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Victims, perpetrators or agents of change?

Gender norms and protection

Megan Daigle[ID], Ján Michalko[ID] and Leen Fouad[ID]

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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.

Megan Daigle[ID] is a Senior Research Fellow with HPG.

Ján Michalko[ID] is a Research Fellow with the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion programme at ODI Global.

Leen Fouad[ID] is a Senior Research Officer with HPG.

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Acronyms

AoR	area of responsibility
CRSV	conflict-related sexual violence
DEI	diversity, equity and inclusion
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GAM	Gender with Age Marker
GBV	gender-based violence
GPC	Global Protection Cluster
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IHL	international humanitarian law
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex plus
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee
SGBV	sexual and gender-based violence
SOGIESC	sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
UNFPA	UN Population Fund
UNHCR	UN Refugee Agency
WLO	women-led organisation

Executive summary

The humanitarian sector is set to change once again: the 'humanitarian reset' comes in the face of cuts to aid from government donors, most notably the United States (US). The wider political landscape continues to push back against gender justice, but a gender lens remains essential to effective risk analysis and delivery of life-saving humanitarian action, including protection.

Gender-responsive protection relies on an understanding of gender norms – expectations around which roles and behaviours are acceptable for men and women – and how they shape people's social, economic and political positioning prior to and during conflict, the types of threats they face and their capacity to respond. Norms also shape the way that humanitarians, including protection actors, perceive and respond to risks. Understanding how gender norms influence and are influenced by conflict is therefore central to how humanitarian response, and protection in particular, should be provided. This is a gender-responsive approach, which is under attack, while never having been fully embedded and operationalised in the first place.

Responding to this challenging context, this research seeks two main objectives. Firstly, it expands humanitarian actors' understanding of gender norms and their impact on humanitarian crises (with a focus on conflict) and humanitarian response by challenging the often uncritical deployment of gendered tropes ('victims', 'perpetrators' and 'agents of 'change'). Secondly, it assesses how the humanitarian system could address the systemic features that drive this approach to gender norms and protection in the context of rising anti-gender politics and a crisis of multilateralism. Ultimately, the paper encourages the sector to use the ongoing humanitarian reset as an opportunity to foster more nuanced, inclusive and effective humanitarian and protection action. Doing so is essential to avoid returning to a chronically insufficient back-to-basics approach, which would be a disservice to affected people and would almost certainly cause them further harm.

A shifting geopolitical terrain

Global developments are in train that will affect the future of humanitarian and protection action. In brief, **funding is becoming increasingly restricted**, with the US and other states such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK) reducing aid spending. These cuts disproportionately (and often explicitly) target areas like sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) programming, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, as well as women-led and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex plus (LGBTQI+) rights organisations.

Some organisations are undertaking **programming shifts and self-censorship** to bring themselves in line with this anti-gender push. For example, the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) GBV Area of Responsibility Community of Practice has been frozen, while the International Organization for Migration and the International Rescue Committee have scrubbed their websites of references to SRHR, GBV, LGBTQI+ and DEI.

This global landscape is also witnessing a crisis of multilateralism that will increasingly bring into question **humanitarian legitimacy and purpose**. Can international humanitarian law be applied in such a way that humanitarian principles can be upheld and political actors and other parties to conflict are not permitted to undermine them? The sector must not embrace a **back-to-basics approach**, which was never fit for purpose anyway. This also means not allowing humanitarian principles to be used to exempt actors from advocating for and working towards gender-responsive protection action. It is not at odds with neutrality and impartiality when the purpose of humanitarianism is to provide protection and assistance to affected populations facing the greatest risk.

Challenging restrictive narratives in gender and protection

Given the above challenging context, it is clear that humanitarians must be able to properly identify affected populations with the greatest needs using locally led, intersectional and in-depth analysis that must include a gender lens. But this analysis is often shaped by limiting and essentialising narratives that are woven into the system, ignoring specific contexts and reinforcing gender norms that transcend conflicts themselves. People of all genders confront gendered risks, possess diverse skills and capacities, and occupy distinct positions within relations of power in the midst of conflict, meaning that diverse individuals can be victims, perpetrators and agents of change – all at once, or at different points in their lives. While humanitarian protection to date takes these three key notions – **'victims', 'perpetrators' and 'agents of change'** – as seemingly gender-neutral, they are operationalised based on gendered assumptions. The humanitarian reset presents an opportunity to address these harmful fallacies and to move towards a gender-responsive approach instead.

Victims

Victimhood is not an objective, universal and neutral concept. It is shaped by complex moral, political and ethical tensions and subjective perceptions of powerlessness and vulnerability.

Women are often painted as the 'ideal victims'. This is based on widespread public and institutional norms that expect women and girls' innocence, passivity, vulnerability and helplessness, and is mirrored in humanitarian policy frameworks. International humanitarian responses therefore tend to prioritise women as more 'deserving' of aid than men. Women from the Global South[1] in particular are viewed as vulnerable and lacking agency due to colonial frameworks.

But victimhood and agency do not constitute a binary. Understanding gender as a relational concept means recognising that power is not fixed but shifts across different relationships and contexts. This

1 The 'Global South' is an increasingly common term used to categorise many countries around the world. Often it is employed as a substitute for referring to nations that have been historically exploited through colonisation. The authors would like to acknowledge current international debates on the usefulness of this term, which question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North–Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.

means that, although they are assumed to be perpetrators of violence in times of conflict, **men and boys can be victims too and have specific protection needs because of their gender**, such as forced recruitment into armed groups.

LGBTQI+ people and people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) also face intersecting protection risks. The humanitarian system's heteronormative framework renders invisible these communities and their needs and also fails to appropriately recognise diversity within these communities, as the needs and capacities of gay men tend to take precedence over lesbian and bisexual women (whether trans or cisgender), trans men and non-binary people.

Perpetrators

There is an implicit assumption that men's gender roles as protectors, warriors, soldiers or dominating patriarchs mean that many will revert to violent behaviours to meet the expectations of being a man in a context of crisis or conflict. **Men are then seen as a protection risk**. But norms are neither universal nor static, and there are alternative, peaceful, equitable ways of being a man across various contexts. Intersecting forms of power (race/ethnicity, religion, disability, age and sexuality) can all shape men and boys' lived experiences and cannot be overlooked. Nor can systemic factors like poverty, political systems and conflict itself. There are also men who are active in rejecting violence and who support gender justice. Gender norms are relational, complex and intersectional, and failing to understand risks beyond the limited lens of GBV can exacerbate protection risks for diverse sets of people.

There are also other sources of risk in conflict contexts, including **violence perpetrated by humanitarians and peacekeepers**, as well as by women who join militaries, become combatants or incite men in their communities to violence. Women have a particular role in fomenting or reducing types of violence that proliferate alongside conflict – gang violence, early and forced marriage of girls and young women, and human trafficking.

Agents of change

The agency of affected people of all genders is key to relevant, effective and inclusive protection. **Yet, women in crisis contexts – and especially in the Global South – are frequently painted as either peaceful or passive actors needing the protection of actors from the Global North.** These narratives leave significant gaps in understanding that limit women's participation in protection and wider humanitarian action as agents of change in their own right. For example, motherhood is socially constructed in different ways and for divergent ends: it can be used to bring about peace, and indeed there is a longstanding association between feminist and women's movements on the one hand and peace on the other. There is also evidence that women's meaningful and empowered participation in peace negotiations and other endeavours can result in more sustainable or durable outcomes. But women are still under-represented in these processes and assumed to have the same goals across time and place.

Women are already active in delivering humanitarian action, as evidenced by the work of women-led organisations (WLOs) around the world. As place-based, local actors, **WLOs implement risk-aware and adaptable approaches, with a focus on protection and humanitarian assistance**. But international actors often assume that WLOs lack capacity and are unable to conform to principles of neutrality and impartiality, which leads to poor support for their work, duplication of efforts, less effective interventions and even harm to WLOs themselves. Moreover, these perceptions of WLOs ties into **ideas about protection as a white, masculine project to be carried out by international intervenors**. It positions external and international institutions, systems and actors as 'saviours'. Ultimately, better understanding gender norms means challenging the idea that humanitarians and protection actors are (or can be) gender-neutral, and best placed to ensure protection.

An alertness to gender norms in conflict can also improve the engagement of men and boys as agents of change, and support transforming harmful masculine norms by elevating other forms of masculinities to the benefit of all people.

Towards more gender-responsive, inclusive and effective protection

People of all genders who are living through conflict face complex risks, but they also present their own skills and capacities – they can be victims, perpetrators and agents of change simultaneously or at different times. Getting gender-responsive protection right, especially in the context of the humanitarian reset, is ultimately a question not just of the substance of protection work, the risks it perceives and to which it responds, but also of the systems, structures and cultures of international humanitarian action.

There is a clear need for comprehensive, locally led, nuanced and contextualised risk analysis that gets beyond conflict dynamics and into social power relations. But the analysis of gender norms in protection does not yet go beyond the surface. A key problem is that existing analytical tools are insufficient on their own and not implemented properly or consistently. The analytical process must also be iterative and shaped continually by affected people's participation and input.

Putting this into practice means delving much deeper into social, cultural and political dynamics in risk analysis – and doing so hand-in-hand with development, human rights, peacebuilding actors, and especially with WLOs and other place-based civil society. Such comprehensive analysis actually optimises resource use. It relies on strategic partnerships with WLOs and leverages their local expertise and networks.

Gender analysis must also go beyond GBV and even risk. While GBV response is both critically important and drastically under-funded, it does not represent the full range of gendered concerns in conflict and crisis, even when it comes to protection. When a wider gender-responsive approach is subsumed under attention to GBV only, it tends to feed reductive narratives around victimhood and agency, and it makes it harder to understand gender beyond a framework of risk, harm and violence. Gender should be both cross-cutting and prioritised in its own right; a gender-responsive approach

to protection should sit across sectors and clusters so that it is the responsibility of all humanitarian actors rather than a siloed group of specialists, in keeping with both the centrality of protection and the sector-transcending nature of gendered forms of marginalisation and exclusion.

Humanitarian and protection actors' ability and willingness to conduct gender-responsive analysis and programming depends on the tools they have and their own awareness, understanding and personal commitment to using them. Training, attitudes and bandwidth, as well as institutional and sectoral cultures, can act as enablers to or – more frequently – as brakes on translating tools, policies and best practices into action. To combat inertia and reluctance to embrace change, advocacy with donors is key, pushing them to condition existing funding across humanitarian action to strengthen centrality of protection with a gender-responsive lens. By asking how all areas of a response can usefully contribute to the overall reduction of gendered risks and interrogate the way that norms shape their own analysis and programming, donors can incentivise greater attention to qualitative gender-responsiveness and effectiveness of protection action.

Conclusion: holding the line in difficult times

The solution to global aid cuts, anti-gender politics and weakening multilateralism is not to give up on embedding gender norms into humanitarian and protection action, but rather to do better with the resources available and safeguard the notion of gender-responsive protection – rhetorically, programmatically, substantively. Going forward, research on gender and protection – including the studies to follow this scoping paper – must support allies and champions within major international agencies and highlight the kinds of organisations, networks and movements doing critical work to counter gendered risks and counter threats wherever they are found.

The following four actions are recommended to international, national and local actors working on gender and protection:

1. **Refocus on gender as a core component of comprehensive risk analysis, given the resources available for protection.**
2. **Focus on fellow actors that are not rolling back and push friendly donors to step up.**
3. **Avoid scrubbing content, programmes and language wherever possible.**
4. **In 'reset' conversations, emphasise quality and partnership.**

1 Introduction

The humanitarian system, and the wider global rules-based order of which it is a part, is under threat. While funding constraints have always challenged the ability of humanitarian actors to provide protection and other forms of support to all people affected by crises, the current geopolitical crossroads has forced the sector to undergo yet another reform process – the so-called 'humanitarian reset' – which is unfolding alongside other multilateral reforms.

Gender justice stands in the middle of the current crisis. On one hand, it is being attacked, erased and disregarded under the pressure of cuts and political opposition. On the other, it remains central to the effective risk analysis and delivery of life-saving humanitarian action, including protection. Gender norms – that is, expectations around which roles and behaviours are acceptable for men and women – play a vital role in how people experience crises. They shape people's social, economic and political positioning prior to conflict and therefore their capacity to respond; they also shape the types of threats that people face, from conflict-related sexual violence, to forced recruitment of men into armed forces and groups, to sexual exploitation and abuse in shelters and refugee camps. At the same time, gendered inequalities are also a key driver of crises and conflicts (Schulz, 2020). Understanding how gender norms influence and are influenced by conflict is therefore central to understanding how humanitarian action, and protection in particular, should be provided.

The centrality of protection has been a priority for the entire humanitarian enterprise for years already, but accounting for gender norms in the design and delivery of protection action requires in-depth analysis that embraces the complexity and multiplicity of people's roles and experiences – attention that it is not currently getting. This analysis must also be ongoing, given that norms tend to shift as social, political and economic systems are uprooted (Holloway et al., 2019; Cohen and Karim, 2022; Daigle, 2022; Holdmann et al., 2024). With limited resources and pressure to respond urgently, however, humanitarian actors often draw on seemingly neutral assumptions and stereotypes. These are themselves reflections of gender norms held by the humanitarian actors and woven into the humanitarian systems and institutions. As a result, humanitarians promulgate narrow understandings of roles, behaviours and attitudes that delimit who is seen as 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' – and therefore who requires protection or, conversely, poses a threat. As Levine et al. (2025: 9) show, vulnerability analysis has come to mean:

> Classification of who counts as vulnerable and then identifying who meets those criteria. Little attention is being paid to the processes that put some people at particular risk and how to mitigate them.

