

HPG WORKING PAPER

Gender norms and protection: navigating agency, risk and backlash

Anki Sjöberg, Ján Michalko¹ and Gemma Davies

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Cover photo: Gender champions and women's protection teams in Mundiri, South Sudan, carrying out an awareness campaign to end gender-based violence against women and girls, March 2026.

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About this publication

This paper was carried out in partnership with Nonviolent Peaceforce as part of its 'Contributing to Peaceful and Safe Societies' (2024–2031) project to generate evidence and learning to enhance the safety and security of civilians through locally led, nonviolent and relational approaches to prevent and respond to risks of violence.

This report is part of the Humanitarian Policy Group's (HPG) multi-year Integrated Programme on 'Gendered norms and protection risks', which builds a more nuanced understanding of the gendered risks people face to inform, and be informed by, broader research on the policy and practice of humanitarian, protection, gender and other relevant organisations.

About the authors

ORCID numbers are given where available. Please click on the ID icon next to an author's name in order to access their ORCID listing.

Anki Sjöberg is a Co-Director at Fight for Humanity and Research Associate with HPG at ODI Global.

Gemma Davies is a Senior Research Fellow with HPG at ODI Global.

Ján Michalko^{ID} is a Research Fellow with Gender Equality and Social Inclusion at ODI Global.

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Acronyms

GBV	gender-based violence
GBV AOR	GBV Area of Responsibility
GPC	Global Protection Cluster
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
NP	Nonviolent Peaceforce
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
PAR	Participatory Action Research
WLO	women-led organisation
WPT	women protection/peace team
YPT	youth protection/peace team

Executive summary

Conflict exacerbates and creates gendered inequalities and risks rooted in gender norms. At the same time, people exercise their agency to strengthen their protection by actively drawing on, adapting or challenging gender norms as part of their self-protection strategies. These strategies are complex and highly context-specific, but share a common feature: they rely on an implicit understanding that gender shapes risk, power and legitimacy.

Effective protection support – actions that intentionally seek to reduce, interrupt or mitigate risks of violence – recognises and strengthens community self-protection efforts, while critically engaging with the gender norms that underpin them. External actors seeking to reduce civilian harm must understand such nuanced dynamics if they are to strengthen people's safety. In the absence of this, they may do harm. A gender-sensitive approach to protection has long been promoted but has been hard to mainstream and systematise, and is now undermined by global anti-gender politics, the erosion of international norms and multilateralism, as well as seismic shifts in the aid sector.

This report identifies six critical takeaways for humanitarian, protection and gender actors to strengthen the intersection of gender norms with protection action in the current hostile geopolitical context. It draws from research in Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan and Ukraine, with a diverse spectrum of gendered protection actors and responses in support of communities. It identifies critical ways forward for humanitarian actors to strengthen gender-sensitive protection.

Takeaway 1: Leveraging or challenging gender norms for safety carries additional protection risks

When people leverage and challenge gender norms to strengthen their safety they face new or additional risks, including backlash, stigma and targeted violence such as harassment. It can also reinforce inequalities. Communities and organisations actively mitigate these risks through relational and adaptive strategies.

Supporting community-led actions requires sustained sensitivity to the risks generated by shifts in gender roles, including risks of reinforcing unequal burdens or exposing individuals to additional backlash.

Takeaway 2: Gender must be understood as more than women and girls – or else risks to men, boys and gender-diverse people may be rendered invisible

Gender is a system of power that shapes vulnerability and exposure to violence. Gendered protection risks affect all people in distinct but interconnected ways, though there has been an increasing focus

in the humanitarian sector on women and girls. This risks a backslide against long-standing efforts to systematically undertake nuanced and intersectional risk analysis. Instead, this push can reinforce simplistic and static notions of vulnerability and lead to concrete gaps in humanitarian responses.

Too often, gendered risks to men and boys are not recognised by humanitarian actors. In highly securitised environments there can be tacit acceptance among some that civilian men and boys potentially pose a security threat, with little to no protective action taken. Gender-diverse people are even more significantly neglected. Across most contexts, risks to LGBTQI+ people remain rarely addressed explicitly in analysis or programming.

However, there has been caution against ‘overcorrection’. Expanding attention to men, boys and masculinities is necessary, but should not come at the expense of the space and resources dedicated to women and girls. This highlights the need for balanced approaches, based on the most acute risks people face that humanitarian organisations can respond to in any given context.

Takeaway 3: Integrating a gender lens to risk analysis supports people’s efforts to stay safe

Organisational approaches do not always systematically reflect gendered protection risks and responses, particularly when gender is treated as an add-on rather than embedded in analysis. The absence of structured tools, guidance, systemic skills development and awareness can lead to dependency on individual staff capacity and experience. Even though context-specific, community-driven and relational analyses are often better at capturing specific risks, such approaches may also overlook risks affecting less visible marginalised groups. However, the use of standardised, top-down tools and procedures without appropriate staff expertise – as is common in the humanitarian sector – can turn intersectional gendered protection analysis into a tick-box exercise. Hybrid approaches are required, with methods that are flexible, adaptable and specific to context.

Integrating a gender lens is shaped by institutional and political dynamics, including limited staff or leadership buy-in; perceptions of gender as externally imposed or politically sensitive; tensions between institutional localisation and normative commitments (e.g. feminist approaches); and budget constraints and reductions in dedicated gender expertise, which are exacerbated by anti-gender mobilisations.

Takeaway 4: While awareness of intersectional risks has increased, translating this into practice remains challenging

While there is recognition that risks are shaped by the intersection of multiple characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, disability, etc., in practice its application remains patchy (Barbelet et al., 2022). Dimensions are often addressed separately or in the binary, leading to gaps in how risks are identified and addressed.

Intersectionality is best understood as a lens that guides how diverse characteristics interact to shape risk, power and access. It is less about adding layers of evidence and more about changing how analysis is conducted and interpreted.

Numerous challenges limit the consistent integration of intersectional analysis, including its complexity and resource constraints, fragmented analytical approaches, or reliance on community perceptions which may overlook or exclude marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ individuals or people with disabilities.

While there is a growing number of practice-oriented toolkits and guides that can be helpful for intersectional analysis, such analysis can be implemented through adaptations to existing practices, including: asking how risks and power differ within groups; observing how roles, risks and access shift depending on context; and engaging a diverse range of actors.

Rather than all organisations aiming to develop expertise across all dimensions of power and risks, organisations can partner with specialised organisations. Humanitarian actors can also supplement local knowledge and community expertise where needed. Among ongoing funding constraints, such prioritisation and collaboration are even more essential.

Takeaway 5: Power inequalities connect protection and gender action – both are inherently political

Both protection and gender approaches converge around a shared entry point: understanding and engaging with power relations. Despite this, humanitarian action often struggles to explicitly engage with power, often due to interpretations of – and perceived tensions with – humanitarian principles. Engaging with power dynamics is inherently political. It tests the boundaries of neutrality in ways that are uncomfortable to many humanitarian actors (Davies et al., 2025a). Impartiality is at times used to resist tailoring responses to specific groups, even where risks are clearly differentiated (Daigle et al., 2025). A relational understanding of protection enables more politically informed action to address unequal power relations and persistent harms (Gray, 2023). There must be recognition of the necessity to engage with power dynamics and their political underpinnings if the sector is to remain relevant. Understanding and engaging with power is central to effective gender-sensitive protection.

Structural fragmentation and siloed approaches to analysing and responding to protection risks can undermine efforts to address the underlying power inequalities that drive violence. With the consolidation of the Global Protection Cluster and its Areas of Responsibility, there are opportunities for a more nuanced and holistic approach to understanding and responding to intersecting gendered risks, including the power dynamics that drive them.

Institutional approaches to power vary depending on mandates, context and positioning. Instead of a binary choice, engaging with power can be differently expressed, for instance: indirectly (through community-based approaches and relationship-building), or more explicitly (through dialogue and negotiation with power holders).

Takeaway 6: The anti-gender backlash and the funding crisis are constraining the integration of gender in protection action

The ability to achieve gender-sensitive protection is shaped by national and international backlash against gender equality, such as the expanded ‘global gag rule’ spearheaded by the United States administration. Funding cuts are integral in these politics which weaponise gender and contest its importance. The pace of cuts, along with broader reforms of the humanitarian and international system, puts at significant risk any advances and learning in the sector. Moreover, some perceive that funding cuts have been used as an excuse to deprioritise gender-sensitive work, which has also faced resistance within humanitarian organisations.

Some actors are narrowing gender frameworks and replacing them with a focus on ‘women and girls’, or avoiding terms such as ‘gender’, alongside other forms of reframing and self-censorship. Most concerning is that some do so even when this is not directly requested. While adapting language may enable access and continuity, it may also weaken the depth and effectiveness of gender-sensitive protection.

Sustaining gender-sensitive protection in this environment requires deliberate and adaptive strategies, while maintaining commitments to best practices and their implications.

Conclusion and ways forward

While gendered violence has long been a strategy of violent actors, gender is increasingly being employed as a conflict and political tactic. Gender-sensitive approaches to protection action are becoming more difficult precisely when they are most needed. The anti-gender politics and the wider funding crisis are narrowing acceptable language and weakening dedicated expertise and programming. The challenge is not only to preserve a gender lens but to ‘hold the line’ on why it matters: without recognising the gendered and intersectional nature of protection risks, humanitarian, protection and gender responses will be less relevant, less effective and more likely to miss those most at risk. Moving forward requires intentional, adaptive and politically aware approaches that integrate gendered risk analysis into humanitarian protective practice, support community-led strategies, mitigate backlash and plan for sustainability from the outset.

Ways forward

Recommendation 1: Systematically integrate gendered and intersectional risk analysis into protection action

Intersectional gendered risks should be analysed as a core part of protection action. Flexible approaches are required to ensure that analysis and responses are context-specific, people-centred and systematised, while safeguarding against standardised, top-down approaches. Maintaining dedicated gender experts and drawing on local gender expertise is critical to achieving systematic integration.

Recommendation 2: Assess gendered risks in relation to specific risks, contexts and moments, rather than relying on fixed assumptions about vulnerability

Humanitarian actors should avoid harmful simplifications, including assumptions that women and girls are always the most vulnerable, that men and boys are primarily threats rather than also being at risk, or that LGBTQI+ and gender-diverse people don't exist when they are rendered invisible. Understanding risks as the interaction between threats, vulnerabilities and capacities helps capture how gendered risks shift over time and enables prioritisation of acute risks. A cross-temporal approach is required, with a nuanced understanding of conflict: what is not a specific risk today may become a risk in the future.

