



**Refugee Women-led Organisations
on the Frontline of Addressing GBV:
Key Actions for the Global Refugee Forum**



What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls: Impact at Scale

A seven-year initiative funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to scale up evidence-based, practice-informed prevention of violence against women and girls. The programme will invest £67.5 million to prevent and contribute to eliminating violence against women and girls (VAWG) by:

- Systematically designing, implementing, and rigorously evaluating a range of approaches to scaling up violence prevention efforts, translating proof-of-concept evidence into robust, large scale programmes and strategies.
- Designing, piloting, and testing new theory-driven violence prevention approaches (innovation).
- Strengthening long-term capability and capacity to deliver cutting-edge, evidence-based violence prevention programmes across the programme's grantees, the UK Government (principally FCDO), and developing country governments
- Using evidence to influence a more effective, scaled-up global response to end VAWG.

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Cover photo: Turpaina Nyoka is a member and Vice Chairperson to the South Sudanese Refugee Women's Association, one of the five women groups supported by CARE's Women Lead in Emergency component being implemented in Uganda. She often refers cases of GBV to the responsible people for support. @ Norah Namono/CARE

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Executive Summary

The Global Refugee Forum in December 2023 presents a pivotal moment to mobilise collective efforts and accountability to address gender-based violence (GBV) within the context of forced displacement.¹ Refugee women-led organisations (WLOs) work across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and have a critical role to play in preventing and responding to GBV.

This policy brief summarises the pivotal role that refugee WLOs play in preventing and responding to GBV, as well as the systemic barriers they face. It aims to support specific and actionable pledges at the Global Refugee Forum.² The insights are based on interviews with refugee WLOs in Kenya, Ukraine, South Sudan, Rwanda, Romania and Jordan, global organisations supporting refugee WLOs, and refugee leaders working with refugee women and youth networks.³ The brief also draws on a rapid desk review of the evidence.⁴

WLOs provide support to refugee women and girls across their displacement journey. This assistance extends from camps and rural and urban settings, through to repatriation and resettlement phases. Organisations also offer crucial social support and activities to support integration with host communities and form a critical part of the support ecosystem for refugee women and children.

At the frontline of GBV prevention and response, refugee WLOs described how they are often the first responders to humanitarian crises and displacement, providing lifesaving GBV services and support alongside other interventions that tackle the underlying drivers of inequality, often with limited or no funding. Interviewees noted that they play an essential bridging role between refugee agencies and communities, between formal and informal decision-making structures, and between refugee communities and host communities.

However, refugee WLOs face a number of systemic barriers, grappling with double discrimination as both women-led and refugee-led entities. Interviewees highlighted challenges relating to registration, legal recognition, stigma, isolation, and the lasting effects of trauma and displacement. They also observed that they receive a tiny fraction of the funding available, have limited voices in decision-making spaces, and encounter inequitable partnerships.

The Global Refugee Forum 2023 provides an opportunity to learn from the experience and expertise of refugee WLOs, and refugee women and girls, and to build long-term, equitable, and well-funded partnerships with refugee WLOs. Stakeholders should commit to specific, actionable, time-bound and funded pledges. Key action areas to consider include:

Funding

- Ensure accessibility of funding mechanisms by working closely with refugee WLOs to identify current barriers, review eligibility criteria to simplify applications and reporting procedures, and progressively adapt systems. To do this, it would be useful to share learning from innovative funding mechanisms that are making progress in increasing accessibility to RWLOs, such as the UN Trust Fund's Special Window on ending violence against women and girls who are refugees and/or forcibly displaced, and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund's funding window linked to the Action Network on Forced Displacement.

A note on terminology:

This policy brief primarily refers to refugee women-led organisations (refugee WLOs). It recognises the importance of self-definition and acknowledges that these organisations often operate at the intersection between different populations, communities and movements. For example, refugee WLOs can be considered both refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and women-led organisations (WLOs) simultaneously.* This policy brief refers to all women and girls in their diversities, including non-binary, gender non-conforming and gender diverse people.

*This briefing draws on evidence that uses the terminology 'women refugee-led organisations', 'women-led civil society organisations (CSOs)', 'women-led organisations (WLOs)' and 'women's rights organisations' (WROs). It uses WLOs as a term to encompass WROs and women-led CSOs.

- Track allocation of funding to refugee WLOs, including to specialist groups supporting refugees and migrants facing intersecting forms of discrimination, such as LGBTQ refugee WLOs, and use data to re-prioritise effective use of resources, including allocation to refugee WLOs.
- Increase the amount and quality of funding available to refugee WLOs, including by working with existing funding mechanisms (e.g. thematic funds, pooled funds and agency-level funds) to improve tracking and accessibility. Prioritise increasing access to both long-term, core, direct, and flexible funding, as well as funds for rapid response to short-term, acute crises.
- Work with host Governments to identify and address key barriers to legalisation of refugee WLOs to enable them to function as a legal entity and receive funding.

