

No Women, No Peace






Credit: Faith Amon/ VSLA Sierra Leone

When crises hit, women step-up as leaders, engaging hands-on to navigate challenges.

Women leaders are often overlooked and unsupported in times of crisis, yet they continue to make considerable contributions. They deliver essential health and nutrition services to the most vulnerable. They document human rights abuses and work to make communities safer. They strengthen their livelihoods through resourcefulness and creativity.

CARE's research shows that women are the key to effective crisis recovery and long-term peacebuilding. By removing barriers to their participation and amplifying the critical work they are already doing, we can give women the recognition they deserve and empower them to change the future of crisis response.ⁱ

CARE surveyed 13,000 women in 15 countries since 2020 and among them, 91% or more are spearheading and participating in responses to crises. Specifically,

-  79% of women are working to make communities safer.
-  71% of women are delivering essential health services.
-  46% of women are diversifying incomes to support their families

What stands in their way?

Women face numerous challenges when trying to help their communities. Some barriers are internal, such as harmful social and gender norms. Others are external, including their near invisibility in global conversations about crises and a lack of funding that finds its way to women. In an era of **prolonged conflict, understanding and addressing women's roles and contributions are critical** to meeting the varied needs of affected populations.

- Narratives of conflict underrepresent women: **Narratives of conflict often ignore women's roles and contributions** toward resolution. Articles, policies, and papers tend to overlook **women's leadership** or portray women primarily as victims. For example, 95% of media coverage of conflicts since 2013 overlooks women, their roles, and their experiences. Less than 3 in ten thousand (.03%) of those media mentions talk about women leaders.ⁱⁱ
- Patriarchal attitudes restrict women: Patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms often confine women to subordinate roles, making it challenging for them to be seen as leaders or decision-makers in crisis situations.
- **Women's basic needs are going unfilled:** In crises, earning income is a critical but unmet need for many women. 58% of women surveyed by CARE reported that earning money to support their family is their top priority. While food security remains a major concern (41% of women cited it as a significant impact of conflict), the ability to earn a living emerges as the most pressing issue for a significant portion of women in these areas.
- Safety concerns: Women face significant safety risks during crisis, including sexual violence and harassment, which can limit their confidence and willingness to take on leadership roles openly and safely. Research estimates that more than 60 million women over the age of 15 experienced intimate partner violence in conflict zones in 2022.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Limited Funding and Resources: Women-led organizations often struggle to secure funding and resources due to lack of direct funding channels, limiting their capacity to lead and respond effectively to crises. 2022 data reveals that a mere 1.2% of humanitarian funding trickles down to local actors^{iv}.
- Lack of inclusive environments: Inclusive environments enable women to become leaders. Women are traditionally considered as those we take care of first and are often not thought of as leaders in crisis, thus overlooked for senior humanitarian roles.

Step by step, we can make a difference

Invest in equality

By making humanitarian efforts more inclusive during times of crises, we can better save lives and uphold dignity. Gender equality must remain integral to these efforts, so that women and girls have **a say in decisions that affect them. To ensure women's leadership, CARE's programs focus on**

breaking down barriers to their safe participation. Our [‘Do no harm’](#) approach delivers programming across all sectors that: facilitates safe access to goods/services; is responsive to gender-based violence risks; and doesn’t increase the likelihood of gender-based violence.

Additionally, [‘Gender in Emergencies’](#) (GiE) Theory of Change, a pioneering framework by CARE emphasizes the integration of gender perspectives in emergency responses. It sheds light on the unique vulnerabilities that women and girls face during crises, highlighting their often-overlooked strengths and capacities. CARE’s approach advocates for their active participation and leadership in humanitarian actions, challenging traditional power dynamics. CARE focuses on three distinct but interdependent pillars within Gender in Emergencies approach – Women’s Voice and Leadership in Emergencies, Gender Based Violence in Emergencies, and Gender Integrated Sectoral Response. **These pillars reflect CARE’s commitment** to understanding the lives of women and girls as holistic, and to both supporting and facilitating their capacities and opportunities to bring about change in their own lives and those of their wider communities.

CARE recognizes that women are overwhelmingly the first responders in any crisis or emergency, **but also that women’s voices are least heard.** CARE’s [Women Lead in Emergencies](#) is a proven and scalable programming model to enable grassroots women’s groups to address barriers to their participation so that they can take the lead in design and delivery of humanitarian assistance. Since 2018, CARE and partners have worked with the WLiE model in 22 countries. In 2020, this included **CARE and partners working directly with 804 women’s groups in Colombia, Mali, Niger, the Philippines and Uganda.** As a result, in Niger, 88% of participants felt confident that they understood their rights and entitlements compared to only 58% of non-participants, and in Uganda 58% of **Women Lead participants reported ‘confidence in accessing services’ compared with 40% of non-participant women** who said the same. Additionally, there was an increase in **women’s** presence, regularity of attendance, and meaningful and effective participation in decision-making community settings.

In Niger, 91% of women who participated in Women Lead had attended formal community meetings and almost 60% said they had attended these meetings regularly compared with only 34% of non-Women Lead participants and in Uganda 22% of Women Lead participants hold leadership positions in their communities compared with 14% of non-participants.^v

“We used to be ashamed to speak in front of the men. Now we are not afraid to defend ourselves when a decision does not suit us. We will say it out loud because we know the ways and means to claim our rights. And all this is thanks to the Women Lead in Emergencies project.”