Recommendation 3: Be clear within the organisation about your approach to gender norms and adapt it to the specific context

Organisations may position themselves differently along a spectrum from gender-aware to gender-transformative approaches. Whatever the approach, it should be grounded in a context-specific understanding of gender and accompanied by an awareness of the risks that may arise both when people challenge restrictive gender norms and when they strategically leverage them. Humanitarian actors should be clear on their parameters to engaging with gendered protection risks. Collaborations can be considered, for example, with actors that have a different risk and/or gender 'appetite'.

Recommendation 4: Design humanitarian and protection interventions with a gender lens from the outset, including for sustainability and responsible exit

Humanitarian and protection interventions should be designed with attention to the consequences of organisational withdrawal. This means investing in local capacities, relationships and community-based structures rather than parallel systems, while also planning for the gender-specific risks that can emerge when support is not planned or ends abruptly.

Recommendation 5: Defend and advocate for gender-sensitive approaches at global level to enable meaningful protection action on the ground

Donors and operational actors should actively defend gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches, fund the expertise needed to sustain them – including by supporting and partnering with local and national women-led and minority/rights-based organisations – and resist the narrowing of gender into simplified categories that weaken the relevance and effectiveness of protection action.

1 Introduction

Humanitarian actors often consider women and children to be the most vulnerable in crisis. Too often they are perceived to be passive victims of conflict, because of prevalent social expectations or norms. This undermines agency – particularly of women and girls – while stereotyping them as uniformly vulnerable, peace-seeking and maternal (Daigle et al., 2025). At the same time, risks and harms facing men, boys and gender-diverse people are overshadowed and too often unaddressed (Carpenter, 2003; Myrttinen et al., 2025; Schulz and Lewis, 2025). This is despite the fact that risks to men and boys are equally shaped by gendered societal norms and expectations on the part of conflict actors and their communities, as well as humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors.

Such simplistic understanding of the gendered nature of risks to people's safety creates gaps in recognising and addressing risks and needs. It also overlooks the actual and potential leadership and participation of people to reduce the risks that they and their communities face, as conflict-affected civilians can and do act for their own protection, rather than solely as recipients of external actors' protection (Davies et al., 2024; Daigle et al., 2025).

The limited understanding of many humanitarian actors about the gendered impacts of conflict reflects persistent, system-wide assumptions about risks, reinforced by resistance to engaging with protection and gender as political issues. This has been exacerbated by a well-funded global anti-gender movement rolling back the rights of women and girls, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+), and other LGBTQI+ people (Khan et al., 2023; Datta, 2025; GIWPS and PRIO, 2025). This is reflected in funding cuts and the dismantling of the multilateral architecture built to ensure protection, rights and equality for all, regardless of someone's gender identity (Breckenmacher, 2025).

The impacts of conflict on people's lives and wellbeing are devastating and increasing. With the unprecedented number of conflicts around the world, currently over 130 (ICRC, 2026), and a normalisation of egregious abuses against civilians (including humanitarian responders) – along with seismic shifts in the sector – humanitarian, protection and gender action are at risk. Organisations have faced existential cuts, leading to staff reductions, ceasing of activities and closing of operations. This has particularly affected women-led and feminist civil society organisations (UN Women, 2025a). For example, at the time of writing, one in three women-led organisations (WLOs) in Ukraine are at risk of shutting down in the next six months under the current funding crisis (GiHA WG, 2026; UN Women, 2026). In a geopolitical context of unprecedented risks, needs and political pressures, it is paramount to better understand how national and international humanitarian, protection and gender actors can strengthen a more targeted and nuanced approach to reducing protection risks.

Working in close collaboration with Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) and other actors in Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan and Ukraine, as well as globally, this research explores protection risks and gender norms in different types of conflict and context in the current moment of global crisis. It does so by looking at how civilians manage and experience gendered risks, including when they leverage their gender and

step into leadership roles to reduce risks for their communities, and any additional risks they face as a result. It considers how humanitarian and other actors' stereotypical and/or superficial understanding of risks and roles in conflict plays out in notions of vulnerability, agency and the threats people face. This paper seeks to contribute by understanding the nuanced and changing positionalities of people to the risks they face. In doing so, it draws out implications for humanitarian and other relevant actors that seek to support civilian-centred protection initiatives (see section 2.2). And it does so at a time when gender-sensitive analyses are deprioritised, delegitimised and defunded.

1.1 Objectives and scope

The research aims to inform the humanitarian sector's more nuanced understanding of gendered protection risks in the context of global anti-gender politics and a crisis of multilateralism. It also seeks to inform intersectional, gender-sensitive analysis (at a minimum; see Figure 1) and relevant responses, such as policy and programmes.

The questions guiding the research are:

- How do gendered norms shape people's experience of current conflicts and the risks that they face in the specific country contexts? How do these experiences and risks change when they mobilise for their own protection?
- How do humanitarian and protection actors analyse and understand these norms and risks, and how does this shape the responses to gendered risks people face in conflict?
- What are the implications of the current dynamics in the ongoing crisis of multilateralism, funding cuts and rights and gender backlash?

1.2 Methodology and theoretical underpinning

This study is based on research in Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan and Ukraine. The four countries represent a variety of conflict and post-conflict situations, with a diverse spectrum of gendered protection risks and responses, including NP interventions, in support of communities.

The contexts are also diverse in their gendered societal norms – understood as societal expectations and informal rules of what it means to be a man, a woman, or gender-diverse person, which shape how power and resources are distributed¹ – including many deeply entrenched patriarchal expectations around livelihoods, protection and leadership in the public sphere, to name a few examples. While many

¹ Gender norms are often treated by practitioners and policymakers as a binary (masculine/feminine) attached to two biological sexes. However, human experience, sexuality and bodies are more diverse. Binary understanding of gender and sex makes the lived realities of intersex, gender-diverse and other LGBTQI+ people invisible. Enforcing the binary then serves to maintain the existing systems of power, which operate on heterosexuality and gender identity/sex alignment as a norm (ALIGN, 2025). This report tries as much as possible to challenge this limited and harmful approach, but as global systems, including humanitarian and protection structures, often implicitly operate on gender binaries, this approach is at times mirrored.

norms are hard to shift, and often take generations to fully transform, conflicts can provide an impetus to open, deepen or reverse ongoing processes of norm change and contestation (Harper et al., 2020). At the same time, changes during violence and conflict may be temporary rather than long term.

By design, South Sudan and Iraq were more researched than Myanmar and Ukraine, due to the in-country situations, operational priorities and accessibility to relevant stakeholders. Table 1 indicates the regions from which most of the research data comes, and which shape participants' insights and experiences, given that conflict and post-conflict situations within each country vary across regions. Interviewees drew from their experiences and expertise, which at times referred to other geographies and timeframes. The country-specific research is overlaid with global interviews and analysis. The goal of this cross-selection of cases was to broadly understand the similarities and differences of gendered norms and protection risks across distinctly different contexts in order to draw out learning applicable for humanitarian, protection and gender action writ large.

Table 1 Geographical coverage of research and situation overview

Country	Regions	Brief situation overview
Iraq	Baaj, Sinjar, Tel Afar and South Mosul	Iraq has experienced multiple overlapping conflicts over the past two decades, most recently the conflict against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (2012–2017), which was marked by highly gendered patterns of violence and has left deep societal divisions along ethnic and religious lines.
Myanmar	National, with some emphasis on Karen, Kachin Chin and Sagaing states	Since the 2021 military coup, Myanmar's conflict has expanded beyond traditional conflict areas, with new armed actors emerging alongside long-standing ethnic armed organisations. This has contributed to increasingly fragmented territorial control, large-scale displacement, and growing humanitarian and protection needs.
South Sudan	Central Equatoria, Jonglei and Upper Nile	South Sudan has numerous, overlapping situations of violence and conflict. Conflict dynamics shift rapidly as armed groups splinter and allegiances change, while communal violence with various linkages to the armed actors continues to have a deadly impact on civilians. Civilians, including women and children, are increasingly targeted, despite past protections under customary law (Davies et al., 2024; see also Diing et al., 2023).
Ukraine	Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Odesa, Mykolaiv Oblasts	Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which is seen as the continuation of Russian illegal annexation and occupation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas in 2014. Gender equality has been central to political narratives of the war (Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan, 2023; Akaliyski and Reeskens, 2024) and policy developments, including those tied to prospective European Union membership, shape the normative environment in which protection action takes place (Bluth, 2026; DRC, 2024; Lejava, 2026). As the war is ongoing at the time of writing, frontlines and occupied territories change, affecting the movement of people and types of risks civilians experience.

This study's primary data is based on 50 remote and in-person key informant and collective interviews with a total of 65 people. Interviewees were predominantly NP staff, partners and volunteers,² as well as humanitarian, protection, gender and peacebuilding experts. Research methods were designed in partnership with relevant individuals and institutions, including for analysis, implications and recommendations. Throughout this paper, interviewees are referenced as much as possible by their role and country or their global/cross-regional expertise. However, in some instances this geographical affiliation is withheld due to the sensitive nature of the content discussed and to ensure participants are not put at risk due to the research.

The research built on an in-depth scoping study and literature review that outlined how humanitarian action is shaped by intersectional gender norms, contextualising the review within the current moment of crisis (Daigle et al., 2025). This study expands this work with relevant geographic and thematic open-source and grey literature, including internal NP documentation.

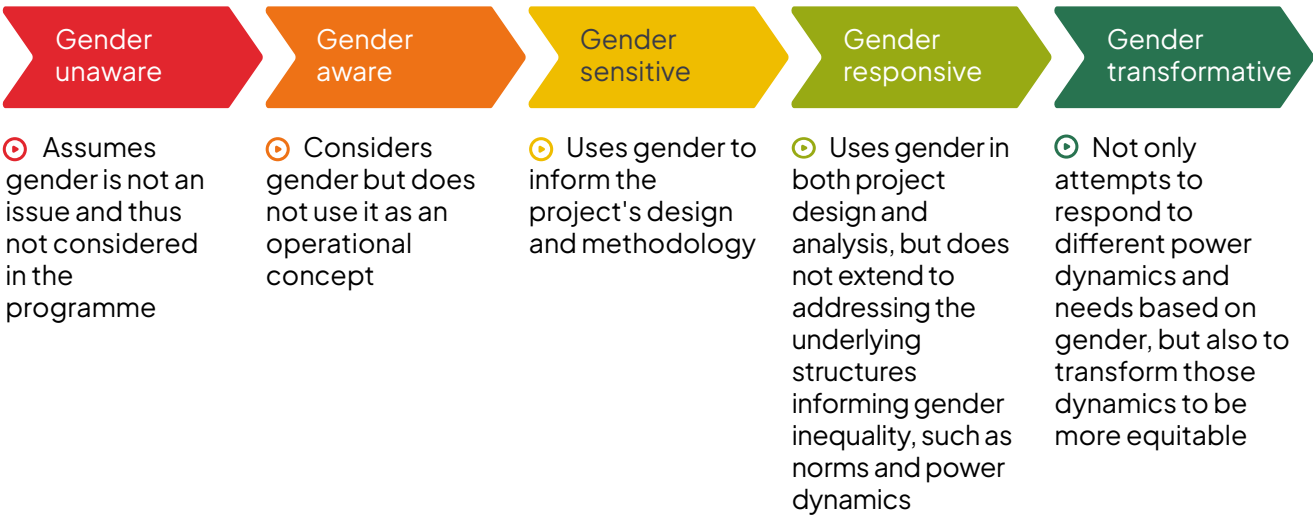
This paper understands protection as actions that intentionally seek to reduce, interrupt or mitigate risks of violence as a result of co-created relationships between different actors, rather than as an act or a service delivered (see Gray, 2023: V). It is based on the understanding that the risks people face are fluid according to time and changes in conflict dynamics. It also recognises that people's agency can be harnessed by different collective actors and individuals, both to protect themselves and incite violence.