Partnership and collaboration

- Honour existing pledges and commitments made through platforms such as the Call to Action for the Protection from GBV in Emergencies and the Grand Bargain, to commit power and resources to refugee WLOs.
- Ensure the leadership of refugee WLOs across the triple nexus: in humanitarian action/response, development programmes and peacebuilding processes, such as representation on coordination committees. Co-design accountability mechanisms with refugee WLOs to ensure their meaningful participation and leadership in these processes and decision-making spaces.
- Support inclusion and leadership of refugee women-led organisations in their host communities, including in the provision of more inclusive, high-quality GBV prevention and response services.
- Prioritise meaningful engagement in the run-up to key global forums and events that is not limited to consultation but includes opportunities for refugee WLOs to advocate and hold stakeholders to account.

Learning, evidence and advocacy

- Support the development of national, regional and/or global refugee WLO networks and convenings, and meaningful opportunities to engage with donors and with policymakers.
- Invest in rigorous, ethical, applied research and documentation to amplify and learn from the essential work of refugee WLOs.

Wellbeing, safety and collective care

- Dedicate a percentage of project funding to support collective care, mental health support, wellbeing and safety of staff and volunteers and take active steps to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation.

Background

The current situation		
<p> Globally, there are currently the highest levels of displacement on record. At the end of 2022, there were 108.4 million people forced into displacement worldwide,⁵ over half of whom were female.</p>	<p>108.4m displaced worldwide</p> 	<p>Over 1/2 are female</p>
<p> In Colombia and Liberia, displaced women were 40% and 55% more likely, respectively, to experience intimate partner violence in the past year, compared to women who were not displaced.⁶</p>	<p> 1 in 5 refugee or displaced women experience sexual violence.⁷</p>	<p> Child marriage rates among Syrian refugees are up to four times higher than pre-crisis levels.⁸</p>

Women and girls who are displaced, affected by disaster, or live in conflict-affected regions face far higher risks of experiencing GBV, and feel the impacts of deepening gendered inequalities. This violence occurs on a continuum from pre-displacement, through conflict and transit, to refuge, and those experiencing it during forced migration often struggle to access protection, justice and support systems.⁹ GBV risks are often compounded and include increased risks of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking, child marriage and female genital mutilation.¹⁰ Refugee women and girls who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression often experience higher levels of GBV risk,¹¹ and there is also evidence that refugee and displaced LGBTQI+ people face particularly high levels of GBV risk¹² and negative mental health impacts.¹³

Refugee WLOs are a diverse set of local and national organisations that directly work with refugee and displaced women and girls, and often with their host communities. All refugee WLOs are led by women, and they are often led by (and/or were founded by) forcibly displaced or stateless women. Some are registered as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), while others are informal community groups of women that meet regularly. Several refugee WLOs that now have a formal NGO structure started as informal, volunteer-led groups.¹⁴ Refugee WLOs also have many commonalities with women-led organisations (WLOs) and women’s rights organisations (WROs), including working on similar issues, facing common challenges, and encountering systemic barriers.

However, refugee WLOs face double discrimination arising from their dual identity as refugee-led and women-led entities. As well as the multifaceted discrimination they experience as women and girls, they often contend with challenges relating to their experiences as refugees, such as registration and legal recognition of their organisations (stopping them from accessing crucial funds and other support available to formalised organisations), increased difficulty accessing, and navigating, support and justice systems, experiences of stigma, racism, discrimination and isolation,¹⁵ and dealing with experiences of trauma and displacement.

“There is often a law that refugees can’t start an NGO, can’t be organised, which doesn’t allow them to have recognition within the broader [NGO/international] community, we’ll forever be called ‘grassroots’” (Refugee woman leader)

The Unique Role of Refugee WLOs in Addressing Gender-based Violence

During interviews with refugee WLOs, and the global organisations that support them, a number of common themes were identified.

Refugee WLOs have a unique role in supporting refugee women and girls throughout their displacement journey. They are on the frontlines of GBV prevention and response and have a deep understanding of the communities they work in. They are ideally placed to identify and support refugee women and girls experiencing, or at risk of, GBV, and bridge the gap between formal and informal decision-making structures. For example, one interviewee in Kenya described how they are working with Somali refugee communities to change behaviours and customary practices whereby GBV cases are settled through traditional dispute resolution mechanisms and supporting women to access justice through the formal justice system. Another refugee WLO is training law enforcement officers on how to deal effectively and sensitively with survivors.¹⁶

“They [Refugee WLOs] are able to identify the real needs of the communities, listen to the refugees and get to know their biggest concerns, the real issues they are facing and the workable solutions that can speak to the problem.” (Refugee WLO)

Many refugee WLOs also work with other populations of women in the host country – both because of open-door policies, and to better support integration with host communities. In some contexts, for example, in Jordan and Kenya, government legislation requires NGOs to provide services to local populations alongside refugees. There are also regional and global refugee WLOs networks, including the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, and the European Network of Migrant Women.

There is well-documented evidence that WLOs play a catalytic role in interventions that promote gender equality, women’s rights and GBV prevention and response.¹⁷ While there is less documented evidence about refugee WLOs, interviews conducted for this policy brief demonstrate how they also play a catalytic role. The refugee WLOs interviewed play a varied and essential role in prevention and response, as shown in the box to the right. They are often the first responders to humanitarian crises and displacement, act as community gatekeepers or mediators between formal refugee structures and informal community mechanisms, address inter-group conflict resolution, and promote social inclusion and social justice.

