexual violence once conflict breaks out, both as a weapon of war[liv] and as a result of escalating chaos, stress, and impunity in their communities. That risk has escalated dramatically in recent years. Since 2010, the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict dataset reports 20 countries with massive levels of sexual violence in conflict. More than 257 million women were living in countries that had significant reports of sexual violence in conflict in 2021.[lv] Research estimates that more than 60 million women over the age of 15 experienced intimate partner violence in conflict zones in 2022.[c]

- Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace tribunal said that at least 35,178 people have suffered sexual, gender, and reproductive violence during Colombia's armed conflict.[lvi]

- As of April 2023, the conflict in Northern Ethiopia has affected over 20 million people, almost three-quarters of them women and children. It has forced 5.5 million people to flee their homes. According to the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan, the numerous conflicts across northern Ethiopia, Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia, and SNNP regions significantly increased GBV risks, especially for women and girls. The escalation of the conflict in the north led to an increase in people in need of GBV services, from 3.5 million in 2021 to 6.7 million in 2023 across the affected regions.[lvii] Since the start of the conflict, women have consistently highlighted sexual violence as having a massive impact on their lives, with no way out. "No one dared to stop them or said no. Those who refused were shot right in front of us." Even women who arrived at camps had nowhere to turn: "There is no place I feel secure and safe within this camp." [lviii]

- In the first 6 months of the conflict in Yemen, GBV went up by 70%.[lix] More than 4,000 violations against Yemeni women by the various warring parties were registered by the Geneva-based SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties from the beginning of

**Prevalence of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts (2010-2021)**
Source: PRIO: Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) Dataset

**Some** (reports of less than 25 incidents or victims of sexual violence in a single year)

**Several** (reports of 25-999 incidents or victims of sexual violence in a single year)

**Massive** (reports of 1,000 or more incidents or victims of sexual violence in a single year)

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C    This number is calculated using the dataset from the Women, Peace and Security Index https://giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index/#:~:text=The%202019%20WPS%20Index%20ranks,worst%20states%20for%20American%20women combined with the population data from the World Bank  https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL

the conflict in September 2014 through the end of 2020.

- In Sudan, 66.67% of female respondents said the security concerns affecting women and girls increased since the start of the conflict, including concerns about rape, being killed by stray bullets, and being attacked if they leave their communities.[lx]

- In Nigeria, 43% of people say security concerns for women have gone up since 2020.[lxi] "We have no alternative but to risk our lives to survive. It is better to die while making efforts to provide for your family than to die of hunger or watch your family become something bad because they cannot bear hunger. … The sad part is that even if we get attacked today, we will have no choice but to take the risk again tomorrow." —Nigeria[lxii]

- "School is reported as an unsafe area by girls because of the fear of schoolgirls' abduction, while the boys in the same community report facing no risk at all." —Woman, Nigeria[lxiii]

- "Now there are so many concentrations of men on the streets, in general, even more than women. And it is very frightening. It is not clear what is in their heads." —Woman, Ukraine[lxiv]

- "The topic of domestic violence is not supported by the authorities on any central basis. Because the war has attracted so much attention, priorities have changed greatly in terms of both women's rights and the protection of women from domestic violence." —Woman, Ukraine[lxv]

Not only does violence rise for women—both from the conflict and at home—but it happens at exactly the same time that access to services dramatically shrinks.

- "Many women were negatively affected and became at the mercy of the person supporting them, whether it was the husband, brother, or father, especially if she is married or a widow." —Woman, Iraq[lxvi]

- In Gaza, already in 2021, 60% of people did not feel safe at home, and GBV hotlines had to extend their hours as calls for support rose and women had no safe way to ask for help.[lxvii] In the current conflict, as GBV rises, the conflict has cut off access to GBV and health services that survivors can access, even remotely.[lxviii]

**Health.** "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[lxix]

Conflict immediately compromises a woman's ability to get healthcare. Women have less freedom to travel than men, have less money to invest in travel costs, and may not be able to arrange care for their children so they can travel. If the health workers cannot get closer to women, women may not be able to access healthcare at all. An estimated 35 million women gave birth in conflict zones in 2022, usually with medical care that does not meet standards for safety and quality. Maternal mortality is more than 40 times higher in fragile contexts than it is in developing countries.[D, lxx] Services may shut down almost completely—in Gaza, only 10 out of 36 hospitals can function at all, and not a single hospital is completely functional.[lxxi]