The research is also based on the assumption that humanitarian action can take varying approaches to gender norms. Norms are key factors in the experiences and roles that people play in violence and conflict, the risks they face, as well as the perceptions and assumptions of humanitarians – including gender and protection actors – about the risks people face and the solutions to reduce them. These are further shaped by broader systems of power and identity in any given society, including age, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and/or gender expression. The intersections of these factors result in time- and context-specific risks to people and inform the strategies people take to reduce them.

Humanitarian action can range from interventions that exacerbate gender inequalities to transformative ones that seek to change unequal power relationships that drive conflict and risks, as illustrated in Figure 1. While it is not the purpose of this research to prescribe where individual humanitarian actors should position themselves (as this will be specific to any given organisation, its mandates, objectives and context-specific limitations), it argues for organisations to move towards a gender-sensitive approach at a minimum and highlights the benefits of gender responsive approaches.

2 Volunteers are civilians that are trained by and work alongside NP in its projects and beyond.

Figure 1 Gender-transformative scale



Source: Adapted from Daigle (2024)

1.3 Research limitations

The research took place at an extremely challenging time, with seismic shifts in the humanitarian sector. This impacted the possibility of engaging with both global and country-based stakeholders, given that people had less availability and rapidly changing priorities. For in-country interviews, factors such as the complexity of the issue (gender norms) and language/interpretation issues when accessing community-based actors, as well as sensitivities surrounding LGBTQI+ issues in communities, created additional challenges.

In order to mitigate the impact of these restrictions, the team prepared targeted interview guides adapted to each context and type of participant, and conducted fewer interviews than planned and worked in close coordination with the country-based teams, focusing more on in-depth and quality information. The team mobilised existing networks and knowledge as much as possible.

Due to the limited geographical scope and sample for qualitative analysis, the study is not representative of the full diversity of gendered experiences of conflict and protection in the select countries. This paper should be taken as an indication of trends and patterns that can help inform strategies, policies and practices of community-focused humanitarian, protection and gender actors.

2 Transgressions and leverage: civilians engaging with gender norms for self-protection

In these situations, there has to be a survival strategy from the communities – people are protecting themselves.

Government representative, South Sudan

Conflict exacerbates and creates gendered inequalities and risks. In extreme circumstances, gendered risks and roles are in flux. At the same time, in situations of conflict and violence, people exercise their agency to strengthen their protection, as the introductory quote suggests. People also actively draw on, adapt to and, at times, challenge gender norms as part of their self-protection strategies. As examples in this chapter demonstrate, people do not only experience gendered risks but also mobilise gendered roles and expectations to reduce exposure to violence, access services, and influence armed actors. These strategies are complex, highly context-specific but share a common feature: they rely on an implicit understanding that gender shapes risk, authority and legitimacy across all societies.

2.1 Norms and agency in contexts of violence and conflict

2.1.1 Men and boys' risks and protection efforts

In many conflict settings, men and boys face heightened exposure to violence precisely because of their gender. Depending on other identity characteristics (ethnicity, religion, origin/area of residence, etc.), they face frequent assumptions that they are affiliated with armed actors or are perceived as potential perpetrators, which increases their risk of being killed, tortured, arbitrarily detained, and forcibly recruited. For example, in Myanmar, men and boys are particularly exposed to forced conscription, arrest and disappearance.

Similarly, in Ukraine, state policies on conscription and mobilisation are strongly gendered, reflecting and reinforcing expectations that men serve as protectors of the nation (Trisko Darden, 2023; Carpenter, 2024; Rose, 2026). Such gendered policies expose men to violence and other risks, for instance at checkpoints or in the streets. As a result, men may restrict their movement, avoid contact with authorities, or face barriers in accessing services, assistance and shelter. In Sudan, too, human rights and protection actors have emphasised the significant increase in direct targeting of men and boys based on ethnicity, for example during the Rapid Support Forces' siege and takeover of El-Fasher and its surroundings. The 'heightened risk of execution, torture, arbitrary detention and/or enforced disappearance' of men and boys has been documented (HRC, 2026).

In Iraq, men and boys also face distinct gendered risks. Expectations of male provision intersect with limited livelihoods, contributing to incentives for recruitment into armed groups or militias. At the same time, exposure to violence and displacement has generated significant mental health needs, yet access to any available psychosocial support remains further constrained by stigma, particularly for men and boys. These dynamics reflect broader patterns in which conflict, economic marginalisation and gender norms reinforce cycles of violence and exclusion (UNDP, 2020).

In Myanmar, prolonged conflict has reinforced patriarchal norms and exacerbated gendered protection risks. Militarised governance and coercion shape people's everyday life in many parts of the country and gender norms play a central role in their exposure to violence. Men and boys are disproportionately targeted for arrest, detention, torture and forced recruitment, risks that have intensified following the activation of the Military Service Law in 2024 (OHCHR, 2024a; b). These dynamics shape mobility and livelihood strategies, with many men forced into hiding, fleeing across borders, or joining armed resistance groups, thereby creating protection and economic vacuums within households and communities. Men – and women, to a lesser extent, given the gendered notions on armed action – are also forcefully conscripted into the ethnic armed organisations, both in military and non-military roles.

Across the case study countries, some men and boys also actively engage in protection efforts, sometimes by reinterpreting dominant forms of masculinities, for example by advocating for women's rights, or by seeking to protect by non-violent means, particularly when intentionally supported by protection actors. In South Sudan and Iraq, male community members and youth have supported the protection of women and girls, including by accompanying them to high-risk locations such as water points or firewood collection sites, and by intervening in cases of violence. Elders, religious leaders and 'gender champions' in South Sudan and different areas of Iraq have also mobilised their authority to challenge harmful practices and promote women's participation, for example by helping to create linkages between women and different duty bearers. However, sometimes new masculinities may still reinforce gender inequalities and hierarchies, as men continue to hold onto power and control (see Daigle et al., 2025).³

Masculinities are closely tied to violence and social expectations of provision and protection (Davies and Mayhew, 2024). In South Sudan, participation in violence is frequently framed as a pathway to social status and mobility, marriage, and economic survival. However, it also exposes men to risks of being killed, forcefully recruited and engaged in criminal or armed networks. At the same time, inability to fulfil provider roles – particularly in contexts of displacement – has significant mental health impacts on men, contributing to domestic violence and other forms of harm, including self-harm. Similarly,

3 While the adaptation of roles in response to security and protection concerns may be useful, concerns over the security of some groups, such as women and girls, may also be used by elites and groups in positions of power as a pretence to maintain power hierarchies. This was, for example, the case in a study in Yemen (Sjöberg et al., 2024), where limitations to women's political participation were presented as a protection strategy by men leaders of armed and political movements, but ultimately undermined women's protection.

the experiences of conflict and violence can contribute to men's support and 'yearning' for traditional inequitable gender norms, which they associate with times of peace and security (MacKenzie and Foster, 2017).

In some cases, participants said that men have used their access to male-dominated spaces to address sensitive issues, such as online extortion against women in Iraq, where male community members engage directly with perpetrators in 'man-to-man conversations' to stop abuse.

2.1.2 Leveraging gender norms to negotiate protection and peace

In many communities in South Sudan, as in many other conflict contexts, some women draw on socially recognised roles as 'mothers of the community' to intervene in violence and de-escalate tensions, including among armed youth.⁴ By addressing young men involved in violence as their 'sons', women have been able to stop violence and reduce escalation in camps and surrounding areas. As explained by one interviewee in South Sudan:

The women are considered to be the mothers of everyone – they use this to intervene; this gives them respect and attention.

In Iraq, some women have used cultural norms that discourage men from engaging in violence in the presence of women to mediate disputes and prevent escalation. As one Iraqi participant highlighted:

If a woman is in between two men, they won't try to fight and hit each other or shoot each other. There is a certain aspect of the culture that tells them not to.

Women have also been involved in negotiations for the release of prisoners. By leveraging the perception of being non-threatening *because* they are women, women that NP has worked with have acted as intermediaries in negotiations and made requests framed as religious or cultural gestures. Through such engagement with duty bearers, women leaders have helped facilitate the release of dozens of detainees. Such relational approaches, tied to norms of women as caregivers and maternal figures, allow women to navigate militarised power structures without direct confrontation (see also Gray, 2023 and NP, 2021a).

In South Sudan and Iraq, women's mobilisation in community protection structures has enabled them to assume leadership roles and engage directly in mediation, negotiation and advocacy. Women's groups have contributed to reducing communal violence and engaging with armed actors, while also

4 Other countries where similar dynamics have been seen include Colombia, Liberia and Sri Lanka. For example, concerning the situation in Medellín, Colombia, one interviewee working at a global level expressed the following: 'There are mothers and those mothers have a very important value. So, let's say that there is also a double game there, because even for the boys who are part of the delinquent combos [gangs] there is a lot of respect for the *cucha*, that is, the mother [...] I would say that [...] gender matters, at least in relation to the feminine, there is a double game, and one has to know how to read it.'

reshaping perceptions of women's roles in public. NP first developed this practice in South Sudan, where one government official noted: 'These days we have a very strong women's team. They lobby for the protection of women and girls.'

At the same time, it is important not to assume that all women are peaceful or necessarily supportive of advancing the rights of (other) women and girls. For example, some women in South Sudan counter gender norms by choosing to directly participate in armed groups and gangs (NP, 2024a). Women are also known to have advocated for the forced marriage of girls and other forms of violence.⁵ Interviewees highlighted the negative reinforcement of gender norms when women encourage or celebrate young men's participation in attacks – or ridicule men and boys who refuse, for example by mockingly asking them: 'Why don't you put on a skirt?' (see also Davies and Mayhew, 2024). As argued by one woman interviewee:

You see, so they [the women] are actually perpetrators of structural violence because when their sons go and fight and they become victorious, the women feel happy.

These patterns reflect the fluidity of vulnerability and agency, where individuals may simultaneously navigate positions as victims, perpetrators and agents of protection (Daigle et al., 2025).