In particular, humanitarian actors tend to equate gender analysis with attention to women's needs, or – particularly when it comes to protection – to the risk of GBV. This narrow focus has led to several challenges, including a non-contextualised focus on specific vulnerable populations (e.g. displaced people) and vulnerabilities (e.g. GBV) (Cocking et al., 2022), as well as on women and children as a monolithic group of passive victims (Santcshi and Dong, 2023). Too often, this results in the overlooking of risks to particular groups of women and girls, like those with disabilities, refugee women or older

women; and to the LGBTQI+ community, and especially to lesbians, bisexual women and trans people; and to men and boys (Agerberg and Kreft, 2022). At the same time, it has entrenched a binary understanding of people's positions within crises as either victims or perpetrators of violence and/or other harms, requiring the intervention of outside agents of change for protection. The reality is that many individuals occupy all three positions – victim, perpetrator and agent of change – at various points in their experiences of conflict and violence, or even all at the same time, depending on their situations, relationships and other factors.

Strengthening gender norms analysis can therefore help humanitarian actors avoid inadvertently doing harm and aggravating the most acute risks civilians face (ICRC, 2024). It can also make protection action more effective to meet the needs of affected populations in their diversity (UN Women, 2025). For years, many actors in the sector, especially feminists and gender specialists, have worked to embed gender analysis and commitments to gender-responsive humanitarian action.[2] Likewise, protection actors have long advocated for the centrality of protection, achieving significant commitments from the wider humanitarian community, although these have yet to be comprehensively actioned.[3] The Global Protection Cluster (GPC) already stipulates 15 types of protection risks, and it acknowledges that gender plays a role in shaping many – if not all – of these risks and who is ultimately vulnerable to them (GPC, n.d.). Similarly, a note on professional standards for protection by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) clearly states the 'fundamental obligation for all actors doing protection work to avoid actions that could aggravate the situation of those they seek to help', a key component of this being understanding the social, political and cultural context – of which gender is a key part – and guarding against adverse distinction on the basis of sex, gender identity and a range of other intersecting identities (ICRC, 2024: 34).

The necessity for reform and more effective, integrated ways of working is greater than ever before, given the unprecedented scale of current conflicts and complex challenges to the international humanitarian system. Further obstacles are posed amidst a new wave of anti-gender politics and mobilisations globally, which are shaping people's ability to access rights and uphold their dignity on the basis of their gender, race, class and other characteristics. The protection system is faced with a challenge: how can humanitarians improve their understanding of gender norms and gender-responsive protection amidst such an existential crisis? The call for a humanitarian reset is an opportunity to tackle this question. At the same time, however, there is a real danger that this political and funding crisis will result in further pushback on gender justice in the sector, as some organisations begin to

2 From recent years, see the World Humanitarian Summit Core Commitments, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) policy and accountability frameworks and the IASC Gender Handbook, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Gender Equality Policy Marker, the G7's Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action, and the Generation Equality Forum's Women, Peace and Security–Humanitarian Action Compact.

3 See, for example, the IASC's 'Statement on the centrality of protection in humanitarian action' (2013), its overarching protection policy (2016), and its 'Action plan on the centrality of protection' (2023).

backtrack and pre-emptively fall in line. As Box 1 demonstrates, the humanitarian sector has a long history of resistance to the inclusion of gender analysis in its work, rooted in a narrow but persistent interpretation of humanitarian principles as conflicting with gender justice or feminist approaches.

As an interviewee succinctly noted, we are 'asking for complexity at the time of no money'. But achieving effective, high-quality protection as an outcome for people living in conflict does not have to cost more in terms of either money or time – rather, it means using an awareness of gender norms to embed gendered dimensions of risk across existing humanitarian response efforts (see section 4.1 on how resources are used more effectively this way).

Box 1 Gender and feminism in humanitarian action

Broadly, the international humanitarian system tends to equate 'gender' with 'women and girls', or even 'women and children', but meaningful **gender-responsive humanitarian action** requires much more than this – see Figure 1. While progress has been slow, especially relative to efforts by development, peacebuilding, human rights and place-based civil society actors, the relevance of gender to understanding crises and delivering effective responses is now established by myriad commitments, mechanisms and bodies – see footnote 2 above.

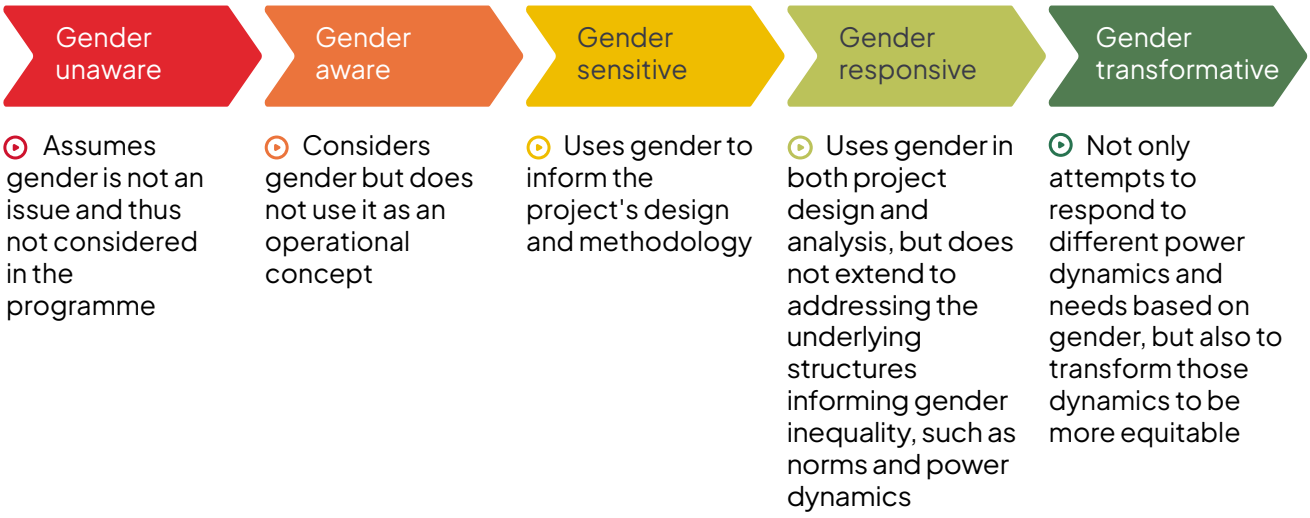
In recent years, this conflation of 'gender' with 'women' started to apply equally to 'feminist', as growing numbers of governments sought to apply feminist foreign policies to their humanitarian work and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) issued their own sets of feminist guidelines or principles, but with little real clarity around what a truly **feminist humanitarian action** might look like or how to differentiate it from previous approaches (Michalko, 2023; Daigle, 2024). There is little understanding that a feminist approach to humanitarian action would mean focusing on intersectional, relational and systemic factors; indeed, 'awareness is low that a feminist approach should bring changes to the systems through which humanitarian assistance is delivered and should challenge its patriarchal nature' (Daigle, 2024). While interest in feminist approaches may wane amidst the current slate of political and funding challenges, actors like the Feminist Humanitarian Network and allies inside mainstream humanitarian agencies continue to advocate for feminist approaches.

Humanitarian principles – in particular, **neutrality** and **impartiality** – are frequently cited as inhibitors to engaging meaningfully with gender and feminist approaches. Impartiality is viewed as grounds to oppose tailoring responses to meet the particular needs of groups, like women, girls or gender-diverse people, including but especially beyond the remit of protection. Neutrality is used to shut down consideration of issues perceived by humanitarians to be controversial, like safe abortion care or LGBTQI+ inclusion, although often without consultation with local communities or reference to local and national frameworks on those issues. However, these narrow interpretations are not settled readings of the principles and should not be allowed to act as constraints on the provision of needed assistance to populations at risk:

> The purpose of humanitarian principles is weakened if they are understood as constraints on ensuring people with the most urgent needs can overcome barriers to access. (Daigle, 2022)

Principled humanitarian action should be about reaching an already diverse, multifaceted population effectively.

Figure 1 A spectrum of approaches to gender



Source: Adapted from Butt et al. (2019)

1.1 The state of play for gender and protection

In practice, and despite commitments to the centrality of protection noted above, the international humanitarian response system's protection efforts have historically been siloed under the responsibility of the GPC since the establishment of the cluster system in 2005. It falls under the overarching responsibility of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and brings together a network of United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The GPC is divided into four areas

of responsibility (AoRs), each led by a UN agency or other organisation: gender-based violence (GBV); child protection; housing, land and property; and mine action. As will be discussed further in section 4.3, these AoRs are now likely to be consolidated into the main GPC as part of the humanitarian reset.

While the centrality of protection has been acknowledged through commitments noted above, many humanitarians still lack clarity about what protection means in practice, as Kirk et al. found (2025: 72):

> only 26% of recently surveyed practitioners [believe] that there is agreement on what 'putting protection at the heart of humanitarian action' entails.

When it comes to protection action, the analysis of how risks, threats and vulnerabilities interact (see Figure 2) can often be gender-unaware or rely on assumptions and narrative tropes, especially when protection actors have limited resources and feel the need to respond with a heightened sense of urgency.

This is despite the inclusion of gender into some of the sector's guidance documents and tools for good practices. For example, according to the GPC guidance note on risk, people can be denied resources or access to humanitarian aid due to discrimination and stigmatisation based on race, gender, sexuality, religion and other factors. The document further highlights that factors that need to be observed to assess this risk include 'structural factors such as poor governance, discriminatory social and gender norms and practice, discriminatory laws or customary practices denying access or decision-making to land, household property, decent work or financial resources' (GPC, 2023).

Figure 2 Protection risk equation developed by InterAction

Source: Adapted from InterAction's protection risk equation (GPC, 2021)

Yet other protection guidance documents and reports are silent on gender. For example, the protection analytical framework from the GPC mentions gender only twice, and neglects, for example, the consideration of unequal and harmful gender norms underpinning threats facing affected populations (Michele et al., 2021).

1.2 What are gender norms?

Gender norms are social expectations that prescribe 'appropriate' roles for men and women, not only in their homes, marriages and families but also in public life, work, community organisations and even in the context of armed conflict. These norms relate to widely held (but socially constructed) perceptions of men and women's relative capacities and skills – for example, as they relate to political leadership, ability to carry out military operations, peacebuilding or the provision of care (Demerit et al., 2014 cited in Holdmann et al., 2024).

When individuals are seen to be rejecting, defying or simply not meeting gender norms, they can be at risk of discrimination, social exclusion and even violence (Daigle, 2022). Over time, norms become 'invisible guardrails' (Wilchins, 2020) that appear natural and common-sensical, infused into legal, political and economic systems and institutions like the state, schools, armed groups, NGOs and the UN (Harper et al., 2020). Gender also intersects with other forms of power and difference, including race, class, age and sexuality. People who face multiple, intersecting forms of oppression can therefore experience compounding and distinctive exclusions, and – importantly for transnational humanitarian response – expectations and experiences can vary cross-culturally and over time (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2020).

Broadly, gender norms tend to operate on an assumed binary distinction between men and women – who are also presumed to be heterosexual – but this is not universal (Myrttinen and Daigle, 2017). People with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)[4] are excluded from 'appropriate' norms and experience intense marginalisation as a result (Connell, 2016; Hilhorst et al., 2018; Wright, 2020; Hagen et al., 2023).

1.3 About this paper

While there is considerable research on gendered risks and vulnerabilities that people face in conflict, there is to date very little available evidence on how this knowledge has informed humanitarian policy and practice, and how the implicit gender norms that have been built into the humanitarian system over decades interact with the situation on the ground.

4 The acronym LGBTQI+ and its variants (e.g., LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA+) are widely used and recognised, but they have also drawn criticism for excluding non-western, culturally specific identities. These acronyms may also 'not ring true for people who see sexual orientation as a set of sexual, affective and social practices rather than identities' (Myrttinen and Daigle, 2017: 9). A newer acronym – SOGIESC – is often used, especially in UN spaces, to circumvent these concerns, but it does not actually designate a particular group of people given that all people have a sexual orientation and gender identity. In this paper, we therefore qualify our use of SOGIESC by adding 'diverse', and we use it interchangeably with LGBTQI+.

This paper sets the stage for a three-year research project on gender norms and humanitarian protection. The research seeks two main objectives. Firstly, it sets out to expand humanitarian and protection actors' understanding of gender norms and their impact on humanitarian crises (with a focus on conflict) and humanitarian response by challenging the often uncritical deployment of terms like victim, perpetrator and agent of change; ultimately the paper strives to foster more nuanced, inclusive and effective humanitarian and protection action as a result. Secondly, it seeks to assess how the humanitarian system could address the systemic features that drive this approach to gender norms and protection in the context of rising anti-gender politics and crisis of multilateralism as reflected in the cutting of humanitarian funding.

In this paper we draw on a non-exhaustive survey of available academic and grey literature, as well as interviews with a purposive sample of nine key actors in the field of gender and protection from academia, INGOs and the UN system. Lastly, we draw on insights from a Geneva-based stakeholder engagement session held in May 2025, which brought together more than 30 representatives of donor governments, UN bodies and civil society organisations.

The paper is organised into three sections. Following this introduction, in Chapter 2 we overview the state of the sector and attacks on gender, diversity, inclusion and humanitarian response sector broadly writ. Then, in Chapter 3 we introduce three key tropes – victim, perpetrator and agent of change – that characterise (and limit) meaningfully gender-responsive ways of working. An understanding of these leads to the stakeholder insights in the final substantive chapter. This explores how humanitarians can achieve more gender-responsive, inclusive and effective humanitarian and protection action as part of the ongoing humanitarian reset, by rooting out the normative stereotypes and assumptions that have become embedded in the system.