Even when services are available, women's health faces the first cuts as hospitals triage resources and staff. 37% of women in Niamey, Niger, report that there are not enough health workers to meet their needs in the wake of the 2023 coup.[lxxii] Specifically, a lack of female health workers dramatically restricts women's access to healthcare in conflict because women often are not allowed to visit male health workers, or do not feel safe visiting a center with all male

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D    539 and 11.9, respectively

staff. In Afghanistan, there are no women nurses in 81% of district health centers, and no women doctors in 71% of health centers functioning as nutrition sites.[lxxiii] 31% of women said the lack of women medical staff prevented them from going to health centers—primarily because they cannot go to visit a male medical staff member without a male relative accompanying them.[lxxiv]

Conflict and violence make it unsafe or impossible for women to get healthcare even when it exists. In 2022, 64% of women in Syria said they needed more access to healthcare.[lxxv] "Medicines aren't enough. There is a medical center, but people don't go there with their children because it's far away and public transportation doesn't come to the camp." —Woman, Syria[lxxvi]

The situation in Afghanistan is especially extreme: Women's unaccompanied access to health facilities dropped from 51% to 39% by February 2022. 47% of women did not access services because they were afraid to travel to health centers.[lxxvii] Many women do not feel safe to travel to health centers during conflicts, or curfews and other mobility restrictions make it impossible for them to access care.

When healthcare is available, it does not meet the standards women need. "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 [lxxviii]

The statistics are staggering, and the burdens fall heaviest on women, especially women who might be giving birth. In 2022, within 50 kilometers of a conflict, the world saw:

- 1 in 7 women (600 million women)
- 1 in 5 women of reproductive age (382 million women)
- 1 in 4 babies born/1 in 4 women who gave birth (35.6 million babies born—27% of live births)
- 1 of 2 (44%) women who died in childbirth or pregnancy (127,524 women)

# Formal Leadership Structures Ignore Women

"The decision-making process has changed. Leading positions are held exclusively by men as a requirement of wartime. Many issues are resolved by directives." —Woman, Ukraine[lxxix]

Women have proven to be extraordinary leaders, but formal systems consistently ignore them. While women are deeply impacted by conflict—facing gender-based violence, the loss of livelihoods, migration, and taking on sole responsibility for managing their households—women are usually locked out of leadership to resolve conflicts. Of 18 peace agreements in 2022, only one was signed by a local women's organization.[lxxx] This means women's needs are not considered in conflict resolution and recovery.

**Traditions dictate that women are only caretakers, not leaders.** In Ukraine, Somalia, and Sudan, women and men both report that formal decisions are reserved primarily for men. Women continue to face many of the same barriers to their public participation and leadership that existed before conflict escalated, only now the effects are worse. Social norms restrict women's rights, including unequal burden of household responsibilities, limited access to education, and institutional barriers such as language and religious beliefs. In Somalia, only 33% of women and 48% of men were involved in community decisions. Although 39% of women and 30% of men said women's rights are improving, 60% of people said women are not fully heard.[lxxxi]

**Money constraints restrict women's participation and women-led organizations.** In Sudan, respondents highlighted that there are women groups that target women, but women cannot afford transportation costs to attend meetings. In Ukraine, Women-Led Organizations and Women's Rights Organizations articulated existing power dynamics within the international system that affect WLOs/WROs from accessing funding.

**The Sector is not prioritizing gender.**
Progress is actually rolling backward. The number of Humanitarian Response Plans that finance gender priorities in 3 sectors—economic empowerment, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health—dropped from 95% in 2021 to 83% in 2022.[lxxxii]

# Women and Their Leadership Are Underrepresented in the Global Discourse

Women's experience in war represents only a small fraction of conflict stories. The proportion of stories that reflect women's leadership or positive stories about women is even smaller. While discussions of conflicts have risen dramatically in the last decade (more than 6 times higher in 2023 than in 2013), mentions of women have not shown the same growth. Of more than 7.8 million media mentions of conflict from 2013 to 2023, only 5% of conflict stories focus on women's experiences, and only 0.3% of those talk about women positively.[E]
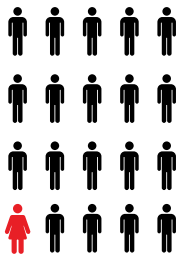
# 5%
of conflict stories focus on women's experiences