For LGBTQI+ and gender-diverse individuals, opportunities to leverage gender norms are often more limited due to stigma and exclusion. However, some evidence suggests that participation in resistance movements in Myanmar or military service in Ukraine can create limited spaces of acceptance or protection, even if broader structural discrimination persists (Shevtsova, 2024; Strelnyk and Phillips, 2025; Matveieva, 2025).

2.1.3 Women's roles in political leadership and in public protection efforts

Interviewees in Iraq stressed that women have gone beyond 'private' positions expected from them in the aftermath of the ISIS conflict. The post-conflict period, displacement and economic necessity were cited as having led some women to assume new roles in public, as well as economic and social life, particularly in urban settings. In some sub-national contexts, such as Sinjar, interviewees saw a direct link between women's roles during the active conflict (including as fighters) and their improved positioning after. Yet, this has reportedly not translated into any proportional or sustained increase in formal political power or decision-making roles (Bagheri, 2022). While structural discrimination remains pervasive, women have increasingly challenged gender norms, for example, by advocating for dedicated and safe visiting times reserved for women in the public park and through engaging with the local authorities and community police. In this sense, some women have been entering into

5 An extensive body of feminist literature has explored women upholding patriarchal gender norms and leveraging their relative positions of power over other women. For example, Lokot (2018; 2023) has explored the family dynamics among Syrian refugees, revealing various forms of violence that are often overlooked by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focusing on husband–wife dynamics.

activities and spaces that would usually be reserved for men. However, women who take on leadership roles to strengthen protection can face stigma, harassment and hate speech, including from influential community figures.

Additionally, interviewees highlighted continued risks of domestic violence and child marriage, alongside a shrinking civic space for women and minority groups, including targeted hate speech, harassment of women human rights defenders and journalists, and increasing forms of online abuse. Online extortion has emerged as a significant protection concern, particularly in areas such as South Mosul, where women and girls are coerced into providing money or entering into relationships under threat of reputational harm (NP, 2024b).

In South Sudan, due to lower social status, women and girls face limited representation in the political sphere despite formal political quotas. They also remain subject to discriminatory and harmful customary practices, including child marriage and the use of girls as compensation payment in dispute resolution. These findings reflect broader evidence that legal reforms often coexist with, and are undermined by, entrenched social norms (UN Women and UNDP, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Economic stress further intensifies these risks: irregular payment of public salaries and widespread poverty constrain household choices, often prioritising boys' education and increasing girls' exposure to early marriage and exploitation, particularly in rural areas.

In Ukraine, women have taken on prominent roles in organising evacuations, running shelters and coordinating humanitarian assistance, partly as a result of male conscription (Matveieva, 2025). Yet they continue to be underrepresented in peace negotiations (Lejava, 2026) and their leadership in politics continues to be accepted more in post-war contexts rather than during war (Skoog et al., 2025).

In Myanmar, increased risks for men linked to conscription, detention and surveillance have led women to assume roles as intermediaries, information brokers and negotiators. Women maintain community connections, collect information and influence decision-making through personal and family networks rather than formal authority. Nevertheless, women's participation in formal decision-making structures is increasing in opposition governance structures, as well in the armed opposition movements, but challenges remain to their participation and protection (Zin Mar Phyo, 2022). Communities seek to protect themselves by understanding troop movements, arrests and security shifts using highly localised indicators, including subtle environmental signs. Women face relatively lower scrutiny, allowing them to share information, maintain networks and give early warning of threats in order to protect communities, including by facilitating evacuations.

On the flip side, women's leadership in Myanmar can result in backlash, especially in conservative communities where women's public engagement is viewed as inappropriate. While their roles as intermediaries and negotiators are enabled by perceptions of being 'non-threatening', they also face harassment, social sanction and heightened risks at checkpoints and in detention, including sexualised violence.

Resistance to women's participation in public life has been decreasing over time in some contexts, as norms of political leadership change (WEF, 2025). Yet this change has been slow and uneven, and shaped by sexual orientation and gender identity or expression, together with other intersecting factors, making openly LGBTQI+ women the frequent subject of harassment, attacks and other forms of violence. Violence against politically active women is a key instrument to maintaining power hierarchies and keeping women and LGBTQI+ people out of the public domain (Harper et al., 2022; Michalko, 2023). Women and LGBTQI+ people then avoid public action, or LGBTQI+ people may try to 'pass' as gender conforming to stay safe while in public (Erdem et al., 2025).

Training in conflict mediation and accompaniment has enabled women to interact with authorities and security actors, which are often otherwise unavailable to them. In Iraq, for example, women increasingly engage with community police and local authorities to report and follow up on protection cases, particularly domestic violence. This has marked a significant change in women's agency, as noted by one interviewee: 'Before, women would not go to the security actors, but now they can do so, they take the lead.'

Similarly, in areas where women's groups have been operating, for example in the internally displaced people (IDP) camps in South Sudan and in some conservative areas in Iraq, women were reported to have increased participation, influence and agency. Many women describe this shift as deeply empowering. For example, Yazidi women in Iraq have taken up new roles, which have been largely accepted by the community. As recognised by a community member:

The context in Sinjar is different than in other areas – women have more freedom, are strong, are capable. We value and respect them even more after the Sinjar invasion, especially the women survivors. They are even more recognised in the community.

2.1.4 Shifting norms and expectations – limitations and hidden risks

In Ukraine, displacement and men's absence have pushed many women further into public, economic and leadership roles that were previously less accessible (see section 2.1.3), including as community and civil society leaders and humanitarian responders. More women have assumed roles as primary earners and heads of households, and take on roles and jobs that had previously been carried out by men, contributing to temporary shifts in gender roles and norms.

However, shifts in gender norms coexist with persistent unequal structures including burdens of (unpaid) caring and household responsibilities (Prügl et al., 2026). Women are still economically disadvantaged and are also more likely to fall into the lowest income bracket and report lower access to employment (Novosolova and Dağlı-Hustings, 2026). And women continue to face risks of conflict-related sexual violence, reported frequently in Russian-occupied territories and by Russian soldiers (JurFem, 2025; Cincurova, 2026), as well domestic and other forms of violence (UNFPA, 2024; REACH, 2025). This has reportedly increased with the return of veterans from active duty, while underreporting and access constraints obscure the full scale of abuse.

Ukrainian women's increased leadership in humanitarian and community responses has expanded their roles but also intensified burdens (Matveieva, 2025; Prügl et al., 2026). The Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group report (GiHA-WG, 2026) finds that due to official development assistance funding cuts, 88% of surveyed women-led organisations experienced increase in workload and burnout, as well as negative wellbeing (Novosolova and Dağlı-Hustings, 2026). Indeed, respondents have cautioned against 'overselling the strength of women as protectors', as 'they can still also be vulnerable'. This reflects broader patterns identified in the literature, where shifts in gender roles during conflict often redistribute rather than reduce labour and risk (Myrtilinen et al., 2025).

Women increasingly face limited decision-making, discrimination and exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence in conflict-affected and displaced households (UNDP and UN Women, 2022). Economic pressures and displacement have also pushed many women into precarious labour, including in urban and extractive sectors, where risks of exploitation, trafficking and abuse are significant. LGBTQI+ individuals face acute discrimination and violence, including sexualised abuse in detention settings,⁶ while broader patterns of torture and ill-treatment – including conflict-related sexual violence affecting both men and women – continue to be documented (Outright International, 2024; IIMM, 2025; OHCHR, 2025).

In South Sudan, broader conflict dynamics have exacerbated the economic decline evident since the late 2000s. Due to rising bridewealth (dowry) demands, which are primarily paid in cattle, there is an increased pressure on young men to acquire cattle, often through raiding, thereby reinforcing cycles of intercommunal violence (Pendle, 2021; Davies and Mayhew, 2024). As noted by one interviewee, 'if you don't have a sister, some youth may go out and raid cattle to be able to get married', as the bridewealth from a sister would otherwise allow a brother to get married.

2.1.5 Limitations to self-protection: the ability to move and access information

Due to the prevalence of militarised masculinities, men who evade mobilisation in Ukraine often face significant social stigma and legal risks, although the latest public opinion surveys demonstrate a complex and ambivalent view of these men in the country (LB.ua, 2024; Rose, 2024; 2026). As a result of the stigma, many may resort to hiding, irregular movement or avoiding state institutions altogether. This limits their access to healthcare, employment and protection, and increases their exposure to harm, including during air attacks and displacement. For example, some interviewees said that shelters used by civilians for protection from bombings and shelling, or for evacuees and IDPs, as well as assistance programmes, often primarily support women and children, and men may at times be unable to get access to these services, out of concern over some stereotypically harmful behaviours, like alcohol abuse. Legal pathways for men to be exempt from conscription and support humanitarian and civilian work are very limited. Trans women have also reportedly faced forced conscription, highlighting gaps in the protection of gender-diverse individuals (Shevtsova, 2024; Zub, 2026).

6 Trans women in detention have reportedly experienced symbolic and sexualised abuse intended to 'correct' gender expression, according to interviewees.

In Myanmar, movement and access to services are highly gendered. Checkpoints function as key sites of coercion, where men face heightened risks of detention, forced recruitment or disappearance, while women are often able to move with comparatively less scrutiny. As a result, communities pragmatically rely on women to sustain daily life, including travelling, accessing services, gathering information and supporting community-level protection efforts. Yet women, girls and gender-diverse people also face increased risks of sexual harassment and abuse at checkpoints.

Similar dynamics have been observed in the West Bank, where men and boys are at risk of acute and widespread exposure to violence, coercion and deprivation, including where being a man is used by Israel to justify resort to force, including lethal force, based on the presumed inherent potential and propensity for violence among men (Protection Cluster, 2026).

Gender norms also shape women's movement, as women and children may stay in dangerous areas in order to not split the family. Gendered roles overlap with other factors, such as age and disability, to create risks: older women who often assume caregiving responsibilities can be unable to leave to seek shelter or protection as they care for others.

Digital spaces introduce additional threats. Across contexts, women and LGBTQI+ activists are disproportionately targeted by online harassment and technologically facilitated GBV (Posetti et al., 2025; Pruthi and Zillén, 2026; UN Human Rights Council Advisory Committee, 2026). In Ukraine, Russian (gendered) disinformation campaigns pose a particular threat. People's reliance on information communicated through various digital platforms to keep themselves safe, for example by understanding the movement of Russian forces or evacuation routes, makes them particularly vulnerable to disinformation (CIVIC, 2025; Spink, 2025). Women are also subject to other forms of violence, from nonconsensual sharing of intimate images to cyberbullying and scams (UNFPA, 2024; CIR, 2024).

Provision of early, accurate and gender-sensitive information to the diverse groups of people on the move, such as women-headed households with children or those caring for people with disabilities, is essential for civilian protection and the focus of various international and national protection actors, including NP. For example, NP developed information leaflets for people with various identities, experiences and needs as they evacuate through Odessa and plan their relocation to other regions of the country.