2 A shifting geopolitical terrain

The shuttering of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in early 2025 sent shockwaves through the international humanitarian sector. As the largest humanitarian donor and a central architect of the international multilateral system, the US is at the centre of the current turmoil in the sector, but it is not the only actor currently drawing back support. In fact, financial and rhetorical challenges to humanitarian assistance, gender justice and diversity have been ongoing for some time already. Here, we briefly summarise the current geopolitical context and the multiple, overlapping crises shaping the context in which protection action must take place. These developments are unavoidably becoming part of our research and provide a tumultuous, ever-evolving backdrop to the reflections we offer in this paper.

2.1 Constricted funding and programming environments

The current landscape of humanitarian funding has reached a critical low point, following a declining trend starting in 2023 and a steep drop in 2024 (Pearson et al., 2025). This deterioration has been exacerbated by significant funding cuts from multiple major donors, most notably the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Sweden, Germany and Belgium (ICVA, 2025). In Sweden, for example, a large portion of development aid was redirected to address domestic costs related to refugees and migrants, leading to sharp declines in support for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and core funding to UNFPA. The funding cuts have been driven by a combination of factors, including domestic fiscal pressures, political shifts and the re-evaluation of foreign policy priorities (ibid.).

Arguably the most devastating – both in scope and nature – has been US President Donald Trump's signing of Executive Order 14169 in January 2025, which initiated a 90-day funding 'pause' to reassess development projects' alignment with US interests. The pause was effective from 24 January and excluded military assistance to Egypt and Israel, as well as emergency food aid. Subsequent exemptions on 28 January allowed for certain humanitarian programmes but explicitly excluded activities related to family planning, abortion, gender, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and administrative costs beyond those essential for life-saving aid (ICVA, 2025).

The termination of over 80% of USAID-funded programmes has effectively gutted a six-decade-old agency that was a major funder of gender concerns like SRHR (albeit with the notable exception of safe abortion care) and GBV response. The Trump administration also issued a mandate that the federal government recognise only 'two sexes, male and female' (The White House, 2025), reflecting its anti-gender politics. The attack on DEI led to restricting the use of federal funds for gender-related programming and activities, including SRHR, which will unquestionably put women, girls, LGBTQI+ people and other marginalised groups at risk (Miolene, 2025; Harper et al., 2025).

Several other key funders are joining the US in rolling back on commitments to gender justice. The Netherlands – previously one of the largest funders of women's organisations and LGBTQI+

communities – similarly announced major cuts in February 2025 that explicitly eliminate support for women's rights and gender justice, which will be especially felt by smaller gender actors in the recipient countries (Global Philanthropy Project, 2024; Rutgers, 2025). The UK, despite previous assurances that aid levels would be protected, announced a £117 million reduction, diverting funds towards defence spending (ICVA, 2025). The UK's Minister of State for International Development indicated in May that cuts are likeliest to fall on 'education and gender' – a statement widely condemned by humanitarian and development actors (see GADN, 2025). Belgium, Finland, France, Germany and Switzerland have also announced major spending reductions; while these have not explicitly targeted gender, previous patterns indicate that gender is often among the first areas to see cuts in the face of financial constraints (Development Initiatives, 2023; ICVA, 2025).

Ongoing cuts are forcing the humanitarian sector to ration resources, make painful choices about who receives aid, and pursue operational reforms. It is against this background that Emergency Response Coordinator Tom Fletcher proposed what he terms a humanitarian reset to recalibrate aid delivery amid growing crises and shrinking budgets (IASC, 2025). Yet the very language of a 'reset' has elicited critical scrutiny from local humanitarian organisations and civil society groups who argue that the term may reflect the limits of the ambition behind it. Unlike reform, a reset does not imply deep structural change, but rather a return to default settings, or a 'back to basics' approach, in a system already prone to self-preservation (Loy, 2025). However, without a genuine transformation, there's a real risk that this so-called reset will fall short of advancing gender-responsive protection outcomes.

2.2 Anti-gender mobilisations and backlash

Cuts to gender-responsive humanitarian action are just one manifestation of widespread global anti-gender politics and backlash (Harper et al., 2025). While humanitarian action tends to position itself as apolitical, the sector's dependency on political actors such as states and multilaterals makes it directly vulnerable to the political objectives of anti-gender actors. The link between humanitarianism and anti-gender politics is well demonstrated in the actions of the current US administration (Harper, 2024; Townley, 2025). Dozens of Trump administration executive orders targeting gender, diversity and inclusion mirror the anti-gender politics of Project 2025 (Cruz et al., 2025; Shao et al., 2025) and seek to restrict and remove the human rights – including SRHR – of LGBTQI+ people (Datta, 2025), seen in the reinstating of the Mexico City Policy (Global Gag rule) and reinvigorating the Geneva Declaration, both of which are anti-abortion.

The anti-gender movement is a network of civil society organisations, think tanks, political actors, businesses and academics that is global in scope and reach and woven together financially as well as ideologically (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). It is extremely well resourced through Russian oligarchs, various religious bodies and churches such as the Vatican, Russian Orthodox Church or US Evangelicals, and some governments (Datta, 2021). These funds far outstrip philanthropic and other support for gender justice, and have allowed significant anti-gender gains over the last decade (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020; 2024). Ideologically, the movement is united by its opposition to so-called 'gender ideology' – an empty signifier invented to stoke fears and social anxieties, uniting relatively

disparate actors in their opposition to gender equality since the 1990s (Graff and Korolczuk, 2021; Korolczuk et al., 2025). Such efforts to re-establish and preserve inequalities have deep roots tied to historical forms of resistance and diverse struggles for equity (Butler, 2024; Ojeda et al., 2024).

In addition to the evocation of 'gender ideology', some of the key features of anti-gender politics include the co-optation of anti-colonial discourses by framing calls for equality as western neocolonial impositions. This narrative disregards decades-long struggles by women and queer people for equality. The centrality of coloniality and the simplistic, binary understanding of gender underscores yet another connection to the humanitarian sector. Humanitarian actors are equally challenged by the coloniality of their practices and structures, which is seen in the push for greater localisation and – as will be discussed in subsequent sections – through calls for more nuanced and in-depth understanding of assumptions behind the key concepts of victims, perpetrators and agents of change.

With their targeting of humanitarian advocacy, achievement of rights and defence of law in the mandate of protection actors (Forsythe, 2001), anti-gender politics should therefore be a cause for concern for protection actors in particular and humanitarians in general. Anti-gender politics can have life-and-death impacts on individuals at the community level where humanitarian and protection actors operate. They can lead to the violent radicalisation of some men who seek to protect and defend their worldviews and thus perpetuate violence and harm to others (Copland, 2023). Populist conservative politicians can also stoke fear through social media platforms and disinformation campaigns, and weaponise existing unequal cisheteropatriarchal[5] gender norms and expectations, especially against those who also experience discrimination based on race or migration status (Sohr, 2023; Browne, 2024; Picq and Thiel, 2024). This leads to increased gendered risks and vulnerabilities in affected populations like trans and non-binary Ukrainians, who have faced mounting risks and challenges since the 2022 full-scale invasion by Russia, spearheaded by Vladimir Putin's transphobic and homophobic political regime (Norosky and Carpenter, 2024).

2.3 Self-censorship and programming shifts

The funding crisis, together with growing anti-gender politics, has triggered concerning responses from organisations dependent on these funding sources.

The most immediate impacts came in the form of the summary shutdown of many important initiatives relating to gender, diversity and inclusion formerly funded by USAID. For example, the International Rescue Committee's (IRC's) multi-year TRANSFORM project – a flagship technical innovation project to develop mechanisms for humanitarians to systematically embed SOGIESC considerations into conflict and displacement response – was scrapped just as it began to prepare its research and learning for publication to the benefit of the entire sector. Meanwhile, the GBV AoR's community of practice,

5 We use the term cisheteropatriarchy instead of patriarchy, building on the work of Gray and Dolan (2022) and others who highlight that patriarchy is not only based on the oppression of women but also of LGBTQI+ people. This is especially true in the current political moment.

also formerly funded by USAID, has been frozen, halting a critical space for coordination, technical exchange and support among practitioners. Our interviewees also pointed to the suspension of the GBV AoR Helpdesk and numerous other mechanisms that once supported gender-focused work. One interviewee highlighted the abruptness of the changes that took place:

> I can tell where the cuts are happening by which emails bounce right now. All the UNFPA, IRC and IMC [International Medical Corps] email addresses are disappearing.

At our stakeholder workshop, one government representative noted that cuts within the UN system seem to be happening haphazardly, without a clear logic – and without reference to gendered impacts:

> It has been quite challenging because of lack of information we've experienced. [...] We're being told that programmes are being cut because there's no money – but that on its own is not a reason to stop providing protection for women. [...] When you prioritise, what are your criteria? How do we know these cuts are in line with priorities we've agreed?

The impact is arguably far worse amongst women-led organisations (WLOs) based in crisis-affected settings. In a rapid survey of 411 WLOs in 44 crisis settings, UN Women described its own findings as 'stark':

> Ninety percent of surveyed organizations reported being financially impacted, with 47% expecting to shut down within six months if current conditions persist [...] Organizations report that programmes and services in GBV response (67%), protection (62%), livelihoods and multipurpose cash assistance (58%), and health care (52%) have been the most affected. (UN Women, 2025: 3; see also ICVA, 2025)

Thus, WLOs like the SEED Foundation in Kurdistan, which had been central to GBV prevention and response, have been effectively decimated by the cuts (Sharif, 2025).

While many have to make major financial decisions and review budgets, some are scrambling to align with this new political climate, often 'obeying in advance' by erasing DEI-related content from their websites on their own initiative (Loy, 2025). Across the sector, organisations are removing language related to gender, LGBTQI+ inclusion and DEI from public materials, internal strategies and funding proposals in an attempt to safeguard eligibility for remaining US funds and in anticipation of other donors' cuts. For example, the IRC has removed the DEI page of its website – previously part of the 'who we are' section – and taken down a Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion action plan, yearly diversity progress reports, and both a DEI strategy document and its summary (ibid.). According to web archive records, this content had been removed by 30 January. Similarly, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has scrubbed its website of references to SRHR, GBV, LGBTQI+ and DEI in apparent efforts to avert US funding cuts (Lynch, 2025). While it can be argued that such self-censorship strategies are merely superficial and aim to safeguard against further cuts, they risk smuggling in substantive regressions on underlying values and diluting or even abandoning the core aims of the work.

2.4 Implications for humanitarian legitimacy and purpose

The global crackdown on gender is not happening in isolation: the international humanitarian system now faces a deep crisis of credibility, as criticism of hypocrisy and double standards in the application of international humanitarian law (IHL) and the humanitarian principles has become routine. This is most starkly illustrated by the contrast in responses to Ukraine and Gaza, as well as in the neglect of crises like that in Sudan. Political actors are often prioritising access over broader political solutions such as ceasefires, placing humanitarian actors under intensifying political pressure and forcing them into ever more constrained and contested spaces. A recent NGO statement on protection of civilians reported that parties to conflict – including states – are 'intentionally undermining the international norms and standards designed to protect civilians from the conduct of war and are deliberately violating International Humanitarian Law' (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025). In Gaza, Human Rights Watch highlights that Israel's obstruction of life-saving aid 'contravenes the [ICJ's] legally binding orders' to allow humanitarian relief (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Navigating this terrain requires acknowledging both the political nature of the humanitarian endeavour and the urgent need to resist double standards, particularly where more sensitive issues such as protection, rights-based approaches and gender justice agendas are at risk of being deprioritised given the overarching backslide on rights.

This crisis is not external to the humanitarian sector; it is reshaping it from within. The international humanitarian system's most common answers to these challenges have exerted downward pressure on gender-responsive humanitarian action, including in the protection space. Reform processes like the Grand Bargain, the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative and the Flagship Initiative have not kept pace with the scale of current political and normative regression (Swithern, 2024). These mechanisms also remain largely gender-unaware, failing to challenge the paternalistic and colonial logics of the aid system (Daigle, 2024). Many donors and agencies are retreating to a 'back to basics' approach focused on a narrow vision of immediate needs and traditional mandates, which has tended to facilitate positioning gender as an optional add-on rather than a core component of effective and meaningful humanitarian response. Such an approach also fails to acknowledge protection as central to humanitarian action (Davies et al., 2025). As another stakeholder observed:

> Back to basics is terrifying because, 20 years ago, we knew that the basics just weren't good enough.

Several major humanitarian organisations, including UNHCR and the ICRC, have long voiced concerns that engaging in gender-responsive work may compromise their perceived neutrality and impartiality (see Box 1). Operational staff often frame core humanitarian principles as barriers to deeper engagement with gendered power dynamics and social norms (Daigle, 2022). This caution contributes to the sector's ongoing reluctance to acknowledge how its own structures reinforce cisheteropatriarchal systems (Fal-Dutra Santos, 2019; Abellán Merelo de Barberá et al., 2022).

3 Challenging restrictive narratives in gender and protection

Despite the rocky terrain outlined above, the primary mission of humanitarian organisations is still to provide protection and assistance to affected populations facing the greatest risk. However, the process of identifying these populations and designing solutions is too often shaped by limiting and essentialising narratives about who is the *victim* of gendered risks and harms, who *perpetrates* these harms, and who has the power and agency to make a positive *change* – a clear set of distinctions that belies the messy reality of overlapping identities, experiences, vulnerabilities and capacities. Yet conducting meaningful and context-specific analyses is perceived as costly and time-consuming, which leads humanitarian agencies to rely on assumptions and stereotypes for quick decision-making and triage, 'us[ing] gender – or ideas about what qualities and attributes constitute men and women – to make life-and-death decisions' (Cohen and Karim, 2022: 426). These tropes are underpinned by gender norms that transcend humanitarian crises and facilitate the construction of rigid 'female victim–male perpetrator' or 'female victim–male protector' binaries (Carpenter, 2005; Johnson, 2011; Kronsell, 2016).