Examples of GBV interventions and strategies led by refugee WLOs

Community engagement and mobilisation including awareness-raising on GBV risks, services and rights.

Establishing informal support networks and trauma-informed healing spaces where refugee women can seek support and assistance from each other, including providing opportunities to socialise with each other and with host communities.

GBV service provision in host communities can include case management, psychosocial and mental health support, legal support, shelter, medical services and referral to specialised services.

Research and advocacy to support the development and implementation of laws and policies that tackle violence against refugee women and girls.

Women’s economic empowerment and skills building, such as supporting women to access vocational training opportunities and providing micro-finances to set up businesses.

Capacity building on women’s rights, refugee rights and GBV, with a range of different actors, including refugee women themselves, smaller community-based organisations, the police, judiciary, and local and national government officials.

Collaboration with local partners on GBV referrals, including refugee agencies, service agencies and CBOs.

Working with adolescent girls, for example through girls’ clubs and safe spaces, including providing psychosocial support and follow-up after violence.

Referrals to and from refugee agencies, notably UNHCR, for support with registration and identification.

In very challenging circumstances, refugee WLOs demonstrate notable resilience, although this often comes at a personal toll in terms of their wellbeing. Some refugee WLOs have managed to formalise, but often started as informal, volunteer-led groups. Many of them operate without funding for many years, before sometimes being able to access small grants. Most refugee WLOs are meeting multiple and intersecting needs of the women and girls they work with, as well as responding rapidly, and adapting quickly, to the evolving needs of particular contexts.

Interviewees described how they possess the trust and relationships needed for longer-term change and are ideally suited to directly consult with communities about their needs.

“We are working in the community, we know what the situation is, they [staff of other agencies] will come in the morning and report, but then they go back. But us, we are not leaving!” (Refugee WLO)

GBV is often a primary focus of refugee WLOs. They work across prevention, mitigation and response, focusing on the types of violence most prevalent in their communities – intimate partner violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and sexual violence. However, GBV is rarely the only focus, and most refugee WLOs work on intersecting issues, with activities differing according to their unique contexts. The issues most commonly referenced during interviews include economic security, sexual and reproductive health, life skills, political participation and women’s leadership, and family reunifications.

“Most of the refugee WLOs are solving not only one challenge that they have seen in their community but multiple. They may be addressing GBV issues, but also include components of self-reliance, leadership, and communication skills.”

(Refugee youth network leader)

Spotlight on Refugee WLOs



MonyQadow, Dadaab, Kenya

MonyQadow is a refugee youth-led organisation, established in 2018 as an informal gathering of refugee women dedicated to giving back to their community. MonyQadow started by researching the situation of women and girls, allowing them to develop effective solutions. This approach means they are able to provide rapid insights into the experiences of refugee women and girls in Dadaab, while maintaining the ability to respond quickly to evolving situations. For example, during COVID-19, there was a rapid increase in teenage pregnancy – MonyQadow, through [the Girls First Project](#), documented the number of girls who got pregnant, offered them psychological support, and then collaborated with other organisations on a back-to-school campaign, offered mentorship skills, and helped young women to establish businesses. It is currently implementing the [Women Rise Project](#) – which works to strengthen and expand sources of support, building stronger coping mechanisms to address chronic stress, and expanding on women and girls’ own inherent resilience and empowerment through stronger connections with other women, as well as through livelihood interventions.

Spotlight on Refugee WLOs



D.O.M.48.24 NGO, Ukraine

Founded in 2014 by internally displaced people, D.O.M.48.24 is dedicated to championing women's rights and protection. The organisation has adapted to the changing needs and priorities of internally displaced women from its initial inception through to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The women who lead it wanted to raise important social questions, and started using theatre and documentary film as a way to challenge stereotypes for internally displaced people and document women's experiences of violence. They also established an events space and a shelter for women escaping violence. When the invasion started in 2022, they used the events space to provide humanitarian aid, but soon recognised that other organisations were providing basic humanitarian relief on a bigger scale, and shifted their focus to addressing overlooked needs. One of the founders explained, *"I remembered my path when I was an internally displaced person, because I knew what I needed."* After conducting a needs assessment, they began providing items such as vacuum cleaners, speech therapy for children, and kitchen equipment. They also recognised the need for people to feel like they had a safe space. It was *"still too early to heal the trauma but people needed to feel safe."* To address this need, they began offering activities such as sports events, art therapy and opportunities to come together and make friendships. The funding for shelter stopped at the end of 2022, when rent hikes made it unaffordable to continue, but the organisation continues to organise training on domestic violence, and to advocate for local authorities to continue to run the shelter for domestic violence survivors.