2.2 Supporting civilian-led approaches

Findings across the contexts suggest that effective protection support recognises and strengthens community self-protection efforts, while critically engaging with the gender norms that underpin them. External actors seeking to reduce civilian harm must understand such nuanced dynamics if they are to strengthen people's safety. In the absence of this, they will fail and may do harm.

As outlined in Box 1, externally supported community-based protection strategies must be context-specific and based on civilians' own self-protection efforts to be effective and relevant. Community

teams often work together or define who is best placed to intervene (teams of women, mixed teams of youth, men or different teams altogether, as is contextually relevant). For example, in some areas of Iraq the approach has often involved creating separate spaces for women to strengthen their influence and allow their participation, such as mothers' committees in schools, instead of pushing for women to integrate into existing structures. In South Sudan, such efforts have been joint between men and women's groups, while in Ukraine, where protection efforts are mainly women-led due to male conscription, there was no need for separate women protection/peace teams (WPTs). This doesn't mean that one approach is to be considered 'better' than another, just that the way communities approach protection is significantly different depending on the context and specific needs.

Box 1 Civilian-centred protection action

To support civilian self-protection efforts, some organisations such as NP, CIVIC and Saferworld provide support to existing community-based groups that undertake protective actionⁱ. Community-led approaches to protection are based on an assessment of what communities are already doing to respond to the risks they face, and if and how this can be supported, for example by providing practical tools and approaches to analyse, understand and influence relationships and actions that the communities take to keep themselves safe. For NP, this builds on its core focus on unarmed civilian protection, which is the practice of unarmed civilians directly protecting other civilians before, during and after violent conflict (NP, n.d.). Such approaches seek to centre diverse members of communities as agents of their own protection.

In the case of NP, community-led groups often take the form of WPTs and youth protection/peace teams (YPTs),ⁱⁱ which then form part of networks of community protection/peace teams. Protection teams are designed to provide community members, particularly those who are often marginalised, such as women or youth, with the skills to protect civilians, strengthening their role as protection actors, as well as by increasing their confidence and leverage, including by addressing harmful power dynamics. Teams mainly organise independently and may comprise anything from a few to over 100 individuals (Gray, 2023). Through this process, roles can be redefined to exercise leadership and agency.

ⁱ While these three organisations all engage with and support communities to identify their own security solutions, NP has a heavy focus on unarmed civilian protection, which is civilian-centred, while organisations such as CIVIC and Saferworld also have a strong focus on community-based approaches to protection, though with an emphasis on advocacy and engagement with duty bearers. See, for example, Linning (2023) and Saferworld (n.d.).

ⁱⁱ To understand what is meant by youth, see Davies et al. (2024); in some contexts, even those over the age of 18 are considered 'youth'. For examples of youth engagement in South Sudan, see NP (2023).

Key implications for operational actors include:

- **Working with gender norms as entry points**, recognising both their protective and their harmful dimensions.
- **Identifying opportunities to support more diverse leadership** outside of traditional structures (e.g. leadership by older men). Build on community protection efforts that already exist and which are at least gender aware, rather than creating new structures where possible. This includes working with local civil society organisations, including women led- and LGBTQI+ organisations.
- **Engaging men and boys as peace and non-violent actors and champions**, including through alternative models of masculinity or empowering men as involved fathers,⁷ while avoiding the potential harms of reinforcing benevolent protectionism built on gendered hierarchies.

⁷ An example of this from South Sudan includes ‘Gathak’s story: a children’s book about nurturing parent-child relationships in Greater Ulang’ (see <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/gathaks-story-a-childrens-book-about-nurturing-parent-child-relationships-in-greater-ulang/>).

3 Implications of gendered norms for protection strategies

Intersecting gender norms on protection strategies have critical implications for humanitarian, protection and gender actors. This chapter draws from examples across country contexts to highlight how considerations of gender norms in civilian protection are essential to understanding harms in situations of violence and conflict, despite the systemic efforts to diminish them. It draws primarily, but not exclusively, on the experiences of NP practitioners and the civilians engaged in NP programming.

3.1 **Takeaway 1: Leveraging or challenging gender norms for safety carries additional protection risks**

Taking on a leadership role comes with risks for everyone. When visibility increases, you have bigger risks.

Human rights activist, South Sudan

When people leverage and challenge gender norms to strengthen their safety and that of their communities, these strategies can also generate new risks, including backlash, stigma and targeted violence such as harassment. These dynamics highlight that strengthened protection is not only about reducing exposure to harm, but also about navigating trade-offs between agency and risk in highly gendered conflict contexts.

Transgressing some restrictive gender norms can also reinforce inequalities and have other negative consequences. Violence can become a tool to enforce power hierarchies and control (Harper et al., 2020).

Men who challenge dominant gender norms also face risks (see, for example, WILPF, n.d). In South Sudan and Iraq, men supporting women's rights or intervening in cases of domestic violence may face stigma or accusations of undermining community values. As noted by participants in Myanmar, men advocating for women may be seen as 'weak', be labelled 'gay' in a derogatory way, or as abandoning cultural expectations. In some areas, however, including in Yazidi communities in Iraq, interviewees have noted that there are no prejudices against 'men who advocate for women'. However, there is limited systematic attention to the risks faced by men acting as allies, suggesting an area for further operational focus and research.

Across contexts, communities and organisations actively mitigate the risks they face through relational and adaptive strategies. These include:

- **engaging families and community leaders** to build acceptance for women's and youth participation;
- **working with authorities and security actors** to legitimise new roles and reduce backlash;
- **adapting roles based on gendered risk patterns**, determining who can safely move, negotiate or intervene;
- **using collective action and visibility** to enhance protection.

Women's visibility in the public sphere and affiliation with international actors can, however, also play a protective function in some contexts. In South Sudan as well as Iraq, WPT members wear matching t-shirts or vests and move in groups, signalling legitimacy and collective strength when leveraging norms around motherhood and peace (as mentioned in section 2.1) and engaging with armed actors. As a woman leader from South Sudan said:

If there is violence – we go there to deter... they [the gang members] usually stop when they see us.

Such practices align with findings that visibility and legitimacy serve as deterrence mechanisms, while being seen as part of an organised, recognised group can reduce the likelihood of attack. It has been argued that this can serve a protective function, giving a message that they have international support even when international organisations are not physically present (Gray, 2023). However, while the presence of accompanying organisations can help reduce such risks, their departure can intensify them and undermine progress that has been made.

In some contexts, in addition to providing protective accompaniment or presence, organisations also support safety audits, and coach communities on risk awareness and mitigation strategies. These measures do not eliminate risk but help redistribute and manage it.

In Myanmar, mitigation strategies are particularly embedded in everyday practices, such as information-sharing networks, gender-sensitive mobility strategies and careful management of visibility and affiliation. These reflect forms of 'everyday protection', where communities continuously assess and adapt to shifting risks.

3.1.1 Operational implications

These findings highlight that supporting community-led actions that leverage gendered roles for protection requires sustained sensitivity to the risks generated by shifts in gender roles, including risks of reinforcing unequal burdens or exposing individuals to additional backlash. Key implications include:

- **identifying and integrating risk-mitigation strategies from the outset**, including for those who challenge gender norms;
- **engaging families, community leaders and authorities** to reduce potential backlash to protection action that transgresses established gendered norms, and to build legitimacy;
- **supporting collective strategies and visibility** that enhance protection while managing exposure;

- **recognising and addressing risks faced by women, men and gender-diverse people** when they leverage or challenge norms to step into leadership roles;
- **adopting gradual, context-specific approaches** that allow for incremental change to harmful (gendered) practices and norms over time.

3.2 **Takeaway 2: Gender must be understood as more than women and girls – or else risks to men, boys and gender-diverse people may be rendered invisible**

Progress was made thanks to the WPS [Women, Peace and Security] agenda, but that also created challenges, as it created the impression that it [gender] was just about women.

Global protection specialist

Gender is a system that shapes power, vulnerability and exposure to violence. Therefore, across contexts, gendered protection risks affect all people in distinct but interconnected ways. However, actors working on GBV issues, and increasingly humanitarian actors too, often claim to prioritise prevention and response to violence experienced by women and girls, because they tend to be more marginalised and disadvantaged in patriarchal societies.⁸ There are indications that the humanitarian sector may **increasingly** frame its focus on ‘women and girls’ (OCHA, 2025), rather than its previous predominant focus on women and children, as problematic as it was. This change risks a backslide against the long-term efforts in the sector to encourage actors to systematically undertake nuanced and intersectional risk analysis, to identify the full breadth of risks as well as the systemic drivers of violence and risk. Instead, this push can reinforce simplistic and static notions of vulnerability and lead to concrete gaps in humanitarian responses.

Writ large, gendered risks to men and boys are not always recognised as protection risks by humanitarian actors, especially as men are not seen as gendered beings, but their experiences are implicitly built into the humanitarian system and the experiences of civilians (Daigle et al., 2025). As noted by practitioners, this creates protection gaps when men and boys are specifically targeted. Moreover, even when risks to other people besides women and girls are acknowledged, they are often deprioritised in practice. This can result in programming and services that are not fully accessible or responsive to their needs.

⁸ While some actors view the current focus on women and girls critically, it should be understood within the broader context in which GBV actors and other women’s rights activists operate. Firstly, the historical and systemic non-recognition of issues that affect women and girls, including conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, as well as the hostilities that feminist and gender experts experience, warranted demand to take women and girls’ experiences seriously and address them. Second is the rise of narratives in many parts of the world, spearheaded by men’s rights activists, misogynist groups (including ‘incels’), and anti-gender actors, who position men as victims of feminist and gender equality activism for political and economic struggles experienced by some men (Greig, 2025; UN Women, 2025b). These actors have been growing in political power and prominence globally and are intertwined with the global crisis of human rights-based order. Attacks by these actors are a major concern for feminists who consequently protect women and girls’ interests.

In some contexts, while there is evidence of the gendered impacts of conflict, humanitarian and international actors can be ‘notably silent’. In Ukraine, this seems to be due to competing ethical dilemmas that humanitarian actors are grappling with related to (male) conscription, as well as structural issues within the sector (Carpenter, 2024). In highly securitised environments such as Palestine and Sudan, some respondents flagged concerns that political actors and some government donors seem to tacitly accept framings of civilian men and boys as potentially posing a security threat. As a result, the safety of men and boys in these situations is often seen as beyond their remit, and little to no protective action is taken.