Here, we identify key gendered narratives that have shaped humanitarian protection to date: victims, perpetrators and agents of change. Across all three concepts, two underlying issues emerge. First is the propensity of humanitarian actors to treat gender as synonymous with women, leading to perceptions of women as universal victims or benevolent peacebuilders (Shepherd, 2011; Daigle, 2022; Sapiano et al., 2024). Men on the other hand are often viewed without a gender lens and are thus both invisible as subjects of gendered protection needs but also hypervisible as perpetrators (Myrttinen, 2023). Second is the unspoken linearity of change in the humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding spaces – be it from conflict to peace, or from victim to agent of change, which reflects 'familiar notions of war as a state of exception' (Dolan et al., 2020: 1162). As we discuss throughout this chapter, people of all genders can occupy all these roles at various points, or even simultaneously, throughout a conflict or crisis – and throughout their lives.

We elucidate the harmful fallacies of these narrative assumptions and the need to address the factors that drive their use, recognising that the current moment and calls for humanitarian reset might represent an opportunity to do so. Understanding these tropes and the gender norms that underpin them paves the way to humanitarian and protection actors being better able to provide gender-responsive and effective action.

3.1 Victims

Classifications of victimhood are established through mapping tools and categorisation systems. These guide the planning, monitoring and implementation of aid programmes for those deemed 'eligible victims' (Bolotta, 2020). The 1985 UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power defines victims broadly as persons who suffer harm, including physical or mental injury,

emotional suffering, or economic loss, due to acts that violate criminal laws or constitute gross human rights violations (General Assembly resolution 40/34). Similarly, the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law extends this definition to include those harmed by gross violations of international human rights or serious breaches of IHL (General Assembly resolution 60/147). In other words, a 'victim' is understood as someone who is or has been affected, injured or killed as a result of a crime or accident, or who has been cheated or tricked (Meredith, 2009).

Although these humanitarian frameworks present victimhood as an objective, universal and neutral concept, in practice it is shaped by complex moral, political and ethical tensions and subjective perceptions of powerlessness and vulnerability (see also Box 2). There is often a disconnect between theoretical ideals and real-world applications, as well as between self-identification and externally imposed labels of victimhood. Perceptions of victim status are highly fluid, shifting across different historical and cultural settings, and are influenced by diverse actors, religious beliefs, political dynamics and gender norms (Ronsbo and Jensen, 2014).

Box 2 'Victim' versus 'survivor' in GBV discourse

In humanitarian policy and operational guidance, the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' are both commonly used to describe individuals who have experienced GBV. Many official guidelines treat these terms as functionally equivalent. For instance, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) GBV Pocket Guide defines 'Victim/Survivor' inclusively and notes that the terms are often used interchangeably (IASC, 2023: 4). Broader inter-agency guidance clarifies that 'victim' tends to be preferred in legal and clinical contexts, while 'survivor' is more frequently used in psychosocial and protection work (IASC, n.d.). Despite this operational flexibility, the choice of terminology carries significant connotations. The term 'victim' when used to describe individuals who have endured sexual violence often evokes negative characteristics such as weakness, powerlessness and vulnerability (Papendick and Bohner, 2017). In contrast, the use of 'survivor' grew out of feminist critiques that challenged the passivity implied by 'victim', instead emphasising resistance and agency (O'Shea et al., 2024). As such, the label 'survivor' elicits imagery of strength, recovery, and overcoming trauma (Papendick and Bohner, 2017).

Importantly, this distinction is not without complexity and cross-cultural tensions that shape the political meaning and use of the terms in places like Colombia:

> Achieving recognition of both the existence of the armed conflict and victimhood has constituted part of long-term fights by social movements in the country against denial, impunity, and state violence. In that sense, in Colombia, the term victim has also been claimed by the various social movements to which the diverse groups of victims belong as a potential site of power. (Sanchez Parra, 2024: 23; see also Van Dijk, 2009; Krystalli, 2021)

Academic literature also underscores the complexity of how individuals self-identify after experiencing sexual violence. The act of labelling, whether by oneself or others, carries social, cultural and political implications that can influence recovery, recognition and the types of support received (Parker and Mahlstedt, 2010).

3.1.1 Women as 'ideal victims': understanding vulnerability and agency

Christie's (1986) concept of the 'ideal victim' suggests that public and institutional recognition of victimhood is shaped by perceptions of innocence, passivity, vulnerability and helplessness, qualities more readily attributed to women and girls. This framework influences humanitarian and legal approaches to vulnerability in conflict settings, often erasing the complexity of victims' lived experiences and reinforcing traditional dichotomies that equate victimhood with femininity and agency with masculinity (Åhäll, 2012; Enloe, 2004). Framing women as either victims or agents represents an 'unnecessary and unsophisticated binary' (Alison, 2003: 52). Instead, empirical studies illustrate the complex realities of prolonged victimisation, where experiences of suffering and harm coexist with acts of resistance and self-determination (Kreft, 2019; Krystalli, 2021).

The widespread association of victimhood with women is deeply embedded in humanitarian and policy frameworks. Women tend to be viewed as the paradigmatic victims, while men are often cast as either heroic protectors or perpetrators (Carpenter, 2005). This feminisation of victimhood aligns with protective paternalism or the belief that men must shield and provide for the 'weaker sex' (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2000). As a result, international humanitarian responses prioritise women's suffering, as female victimhood elicits greater empathy and mobilises political will for intervention (Agerberg and Kreft, 2022). This discourse about vulnerability positions women as civilians deserving of aid, while implicitly excluding men from this status, particularly in conflict settings where men are associated with non-civilian status and violent masculinity is a marker of agency (Carpenter, 2005).

The construction of victimhood in humanitarian discourse is also deeply embedded in colonial and cisheteropatriarchal assumptions that frame women and girls from the Global South as inherently vulnerable and lacking agency. Rooted in colonial narratives of saviourism and continued through modern humanitarianism, this framing is perpetuated by western feminist discourses that universalise victimhood and erase local sociopolitical contexts (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1988). Humanitarian campaigns often rely on stereotypical imagery of passive, impoverished women to mobilise empathy, a practice that Doezema (2001) critiques as fostering a 'wounded attachment' to victim identities. This reinforces paternalistic logics, obscures structural inequalities, and sidelines local and indigenous voices in both discourse and policy (Welfens, 2023; Pinnington, 2023; see also 3.3.4 below).

A key issue underpinning these debates is the conceptualisation of vulnerability. Recent research questions these rigid categorisations and is instead seeing victims of gender violence during conflict as people who take action, by coping, resisting or responding to the harm they've experienced (Cubells and Calsamiglia, 2018; Kreft, 2019; Touquet and Schulz, 2021). However, despite these advances, binary

understandings of victimhood and agency persist, with individuals expected to occupy either one space or the other (Steans, 2021; Mardorossian, 2014). Viewing gender as a relational concept challenges this either/or framing by recognising that power is not fixed but shifts across different relationships and contexts. This assumption is particularly evident when survivors who engage in activism are described as having 'moved beyond victimhood to agency' (Manchanda, 2001), or as 'agents of positive change' in an assumed linear progression from passive victim to empowered actor (Andrabi, 2019: 8). The 2020 UN Secretary-General's report on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, for instance, highlights a survivor's 'exceptional journey from victim to activist' (Patten, 2020: 6), reinforcing the problematic notion that one must shed victimhood in order to claim agency.

3.1.2 Excluding men from the victim narrative

In the context of protection, the difficulty in seeing men in the 'victim space' is a product of several factors, including deep-seated gender norms tied to men and masculinities in conflict, post-conflict and displacement settings (Jones, 2004; Carpenter, 2005; Schulz, 2020; Touquet et al., 2020; Turner, 2021). These norms, adopted by humanitarian actors, tend to assume that men are either potentially involved in the conflict and violence or that they have power and agency over their lives and others. As a result, men tend not be approached as civilians or potential victims and people in need of protection. Palillo summarises this systemic feature of the sector, writing that 'humanitarian discourse serves as a powerful ideology in making male vulnerability essentially unimaginable' (2023: 7). This was underscored by an interviewee, who reflected on the experiences of refugee men coming to Europe, saying:

> There were tons of adolescent boys, and the programmes were same old same old. Not wanting to address protection needs even as boys were being raped, beat up, drowned, shot. But they were undeterred, and no one was talking to [the boys] as a vulnerable group, and how can we support you, and never through a gendered lens. Why don't you do activities for these boys?

These norms embedded in the humanitarian system are closely intertwined with wider societal views. For example, Kreft and Agerberg (2024) find that the public in the UK and the US consistently underestimate men's victimisation and ultimately find it more difficult to see male refugees as 'deserving' of protection. Marchetti and Palumbo (2021), Turner (2021) and Palillo (2023) have highlighted similar racialised bias. In Italy, for example, young male refugees and asylum seekers are often assumed to be 'fake' (Palillo, 2023). While attention to risks facing men and boys as refugees is beginning to grow in some circles, Turner (2021) warns that this ought to be situated within systemic power hierarchies between humanitarian actors and displaced populations, whose agency is often taken away through the application of a 'victim' lens.

One area where progress has been made in recognising men as victims – or at least as people in need of protection – is with regards to forced recruitment, especially of child soldiers by armed groups. Since the early 2000s, humanitarian and protection actors, as well as researchers, have brought to the fore the risks men and boys face *as men* – risks posed by armed actors (Palillo, 2023). For example, a study by UNFPA and Sonke Gender Justice (2012) revealed the experiences of boys in Liberia, Sierra Leone,

the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and other countries where, under the threat of violence to family members or to themselves, young boys were forced to join armed groups where they were often abused physically and psychologically.

Most visibility, however, has been given to sexual violence against men and boys in and outside of armed groups (Kirby, 2015). As a result of feminist scholarship and activism, the experiences of male survivors of this and other forms of GBV are now more frequently recognised and addressed, albeit still under-researched (Touquet et al., 2020; Myrttinen, 2023). This includes, for example, in detention centres and prisons, instances that are often classified as torture rather than as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).[6] Sexualised violence by men against other men and boys can be rooted in heteronormativity and driven by homophobia, and used to assert male dominance of the perpetrator and control over women and those that are feminised (Peet and Sjoberg, 2019). However, as Touquet et al. (2020) highlight, the impact of this violence on survivors is context-specific, depending on norms of masculinities in the local context, as well as the interventions that support these survivors.

The relatively low awareness of male survivors of GBV in some contexts can be exacerbated by high levels of stigma and shame that prevent some men from reporting this violence or seeking protection and assistance (Pilkington et al., 2025). Moreover, views of humanitarian and protection actors themselves can contribute to the lack of reporting and disclosure. An analysis of Bangladeshi protection actors working with refugees found that providers have very little awareness of sexual violence against men perpetrated by soldiers in Myanmar, due in part to the 'commonly accepted view in the Rohingya [and Bangladeshi] community that a man cannot be penetrated' (WRC, 2021a). Similarly, a Norwegian Red Cross and ICRC report highlights:

> Common harmful myths which e.g. suggest that men and boys cannot be victims/survivors of SGBV, and misconceptions around SGBV against men/boys and homosexuality also serve as obstacles to care. The latter is reportedly a widespread perception amongst victims/survivors themselves, their communities, but also humanitarian staff, including service providers. (2022: 42)

However, it ought to be underscored that good practices to support male victims have been identified, not least due to the experience of supporting women survivors, who continue to represent the vast majority of survivors of SGBV because of unequal cisheteropatriarchal norms, and who also face stigma and other negative consequences across cultural contexts and due to local perceptions of gender norms (Touquet et al., 2020).

Other gendered risks that men and boys face include abductions and disappearance, as documented for example by the Report of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances in Iraq (Amnesty International, 2023a), as well as torture and targeted killings. In the context of the current war in Ukraine, Norosky and Carpenter (2024) show how civilian men are put at risk through the imposed

6 Throughout this paper, GBV and SGBV are used depending on the context, and usually in alignment with the source(s) referenced.

travel ban forbidding men between certain ages to leave the country. As a result, men are not able to exercise their right as objectors, but in some parts of the country face threats of violence from the Russian military, as they are seen primarily as potential – or actually conscripted – soldiers.

If some men and boys are not seen as having vulnerabilities based on gender norms and other characteristics in a specific context, then humanitarian and protection actors can and do fail to provide life-saving assistance and protection to those who need it without bias and according to IHL (Spoljaric, 2023). Indeed, assuming that all men and boys are unlikely to be in need of protection because they do not fit the gendered notions of an ideal victim can lead to harm and loss of life for some men and boys (Peet and Sjoberg, 2019; Palillo, 2023; Norosky and Carpenter, 2024).

3.1.3 Risks to LGBTQI+ communities and people with diverse SOGIESC

The humanitarian system has historically operated within a heteronormative framework that significantly compromises its ability to see, much less address, the protection needs of LGBTQI+ individuals in crisis settings. This approach not only renders diverse LGBTQI+ people invisible in humanitarian responses but also exposes them to heightened risks of violence, discrimination and exclusion during emergencies.

LGBTQI+ individuals and others with diverse SOGIESC face numerous protection risks in humanitarian contexts that are often unaddressed or exacerbated by existing response mechanisms, including discrimination, violence and exclusion, before, during and after disasters and conflict. These manifestations are often profound, undermining people's potential to develop resilient and dignified lives, and to survive and recover from shocks (Dwyer, 2020). Their vulnerability is further exacerbated within the hyper-masculine context of armed conflict, where heteronormativity is prevalent and armed actors frequently seek to regulate appropriate gendered behaviour (Myrttinen and Daigle, 2017; Rossouw, 2021). LGBTQI+ persons and individuals with diverse SOGIESC, whether self-identified or perceived by others, are often made victims of extreme forms of violence, frequently targeted specifically because of their non-conforming sexual orientation or gender identity (ibid.).