Women Lead Group Member, Diffa, Niger

Strengthen livelihoods in crises

Conflicts, pandemics, and climate change are pushing the number of people in crises requiring humanitarian aid past 339 million. This means traditional funding sources may never be enough.

CARE's Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) model offers a promising alternative. It empowers communities by creating local savings groups where people can save and borrow money from each other. This not only helps them survive emergencies but also builds long-term resilience. Especially for women, VSLAs and cash assistance have been shown to dramatically boost the ability of women and their families to prepare for, react to, and recover from crises.

Globally an estimated 1.1 billion women, nearly one in three, are excluded from basic financial services. The VSLA model provides a low-cost, community-run alternative to empower women and help them recover from crises. For example, in Yemen, CARE initially created saving groups for 300 women, who in turn formed an additional 22 groups on their own, reaching over 600 more people without further assistance from CARE. **Notably, nearly half (48%) used the program's loans to start successful businesses.** The impact is clear: before joining, only 3% of the women had any savings and after participating, all of them have an average of \$220 saved. 89% of women used some part of their money to support other people in their communities.^{vi} Under CARE's Humanitarian programming, from July 2023 to December 2023, 492.7K people in crisis settings received livelihood support through savings groups.^{vii}

Place local women responders at the center

Understanding the impact of 'localization' in enhancing the efficiency and efficacy of crisis responses remains a pivotal focus for donors and the humanitarian sector. CARE believes that locally generated solutions, especially by women-led organizations, improve the quality of services and lead to more successful outcomes. **CARE's research on women responders (with focus on GBV)** also found that women responders mitigate risks by actively responding to protection risks, organizing collectively, and identifying and meeting needs on the ground.^{viii}

"We can hire or contract anyone who has technical expertise, but a woman advocate who has intimate knowledge of a community is invaluable" - Woman, interviewed by CARE

CARE has found that effective humanitarian response can't just be locally led. It must be sensitive to unique challenges and needs of populations that experience crises differently. For this reason, the [Humanitarian Partnership Platform \(HPP\)](#) at CARE Philippines **doesn't just treat gender as a checkbox but as a key differentiator.** The HPP champions gender sensitivity through CARE-designed Rapid Gender Assessments, leading to responses that are gender-aware and sometimes even transform the way communities view and address gender imbalances.^{ix} Through the HPP, CARE

Philippines has been able to channel 76% of its humanitarian expenditure directly to its partners by simply pre-authorizing partners to access funds for rapid assessments and distributions.

Focus on women's voices

More than 600 million women and girls lived in conflict-affected countries in 2022, a 50% increase since 2017.^x At the frontline of every crisis are women – from volunteering at the community level to providing the majority of health services and leading community-based responses. **CARE's Her Voice Report 2024^{xi}** represents the voices of 9,517 respondents (7,208 women) from 12 countries and shows that women report climate change, food insecurity, and conflict as the top three crises that negatively impact livelihoods, their ability to feed their family, and safety. Women are disproportionately affected by these crises as they are often impacted the most with specific forms of violence and discrimination and are underrepresented in social, political and economic decision making. Safety concerns are rising, especially for women facing both general conflict violence and gender-based violence. Despite compounding crises, women are taking action and leading community responses through savings groups, income diversification, and borrowing. So, what do women need from us? Their top four requests are: support for livelihood recovery, addressing food insecurity, strengthening health services, and addressing safety concerns.^{xii}

Change the narrative

Conflict zones are often portrayed as scenes of despair. While the challenges are undeniably real, this narrative misses a crucial element: the power and resilience of women leaders. By amplifying the voices of women leading progressive action in conflict zones, we can rewrite the narrative and build a future where their courage, resilience, and leadership are recognized and celebrated. We need to seek, create, and amplify diverse stories, follow women leaders, and hold ourselves accountable. Donors should fund women-led organizations, track progress towards goals and hold themselves accountable to the communities they fund and support empowering networks.

References

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ⁱⁱ 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>

ⁱⁱⁱ A better humanitarian system: Locally led action. Development Initiatives. (n.d.).

<https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2023/a-better-humanitarian-system-locally-led-action/>

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^v VSLAiE Final Report. CARE. (2022) <https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/VSLAiE-Final-Report.pdf>

^{vi} Local Knowledge Learning Report. CARE. (2023). <https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Local-Knowledge-Learning-Report-August-2023.pdf>

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^{vii} Women responders: Placing local action at the centre of humanitarian protection programming. Reliefweb. 2018. 10. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/women-responders-placing-local-action-centre-humanitarian-protection-programming>

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^x Her Voice- Listening to Women in Action. CARE. (2024). <https://www.care.org/news-and-stories/resources/her-voice-listening-to-women-in-action/>

^{xi} Women in War Report. CARE. (May 2024)

^{xii} Enhancing Women's Participation and Leadership in Humanitarian Action. CARE. 2024.

<https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Policy-Brief-Enhancing-Womens-Participation-and-Leadership-in-Humanitarian-Action-March-2024.pdf>