Challenges and Systemic Barriers for Refugee WLOs

Disconnect and exclusion from the humanitarian, peace and development system

There are power imbalances at all levels of the humanitarian, peace and development system and women, WLOs, and refugee WLOs are under-represented at all levels of decision-making. WLOs and refugee WLOs are not brought into the system either often or early enough, including in the run-up to important global events such as the Global Refugee Forum.¹⁸ Some interviewees expressed reservations that the localisation agenda – intended to give voice and accountability to local and national partners, including refugee WLOs – is often implemented with a check box approach. In particular, there are concerns about the prioritisation of male-led national organisations under the banner of localisation, taking away refugee women's voices and reinforcing power imbalances.

"It's about power, control and money – and there's a great reluctance to that give up"

(Global organisation)

The important work of WLOs and refugee WLOs is recognised within global policies, with numerous commitments to GBV localisation and women's and WLOs' leadership in development, humanitarian and peace response.¹⁹ However, commitments at global and regional levels often do not translate into funded, tangible action.

"If we review the pledges from 2019 – they were nice – but where's the money?"

(Refugee women leader)

WLOs' work on GBV is often not seen as essential or lifesaving during a humanitarian crisis, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine, and this is likely to be exacerbated for refugee WLOs given the additional levels of discrimination they face being refugee organisations.

“People do not see this as an emergency crisis. When I advocate about violence [to the humanitarian country team], they call it a ‘soft component’ – but I tell them it affects people mentally and physically” (Refugee WLO)

Lack of flexible, long-term funding

A significant funding gap remains for WLOs and Refugee WLOs working on GBV, with a lack of accountability and tracking for how funding is allocated. In 2016-2017, less than 0.4% of overall allocable aid (USD 430 million) went to women's organisations and institutions, falling to 0.2% in fragile and conflict-affected states²⁰, and less than 0.2% (USD 194 million) went to GBV.²¹ Although a mechanism exists to track how much humanitarian funding is going to GBV and WLOs, it does not capture the full picture and certainly not how much funding is going to refugee WLOs.

The lack of long-term, core and flexible funding available for refugee WLOs poses a significant challenge, hindering their ability to carry out gender transformative work and sustain their organisations. Some refugee WLOs are entirely volunteer-run, whilst others often rely on small, short-term grants. One organisation described how they work with a core team of ten people, but only four of them get paid at any one time and they rotate who gets paid when they get new funding in. Other interviewees emphasised that the grants that were available to them were for small amounts of money and were short-term, making it almost impossible for them to do both the longer-term work of shifting gender and social norms, and providing survivors with consistent, trauma-informed support.

Rigid donor eligibility criteria (e.g. around organisation size, legal status and financial accountability) can make it harder for refugee WLOs to access funding, as can heavy reporting requirements and a lack of flexibility for refugee WLOs to use funding according to the evolving needs and priorities of refugee communities. Several small refugee WLOs described how the process of writing proposals, often at short notice, does not align with their operational realities. Even when they secure funding, the demanding programme and financial reporting requirements, coupled with a lack of trust, hamper organisations' ability to deliver effectively. This approach has been documented to disadvantage WLOs working on GBV²² and acts as a barrier to implementing women-led approaches to GBV and localisation. Donors often commit to funding a small number of organisations that cover various protection-related activities.²³ Consequently, WLOs have to try and cover as many of these areas as possible to secure funding.²⁴ This situation is even more challenging for refugee WLOs.

“Sometimes what they want might not be what the donor has sent the funds for. You have to struggle to align it – this is a struggle that most of the national partners also get. We need donors that are responsive to what the participants really want. At the end of the day, you might have the resources, but those resources might not be useful.” (Refugee WLO)

“Donors want high numbers, but we believe in quality, not quantity.” (Refugee WLO)

Safety and wellbeing

Trauma, secondary trauma,²⁵ and burnout are significant concerns for the refugee WLOs interviewed. Many are responding to high levels of need, with incredibly limited resources, increasing the risk of staff and volunteer fatigue and burnout. They are working with vulnerable groups of women and girls, often being exposed to reports of abuse and extreme violence and without access to counselling,

and other support systems in place for them to process secondary trauma. Additionally, many of the women working with refugee WLOs will have their own lived experiences of violence, racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination – putting them at risk of re-traumatisation.

“We also have to think about our employees and their capacity because the self-care of the employees is really important because they are working in the field they are in, in direct contact with refugees.” (Refugee WLO)

“As one listens to their stories, she identifies and spends sleepless nights thinking about the tragic experiences they went through. This strongly affects the life of the Woman Human Rights Defender and even the work she is doing.” (Refugee WLO)

Many refugee WLOs also report community backlash. Interviewees described meeting significant resistance to their activities from community members, and in particular from male community leaders. This resistance has extended to staff and volunteers being threatened and intimidated, and misinformation about their organisations being spread around the community. In Dadaab, research by What Works to Prevent VAWG found that 1 in 3 refugee community workers reported experiencing threats or physical violence in the last 12 months as a direct result of their GBV work.²⁶ In contexts of already limited resources, there is also often a perception that more resources are going to refugees than to host communities, leading to increased tension. Halgan, a refugee WLO in Dadaab, faced community opposition when they first started, which was fuelled by misinformation about their intentions. To build trust and understanding, they make a point of working with community leaders and sharing job descriptions of organisation staff, and community relations have started to improve.²⁷

Working within hostile environments and changing constraints

Refugee WLOs are often trying to support women and girls in all their diversity in hostile environments – this includes having less recourse to rights and social protections, restricting refugee and undocumented women and girls from accessing essential health and support services, preventing them from using refuge centres or pursuing legal action against their abuser²⁸. For example, one refugee leader interviewed emphasised that many women fear that their children might be taken from them if they seek legal redress. They also noted that refugee WLOs often work in contexts with laws that criminalise LGBTQI+ populations, encounter racism and xenophobia in host communities, and observe refugee rights becoming entangled in political agendas. This convergence of factors increases the intolerance and restrictions that they face.