Although these initiatives are now under pressure due to the political attacks referenced in Chapter 2 above, many UN agencies and INGOs had visibly recognised Pride Month, issued public statements affirming support for LGBTQI+ rights, and trialled some programmatic initiatives. For example, UNHCR and IOM have engaged in operational work on SOGIESC inclusion for nearly a decade. Since at least 2015, UNHCR in Jordan has implemented targeted trainings and designated LGBTQI+ focal points to strengthen service delivery and protection for LGBTQI+ refugees. UNHCR has also played a key role in resettling LGBTQI+ individuals fleeing persecution based on their identity. Nonetheless, LGBTQI+ individuals remain largely excluded from formal relief programming, frequently depending on informal networks of solidarity and support from within the LGBTQI+ community itself (Larkin, 2020; Camminga, 2021; Reda and Proudfoot, 2021). An interviewee similarly recounted how INGOs operating in Uganda – including a country director – were unequivocal in their refusal to engage on risks to LGBTQI+ communities, citing risks to access:

> What we witnessed was the SOGI[ESC] community going from being a marginalised group like so many others, to being an excluded group by the international humanitarian sector.

Numerous studies have documented the experiences of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people, and all of these highlight the heteronormative design of humanitarian programmes and repeated failures to give more than a passing mention to the particular needs of people with diverse SOGIESC in terms of needs assessment or substantive guidance (see Balgos et al., 2012; Nyanzi, 2013; Rumbach and Knight, 2014; Myrttinen and Daigle, 2017; Holloway et al., 2019; Dwyer, 2020; Roth et al., 2021; Daigle et al., 2023).

In both research and practice, humanitarians also generally fail to adequately recognise and address diversity within the range of people covered by the phrases 'people with diverse SOGIESC' or 'LGBTQI+ communities', focusing instead on the needs of and initiatives led by gay men, with little consideration for lesbian and bisexual women (cisgender or otherwise), trans men or non-binary people (Moore, 2019; Dwyer, 2020; Samuels et al., 2021; Jolly, 2023). One of our interviewees concurred, noting that this is another example of conformity to gender norms:

> [Programming] is always about gay men and trans women – they ignore lesbians, trans men and bisexual people. The gender norms are still in there. The LGBTQI+ work tends to be about gay men.

3.2 Perpetrators

Worldwide, men perpetuate the vast majority of cases of GBV against people of all genders, be it in their roles as combatants or as intimate partners, to name just a couple of examples (Myrttinen et al., 2025). Women, on the other hand, represent the majority of 'civilian casualties, victims of physical and sexual abuse, and sufferers of long-term health and economic hardship' (Peet and Sjoberg, 2019: 45). It is therefore not surprising that because humanitarian and protection actors tend to adopt a gender lens in the specific context of the prevention of GBV against women and girls (Michelis, 2023; Myrttinen et al., 2025; UN Women, 2025), the systemic and most common approach to men is that of a (potential) protection threat as perpetrators of violence (Wright, 2020). However, relying solely on this gendered notion of perpetrators can lead to a failure to recognise other sources of gendered risk and potential ways to reduce them.

3.2.1 Men as a protection risk

There are several underlying reasons that drive humanitarian and protection actors' focus on men as perpetrators and a threat. First is the already mentioned focus on the protection of women and girls against GBV perpetuated by men, and the militarised, harmful or violent forms of masculinities that are tied to it. In other words, there is implicit assumption that men's gender roles as protectors, warriors, soldiers or dominating patriarchs mean that the majority of men commit violent behaviours to meet the expectations of being a man in a context of crisis or conflict. As Schulz has summarised:

> Most dominant research on men and masculinities in the context of war focuses on the 'violences

> of men' (Hearn 1998) and the linkages between (militarized) masculinities and the various forms of aggression and violence associated with them. All too often these examinations have (re)produced an unreconstructed view of men as universal aggressors and women as universal victims during armed conflicts (2020: 7).

It ought to be recognised that cisheteropatriarchal norms in many contemporary societies set the societal ideals for men to be physically strong, assertive, dominant and dominating, heterosexually virile and protectors of their families, communities and nations (Peet and Sjoberg, 2019; Katz, 2025). As a result, men are both socially and politically enabled, and also expected, to perpetrate various acts of violence against other people to demonstrate their acceptable ways of being a man (Henry, 2017; Cohen and Karim, 2022).

However, as has been discussed, norms are neither universal nor static, and alternative, peaceful, equitable ways of being a man are also a reality in various contexts. The simplified assumption of men's cisheteropatriarchal gendered roles disregards three key considerations:

- First is the impact of other intersecting forms of power on shaping diverse men and boys' lived experiences, including race/ethnicity, religion, disability, age or sexuality, which ultimately result in multiple forms of masculinities and their relations to the domination of women (Hagen et al., 2023; UNFPA EECARO, 2023). As Henry (2017) highlights, intersectionality as a concept developed from the lived experiences of poor, black women, and coined by Crenshaw (1991), has been increasingly used in critical military studies to dehomogenise and add nuance to militarised masculinities. However, it has not always been used in accordance with the concept's transformative, radical political and epistemic origins.
- Second, it neglects systemic factors like poverty, political systems and the conflict itself (Harper et al., 2020; Peacock et al., 2025). In their study of the South Sudanese armed cattle-keeping groups, the ICRC highlights that older men and local economic and political elite men play a key role in shaping the behaviours of younger men, who are often mobilised to participate in armed activities along ethnic lines in exchange for provisions and other needs (Terry and McQuinn, 2018).
- Lastly, this view neglects to consider men's political positions against GBV and other forms of violence. For example, men who are conscientious objectors reject participating in armed conflict and violence and thus challenge the normative expectations of what 'real' men should be doing in the context of conflict (Recalde Escobar and Parra Macías, 2023; Norosky and Carpenter, 2024). Men can also be supporters of gender equality and women's rights in peacebuilding (Yousaf and Peacock, 2023) and equally transgress the unequal cisheteropatriarchal hierarchies among men, women and gender-diverse groups.

While it is essential to address men's SGBV and the related norms that drive it, understanding men's behaviour purely from this lens can lead humanitarian actors to neglect analysing and addressing other masculine norms that can also result in protection risks, such as the pressures to be breadwinners and providers. Gender norms tied to men's role as protectors of the family and nation, or providers of safety, food and shelter, go hand-in-hand. For example, some men who are not directly participating

in a conflict by fighting, but are unable to find employment to meet their families' and societies' expectations to provide for their families, might be more likely to try to join the conflict economy, or find ways to cope with not meeting these expectations that may be harmful to themselves and others (Hilhorst, 2015). Therefore, not analysing and addressing all gender norms in their complexity and failing to go beyond GBV can exacerbate protection risks.

Humanitarian interventions to address these gender norms and risks can be effective. For example, in conflict contexts where men and boys might join armed groups for economic reasons, livelihoods support can steer them away from this choice, thereby reducing the risk of violence to themselves and the local community (see Davies et al., 2024a). However, such interventions are often neglected by humanitarian actors.

Another factor that drives humanitarians' focus on men in conflict and crisis settings as (potential) perpetrators of violence is systemic racism towards men in and from countries of the Global South, including refugees and displaced people (Kreft and Agerberg, 2024). The humanitarian system is riddled with western-centric, racialised assumptions about the societies (in the Global South) from which these men come. These societies and men are problematically assumed to be more patriarchal, conservative or traditional – and thus more violent and dominating – than those societies from which many humanitarian actors come in the Global North (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2023). Racist prejudices against men are further in evidence in forms of discrimination that see young, single men – often including unaccompanied minors – as especially dangerous, in the context of people on the move and arriving in the Global North. This overlooks the fact that youth is in fact a source of vulnerability for men and boys, as underlined by a report from the Norwegian Red Cross and the ICRC:

> In particular, unaccompanied or separated children, children in detention, child migrants, or children associated with the armed forces or armed groups may face heightened exposure to SGBV due to the combination of their young age and the risks associated with the particular humanitarian context. (2022: 29)

The last factor of mention is the prevalence of gendered tropes in state and military institutions, and by extension in many state-centric multilateral organisations which shape the humanitarian system and provide the context in which humanitarian and protection actors operate (Henry, 2017; Holvikivi, 2021). For example, state and non-state actors that are parties to various conflicts often mobilise gender norms, including certain forms of masculinities, in nationalist narratives of war and conflict (Terry and McQuinn, 2018). These narratives can include myths about men's presumed (biological) propensity for violence or can seek to mobilise men's gender roles as protectors and warriors to increase their participation in conflict or women's support for men taking up arms (Peet and Sjoberg, 2019).

3.2.2 Forgetting other perpetrators and solutions

While men as perpetrators of gendered harms do represent a key protection concern, the lack of in-depth analysis of power relations and conflict dynamics can cause humanitarian actors to

neglect protection risks (i.e. risks of sexual exploitation and abuse) posed by other actors, including humanitarians themselves, peacekeepers and other aid workers. It can also lead to oversight of the violence and other harm perpetrated by women and gender-diverse individuals.

Violence perpetrated by male humanitarians and peacekeepers is increasingly recognised and documented (Gilder, 2023; Abdi, 2025). As one of our informants highlighted, the root causes include the fact that protection actors always bring into a conflict situation a new set of power relations that are conducive to exploitation of vulnerabilities and abuse. The vast number of cases of sexual abuse by men UN peacekeepers against women and girls in the DRC or Haiti, for example, demonstrates this challenge, despite a stated zero-tolerance policy and the provision of gender training (Westendorf, 2023a, 2023b; Westendorf et al., 2024; Peacekeeper Perpetrated Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, n.d.). These trainings narrowly take gender to mean women and thus contribute to the lack of reflections on the role that masculinities play in the military and other peacekeeping institutions (Holvikivi, 2021; Weber, 2023).

Military and state actors' approach to gender norms also shapes the operational landscape for protection actors regarding conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), and more specifically the dominant narratives about rape and other forms of CRSV as weapons of war. This understanding has meant that CRSV is often detached from unequal gender norms and harmful, violent practices that occur regardless of the conflict dynamics, and is not understood as being due in part to gender norms within the local context and armed groups. As Wood (2018) highlights, because CRSV is not solely a strategic tool of war, solutions to protect women and girls in conflict contexts need to tackle the power relations and norms that drive SGBV more broadly. Human Security Report concurs, as most sexual violence in conflict is perpetuated 'domestically' rather than by armed actors (Human Security Report Project, 2012: 4) and therefore protection actors need to move beyond the focus on (men) conflict actors.

Women can also be active perpetrators of violence, although the gendered tropes of passive and vulnerable victims elaborated in section 3.1 above tend to mean that humanitarian and policy actors can only comprehend women's participation in conflict as unwilling and coerced actors, forcibly recruited to provide care for the warring groups and often victims themselves of GBV. This world view aligns with western understanding of binary divides between femininities and masculinities as attached to men and women and therefore any transgressions of this understanding are incompatible with the system. Yet, in reality, women's participation in conflict is complex, as some women join armed groups as fighters through personal conviction and choice (Mazurana, 2008) and thus are not always peacemakers and peace promoters, and do not fit into what Cohen and Karim (2022: 419) highlight as the problematic assumption that 'women are (always) feminine and men are (always) masculine', when in fact women combatants can embody traits and expectations that are coded in predominant western narratives as masculine, such as assertiveness and strength (Weber, 2023).

Thus, Gentry and Sjoberg (2015) highlight instances of women's violence, including the US military women involved in cases of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq; Chechen *shakhidki*, or female holy warriors, dubbed 'black widows' by the Russian government and international media; women suicide

bombers in the Palestinian liberation movement; and the women who directed and participated in genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. In Lebanon, Palestine and South Africa, women fighters have even been used strategically by some armed actors to gain support and legitimacy for their armed struggles (Loken, 2021), while women fighters in Kurdistan and Ukraine have also received positive news coverage (see, for example, Santoire, 2023; Frada, 2024; GPPAC, 2025).

Women may also incite or participate in other forms of violence and harm that are engendered in conflict contexts – gang violence, such as in South Sudan (Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2024); early and forced marriage, which has emerged as a strategy ostensibly to protect young girls from GBV in places such as Afghanistan (Safi et al., 2024); and human trafficking, for example in Central Asia (McCarthy, 2020).

Women can be enablers and supporters of violence even without transgressing traditional gender norms, for example through their roles as mothers, carers or labourers. In Ukraine, women often support military efforts or encourage their male family members to join the war and thus uphold patriarchal masculine norms (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen, 2017; Norosky and Carpenter, 2024). Similarly, Levine (2020) describes the role of songs sung by women at community events like weddings and engagements in the former Federally Administered Tribal Area of Pakistan, which sketched out ideal forms of masculinity and femininity, glorifying violence and even the act of killing, and how the importance of such songs has shifted over the course of displacement and return (see also Sanauddin, 2015). Davies et al. (2024b) likewise find that women in South Sudan were sometimes known to use their social roles as mothers to celebrate the use of violence and ridicule young men who refused to participate in raids.

This presents a much more complex and nuanced picture than the traditional trope of women as victims – and as couched in vulnerability and passivity – would suggest. If humanitarian and protection actors remain blinkered about women's roles as perpetrators of violence and other harms – roles they may hold while at the same time being subject to protection risks themselves – then the full breadth of affected people's risks and capacities will continue to be overlooked.

3.3 Agents of change

Humanitarian protection is premised on the reduction of risk, but where women living in conflict-affected settings are read as actual or potential victims and men are similarly understood as perpetrators, this raises an important question: who is positioned as capable of reducing these risks, and achieving protection as an outcome for people at risk? The agency of affected people of all genders – whether through participation in protection programming led by international agencies, or in the leadership of WLOs in humanitarian protection – is key to relevant, effective and inclusive protection. This participation is also an ethical imperative aimed at supporting the autonomy of people at risk, a fact that is readily acknowledged by ICRC guidelines for protection:

> Those at risk usually have the clearest understanding of the risks they face (types of threat, potential

> perpetrators, times when risks are higher, etc.). They often know some of the most effective means of mitigating these risks. Protection actors should work with affected communities to assess the individual and collective capacities for protection that exist within those communities. At a minimum, protection actors must ensure that their own actions do not diminish these capacities. More ambitiously, they should try to reinforce these capacities and to strengthen the resilience of communities over time. (ICRC, 2024: 41)

This, however, has not translated into action: meaningful participation of women, girls and gender-diverse people in humanitarian response broadly writ remains out of reach, even in terms of simply meeting their needs as an at-risk population (Martin and de la Puente, 2019: 3).