There are important positive stories about women that break through this trend. Some actors are working to shine a light on women's leadership in conflict. Some examples of positive stories about women include women volunteering to support others, women housing refugees in Burundi, women delegates in South Sudan being involved in the peace process [lxxxiii],and women growing food in a crisis. These examples are the exception; less than 0.3% of total articles show a positive lens on women and their role in coping with conflict.

Women's leadership is almost non-existent in the current narrative. Only 0.04% (2,748) articles published about armed conflict from 2013 to 2023 mention women leaders or women's leadership. That's fewer than 300 articles a year over the last decade showcasing what women are contributing as leaders.

Some examples of how this plays out at a national level:

- From 2014 to 2021, women's representation in Ukrainian media grew every year. The full-scale invasion of Russia in February 2022 rolled back media progress in this area by 10 years for women as storytellers. According to the Institute of Mass Media's monitoring, in 2021, women accounted for 30% of all expert commentary in the media. Since then, this figure has been falling by about 5% annually, and women are now only 17% of all expert commentary. The presence of women as heroines in online media is 22.5%, while men are listed as heroes 77.5% of the time.[lxxxiv]

- In **Colombia** in 2023, out of 5,490 media mentions of the conflict, 381 (7%) highlighted women. Fifteen articles (less than 0.3%) talk about women as leaders. In 2023 articles about women in the Colombian conflict, "sexual violence" and "victim" were among the most common words.

# What We Must Do Now

While the challenges may feel overwhelming, this is a story we can change. We have more power than we think. Women are leading in the face of massive threats, and we can be inspired by their courage. We can act. We must act so that we reaffirm that all people everywhere have the right to live in dignity and to reach their full potential, including in war. **We can make changes that recognize, support, and value women leaders and in so doing, they can help to build the resilience that is so crucial for communities to heal and recover from conflict.**

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E    This is based on media analysis of conflicts in Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Ukraine, West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen from 2013 to 2023. For full details, see the methodology section at the end of the report.

## For Media Consumers:

- **Be aware of the story.** Think about the stories you read and tell about women's and girls' voices. Focus on women leaders, and actively seek out stories that show more of the story—not just the suffering and hopelessness, but how these leaders are working to support their communities and keep hope alive.

- **Diversify your media consumption.** Follow individual women advocates on your Instagram, TikTok, and other social media accounts. Look for creators who are publishing stories about women and their leadership.

- **Look for local voices.** Seek out reporting from both major news organizations and country or regionally based sources.

## For Donors and Funders:

- **Finance women leaders and the organizations that represent them.** Increase quality funding directly to WLOs and WROs so they can scale up their humanitarian work, offer competitive salaries, and have the assurance they can plan for the longer-term rather than being stuck in "survival mode."

- **Track your progress toward goals and hold yourself accountable to the communities you fund.**
    - Set agency-specific targets for funding to WLOs.
    - Make them publicly known.
    - Report against those targets annually and publicly, using existing mechanisms such as the Grand Bargain self-reporting exercise.

- **Pay for networks, conveners, and solidarity.** Fund larger organizations, with priority to WLO/WRO national, regional, and global networks. Convene, support, and partner with them to provide institutional development and organizational strengthening, appropriate technical capacity sharing, and accompaniment for the WLOs/WROs so they are supported as they navigate the politics and leadership responsibilities of the humanitarian sector.

## For Humanitarian Actors:

- **Invest in safe participation for women.** Increase women and girls' voice and their full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation and leadership in humanitarian coordination structures at all levels—local to global. Participation only counts if it translates into influence and the people most in need in affected communities experience a discernible change for the better. Ensure the safe involvement of both individual women and girls and formal WLOs/WROs from the earliest stages of a humanitarian response in the identification of needs, development of responses, delivery of services, and evaluation of the outcomes, so their feedback is regularly used to improve the quality of the humanitarian response.