Another factor highlighted by many of the interviewees was that working with the laws, policies and constraints of different host countries also greatly impacts refugee WLOs’ access to funding, their ability to set up bank accounts, set up formal organisations and structures, and their opportunities for engagement in the development, humanitarian and peacebuilding systems. Some refugee women leaders face severe restrictions on their movements – due to encampment policies, or not being able to access visas to travel to other locations – making it very difficult for them to engage in the national, regional and global spaces where they could connect with other organisations, donors and policymakers.

“We don’t know what’s going on outside, we can’t go out to global forums, if I could go out and share with different places – but we are restricted, I cannot even reach the capital city because of a lack of documentation” (Refugee WLO)

Refugee WLOs can also face internal difficulties taking an intersectional approach and working with certain refugee populations, including refugees with disabilities and LGBTQI+ refugees. This challenge can be linked to limited funding, organisational capacity, and a hostile environment. It is also important to acknowledge that refugee WLOs can, at times, replicate existing biases within an ethnic or national community.²⁹

Inequitable partnerships

Many of the refugee women-led organisations interviewed highlighted that their partnerships with donors, with INGOs, and with other refugee agencies are often not equal or equitable. While functional relationships exist, there is a pressing need to improve collaboration and engagement, striving for equal partnerships rather than a top-down approach where refugee WLOs have little say in shaping programmes and partnerships. Evidence shows that partnering with WLOs on GBV prevention and response is linked to the effective use of resources and efforts, securing community buy-in and sustainability.³⁰

“There are very few incentives in the system. Why don’t we have clear resources for refugee WLOs? Some of the recommendations are basic and aren’t happening. Organisations should be held accountable for the standards they have signed up to.”

(Global organisation supporting refugee WLOs)

Spotlight on partnerships with Refugee Women-led Organisations



The UN Trust Fund’s Special Window on ending violence against women and girls who are refugees, and/or forcibly displaced supported 18 projects led by civil society organisations. Grantees were mostly WLOs working with refugee women and girls, while some were also led by refugee or forcibly displaced women. Findings from a recent synthesis review showed that the fund *enhanced grantees’ capacities to prevent and respond to violence against refugee and/or forcibly displaced women and girls*. The review emphasised the significance of having a dedicated window on violence against refugee and/or forcibly displaced women and girls, and not having to compete with other GBV organisations working with different populations. The special window has now closed, and in 2022, the UN Trust Fund launched a call for proposals for WROs and CSOs working in crisis settings to address GBV by providing longer-term, comprehensive and lifesaving services. The synthesis review recommends monitoring if and how the focus on refugee and/or forcibly displaced people is mainstreamed across their portfolio, and to consider re-establishing the special window.

The International Rescue Committee partners with a number of refugee WLOs to integrate the **Girl Shine** Approach, which works with adolescent girls and their parents/caregivers to prevent and respond to violence, into their broader programming. Partners who are using the approach can access the Girl Shine materials, as well as mentorship and a community of practice to support context-specific implementation. For example, **Halgan**, a refugee WLO in Dadaab, partners with IRC to implement the Girl Shine programme model, and once girls have graduated from the Girl Shine programme, they can then take part in other life-skills activities, such as learning tie-dye techniques. **Thrive**, a refugee WLO in Gulu, Uganda, also uses the Girl Shine methodology as one element of their work supporting refugee women and girls to connect with each other and access support services – they implement the approach alongside economic empowerment activities, and community radio programmes where women speak on the issues impacting them.³¹

Recommendations

“What I want to see are some specific pledges on GBV prevention and response, and let’s understand that we need to have multi-year funding for GBV programming. I work with women who are traumatised – it often takes a whole year just for people to trust you and open up! If you give me a six-month project, I can’t do anything.” (Refugee WLO)

This policy brief sets out a number of considerations for humanitarian actors, host governments, UN agencies, INGOs, funders, and other stakeholders, to promote a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the crucial work of refugee WLOs, and how that might translate into specific and actionable pledges ahead of the Global Refugee Forum.

The essential, life-saving work of refugee WLOs can be greatly enhanced when partners learn from and support their valuable experience and expertise, as well as all refugee women and girls. It is important to build long-term, equitable, and well-funded partnerships that prioritise intersectionality in order to promote the agency of forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls and to achieve sustainability in GBV prevention and response programmes.