Here, we examine how gender features in understandings of agency and the capacity to enact protection within the rubric of international humanitarian response, before unpacking what is lost when limited narratives come to shape policy and practice.

3.3.1 Who are the agents of change?

Our review of literature on gender and protection reveals a restrictive picture of who has the capacity to bring about change, whether that means negotiating with armed actors, advocating for peace and protection for themselves and their communities, or designing and delivering effective protection action. This is linked to a bifurcated understanding of women's role in conflict and crisis that paints them as one of two things: passive or peaceful. As one key informant remarked, 'naïve thoughts about what women are like [...] inform some of our programming'.

On the question of passivity, women tend to be viewed as less 'agentic' than men (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2000; Agerberg and Kreft, 2022: 860). Humanitarian risk analyses and prioritisation often position women as more innocent, helpless and even childlike than men – and very much in need of protection, whether by men in their own communities or by international intervenors. This perspective is closely linked to notions of victimhood discussed above. Enloe (2014) captures this infantilisation of women in her use of the term, 'womenandchildren'.[7] It is rooted in the idea of war and conflict as 'men's business' (Al Oraimi and Antwi-Boateng, 2023: 2; see also Carpenter, 2005; Cohn, 2013; Peet and Sjoberg, 2019), which then shapes attitudes towards protection:

> The framing of humanitarian catastrophes in terms of the need to protect 'women and children' is common among civilian protection advocates because it appeals to gender essentialisms that continue to have traction in society. (Agerberg and Kreft, 2022: 857)

7 Grouping women together with children is a well-known means of infantilising women, but it also bears noting that the agency of children is also generally dismissed in humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts (Wratto, 2025).

Where women are visible in their activism in conflict-affected communities, they are presumed to be agitating for peace, often based on a conflation of all women with motherhood. In the context of protection and peace, women are thus readily understood as calm, sympathetic, inclined towards negotiation and compromise, interested in justice over retribution, and well placed to represent and engage with victims of war, human tragedy and loss (Carpenter, 2005: 306; Al Oraimi and Antwi-Boateng, 2023; Davies et al., 2024b).

There is some truth to this association between women and peace, as will be discussed below, but narratives that prescribe roles for woman as either passive and without agency, or using their agency only in pursuit of stereotypical associations with peace, leave significant gaps in understanding that limit women's participation in protection and wider humanitarian action as agents of change in their own right. These stereotypes are often left unchallenged because, in distancing women from violence and the 'perpetrator' role, they are seen as positive – but this kind of 'benevolent sexism' (Glick et al., 2000, quoted in Agerberg and Kreft, 2022: 857) is still a driver of inequality and can be harder to uproot due to its purported positivity.

3.3.2 Women's agency in navigating protection and peace

As noted above, victimhood is not synonymous with passivity or helplessness, nor does it preclude agency. Similarly, women's agency in conflict is far more complex than a simple orientation towards peace. However, women's already limited participation in peacebuilding and protection alike is conditioned by these assumptions, presumed to be limited to GBV prevention, peacefulness or motherly benevolence (Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2017). Motherhood, however, should also be understood as complex and socially constructed in different ways and for divergent ends, and claims that it is inherently singular in its orientation – even towards peace – are ultimately disempowering (Ruddick, 1982; Confortini and Ruane, 2014; Hall et al., 2020). Thus, in practice, women may instrumentalise norms about their inherent peacefulness to enter into peacebuilding, negotiation and other leadership roles:

> In Maban, women used their position as part of Maban's Inter-Church Committee to negotiate with SPLM-IO [the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition] at a time of ongoing attacks between SPLM-IO, government and semi-affiliated Maban Defence Forces. Leveraging the perceived neutrality of the church as an entry point, women's union representatives presented themselves as mothers of fighting youths, moving combatants to tears when they described the harms they were causing to civilians. They managed to de-escalate tensions, securing an agreement from the SPLM-IO to move their military base away from civilians, while combatants called off an attack planned for a week later. (Davies et al., 2024b: 24)

Evidence shows that women play crucial roles in civilian peace movements and reconciliation processes, pressuring the conflict parties not only to initiate negotiations but also to pursue peace dialogue and include civil society actors (Adjei, 2019; Paffenholz et al., 2016, cited in Holdmann et al., 2024). There is a longstanding association between feminist and women's movements on the one hand and peace on the other, which can be seen lately in efforts amongst Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian women's anti-

war activism seeking to build solidarity and to counter misinformation about Russia's war on Ukraine (Al Oraimi and Antwi-Boateng, 2023; Popova et al., 2022). Similarly, in Colombia and Mindanao in the Philippines, Holdmann et al. (2024) document women's advocacy for a halt to violence and the signing of peace agreements, or for women's representation and rights to be granted in the post-conflict state. The UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda grew out of just this kind of women's peace activism over many years, although it may have since deviated from these roots (GADN, 2021) – see Box 3 below.

There is also some evidence that women's involvement in peace negotiations and other endeavours can result in more sustainable or durable outcomes. Paffenholz et al. (2016) describe a positive correlation between influential women's groups in negotiation processes and the conclusion and durable implementation of peace accords, while Krause et al. (2018) point to a significantly longer peace duration in accords with female signatories (both cited in Holdmann et al., 2024). In 2015 in Burundi, the UN established the Women's Mediators Network in close partnership with the Ministry of Interior and civil society organisations. The mediators, working in groups of four across 129 municipalities, engaged with over 3,000 local conflicts to advocate for the release of protesters and opposition party members, promoting tolerance, and countering misinformation to constructively handle political and electoral conflicts (Carter, 2021).

Indeed, evidence shows that crises like armed conflict and displacement can actually bolster women's agency in some settings, disrupting restrictive gender norms and giving women the opportunity to advocate for the changes they want to see. These changes include access to paid employment, greater decision-making power in their homes and families, a reduction in various forms of GBV, and greater access to education (Levine, 2020; Holloway et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, despite the relevance of gender-inclusive measures in negotiations, women remain conspicuously underrepresented within these processes (Nagel, 2020 and Reid, 2021 cited in Holdmann et al., 2024) due, at least in part, to 'masculinist protection norms' (Duriesmith et al., 2024: 451). Where women do participate, their influence is frequently predetermined through a lens of innate peacefulness and conciliation:

> Women often enter spaces where they are expected to work together towards a common understanding of peace. Mechanisms for women's participation in peace negotiations are designed in a way that assumes that women will overcome differences and work together for resolution. (Sapiano et al., 2024: 2554)

But women – like any group – are far from monolithic, and as such their peacefulness should not be taken as implicit. Women are diverse and should not be pigeonholed, nor their influence romanticised, even when a peaceful label is deemed a 'positive' one, as outlined above. A truly gender-responsive approach means understanding this diversity and the intersection of gender norms with a host of other facets of identity, and how it interrelates with risks and agency, which can bring about very different

perspectives, priorities and experiences for diverse people of all genders, permitting disagreement amongst them and focusing on 'how power structures in decision-making spaces silence or inhibit diverse contributions' (ibid: 2555).

Box 3 Protection and the Women, Peace and Security agenda

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is a set of 10 UN Security Council resolutions that, since its inception in 2000, has been the core mechanism through which the UN system engages with gender and conflict. The flagship Resolution 1325 sets out four pillars: **participation**, **prevention**, **protection** and **relief and recovery**.

Humanitarians have tended to dismiss the WPS agenda as too political to conform to humanitarian neutrality and relevant only to peacebuilding actors, but the third and fourth of these pillars are explicitly relevant to humanitarian response and protection action (GADN, 2021). While these have the potential to guide diverse actors towards cross-sectoral ways of working and more meaningfully gender-responsive protection, it should be noted that the WPS agenda is another area where assumptions about women's purportedly 'natural' inclination towards peace are evident and have drawn criticism (Shepherd, 2011).

3.3.3 Women providing humanitarian assistance

Beyond questions of individual women's participation, failures to see women and gender-diverse people as agents in their own right also extend to the ability of humanitarian responders – including protection specialists – to work effectively with place-based (local and national) organisations that are led by women and gender-diverse people and that work to reduce risks in conflict settings. ICRC (2024: 34) guidance is clear that 'communities and individuals at risk – to whom protection workers should be answerable – are themselves critical actors in the protection process'.

WLOs[8] possess a deep knowledge of 'gaps, needs, risks, norms and power relations' within their communities and can therefore respond appropriately (Njeri and Daigle, 2022: 9; see also FHN, 2021; WRC, 2021b; Luqman, 2023; Khoury and Scott, 2024). This includes detailed understanding of pre-existing risks of GBV and effective methods of prevention and response, as well as wider protection risks to WLOs themselves, individual women and LGBTQI+ activists, and human rights defenders, who face gendered risks for speaking out about a range of issues (Dwyer, 2020; FHN, 2021; Njeri and Daigle,

8 IASC (2024) defines 'WLO' as 'an organization with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is (1) governed or directed by women; or 2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions'. The term is often used interchangeably with 'women's rights organisation' and 'feminist organisation' despite important distinctions between them. Notably, WLOs led by women and girls with disabilities, lesbian, bisexual and trans women, refugee/displaced women, or others facing multiple marginalisations confront greater and more complex obstacles.

2022; Amnesty International, 2023b). Moreover, WLOs – like other community-based organisations – tend to design their own solutions rather than importing models from other crises, using grassroots processes already in place and working with rather than against structural conditions (Ravon, 2014; Al Oraimi and Antwi-Boateng, 2023). This risk-aware and adaptable approach makes them particularly well placed to work on prevention as well as response to risks (Ramirez, 2024). A speaker at our stakeholder consultation representing a WLO described precisely this:

> Gender analysis helped us to reach people who have never been reached before by humanitarian actors. It helped us to get beyond numbers and figures to understand power dynamics.

However, WLOs – many of which have a strong thematic focus on protection – suffer from perceptions relating to their capacity and agency relative to international actors. A recent report details how donors hesitate to directly engage with partners that they deem to lack clear and measurable capacity, which poses a particular barrier to partnerships with WLOs (IRC, 2023), but this in itself can be indicative of misconceptions, as 'actors tend to define capacity in the way that best matches their own interests and perceptions of their own strengths' (Barbelet, 2019: 1). Similarly, local actors are often undermined by INGOs due to doubts about their ability to live up to expectations of neutrality and impartiality, despite prevalent and systematic inequalities that raise those doubts in the first place (Chatham House, 2022; Pinnington, 2023).[9]

Thus, contributions by WLOs are frequently erased by international actors and mainstream humanitarian narratives that do not acknowledge their presence or role, while at the same time emphasising international agencies (Pinnington, 2023). A 2017 report by International Alert revealed similar dynamics: INGOs were shown to pressure national and local organisations to conform to their priorities and, more troublingly, to consent to approaches that compromised their own self-defined priorities and even their security (Anderson, 2017). This failure by international actors to recognise and respect the agency of women and others marginalised for their gender, leads to duplication of efforts, less effective interventions and even harm to WLOs themselves:

> WLOs often experience low psychological safety when faced with scepticism from agencies about our capabilities, which can hinder open communication. For instance, in South Sudan, WLOs working on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention in protection-of-civilian sites have repeatedly proposed community-led initiatives for GBV prevention that were initially dismissed by a leading international agency as too 'unstructured' and 'informal'. In this case, the leaders of the [WLO] felt that their insights, rooted in cultural understanding, expertise and a community-based approach, were not taken seriously. (Ramirez, 2024)

9 It is important not to conflate WLOs with gender-focused work, in protection or elsewhere, or to make WLOs responsible for the achievement of international actors' commitments on gender-responsiveness. Research on the implementation of the WPS agenda in Yemen and Myanmar showed that armed movements may also delegate women's rights issues, including protection, to WLOs or the women's wing of their movement, who are then seen as responsible for any failure (Mar Phyo, 2022; Shakir et al., 2024). Similarly, WLOs have frequently objected to being pigeonholed as concerned with or responsible for 'women's issues' alone (Mazzilli et al., forthcoming).

3.3.4 Protection as a white, masculine project requiring external agency

Such presumptions about the passivity and inherent peacefulness of women and girls, combined with the presumed violence of men in conflict contexts, leads to the positioning of international humanitarian actors in general – and protection specialists specifically – as necessary outside intervenors with agency. A GPC learning paper describes local leadership in protection as 'subject to caution', citing concerns that:

> Local leadership might in some instances undermine protection outcomes or the quality of protection response; some expressing doubts about the ability of local and national actors to implement impartial and independent humanitarian response. (GPC, 2022: 6)

Similarly, ICVA (2018: 5) has noted 'concerns [amongst humanitarian actors] that localization may weaken protection aspects of a response'. Corbett et al. (2021: 60) write that these concerns speak to humanitarians' own assumptions that tend to position international actors as 'saviours':

> Everyone is working with the best of intentions, but we often lack awareness of how our own assumptions are shaped by cultural hegemony of aid that pushes us to assume roles either of saviour/implementer or victim/beneficiary. Until we challenge our own personal perceptions, institutional change will remain slow: victims aren't expected to lead, saviours are.