- **Stay accountable to gender priorities.** Address gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence in emergencies as **fundamental rights issues.**

- **Increase funding for targeted gender equality interventions.** This includes focused activities such as preventing and responding to GBV in emergencies or providing health services to women in emergencies.

- **Fund gender equality programming in priority sectors** such as food; livelihood; water, sanitation, and hygiene; shelter; and protection, including through engaging and influencing Inter-Agency Standing Committee coordination structures and UN agencies at country and global level and scaling up tested models such as savings groups in emergencies, Women Lead in Emergencies, and Engaging Men and Boys in Emergencies.

# Methodology

This report draws data from a variety of primary and secondary sources. The methodology for each category of finding is listed below.

**Women's Voices** The primary data represents 13,785 women in 15 countries who have shared their stories, needs, and experience of leadership. This data covers CARE's different Rapid Gender Analyses (RGAs), assessments, and studies conducted in 15 countries—Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, Ethiopia, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen—from 2020 to 2023. In addition to the survey, this brief includes insights from qualitative assessments and case studies to show the growing challenges conflict poses on women and girls, and the incredible leadership roles women are taking during these times. That includes 99 RGAs CARE has conducted with partners since 2013 in 18 countries: Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen.

Most of the people in these samples are participants of CARE's programs, which implies that they are among the poorest and most vulnerable people in society. This data does not reflect national-level representative surveys

Additionally, there is some variation in surveys from country to country based on context and needs. Denominators for sample sizes are calculated out of the percentage of women who had an opportunity to answer that question. For example, if the survey did not ask about education, the respondents for that survey are not included in the denominator when we calculate what percentage of women answered that they focused on education. Only women who had an opportunity to answer yes are included in those calculations. A 60% response rate for education should be interpreted as: 60% of women who were asked about education said that they are taking action on education as a response to crisis.

**Statistics on Women Within 50km of a Conflict** These statistics draw heavily from the data laid out in the Women, Peace and Security Index 2023/2024. The CARE team downloaded the dataset that shows statistics for each country, and focused on countries that had any prevalence in "Proximity to Conflict." Full definition of each term is listed on page 16 of that report. That includes:

- **Proximity to conflict:** Percentage of women who lived within 50 kilometers of at least one armed conflict event during 2022.

- **Intimate partner violence:** Percentage of ever-partnered women who experienced physical or sexual violence committed by their intimate partner in the 12 months preceding the survey in which the information was gathered (current rate of intimate partner violence).

- **Maternal mortality:** Number of maternal deaths due to pregnancy-related causes per 100,000 live births.

- **Conflict event:** An incident in which armed force was used by an organized actor against another organized actor or against civilians, resulting in at least one direct death at a specific location and on a specific date (page 57 of the report).

**To calculate numbers of people impacted by conflict, CARE complemented this data with the following sources:**

- **Total population figures and population of women by country in 2022**: World Bank Open Data.[lxxxv]

- **Crude birth rate per 1,000 people:** World Bank Open Data.[lxxxvi] This data uses projections for the most recent year available in each country; not every country has data for 2022, so we used the most recent available data. Typically, this was 2021 data.

- **Population data, including women of reproductive age (15-49) and births (children under 1 year old) in a specific country in 2022:** UN Data Portal Population Division.[lxxxvii]
- **Maternal deaths:** World Health Organization.[lxxxviii] This data is from 2020. We adjusted 2020 data for 2022 using a 1.2% population growth rate among women of reproductive age, based on data from UN Data Portal Population Division.[lxxxix]

**Our calculations are as follows:**

- **Births within 50km of a conflict =** Crude Birth Rate x (Population/1,000) x Percentage of women living within 50km of a conflict (summed across all countries where the number was higher than zero).

- **Women of Reproductive Age within 50km of a conflict =** Women of Reproductive Age in each country x Percentage of women living within 50km of a conflict (summed across all countries where the number was higher than zero).

- **Maternal Deaths within 50km of a conflict =** Maternal Mortality Rate in country x Crude Birth Rate in each country x Percentage of women living within 50km of a conflict (summed across all countries where the number was higher than zero). This number is then reduced by 1.6% to account for stillbirths and multiple births.