Key action areas

The 2023 Global Refugee Forum provides an opportunity for stakeholders to announce concrete pledges, including under the Call to Action+ (CTA+) Multi-stakeholder Pledge on Gender Equality and Protection from GBV. These pledges will build on outcomes from thematic discussions and key convenings held in the run-up to the event, including a Wilton Park conference, the 2023 Women Deliver Conference, and commitments such as those under the Grand Bargain.

Based on the research conducted for this policy piece, below is a set of key action areas for stakeholders to consider in preparation for the Global Refugee Forum and beyond. It is recommended that all stakeholders consult further with refugee WLOs, to build context-specific policy pledges that are actionable, time-bound, and relevant to their context. UNHCR has also published pledging guidance on Inclusion and Access to GBV prevention and response services as well as on Innovative Partnerships with (Refugee) Women-Led Organisations, which further highlight the unique and complementary role that refugee WLOs play - as partners - in national protection systems.

1. Funding and organisational

1.1 Ensure accessibility of funding mechanisms. Work closely with refugee WLOs to identify and address key funding barriers, such as lack of access to bank accounts, heavy reporting requirements, and strict eligibility criteria. Commit to simplifying funding application processes and eligibility requirements, and set clear, time-bound actions to minimise these barriers. Share learning from funding sources that are making progress in increasing accessibility to RWLOs, including those targeted at refugees and forcibly displaced women and girls, such as the UN Trust Fund’s Special Window on ending violence against women and girls who are refugees and/or forcibly displaced, and the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund’s funding window linked to the Action Network on Forced Displacement. Strengthen networking and collaboration among those funds already making progress in improving accessibility for refugee WLOs to inspire others to follow suit.

1.2 Track allocation of funding. Conduct regular assessments to track the distribution of funds among various types of organisations (refugee WLOs, WLOs, refugee-led organisations, CBOs, etc.) within specific mechanisms. Use this data to re-prioritise resources effectively and establish future funding targets that align with the needs and priorities of refugee WLOs.

1.3 Increase the amount and quality of funding to refugee WLOs. Work with existing funding mechanisms to improve tracking and accessibility of funding for the work of refugee WLOs, for example in thematic funds, pooled funds, and agency-level funds. Prioritise both long-term, core, direct flexible funding to enable refugee WLOs to work on gender equality and social norms change, as well as access to funds for short-term, acute crisis response.

1.4 Work with host governments to identify and address legal barriers that impede the formal recognition of refugee WLOs, enabling them to function as legal entities and access essential funding.

Example pledge 1a: *By [year], the [donor/ UN Agency] in [country] commits to [amount of funding pledged] of long-term, flexible funding of [amount of years] to organisations working with refugee women and girls to end violence, with at least [percentage amount] % going directly to refugee women-led organisations.*

Example pledge 1b: *By [year], the [relevant donor/UN Agency/ NGO] in [country] commits to tracking the allocation of funding in [specific funding mechanism] to refugee WLOs, making the data public, reviewing the data in collaboration with refugee WLOs, and, based on the review re-prioritising resources and setting new targets to better reach refugee WLOs.*

2. Partnership, collaboration and commitments

2.1 Honour existing commitments and pledges that shift resources and decision-making power to refugees and WLOs. Uphold pledges already made through previous agreements, such as the Call to Action for the Protection from GBV in Emergencies and the Grand Bargain – work with refugee WLOs to create a realistic and ambitious plan of action, commit to timelines, and allocate appropriate budgets.

2.2 Ensure the leadership of refugee WLOs in refugee and humanitarian response, including peacebuilding opportunities and sustainable development. Ensure the active participation of refugee WLOs in leadership roles, such as representation on coordination committees, and provide resources and capacity-building support to enhance their influence and impact in these areas. Collaborate with refugee WLOs to co-design and implement accountability mechanisms to assess progress in meaningful participation in decision-making (e.g. indicators that measure the impact of refugee meaningful participation in developing feminist refugee policies). Additionally, establish mechanisms to support the meaningful participation of diverse groups of refugee WLOs in prevention and peacebuilding processes.

2.3 Support inclusion and leadership of refugee women-led organisations in their host communities, including in the provision of more inclusive, high-quality GBV prevention and response services. Provide support for refugee WLOs to identify ways to ensure greater inclusion of refugee women and girls in all their diversity in the local refugee and host community.

2.4 Prioritise meaningful consultation, leadership and engagement in the run-up to key advocacy moments and events, as well as in the development of programmes and policy. Ensure representation and leadership by refugee WLOs at all levels and stages of these processes, from the start of the planning process. A key consideration for facilitating this meaningful engagement includes collaborating with all stakeholders to facilitate the provision of documentation needed for refugee women to travel and engage in global decision-making spaces. It also involves assessing and providing the necessary support for meaningful engagement, including establishing realistic timelines, compensating for people's time and expertise, planning for accessibility needs, and providing translation.