Whether it is conscious or not, this thinking is in keeping with longstanding tropes that paint racialised women in crisis settings of the Global South as needing protection from outsiders (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1988; Smirl, 2008; Autesserre, 2014; Chisholm, 2016). Thus, Bian (2022) notes the 'racialization of expertise' in the humanitarian sector, while others have pointed to masculinist culture and heteronormativity within the sector, as well as within particular agencies and organisations:

> The women who work in the protection cluster, they exhibit a lot of male, masculine norms because [agencies are] coded very male. So in the hiring and dynamic, I see gender norms reflected. (See also Rainbow Network, 2017; HWN, 2017; Spencer, 2018).

Importantly, this positioning of international humanitarian action as a white, masculinist project is a normative argument, meaning that even when individual humanitarians are neither white nor men, their position relative to crisis-affected people and related expectations, concerns and assumptions are modelled on whiteness and masculinity (see Loftsdóttir, 2009; Benton, 2016; Jennings, 2019; Rutazibwa, 2019).

As such, by perpetuating narratives around gender, agency and protection, international humanitarians play into what Owens and Pallister-Wilkins (2024: 118) call 'protection logics that place those dwelling in [refugee camps] as passive recipients or beneficiaries without agency'. One informant spoke to this point about the specific contribution of international actors to protection:

> If you talk to local organisations or people living in the context, a lot of those risks are innately known. A lot of what we do as international humanitarians is put names or barriers around them to respond to risks that people are aware of, living in those communities.

Nonetheless, another pointed to the widely held perception amongst protection actors that 'change only happens *with us* – the Security Council, UN-led conversations' and other international spaces, rather than in spaces led by diverse civil society, peacebuilding and other actors and movements. Ultimately, better understanding gender norms means challenging the idea that humanitarians and protection actors are (or can be) gender-neutral, as well as combating assumptions about the agency or priorities of people of all genders living through conflict. Regardless of where they come from, humanitarians do not exist at a distance from gender norms – rather, they bring their own norms to every setting in which they work and are intervening in the retrenchment, maintenance or transformation of norms simply by being present (Daigle, 2022).

3.3.5 Working with men to prevent harm

An alertness to gender norms in conflict and protection can also improve the engagement of men and boys as agents of change, and support transforming harmful masculine norms by elevating other forms of masculinities to the benefit of all people (Duriesmith et al., 2024). Many men actively choose to pursue peace and gender equality without external interventions, and even at great personal risk. However, as Yousaf and Peacock (2023: 438) highlight in their analysis of men's activism in Afghanistan, progressive men who work towards feminist peace can be overshadowed by assumptions rooted in western, colonial prejudices against Muslim men in particular. Unquestioning tropes of men as perpetrators can then disempower those who seek to be agents of change.

Engaging men as positive agents of change in protection comes with potential pitfalls. First is the danger of reaffirming inequitable masculinities and men's control over women and children. This can happen when programmes engage men by mobilising the expectation that they should protect women from violence perpetuated by other men and boys. Such approaches, while seemingly positive as they contribute to the reduction of violence against women and girls, can actually (and problematically) reinforce gendered inequalities because they re-establish the cisheteropatriarchal status quo of men having control over women and undermining women's autonomy and agency – that is, 'the re-imposition of restrictive gender norms and the return of men and women to gendered divisions of labour' (Duriesmith et al., 2024: 451; see also Peet and Sjoberg, 2019; UNFPA EECARO, 2023). Moreover, these programmes can also lead to further discrimination of marginalised groups of men, for example those that are from racial and/or religious minority groups, by positioning the 'other' men as villains (Turner, 2021; Myrttinen et al., 2025).

Programmes that facilitate and support men's reflections on masculinities and their critical interrogation of gender norms may have a longer-term protective impact, by challenging the harmful building blocks that contribute to conflict and violence (Myrttinen and Schulz, 2023).

4 Towards more gender-responsive, inclusive and effective protection

People of all genders confront gendered risks, possess skills and capacities, and occupy distinct positions within relations of power in the midst of conflict, meaning that diverse individuals can be victims, perpetrators and agents of change – all at once, or at different points in their lives. This is ultimately a question not just of the substance of protection work, and the risks it perceives and to which it responds, but also of the systems, structures and cultures of international humanitarian action.

Reflecting on the centrality of gender norms-based assumptions in protection action, in this chapter we outline insights from key informants obtained via interviews and a workshop with Geneva-based stakeholders. These insights will shed light on how humanitarians, including protection actors, can address these norms and systemic challenges as part of the ongoing humanitarian reset and how the sector can continue to effectively deploy such an approach – and embed it across the wider humanitarian sector – in the face of mounting challenges to gender justice in humanitarian response, to the centrality of protection, and to humanitarian funding (as outlined in Chapter 2).

This chapter therefore summarises how those working to deliver humanitarian protection can take up and strengthen gender-responsive approaches to protection in the face of complex challenges and in response to budget cuts that are necessitating greater efficiency in the humanitarian system.

4.1 Enhance the use of gender-responsive, contextualised power analysis

To properly understand the role that gender norms are playing in generating, exacerbating or mitigating protection risks, there is a clear need for comprehensive, locally led, nuanced and contextualised risk analysis that gets beyond conflict dynamics and into social power relations. One interviewee lamented the lack of just this kind of granular analysis in current protection action:

> Are we limiting [analysis] to macro analysis of political conflict, environmental conflict and the specific needs that come out of that? Or are we digging into the social context and diversity status, and how those create conditions favourable to inclusion or exclusion? I can't speak for [everyone at my agency] but my sense is that as a sector we're not successful at that.

Another informant concurred, arguing for power mapping as a key component of effective protection work:

> You can't do protection unless you understand power, vulnerability, agency – and that's sounding to me a lot like a gender sort of analysis.

Nonetheless, interviewees confirmed that the effective use of gender norms in risk assessments and power analyses is not widespread beyond a shallow, tokenistic approach. Asked whether protection actors account for gender norms in analyses, one informant remarked, 'They think they do, but it's a tick-the-box exercise.'

A key problem is that existing analytical tools are insufficient on their own and not implemented properly or consistently. Gender markers in particular were criticised by interviewees for being 'just another form to complete' rather than indicative of a genuine commitment to gender-responsive humanitarian action.[10] These informants noted that colleagues see the markers as sufficient on their own to achieve gender responsiveness, and thus effectively subvert any further analysis needed to actually account for the gendered risks and narratives detailed above.

Others highlighted the need to make risk analysis iterative and ongoing, a 'reflex' towards risk reduction rather than a one-off endeavour at the outset of a project or intervention. They recommended returning to communities to ask, 'Did we get this right?', and assessing the data produced to understand whether the tools and frameworks in question are capturing useful, multifaceted insights and are therefore fit for purpose. This kind of approach aligns with other calls for more granular risk analysis:

> Historically [...] humanitarian actors have not prioritised micro-level community stakeholder and conflict-sensitivity analysis [which] can be seen by humanitarian actors as time consuming and a cost that might detract from life-saving assistance [...] But there are high costs to not carrying out such analysis that in the best case will do harm, and in the worst case can cost lives. (Davies et al., 2024a: 9–10)

Putting this into practice means delving much deeper into social, cultural and political dynamics in risk analysis – and doing so hand-in-hand with development, human rights, peacebuilding actors, and especially with place-based civil society. Where many humanitarians are assigned to a response for only a few years or even months, gender-responsive protection analysis requires that they avoid importing models from other responses and instead cultivate greater sensitivity and awareness of the layered, complex and intersectional nature of gendered forms of risk in each distinct crisis setting. This kind of collaboration and collective action is encouraged by the independent review of IASC's protection policy (Cocking et al., 2022).

Our workshop participants highlighted that gender analysis is often seen as an add-on or 'nice to have' component, which in practice means that it is often undervalued, cut, or ignored in the context of limited resources. As Box 4 elaborates, some of this resistance to taking gender seriously can at times manifest itself in calls for subsuming gender into comprehensive or all-inclusive risk analyses.

10 The OECD DAC Gender Marker provides criteria to tag projects as having 'principal' or 'significant' attention to gender in their design, and has been integrated into many governments' internal frameworks and used by databases tracking the potential impact of spending. Similarly, the IASC Gender with Age Marker (GAM) uses a 0–4 scale to indicate projects' level of gender sensitivity (O'Donnell et al., 2021).

Box 4 Comprehensive risk analysis: with or without gender?

According to some informants, especially those with broad protection backgrounds, gender should be considered organically within a broad-based, comprehensive risk analysis together with other factors such as age, disability or ethnicity. While partially incentivised by funding cuts, moving away from specific 'types' of people was also justified by the principle of impartiality. This reading of impartiality is contentious, with clear divisions between GBV specialists and their critics.

Some informants suggested that without specific attention to gender and the associated data, important gendered dynamics are unlikely to emerge, causing gendered risks (including GBV) to slip through the cracks of the system. Others took a more critical view of GBV specialists' 'overt focus' on gender. As one informant noted, 'The GBV world has been very resistant to the idea that you should start from a good overall assessment of risk, because there's a chance you may not decide that GBV is a key risk.'

An impartial approach, however, is not necessarily at odds with inclusion – on grounds of gender or gender identity, or any other intersecting aspect of diversity. Barbelet and Wake (2020: 13) write, 'Impartial humanitarian action is necessarily inclusive, and inclusive humanitarian action is necessarily impartial.' Rather than targeting any one group on the basis of their marginalisation, at the expense of the majority, this is about ensuring that interventions are effective in reaching a diverse population of conflict-affected people.

This view of gender analysis and subsequent protection action as superfluous to existing analyses means that they are often subject to extra scrutiny or, as a workshop participant put it, bear a higher 'burden of proof' to show evidence that it is needed and impactful. However, as another participant further highlighted, any concern over justifying costs or time delays caused by a gender-responsive approach are unwarranted. As they highlighted, a comprehensive analysis – including a gender-responsive one – actually optimises resource use. It relies on strategic partnerships with women's organisations and leverages their local expertise and networks. Having detailed understanding of the local context then avoids duplication of efforts because vulnerabilities are better understood. It does not require additional tools, but a better utilisation of those already in place.

For all actors involved in protection, the solution lies in highlighting ethical commitments and high-quality responses, emphasising how a gender lens can be embedded into existing analysis and ways of working to ultimately strengthen protection as an outcome for people in crisis. To some extent, this is also true of other dimensions of diversity:

> The biggest motivator for me was examples of what happened when we consulted children [for example] and what happened when we didn't.

Therefore, despite the current political and funding climate, all actors working on protection should retain an alertness to gendered risks as a core component of effective, high-quality protection.

4.2 Expand gender analysis beyond GBV – and beyond risk

Across the board, our informants remarked on the fact that 'gender' has become synonymous with GBV, 'both as a theme and as a set of actors' – within the protection sphere, as well as in the humanitarian sector as a whole – confirming findings in the literature. They describe how gender work within their own institutions has grown out of two key concerns: internal questions related to diversity and inclusion that have emanated largely from human resources departments, and a programmatic concern with GBV as a key protection risk.[11] This association is reinforced by gender and inclusion work frequently being seated under protection within the structures of many humanitarian agencies and INGOs – a state of affairs that one informant called 'the worst solution apart from all of the others'. A recent survey by UN Women supports this perspective: more than one-third of respondents reported that 'gender falls within the GBV/protection clusters' in the context where they work (UN Women, 2025: 14). Recent research by the Women's Refugee Commission similarly found that 'gender' is frequently understood as a synonym for GBV or even SRHR within the sector, or used as a 'codeword' for vulnerability (WRC, 2021b: 8).

While GBV response is both critically important and drastically under-funded, it does not represent the full range of gendered concerns in conflict and crisis, even when it comes to protection risks. When a wider gender-responsive approach is subsumed under attention to GBV, it only feeds the reductive narratives around victimhood and agency described in Chapter 3 and makes it harder to understand gender beyond a framework of risk, harm and violence:

> There's a challenge where if inclusion always sits within protection, then we're always going to be making it about risk. So if you come at it from that perspective, we're more immediately going to be looking at risk risk risk. There is a challenge there, but at the same time [...] it's hard to see what other sector [other than protection] could take on inclusion in that way.

It has also brought about the growth of a corps of GBV experts who are then asked to provide specialist support to a wide range of humanitarian colleagues, resulting in gender capacity that is concentrated in a set group of specialists – but specialists who are then so thinly spread that their expertise has 'completely lost all meaning'.

Gender should be cross-cutting, and a gender-responsive approach to protection should sit across sectors and clusters so that it is the responsibility of all humanitarian actors rather than just a siloed group of specialists, in keeping with both the centrality of protection and the sector-transcending

11 A key exception is the ICRC, where attention to sexual violence and other concerns linked to gender originates from work with detainees who are mostly men.

nature of gendered forms of marginalisation and exclusion. Informants with deep knowledge of gender in crisis settings and humanitarian response alike noted that GBV itself is indicative of much wider, cross-cutting inequalities and problems:

> [GBV] is a symptom of wider needs. You very rarely get gender-based violence isolated from health issues, isolated from access to clean water, isolated from medical, isolated from livelihoods.

Thus, GBV may be an entry point for a lot of humanitarian responders, individually or institutionally, but treating it as a stand-in for the full range of gendered and intersectional risks, challenges and opportunities that emerge in crises leads to an incomplete picture – and significant gaps through which entire populations can fall.

This is already acknowledged in some policies and documents – see the IASC gender handbook (IASC, 2018) – and is also consistent with commitments to the centrality of protection, but these efforts need to go further and be consistently and comprehensively put into practice. Similarly, recognising and supporting the capacities and agency of crisis-affected people – including but not limited to women and girls – means working with place-based movements and organisations to understand the complexity of people's experiences and what they need to be safer.

4.3 Strengthen capacities and address challenges in systems and organisational cultures

As in all sectors, humanitarian and protection actors' ability and willingness to conduct gender-responsive analysis and programming depend on the tools they have and their own awareness, understanding and personal commitment to using them. Training, attitudes and bandwidth, as well as institutional and sectoral cultures, can act as enablers to or – more frequently – as brakes on translating tools, policies and best practices developed over the years into practice. Informants describe how much relies on the particular constellation of individuals; policies, tools, and resources; and organisational priorities in a given setting. For example, one interviewee highlighted this issue regarding coordination: 'The problem with coordination has always been personalities'.