Gender-diverse people are even more significantly neglected. Across most contexts, LGBTQI+ issues remain highly sensitive and are rarely addressed explicitly in programming or analysis. In South Sudan and Iraq, legal and social constraints limit the visibility of LGBTQI+ individuals and organisations, and protection actors face restrictions in engaging with these issues. In Myanmar, LGBTQI+ individuals experience discrimination and targeted abuse, including in detention. In Ukraine, while there is relatively greater openness compared to other contexts in this study, LGBTQI+ concerns remain marginal in practice. Overall, the limited visibility of LGBTQI+ risks reflects both contextual sensitivities and broader gaps in gender analysis.

Finally, while it is important to nuance the understanding of risks, at the same time, some women’s activists and organisations caution against ‘overcorrection’. While expanding attention to men, boys and masculinities is necessary, this should not come at the expense of the space and resources dedicated to women and girls (see, for example, NP, 2021a; Myrtilinen and Schulz, 2022). This highlights the need for balanced approaches, based on the most acute risks people face that humanitarian organisations can respond to in any given context.

3.2.1 Operational implications

These findings emphasise the importance of adopting a more comprehensive understanding of gender in protection practice. Key implications include:

- **moving beyond ‘gender = women and girls’** towards a relational understanding of gender as a system shaping risks and power;
- **systematically analysing intersectional protection risks faced by people of all genders**, including in relation to violence, recruitment, detention and access to services;
- **expanding operations that address masculinities and support men and boys** as both protection actors and individuals at risk;
- **increasing attention to LGBTQI+ protection needs**, while adapting approaches to legal and cultural constraints;
- **avoiding both under-recognition and overcorrection**, ensuring that expanded gender analysis complements rather than displaces existing work on women and girls.

3.3 Takeaway 3: Integrating a gender lens to risk analysis supports people's efforts to stay safe

[A] gender protection approach is more impactful. It's not better for women. It's not worse for men. It's not a zero-sum game. It is more impactful on the communities.

Gender specialist

Across contexts, integrating a gender lens into protection risk analysis strengthens people's ability to stay safe by better understanding how risks are distributed and experienced. However, organisational approaches do not always systematically reflect these dynamics, particularly when gender is treated as an add-on rather than embedded in analysis.

At the same time, the findings highlight a key tension: while more systematic approaches to gender analysis are needed, overly rigid or standardised tools may be ineffective – or even counterproductive – to context-specific approaches, especially in sensitive and particularly challenging environments.

According to the interviewees, some protection and humanitarian actors integrate gender into protection analysis. For example, NP uses bottom-up and informal approaches, rather than formalised tools. This reflects a broader preference for contextual, community-driven methodologies. In practice, this involves:

- consulting diverse groups (women, men, youth, people with disabilities, etc.);
- continuous observation and informal conversations in everyday spaces;
- iterative learning through presence and trust-building.

In contexts such as Iraq, where there are highly sensitive social and political dynamics – for example, the concept of 'gender' can't be used outside the Kurdistan Region as a result of a government directive – informal engagement is more effective than structured tools. Participants emphasise that rigid questionnaires or formal focus group discussions may lead to 'socially desirable' responses rather than accurate insights. Instead, gendered risks are understood through ongoing dialogue embedded in daily interactions (for example, at the market, hair salon, tea house). Similarly, in Myanmar, interviewees explained that gender analysis is rarely formalised in their work but is implicitly embedded in everyday risk-management practices, such as decisions on mobility, communication and roles within communities.

These approaches align with broader insights from protection practice that locally grounded, relational analysis is often more effective for a nuanced understanding and response to risks (Davies et al., 2025a), particularly where issues such as gender norms, GBV or identity are politically or socially constrained.

While flexible and informal approaches can enable contextual sensitivity, they also have important limitations to consider. The lack of structured tools, guidance, systemic skills development and

awareness can lead to inconsistent and non-systematic intersectional gender analyses dependent on staff capacity and experience. It may be accompanied by overreliance on individual skills by team members, which can undermine organisational approaches, particularly when an employee leaves. Equally, this can create gaps in identifying less visible risks, for example those affecting men, boys and gender-diverse individuals. A purely bottom-up analysis without additional guidance and technical know-how may overlook risks affecting groups that are marginalised or less visible, because people in communities may also internalise gender norms. Therefore, without explicit prompts, nuanced gendered risks may remain under-analysed.

At the same time, the use of standardised, top-down tools and procedures without appropriate staff expertise – as is often used in the humanitarian sector – can turn intersectional gendered protection analyses into tick-box exercises.

Findings suggest that the key issue is not the absence or presence of tools per se, but the need for context-specific, people-centred approaches to integrating gender into analysis. In some contexts such as Ukraine and South Sudan, more structured gender-sensitive tools can be valuable. In other contexts – particularly highly sensitive or restrictive environments – informal and adaptive approaches remain more appropriate. For example, addressing the risks of LGBTQI+ communities may be difficult using the language and approaches suitable for more open contexts. Drawing on the expertise and skills of local LGBTQI+ and aligned human rights activists and gender-justice movements can therefore help humanitarian actors find relevant, appropriate and safe ways to engage in risk analysis of gender-diverse people, rather than avoid them due to insufficient terminology or standardised tools, while bearing in mind the risks of visibility discussed in section 3.1. This points to the need for hybrid approaches, where:

- core principles and approaches ensure gender is systematically considered;
- methods remain flexible and adaptable, specific to the context;
- tools support – rather than replace – relational and community-based analysis.

Such approaches are increasingly recognised in the sector as necessary to reconcile accountability and consistency with contextual sensitivity.

Some practices illustrate how gender analysis can be strengthened while remaining context-sensitive:

- Participatory approaches (e.g. Participatory Action Research) that position community members as analysts of their own protection risks.
- Integration of gender into broader tools, rather than standalone gender assessments.
- Attention to increasingly prevalent and harmful risks, such as online GBV or climate-related impacts, where gendered dimensions are explicitly analysed.
- Capacity-strengthening of local actors, enabling them to conduct their own gendered risk analysis.

Cross-context learning and exchange between programmes also support the gradual development of more consistent practices without imposing rigid frameworks.

Integrating a gender lens is not only a technical issue but also shaped by institutional and political dynamics. Generic challenges that emerged from the in-country and global participants include:

- **limited staff or leadership buy-in** (with gender seen as an extra or add-on) or limited understanding of gender as a systemic concept;
- **perceptions of gender as externally imposed** or politically sensitive;
- **tensions between localisation and normative commitments** at an organisational level (e.g. feminist approaches);
- **budget constraints and reductions** in dedicated gender expertise.

These constraints highlight that gender analysis is both a technical and political process, requiring negotiation, translation and adaptation.

3.3.1 Operational implications

These findings suggest that integrating a gender lens into protection risk analysis requires a balanced and context-sensitive approach to:

- **embed gender systematically** within existing risk analysis frameworks, rather than treating it as an add-on;
- **adopt flexible methodologies**, combining structured prompts with informal, relational approaches;
- **strengthen staff capacity**, while reducing overreliance on individual expertise;
- **ensure inclusion of less visible risks**, particularly affecting men, boys and gender-diverse individuals;
- **support community-led analysis**, while recognising its limitations and complementing it where needed;
- **invest in gender expertise and training**, including in resource-constrained environments;
- **partner with women- and LGBTQI+-led organisations** to help bridge the gap between the community-led analysis and technical gender expertise.

3.4 Takeaway 4: While awareness of intersectional risks has increased, translating this into practice remains challenging

Intersectionality matters because risks are higher for displaced people, minority groups, people with disabilities or LGBTQI+ individuals.

Protection specialist

While there is recognition that risks are shaped by the intersection of multiple characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, etc., in practice, its application remains patchy, and it is not systematically embedded in analysis or humanitarian responses (Barbelet et al., 2022). Dimensions are often addressed separately or in the binary, leading to gaps in how risks are identified and addressed.

Intersectionality is best understood not as a checklist or a tool but as a lens that guides how risks and power are analysed. It is less about adding layers of evidence and more about changing how analysis is conducted and interpreted. Unlike diversity, which seeks to ensure representation of different groups such as women, youth and people with disabilities, intersectionality denotes analysing how these characteristics interact to shape risk, power and access in a specific context and situation. In practice, ensuring diversity – among communities, staff and partners – is an important first step. However, without an intersectional lens, diversity alone may not capture how risks are distributed or experienced.

In Iraq, analysis of risks has often reflected multiple intersecting factors, including gender, age, displacement status, and experiences linked to ISIS. This has enabled more tailored approaches, for example recognising the distinct roles and influence of older women in certain communities.

In South Sudan, differences between groups of women – such as generational divides or rural versus urban perspectives – have influenced how gender norms are perceived and leveraged within and between communities. Similarly, collaboration between grassroots women and more formally organised actors (human rights or women’s activists) has helped bridge different forms of information, capacities and influence (NP, 2020).

In Myanmar, interviewees see that intersectional risks are implicitly recognised through attention to factors such as ethnicity, religion, location and perceived political affiliation, which shape exposure to violence and mobility constraints. However, these are rarely framed explicitly as intersectional analysis.

In Ukraine, some intersectional dynamics are recognised by research participants – such as the differentiated risks faced by older women due to demographic patterns and care responsibilities – but are not consistently integrated into programming, with categories such as ‘older people’ often treated as homogeneous in practice.

Several challenges limit the consistent integration of intersectional analysis:

- **Complexity and resource constraints:** Understanding how multiple identities interact in specific contexts requires time, local knowledge and sustained engagement, which may not always be feasible.
- **Fragmented analytical approaches:** Risk categories (e.g. gender, age, disability) are often treated separately in assessments and reporting, making it difficult to capture how they intersect.
- **Tendency towards binary analysis:** When gender is prioritised, other dimensions may be overlooked, and vice versa, resulting in partial understandings of risk.
- **Reliance on community perceptions:** While community-led analysis is essential, it may overlook or exclude less visible or marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ individuals or people with disabilities.

There are a growing number of practice-oriented toolkits and guides such as by Protection Approaches on inclusive atrocity prevention (Mostafa, 2025) that can be helpful for intersectional analysis. Yet drawing on existing good practices, intersectional analysis doesn’t always require specific tools, but can be implemented through adaptations to existing practices, including:

- asking how risks differ *within* groups (e.g. which women, which men, which gender-diverse people?);
- combining diversity analysis with power mapping, to understand who holds influence and who is excluded;
- observing how roles, risks and access shift depending on context (e.g. displacement, urban vs rural settings);
- engaging a diverse range of actors, including those less visible or less represented;
- recognising that identities are dynamic and relational, rather than fixed categories.

Given complexities around intersectional analysis, it may not always be realistic or even preferred for all organisations to develop deep expertise across all dimensions. Partnering with specialised organisations, including those focusing on disability, LGBTQI+ issues or minority rights, is therefore often a good solution, which can further reduce the exposure risk for these groups as well as survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Humanitarian actors can also leverage local knowledge and community expertise, particularly from actors with lived experience, and supplement it with targeted technical support where needed. This approach is particularly relevant in the current context of funding constraints, where prioritisation and collaboration become even more essential.