- **IPV rates for women of reproductive age within 50km of a conflict =** Women of Reproductive Age in each country x IPV prevalence x Percentage of women living within 50km of a conflict (summed across all countries where the number was higher than zero).

**Media Analysis** The methodology employed in the media analysis conducted by CARE included an innovative approach to understanding the portrayal of conflict across 13 countries (Afghanistan, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gaza, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen). Using a media monitoring intelligence application, Meltwater, the analysis focused on digital news sources on a global scale to find patterns and trends in media coverage between 2013 and 2023. Building on the methodology in the Breaking the Silence report, the report analyzed online articles from news sources in Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and German. All search terms were translated for each set of language searches.

The primary objective was to understand how conflict is depicted within the media landscape of each country, compared with the portrayal of women within these conflict narratives. By explicitly examining references to women in conflict contexts and mentions of "women leaders" or "women's leadership," CARE could track and categorize mentions of conflict-related topics, assessing the frequency and context of coverage across the selected contexts.

Furthermore, the methodology incorporated sentiment analysis to depict the tonality of media mentions, utilizing Meltwater's natural language processing algorithm to classify mentions as positive, negative, or neutral. This process provided valuable insights into the overall framing and perception of conflict within each country's media discourse. The scope of the analysis was limited to online news sources, with social media platforms deliberately excluded, as well as parameters set to include the mentions of conflict or women in the title or first paragraph of the article. This works to ensure the media pieces are as relevant as possible when talking about the conflict at hand.

**Other** Additional data is cited appropriately to its source, including CARE evaluations, UN reports, and expert sources like Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Dataset and the Women, Peace and Security Index.

# Annex

**RGA**: The total number of female respondents is 600 in 2020, 2,944 in 2021, 269 in 2022, and 1,552 in 2023.

| Country | Year and Number of Female Respondents |
|---|---|
| **Syria** | **2020:** 48; 2021: 412; 2022: 42 |
| **Afghanistan** | **2020:** 161; 2021: 182 |
| **Sudan** | **2021:** 356; 2023: 66 |
| **Gaza** | **2021:** 42 |
| **Ukraine** | **2023:** 348 |
| **Somalia** | **2021:** 1,716; 2023: 978 |
| **Iraq** | **2021:** 236; 2022: 227 |
| **Burkina Faso** | **2023:** 160 |
| **Haiti** | **2020:** 391 |

**WR**: The total number of female respondents is 2,076 in 2020, 6,892 in 2021, 1,965 in 2022, and 2,891 in 2023.

| Country | Year and Number of Female Respondents |
|---|---|
| **Ethiopia** | **2020**: 330; 2021: 645; 2023: 601 |
| **Mali** | **2020**: 317; 2021: 618; 2023: 479 |
| **Niger** | **2020**: 391; 2021: 729; 2022: 331; 2023: 400 |
| **Nigeria** | **2021**: 3,759; 2022: 1,269; 2023: 580 |
| **Burundi** | **2021**: 1,141; 2022: 365; 2023: 438 |
| **Colombia** | **2023**: 393 |

**Data from the Women Respond Dashboard**
(https://app.powerbi.com/groups/133bca5a-db36-49d0-be50-929f8780ac48/reports/196a2f42-5b23-4dfd-ae87-39f21659fe40/ReportSectionf82a9373d2d189d1d882?ctid=e83233b7-4813-4ff5-893f-f60f400bfcba&clientSideAuth=0&experience=power-bi)

**This covers 15 countries:**
Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Colombia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen

**Total respondents: 20,000 (13,785 women)**
Survey timeline: March 2020 to October 2023

| **Impact area and % of women** (this question is covered in all the 15 countries) | **Action area and % of women** (this question covers 13 countries) | **Need area and % of women** (this question covers 15 countries) |
|---|---|---|
| **Livelihood**: 58% | **Participating in leadership and emergency response committees:** 91% | **Livelihood:** 58% |
| **Food security:** 41% | **Safety:** 79% | **Mobility:** 36% |
| **Education:** 16% (33% of those who reported education are under the age of 18 and 23% are between 18 and 24) | **Health information:** 71% | **Food security:** 36% |
| | **Education:** 60% | **Education:** 23% |
| **Hygiene:** 15% | **Sharing information with others:** 52% | |
| **Safety:** 15% | | |

# End Notes

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