Training to ensure that humanitarians have the skills to apply a gender lens to humanitarian action is notably under-funded and not always (or even often) widely available, with some informants recalling being 'just thrown in':

> Most people learn by doing. Most of the humanitarian field, you learn on the job. We're drowning in guidelines and nobody reads those, so usually it's sitting in a meeting or knowing someone who works on it, and listening to what they have to say.

Trainings on protection that apply a comprehensive gender lens are arguably even rarer, despite the existence of the IASC Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap) and Gender Standby Capacity

Project (GenCap), initiatives that are intended to fill capacity gaps. One informant noted how this lack of training also overlaps with attitudinal barriers, which may be rooted in cultural or social norms but are by no means unique to crisis settings:

> Many [...] tried multiple times to get help from UNHCR but were turned away. [...] One major issue seems to be that the first point of contact for a refugee might be a local UNHCR staff member who isn't a human rights expert, doesn't have adequate training, or may even hold prejudices themselves.

Such attitudes permeate the sector and play out in relationships within and between different parts of the international humanitarian architecture. This affects working relationships between different parts of the response machinery as well as between particular individuals, and it is also highly illustrative of how gender norms function within the humanitarian sector:

> Internally, there's this dynamic that if you work in GBV you'll be seen as an annoying feminist. We've all been called bitches, difficult, this and that. [...] If you're a woman working on gender or GBV, you'll be shrill, difficult, hard to work with.

Another informant described similar experience as an LGBTQI+ specialist wherein they found themselves siloed off from the wider sector and seen by other colleagues as pestering or harping at them.

This dynamic emerged in our interviews as tensions between GBV and gender specialists, mostly situated within the GBV AoR, and the wider GPC. GBV specialists reported feeling unsupported by the GPC and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA, which hosts the AoR), and consequently sensed that the utility and sustainability of their AoR was being questioned (see Box 5). Conversely, protection specialists described the AoR as 'quickly moving towards a gender racket'. While some of this tension is attributable to ongoing divisions around the precise definition of GBV,[12] it nonetheless exerts a downward pressure on much-needed internal collaboration as well as cross-sectoral coordination with other sectors or actors.

12 Historically, protection specialists including GBV experts have been divided over whether the term 'GBV' should be understood to apply only to harms against women and girls, or to people of all genders when the harms in question relate to their gender identity. This has manifested itself in reluctance on the part of some GBV specialists to recognise GBV against men, boys and gender-diverse people and fears that inclusive definitions would lead to the dilution of hard-won gains in terms of policies, funding and mechanisms for women and girls.

Box 5 The humanitarian reset and the GBV AoR

The sectoral pressures surrounding gender work are now complicated by the humanitarian reset, which looks likely to see the consolidation of all four AoRs into the main GPC. This aligns with the recommendations of the independent protection policy review (Cocking et al., 2022), which found that existing silos create tensions and barriers, but it has also sparked an outpouring of opposition in the form of open letters to humanitarian leadership from networks of WLOs and agencies.[i] These letters call for continued prioritisation of GBV as well as gender equality and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse; retention of specialised capacity and coordination spaces within responses globally; and greater levels of consultation with affected communities and local actors, including WLOs. It is clear from these interventions that WLOs have valued the GBV AoR both as a coordination space on GBV specifically and as a general entry point to humanitarian response where they have encountered fewer barriers:

> The proposed merger of the GBV AoR with the Protection Cluster, without clear conditions for technical continuity, operational autonomy, and visible leadership, poses a serious risk of dilution. And when protective structures are diluted, women and girls are left without effective response.[ii]

As debate continues about the future shape of the international humanitarian architecture, it will be essential to find mechanisms that retain and safeguard gender expertise and prioritisation – as demanded by these letters – while also embedding gender across all areas of action and responsibility.

i For example, see collective letters addressed to in-country Humanitarian Coordinators from WLOs in Cameroon (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1582tO9O8ooyHr1jO1Jx07sNHD3texTGJ/view), Colombia (https://drive.google.com/file/d/10GvyU5xf1dm62ihmyvdZxFHMo28qgywk/view), South Sudan (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1O4VqrBMTuXic-bAL_neZFTyMBviRYzjF/view) and Yemen (https://drive.google.com/file/d/15yVhi8QbKBrtLehVi1WtUoVWQWdHrRIL/view).

ii From the Tinta Violeta-led global letter to Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) Tom Fletcher, signed by countless organisations (see https://drive.proton.me/urls/FEKCFFND1M#GzZVHlkrMUys).

Also key here is humanitarian culture within the international response architecture, which has been widely criticised for operating on masculine norms, as well as being paternalist, heteronormative and focused on the nuclear family as the central unit of risk analysis and needs assessment (Appelby, 2010; Benton, 2016; Kagumire, 2018; Daigle et al., 2021; Bian et al., 2024; Owens and Pallister-Wilkins, 2024). One of the many ways that this culture manifests is the centralisation of power and purported protective capacity in international actors, to the exclusion of local and national organisations – actors that Michelis et al. (2024: 1521) called 'chronically overlooked' (see also Njeri and Daigle, 2022; FHN, 2021). With regard to GBV response and the implementation of survivor-centred approaches, for example, Michelis et al. (2024: 1527) describe the maintenance of a 'service-led approach where power is retained by humanitarian agencies'.

Here informants concurred again, remarking on what they saw in the sector where they work and the way that both crisis and response bring about opportunities for abuse:

> A disconnect between international expatriate staff – the 'experts', so to say – on how to do this analysis, prioritising [their] process over national staff that constitute the majority.
>
> What's important to change, and why do we constantly make ourselves [international humanitarian actors] the centre of things? [...] It's not enough to give people access to our space, the space we've created in our own image. We need to reexamine the conditions for accessing and being heard in that space.

Some informants pointed to a purported generational shift, with younger colleagues more interested in things like feminist approaches and non-binary understandings of gender, but this is far from guaranteed given recent trends towards conservatism amongst younger men (Campbell et al., 2024; PRRI, 2024; Davis, 2025), and it also has yet to be substantiated in terms of observed changes in systems or programmes. Humanitarians – especially those who are women, LGBTQI+ and/or racialised – are often at risk themselves, a fact that is not unrelated to humanitarian culture centred on the 'romanticised figure of the white, male humanitarian' (Daigle et al., 2021: 5; see also Bian, 2022), but these risks are rarely discussed or addressed.

The barriers to change here are considerable but not insurmountable, taking into account obstacles and incentives. Currently, humanitarians themselves are overstretched with little bandwidth to read and take onboard available guidelines, including about locally led, context-specific and gender-responsive risk analyses, and they are judged on quantitative measures that leave little room for gender-responsiveness as a priority:

> The unfortunate part that keeps me in a job is that each individual is going to need their own motivation if they don't innately believe that inclusion is an inherent good [...] If you're a health actor and all you're being judged on is vaccines in arms, are you being judged on whether or not there were enough girl children getting those? Are you analysing whether or not you're reaching children with disabilities?
>
> But it's more of an unconscious reaction of, 'I'm overwhelmed by the idea of what you're asking me to do. And I'm gonna do what I normally do and get my job done.'

As will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, to combat this inertia and reluctance to embrace change, advocacy with donors is key, pushing them to condition existing funding across humanitarian action to strengthen centrality of protection with a gender-responsive lens. By asking how all areas of a response – for example, food, shelter, water and coordination – can usefully contribute to the overall reduction of gendered risks and interrogate the way that norms shape their own analysis and programming, donors can incentivise greater attention to the qualitative gender-responsiveness and effectiveness of humanitarian and protection action.

5 Conclusion: holding the line in difficult times

> If you're going to look at how to be the most effective in humanitarian response, you need to know who the people are that you're trying to reach and what they want.

Tonni Ann Brodber, Head of Secretariat, Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund

The current moment is testing commitments to both gender-responsive humanitarian action and the centrality of protection, but these challenges are not entirely novel. While the international humanitarian response architecture has made significant progress on both fronts in recent years, resistance and even outright opposition to truly gender-responsive (much less feminist) approaches has always been and remains considerable (Daigle, 2022). Regressive political discourse and the slashing of funds from the US and other sources is also emboldening those within humanitarian agencies and systems that were never committed to rights, inclusion and protection as core priorities. Some INGOs and UN agencies have resorted to erasing or reformulating their commitments, and while this may be perceived – by those organisations themselves or by others – as a survival strategy in the face of existential crisis, it also demonstrates the shallowness of their dedication to meaningful inclusion and gender justice, despite years of commitments.

The solution, however, is not to give up on embedding sound gender norms analysis into humanitarian and protection action, but rather to do better with the resources available and safeguard the notion of gender-responsive protection – rhetorically, programmatically, substantively. In the words of one of our key informants, 'to me, the most important thing is we've got to keep it alive'. Failing to do so will mean continued reliance on the harmful and obfuscating tropes of victims, perpetrators and agents of change as they are currently understood, which belie the reality of protection risks in conflict contexts and lead to ineffective and even damaging protection action.

This is also not a defence of a system, or of institutions like USAID, that have always been ultimately hierarchical and driven by donor interests. People of all genders in crisis settings are at the centre of analysing risks, navigating threats and designing the kinds of inclusive, safe, post-conflict societies they want. Going forward, research on gender and protection – including the studies to follow this scoping paper – must support allies and champions within major international agencies and highlight the kinds of organisations, networks and movements doing critical work to counter gendered risks and counter threats wherever they are found.

5.1 Ways forward

The following four actions are recommended to international, national and local actors working on gender and protection.

1. Refocus on gender as a core component of comprehensive protection analysis.
A gender-responsive lens is a tool for more comprehensive, nuanced and contextualised protection analysis that sees risks, threats and capacities as they really are for people living through crises. Such a lens helps root out assumptions shaped by gender norms – and hidden behind the pervasive tropes of victims, perpetrators and agents of change.

Without this kind of nuanced analysis, protection – which is integral to high-quality and ethical humanitarian responses – will fail to recognise the layered and overlapping sets of risks that diverse people face, and therefore fail to effectively respond to risks and threats. Gender must continue to be a cross-cutting focus, including but also above and beyond specific attention to GBV.

2. Focus on fellow actors that are not rolling back and push friendly donors to step up.
USAID was never the only funder active in gender justice, protection or LGBTQI+ inclusion. There remain funders, networks and partners – at the time of writing, Norway and Australia remain key allies – who are staunch in their support for gender-responsive humanitarian and protection action.

In this hostile context, it is vital for donors to step in and step up, both in their resourcing decisions and their advocacy. There is a clear need for other donors to become more outspoken about the criticality of a gender lens in protection, and to be the voice in every decision-making space that asks, 'What about gender?' A range of actors, including INGOs and networks, have a particular role to play here by holding these donor governments accountable to not giving in and hold the line.

3. Avoid scrubbing content, programmes and language wherever possible.
The current atmosphere of backlash and attacks on the sector are incentivising the narrowing of debate, pushing humanitarians of all stripes to determine more and more priorities to be out of scope, not 'really' humanitarian, or simply not important enough to prioritise. While in the past humanitarians have worried that gender-responsiveness threatened principled approaches, the reality may actually be the opposite: stripping out considerations for marginality, social exclusion and discrimination – and for their impact on people's experience of risk and harm – runs directly counter to the fundamental principle (and goal) of humanity (Davies et al., 2025).

Protection actors (and humanitarians in general) must be mindful of the important qualitative difference between *lowering the profile* of certain areas of work to protect them from funding cuts or political attacks on one hand, and *substantively shifting away* (or further away) from a relational, intersectional and inclusive notion of gender. These moves are not new – in fact, they have frequently been couched in terms of appeals to a principled or 'back to basics' approach in recent years – but this is a depoliticising impulse that should be challenged (see Daigle, 2022).

While the mood has been apocalyptic amongst gender specialists with job losses and the closing down of programmes, there is no call or need to scrap commitments to gender on protection actors' own initiative – in the name of principles, needs-based approaches or the whims of any particular donor. Our research informants were adamant about this point, saying, 'We can try harder than just stripping things out completely', not least because there are still funders and donor governments that maintain their commitment to principled, gender-responsive humanitarianism. Humanitarian decision-making must instead continue to be based on comprehensive analysis of the risks that people in all their diversity face as they navigate crises.

4. In 'reset' conversations, emphasise quality and partnership.

Gender is critically important to a high-quality, principled, inclusive humanitarian and protection response, while local and national actors and organisations – especially those led by women, girls and LGBTQI+ people – are uniquely placed to assess and respond to context-specific risks. Regardless of their background as GBV specialists, protection actors or humanitarian generalists, informants were clear-eyed about what is at stake when it comes to undermining gender justice in the name of needs-based, principled or 'basics' approaches:

> Not working on gender issues, not working on women and girls specifically is not neutral [...] you think you're backing away from politicised things, but who is seeing that as neutral?

The current level of prioritisation for GBV and structures for tackling it – including the GBV AoR – are far from ideal, but they were also never a given. Rather, they are the hard-won result of years of activism by feminists and gender-justice advocates inside and outside the international humanitarian architecture. Women-led and LGBTQI+ organisations and movements, at both the local and national levels, have also been delivering humanitarian assistance under difficult conditions for a very long time, and they will continue to exist with or without the support of the international system.

Holding the line, even in the midst of unprecedented and direct challenges to gender justice and the centrality of protection, must be about insisting on gender-responsive protection as a core component of effective and high-quality humanitarian action. It must be rooted in intersectional analysis that challenges easy assumptions about victims, perpetrators and agents of change – and does so in partnership with crisis-affected women, girls and gender-diverse people themselves as the key to their own protection goals.

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Humanitarian Policy Group
ODI Global
4 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom

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