3.4.1 Operational implications

These findings suggest that strengthening intersectional approaches requires a shift in how analysis is conducted, rather than simply adding new tools:

- **Use intersectionality as a guiding lens**, not a checklist.
- **Integrate questions of power, influence and exclusion** into protection analysis.
- **Move beyond single categories to examine intra-group differences.**
- **Combine community-led approaches with efforts to include less visible groups.**
- **Leverage partnerships and specialised expertise** where needed.
- **Ensure that diversity in participation is complemented by analysis of how identities interact.**

3.5 Takeaway 5: Power inequalities connect protection and gender action – both are inherently political

We look at how we can enable agency – who is in charge, how do we engage them?

Protection specialist Iraq

Gendered protection risks are fundamentally shaped by power inequalities. These inequalities determine who is exposed to violence, who can access protection, and who has the ability to influence outcomes. As such, both protection and gender approaches converge around a shared analytical entry point: understanding and engaging with power relations.

Protection risks are shaped by unequal relationships within and between civilians, armed actors, authorities, communities and other powerholders. For example, many protection measures in Ukraine rely on and are provided by the state. In addition to new measures in response to the war, others include long-term social protection and welfare system provisions, such as pensions or child subsidies. As these gendered state policies influence people's differentiated abilities to keep themselves safe, including from domestic violence or exploitation, effective civilian protection measures include direct advocacy targeting the state (Michalko, 2026; Prügl et al., 2026).

Understanding protection as relational – co-created through interactions between actors – highlights how power relations shape protection outcomes. This perspective enables:

- recognition of civilians as active agents in their own protection;
- identification of protection strategies beyond state or force-based approaches;
- analysis of how unequal power relations drive harm and shape responses.

Ultimately, it emphasises that gender and protection are not separate agendas but should intersect through their shared focus on power, inequality and its implications for the risks people face.

Despite this, humanitarian action often struggles to explicitly engage with power, often due to interpretations of – and perceived tensions with – humanitarian principles. For example, engaging with power dynamics, and how they interrelate with issues of gender or protection – particularly when engaging with violent actors, and those with influence over them – is inherently political. It tests the boundaries of neutrality in ways that are uncomfortable to many humanitarian actors, as well as to the risk appetite of a highly risk-averse humanitarian sector (Davies et al., 2025a). Impartiality is at times used to resist tailoring responses to specific groups, even where risks are clearly differentiated (Daigle et al., 2025). As one informant noted, there are still strong assumptions that: 'neutrality is taken to mean that we shouldn't be looking at gender dynamics because they are political'. For this reason, some humanitarian and protection specialist organisations such as NP, Oxfam and Fight for Humanity intentionally do not incorporate a commitment to neutrality. Such organisations instead take a position as non-partisan (not biased) in order to either proactively deal with power inequalities and their connections to issues of politics (see section 2.2 in NP, 2021b), or show their commitment to human rights and survivors and/or victims (Pinnington, 2023).⁹

Whatever the humanitarian sector's and individual organisations' approaches to principles, particularly neutrality, there must be recognition of the necessity to engage with power dynamics, power holders

9 'Victim' encompasses both those who have experienced violations and harm, and people who have been killed, while recognising concerns around agency associated with the term 'victim'.

and their political underpinnings if the sector is to remain relevant.¹⁰ Indeed, humanitarian actors need to recognise that they are part of the political economy of conflict and violence and of the power dynamics within it. Ignoring this can (and has) done harm, and even cost lives (Davies et al., 2024).

In addition, the humanitarian architecture's siloed approach to responses has historically tended to favour a separation of protection responses (e.g. protection, GBV, children), which can fragment analysis of risks, limit holistic responses and exclude actors whose work does not fit neatly into these categories and sectors – or indeed fully in the humanitarian structure. This structural fragmentation can undermine efforts to address the underlying power inequalities that drive violence and how they interconnect. With the consolidation of the Global Protection Cluster and its Areas of Responsibility, there are opportunities for a more nuanced and holistic approach to understanding and responding to intersecting risks, including gendered risks and the power dynamics that drive them. To do so, however, would require integrated and intersectional approaches to risk analysis in order to define responsive actions, with inclusion of relevant technical and contextual expertise.

Across contexts, approaches to power vary depending on mandates, context and organisational positioning. While commonly carried out by many community-based and local civil society organisations, only some international actors (such as NP, CIVIC and Geneva Call) engage more directly with power dynamics, including by working with authorities and armed actors (state and non-state), supporting community influence and negotiation capacity, and addressing the relational dynamics that shape violence.

Other (international) humanitarian actors adopt more cautious approaches, particularly due to perceptions of approaches to prioritise neutrality or where political sensitivities are high (see Davies et al., 2024). Therefore, directly addressing threats – which means engaging with violent actors and those that have influence over them – is deprioritised, and is often left out of protection action entirely (ibid.).

Instead of a binary choice, findings suggest that engaging with power is always present but differently expressed:

- indirectly, through community-based approaches and relationship-building;
- pragmatically, through influencing behaviours, policies and practices rather than structures;
- more explicitly, through dialogue and negotiation with power holders.

In practice, even gradual actions – such as supporting communities in their engagement with authorities (for example, in strengthening the content, form and quality of such engagements) or influencing shifts in who can speak, be heard and included (e.g. facilitating women's engagement with local governance and security actors) – can contribute to rebalancing power, without requiring the formal political positioning of external actors.

¹⁰ As highlighted in the literature, a relational understanding of protection enables more politically informed action to address unequal power relations and persistent harms (Gray, 2023).

As highlighted in practice, change often requires working within existing systems while opening space for reflection and adaptation, rather than imposing external models that can create backlash and new risks. At the same time, there is a need to balance longer-term reduction in civilian harm alongside longer-term shifts in norms and power relations, which can take generations. However, consideration should be given to how gendered norms and risks can shift during conflict, which is a time of upheaval of norms. Yet this doesn't mean that things will not go back to 'normal' once the conflict has ended, nor that all people want norms to change, as some may instead desire the social and power structures they knew before the war and which they associate with peace and stability. This does not necessarily require organisations to adopt a fully 'gender-transformative' approach (see Chapter 1). Rather, it requires clarity about intended outcomes, attention to potential unintended harm, and alignment with community-led processes.

In this sense, integrating a gender lens into protection is about ensuring that interventions:

- do not reinforce harmful inequalities;
- support agency where it already exists to strengthen it;
- remain realistic about what change is possible in any given context.

3.5.1 Operational implications

These findings highlight that integrating gender into protection requires engaging with power in deliberate and context-sensitive ways:

- **Use gendered power analysis as a core entry point** (e.g. looking at who has power, who lacks it and how that shapes risk – see takeaway 3) for both protection and gender action.
- **Move beyond vulnerability-focused approaches**, incorporating threats, capacities and relationships between actors and understanding their gendered nature.
- **Acknowledge the 'political' nature of protection and gender** (e.g. that it can affect power distribution or balances), while maintaining principled humanitarian action.
- **Avoid siloed approaches**, ensuring gender, protection and power dynamics are analysed together (whether related to a conflict or not).
- **Be explicit about objectives**, including where interventions sit on a spectrum from risk mitigation to longer-term change.
- **Apply a 'do no harm' lens**, recognising that shifting gender roles may create new risks.
- **Invest in relational approaches**, including dialogue, trust-building and community-led strategies.

Overall, understanding and engaging with power is not an optional add-on or 'nice-to-have', but central to both effective protection and meaningful gender analysis.

3.6 Takeaway 6: The anti-gender backlash and the funding crisis are constraining the integration of gender in protection action

Should we ‘shift the work’ or ‘shift the words’ in the kind of situation we’re facing?

Protection specialist

The ability to achieve gender-sensitive (at a minimum) protection is increasingly shaped by a combination of national and international backlash against gender equality, such as the expanded Mexico City Policy (see Box 2 below) or the Geneva Consensus Declaration¹¹ spearheaded by the United States (US) administration. These developments induce fear and concerns that a choice must be made – either give up on gender and the intersectional considerations of protection risks or face existential funding cuts and other repercussions. While some of these dynamics predate the current wave, they have intensified in recent years and are reshaping both what organisations do and how they frame their work (Harper et al., 2025).

Box 2 The impacts of the ‘global gag rule’

The expanded ‘global gag rule’ – the colloquial name by activists and opponents of the Mexico City policy – is likely to significantly weaken humanitarian and protection activities of humanitarian and development organisations, including United Nations agencies (Angevine, 2025; Daigle and Michalko, 2026). Building on the Trump administration’s executive orders regarding diversity, equity and inclusion, the expanded gag rule sets back efforts to improve more inclusive, equitable approaches to humanitarian action in recent years, as it seeks to prevent organisations receiving US government funds to promote or engage in what they purposely misrepresent as diversity and gender ideologies. The lack of clarity regarding some of the terms of the policy has led to organisations’ overcompliance and stopping activities that consider intersectional protection risks and vulnerabilities such as gender, race or nationality in order to retain access to US funding. Organisations that do not accept any US funding, as has historically been the case for some sexual and reproductive health and rights and GBV organisations, have been better able to withstand some of these pressures tied to the US funding cuts. However, this strategy may be more challenging in an increasingly restricted funding landscape.

¹¹ The Geneva Consensus Declaration, launched in 2020 under Trump’s first administration and reinstated in 2025, brings together about four dozen countries, among them Iraq and South Sudan, in support of traditional family values and in opposition of some sexual and reproductive health and rights (Ipas, 2024; Brechenmacher, 2025).

Funding cuts by the US government, as well as many other donors, are part and parcel of global anti-gender politics, as gender equality-related activities have often been the first to be cut, along with GBV programming and support to women-led and LGBTQI+ organisations (Daigle et al., 2025; George et al., 2025; Mostafa, 2025; Hubbard and Hussain, 2026). Protection action, too, has seen significant cuts, with a prioritisation of simplistic notions of life-saving (Davies et al., 2025b). This has affected gender- and protection-focused activities across the studied contexts (postponing of gender assessments, cuts to gender and protection workforces, etc.).

Across the board, there are perceptions that ‘things are going in the wrong direction’ and that there is a need to ‘step up’ the work. As stressed by one protection specialist:

It’s already happening [...] women and LGBTQI people are already losing their lives. How can we be part of that conversation and interrupting that in a way that gives people pause?

In addition, some humanitarian workers interviewed argue that funding cuts have given an excuse to some practitioners and organisational leaders to deprioritise gender-sensitive work, which they believe their organisations shouldn’t be doing anyway.

Broader reforms of the humanitarian and international system, including the humanitarian reset and UN80 reform (IASC, n.d.; UN, n.d.), are being driven by financial pressures rather than strategic priorities. The pace at which cuts have been made in the past year puts at significant risk any advances and learning in the sector over the last decades.