Example pledge 2a: *By [year], the [relevant national authority] in [country] commits to the inclusion of [number] Refugee Women-Led Organisations in [x location/nationally/sub-nationally] into National Gender and Equality and National Gender-Based Violence coordination forums.³²*

Example pledge 2b: *The [name of INGO/NGO/UN Agency] commits to ensuring that refugee women and girls meaningfully participate and lead in the process of the [name of global event/advocacy space] in [year], including all their travel costs and support to gather all needed documentation.*

3. Learning, evidence, and advocacy

3.1 Support the development of national, regional and/or global refugee WLO networks and convenings and the interconnection among them, and meaningful opportunities for refugee WLOs to engage with donors and with policymakers for mutual sharing and learning. Facilitate access to appropriate platforms and spaces for meaningful engagement, fund opportunities for networking, and support with the needed documentation to travel to events and delocalisation of events.

3.2 Invest in rigorous, ethical, applied research and documentation with findings that impact policymaking and programming, highlight the value and impact of the work of refugee WLOs on GBV, and amplify that evidence through appropriate platforms and at high-level events. For example, the University of New South Wales undertook a collaborative action research project, which worked closely with refugee women, academics, service providers and UNHCR in Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh and Myanmar to advance commitments set out in the Global Compact on Refugees, including ending GBV in refugee settings. Follow ethical research approaches and data collection when working with refugee WLOs on GBV. Priorities for research include exploring innovative ways to support the work of refugee WLOs in addressing GBV that emphasises their unique contributions, testing, refining, and making context-specific adaptations to existing approaches to effectively reach refugee women and girls at higher risk of violence, and engaging refugee WLOs as equal partners in the research process.

Example pledge 3a: *In [country], the [Academia] commits to supporting [Number] Refugee WLOs with research and documentation to evidence the impact and value of their work, including in relation to their intersectional and multi-generational work.³³*

Example pledge 3b: *[Donor/UN Agency] commits [amount of funding] to provide an opportunity for Refugee WLOs to network, learn from each other, and build solidarity. This will include supporting [number of] women with the travel costs, documentation and other practical support needed to attend [name of event/opportunity].*

4. Wellbeing, safety and collective care

4.1 Dedicate a percentage of project funding to support collective care, psychosocial and mental health support, wellbeing and safety of staff and volunteers and take active steps to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation. Recognise that the staff and volunteers of refugee WLOs are often supporting responses to their own lived experiences, and carrying out this work often places them at risk of burnout, re-traumatisation, secondary trauma, and other mental health risks, including addressing the specific needs of LGBTQ women, due to the trauma from specific violence and discrimination they might face because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression. Consider appropriate support and mitigations for this in partnerships and events, and make funding for psychosocial support, safety measures and wellness activities a key component of all funding streams.

Example pledge 4a: *The [donor] commits to allocating sufficient resources in [name of funding mechanism] towards providing counselling, wellness and collective care resources.*

Example pledge 4b: *The [name of INGO/NGO/academia] commits to ensuring all GBV programming, including GBV programming with refugee women and girls, is inclusive of appropriate psychosocial support and safety measures such as [give examples of practical measures] to protect the wellbeing of all staff and volunteers.*

Suggested Reference: Chadwick, K. and Fraser, E. (2023) *Refugee Women-led Organisations on the Frontline of Addressing GBV: Key Actions for the Global Refugee Forum: A policy brief*, London: Ending Violence against Women and Children Helpdesk (part of the UK-funded What Works to Prevent VAWG: Impact at Scale programme).

Endnotes

- 1 Global Compact on Refugees (2023) <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/pledges-contributions/multistakeholder-pledges-2023/multistakeholder-pledge-gender-equality-and>
- 2 This policy brief draws on a think piece on the role of refugee women-led organisations developed in the run-up to the Wilton Park conference in July 2023. Vlahakis, M., Saggu, A., and Fraser, E. (2023) *Refugee women-led organisations and the Global Refugee Forum: A think piece*, London: Ending Violence against Women and Children Helpdesk.
- 3 In total, fourteen interviews were conducted: ten interviews with refugee WLOs and WLOs who work with refugee women and girls, based in Kenya, Ukraine, South Sudan, Rwanda, Romania and Jordan, four interviews with global organisations working with refugees, and one interview with a refugee leader working with refugee women networks. Interview participants were provided with a draft of this policy brief and the recommendations, and their feedback has been incorporated into this final version.
- 4 It is important to note that available literature on the specific role of refugee women-led organisations is very limited, with the majority of literature more focused on local, women-led response.
- 5 UNHCR Global Trends <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>
- 6 Arango, D., Thalassa Deverell, J., Klugman, J. and Ortiz, E.J. (2022). *Forced Displacement and Violence Against Women: A Policy Brief (English)*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.
- 7 UNHCR, statement from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/unhcr-urges-support-address-worsening-gender-based-violence-impact-displaced>
- 8 United Nations, Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2017/02/new-study-finds-child-marriage-rising-among-vulnerable-syrian-refugees/#:~:text=Estimates%20vary%2C%20but%20some%20show,are%20driving%20the%20underage%20marriages>
- 9 University of Birmingham, IRiS, SEREDA Project briefing (2022) *Highlighting the continuum of SGBV in forced migration*
- 10 UN Women <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/humanitarian-action/facts-and-figures>
- 11 Including adolescent girls, women and girls with disabilities, unaccompanied and separated girls, women and girls with low levels of digital literacy and who lack access to mobile phones and the internet, and undocumented women and girls - UNICEF ECARO (2021) *Impact of COVID-19 on Gender-based Violence Refugee and Migrant Response*, UNICEF Multi-Country Case study, 2020
- 12 In particular trans and gender diverse individuals whose visible gender expression can be seen as a direct challenge to prevailing social norms in both their country of origin, and in the place in which they seek refuge - OHCHR [LGBTI and gender diverse persons in forced displacement](#)
- 13 Nematy, A., Namer, Y., & Razum, O. (2023) 'LGBTQI+ Refugees' and Asylum Seekers' Mental Health: A Qualitative Systematic Review', *Sex Res Soc Policy*, 20, 636-633.
- 14 Refugee WLOs can be founded during an emergency to provide immediate humanitarian support to refugee women, while others work in protracted crises on a longer-term basis. Some WLOs that are well-established GBV service providers can start to provide support to significant numbers of refugee women and girls when a crisis emerges.
- 15 Tabibi, J., Ahmad, S., Baker, L., & Lalonde, D. (2018). *Intimate Partner Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women. Learning Network Issue 26*. London, Ontario: Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children.
- 16 UN Trust Fund to End VAW (2022) 'Addressing violence against refugee and internally displaced women and girls in Kenya: Interview with Shadrack Kuyoh, Programme Officer at Refugee Consortium of Kenya', August 22 2022 <https://untrustfundevaw.medium.com/addressing-violence-against-refugee-and-internally-displaced-women-and-girls-in-kenya-interview-c95e21f88ea>
- 17 See for example: GENDERNET (2016) *Donor Support to Southern Women's Rights Organisations*, *OECD Findings*; Womankind Worldwide (2014) *Prevention Is Possible. The role of women's rights organisations in ending violence against women and girls in Ethiopia, Ghana and Zambia*, Womankind Worldwide
- 18 This point was highlighted during an interview with a global organisation supporting refugee WLOs
- 19 For example through the *Grand Bargain*, the *World Humanitarian Summit's (WHS) five core commitments to women and girls*, the *Call to Action on Protection from Gender-based Violence in Emergencies* and the call to Action Roadmap 2021-2025; the *Women, Peace and Security agenda* and the *Sustainable Development Goals*.
- 20 UN Security Council (2019) *Report of the Secretary-General on women peace and security*, 9 October 2019 (S/2019/800)
- 21 OECD (2019) *Aid in Support of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Donor Charts*, OECD-DAC Secretariat
- 22 Fletcher-Wood, and Mutandwa, R. (2019) *Funding a localised women-led approach to protection from gender-based violence*, London: ActionAid.
- 23 Ibid
- 24 Trocaire, *Active in Development Aid and Women for Change (2023) Women-led Organisations (WLOs) - Leadership in GBV Coordination Resource Package*.
- 25 Secondary trauma (also called vicarious trauma) refers to the impacts that consistent exposure to hearing about and witnessing others' trauma, can have on those who are in supporting roles
- 26 What Works to Prevent VAWG (2018) *Violence, uncertainty, and resilience among refugee women and community workers: An evaluation of gender-based violence case management services in the Dadaab refugee camps*, Policy Briefing.
- 27 Interview with Halgan Director
- 28 Dastan Salehi and Michele LeVoy (2022), *Unconditional access to services for undocumented victims of crime*, PICUM, https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Unconditional-access-to-services-for-undocumented-victims-of-crime_EN.pdf
- 29 Motalebi, N & Martin-Shields, C (2023) *Refugee-led Organisations and Intersectionality: Feminist Development Policy in the Lives of Refugees*, IDOS Policy Briefing
- 30 Robinette, K. (2023) *Evidence Digest: Why Partnering with Local Women's Organizations for GBVIE Programming is Crucial*, London: GBV AoR Helpdesk.
- 31 UN Trust Fund to End VAW (2023) 'Mobilizing communities to prevent violence against refugee women and children in Uganda: Interview with Alal Single Dora, Director of THRIVE', <https://untrustfundevaw.medium.com/mobilizing-communities-to-prevent-violence-against-refugee-women-and-girls-in-uganda-interview-a7c927b22b51>
- 32 This pledge is taken from the UNHCR [pledging guidance for developing innovative partnerships with \(refugee\) women-led organisations](#)
- 33 Ibid
- 34 UNHCR Global Trends <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>
- 35 Arango, D., Thalassa Deverell, J., Klugman, J. and Ortiz, E.J. (2022). *Forced Displacement and Violence Against Women: A Policy Brief (English)*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.
- 36 UNHCR, statement from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/unhcr-urges-support-address-worsening-gender-based-violence-impact-displaced>
- 37 United Nations, Office of the secretary-general's envoy on youth <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2017/02/new-study-finds-child-marriage-rising-among-vulnerable-syrian-refugees/#:~:text=Estimates%20vary%2C%20but%20some%20show,are%20driving%20the%20underage%20marriages>



To find out more, please visit our website:
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