As a result, gender continues to be weaponised, its importance contested and, in some cases, ultimately deprioritised. As one previous interviewee noted, there is now ‘no incentive vis-à-vis [providing] funding anymore [for gender-sensitive protection work]’ (see Daigle et al., 2025), and abuses of international humanitarian law and international human rights law risk going ‘unchecked’ as accountability weakens.

In response to the direct reduction and deprioritisation of gender programming, some global and transnational actors are narrowing gender frameworks and replacing them with a focus on ‘women and girls’, alongside other forms of reframing and self-censorship. This means that many organisations are starting to adapt language and framing to remain operational, avoiding terms such as ‘gender’, ‘WPS’ or ‘LGBTQI+’. Most concerning is that some do so even when this is not directly requested of them. As highlighted in recent research, alternative framings such as ‘human security’ or ‘vulnerability’ may gain traction in politically sensitive environments, but risk diluting attention to gendered power relations and discrimination (Bastick and Egorova, 2025). These dynamics reinforce existing challenges within the sector, including the aforementioned issue of gender being reduced to GBV response in humanitarian action.

At the same time, the connections between global and local anti-gender and anti-democratic politics, as well as the links between global trends and events on the ground, may be invisible to protection practitioners, especially working on the community level.

In some settings, backlash and resistance take the form of explicit political or legal restrictions on gender-related work, such as so-called ‘anti-gay propaganda laws’, which are adopted in many countries based on the Russian approach, and which are often legitimised by the claimed need to protect the family and children from gender ideology (Norocel and Paternotte, 2023; Kuteleva, 2024; Durmuş, 2026). In Iraq, the authorities started imposing restrictions on the use of the word ‘gender’ in 2023.¹² In other countries, similar laws shape what language is acceptable or which issues can be addressed. In some Muslim-majority countries, gender opponents have ‘framed the term *gender* as a Western plot aimed at undermining Islamic values and societal norms’ (Mustafa, 2025).

To overcome such challenges at a national or sub-national level, according to our participants, organisations have adapted by grounding their approaches in community perspectives and locally accepted entry points.¹³ As argued by one informant: ‘The approach is to start from the community perspectives and not come in with the 1325 framework’.¹⁴ This reinforces the importance of relational, context-driven approaches. Some initiatives have been privileging storytelling and dialogue-based approaches, allowing communities to reflect on sensitive issues indirectly, rather than through confrontational or externally imposed framing (for example, by women sharing their life stories).

A key risk emerging from these overall dynamics is the gradual dilution of gender and protection within humanitarian action, further exacerbating challenges discussed in this paper. At the same time, framing gender or protection as purely technical risks obscuring their inherently political nature. This creates a tension: adapting language may enable access and continuity but may also weaken the depth and effectiveness of gender-sensitive protection.

Responses taken at global and organisational levels include the development of guidance to navigate restrictive environments, support from donor allies, and peer exchange through communities of practice. As stressed by interviewees, these can be important ways to ‘hold the line’ on gender-sensitive protection in a shrinking operational space.

12 Including a 2023 directive banning its use in media and certain official contexts. This was followed by a 2024 Federal Supreme Court ruling de facto banning the use of ‘gender’ (Mustafa, 2025).

13 Note that except at the national levels, this has often been the case before the current anti-gender backlash, as more ‘theoretical’ or policy-level concepts (gender, WPS, etc.) usually need ‘translation’ to make sense to communities. In addition, some languages have no word for ‘gender’ that is separate from ‘sex’, so in any case a workaround is needed.

14 The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 agenda – commonly understood as the broader Women, Peace and Security agenda or framework established by Resolution 1325 and subsequent related UN Security Council resolutions – seeks to ensure women’s full, equal and meaningful participation in peace and security processes while protecting their rights and addressing the gendered impacts of conflict.

3.6.1 Operational implications

These findings emphasise that sustaining gender-sensitive protection requires deliberate and adaptive strategies grounded in a clear understanding of power and inequality, while maintaining commitments to best practices and their implications as highlighted in the previous chapters of the report. This would require:

- **working through community structures**, such as community protection teams or community police, as well as with local women's and LGBTQI+ rights organisations, to address issues like domestic violence or child marriage in locally accepted ways, while paying attention to approaches that may be generally harmful to survivors and gender-diverse people;
- **embedding gender within broader protection activities**, rather than addressing it as a standalone or explicit theme when it is at risk of being targeted;
- **balance pragmatism and principles**, carefully navigating trade-offs between response to acute risks, relevance with risk appetite and potential negative repercussions;
- **invest in collaboration and shared learning** for how to confront these challenges, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

4 Conclusion and ways forward

Situations of violence and conflict continue to escalate globally, with egregious abuses against civilians. While gendered violence has long been a strategy of violent actors, gender is increasingly being employed as a conflict and political tactic. The anti-democratic and anti-gender backlash is unfolding alongside seismic shifts in the aid sector, resulting in a more fragile, higher-risk geopolitical context relating to gendered risks and the response to them. It is critical to recognise the findings and implications of this and related research (Daigle et al., 2025; CIVIC, 2026): that risks of violence are inherently gendered and deeply intertwined with gendered norms, as are strategies to reduce risks in situations of violence and conflict. As demonstrated across the four contexts, people do not only experience gendered risks shaped by the interaction of conflict dynamics, gender and other forms of marginalisation, and other systems of power; they actively navigate, leverage and, at times, challenge gender norms in order to stay safe, protect others and access services.

At the same time, when people step into new roles or challenge norms, this can expand their agency and influence, but also expose them to backlash, stigma and new forms of violence. It is critical that humanitarian actors understand risk not as static attributes related to certain 'vulnerable groups' or vulnerabilities, but as dynamic, relational and shaped by changing threats, vulnerabilities, capacities and power relations.

The findings highlight that gender-sensitive humanitarian action cannot rely on simplified assumptions, including the equation of gender only with women and girls. A nuanced and more intentional understanding of gender is needed to ensure that the risks faced by men, boys and gender-diverse people are not rendered invisible.

This requires more systematic but context-sensitive gendered risk analysis, including attention to intersectionality, so that organisations can better understand how risks differ within and across groups and adapt their responses accordingly.

Yet analysis alone is not enough. These dynamics unfold within wider networks of power, and humanitarian, protection and gender action is inherently shaped by how actors engage – or choose not to engage – with inequality, exclusion and influence at community, conflict and institutional levels.

This agenda is becoming more difficult precisely when it is most needed. The anti-gender politics and mobilisations, shrinking civic space for human rights-based organisations, and the wider funding crisis are constraining gender-sensitive humanitarian and protection work, narrowing acceptable language and weakening dedicated expertise and programming. In this context, the challenge is not only to preserve a gender lens but to 'hold the line' on why it matters: without recognising the gendered and intersectional nature of protection risks, humanitarian, protection and gender responses will be less relevant, less effective and more likely to miss those most at risk. Moving forward requires intentional,

adaptive and politically aware approaches that integrate gendered risk analysis into humanitarian protective practice, support community-led strategies, mitigate backlash and plan for sustainability from the outset.

4.1 Ways forward

We need to continue to be curious about safety and gender.

Protection specialist

Recommendation 1: Systematically integrate gendered and intersectional risk analysis into protection action

Gendered risks can and should be analysed as a core part of protection risk analysis, rather than as a separate or optional add-on. This requires intentionality to understand and respond to risks based on the specific attributions of any given individual or group: organisations should not rely only on intuition or individual staff sensitivity, but should strengthen existing protection analysis, tools, staff capacity and team reflection so that gendered risks are considered more consistently across contexts and sectors. Flexible methodologies and approaches will be required to ensure that analysis and response are context specific, people-centred and systematised without risking standardised, top-down approaches (Davies et al., 2025). Maintaining dedicated gender experts and drawing on local gender expertise is critical to achieving systematic integration.

Recommendation 2: Assess gendered risks in relation to specific risks, contexts and moments, rather than relying on fixed assumptions about vulnerability

Humanitarian actors should avoid harmful simplifications, including assuming that women are always the most vulnerable and least safe, that men and boys are primarily threats rather than also being at risk, or that LGBTIQI+ and gender-diverse people don't exist in conservative societies. Looking at risk as the interaction between threats, vulnerabilities and capacities helps capture how gendered risks shift over time and enables more relevant prioritisation to acute risks, including in areas such as recruitment, detention, trafficking, access to services and exposure to GBV. This also needs to take a cross-temporal approach with a nuanced understanding of conflict dynamics – what is not a specific risk today may become a risk in the future (Davies et al., 2025b). Participatory action research is a good strategy to move beyond simplistic assumptions about vulnerability, and can enable communities' agency.

Recommendation 3: Be clear within the organisation about your approach to gender norms and adapt it to the specific context

Organisations may position themselves differently along a spectrum from gender-aware to gender-transformative approaches, depending on their mandate, objectives and operating environment (including legal, political and cultural limitations to openly address gender). Note that these approaches

are not in contradiction to humanitarian principles; to the contrary, they ensure that risks and needs are understood more accurately. Whatever the approach an organisation chooses, it should be grounded in context-specific understanding of gender and accompanied by an awareness of the risks that may arise both when people challenge restrictive gender norms and when they strategically leverage them. Either way, humanitarian actors should seek to support agency while mitigating harm and be clear on their parameters to engaging with gendered protection risks. Collaborations can be considered, for example with actors that have a different risk and gender ‘appetite’ than their own organisation, and who may be willing to engage armed and political actors and/or conduct advocacy campaigns.

Recommendation 4: Design humanitarian and protection interventions with a gender lens from the outset, including for sustainability and responsible exit

Humanitarian and protection interventions should be designed with attention to how gender norms shape participation, risk, leadership and the consequences of organisational withdrawal. This means investing in local capacities, relationships and community-based structures rather than parallel systems, while also planning for the gender-specific risks that can emerge when support is not planned or ends abruptly, including backlash against women and others whose public roles expanded during the intervention. Some punctual protection ‘hardware’ could be considered, such as means of transportation to enhance the possibility of the continuation of protection in the case of a sudden – and unplanned – withdrawal of external support. Gender-sensitive protection in the digital space is also of particular importance, such as digital security and countering disinformation, gendered hate-speech and other forms of violence.

Recommendation 5: Defend and advocate for gender-sensitive approaches at global level to enable meaningful protection action on the ground

Global policy, donor priorities and funding decisions directly shape what is possible in practice, including whether organisations retain the language, staffing, expertise and political space needed for gender-sensitive protection action. Donors, UN agencies and international NGOs should therefore actively defend gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches, fund the expertise needed to sustain them – including by supporting and partnering with local and national women-led and minority/rights-based organisations – and resist the narrowing of gender into simplified categories that weaken the relevance and effectiveness of protection action (Maung et al., 2025).

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Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI Global
Foul Millbank
London SE1p 3JA
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg
