



INTERNATIONAL
RESCUE
COMMITTEE

MISSING WOMEN

How to Ensure Beijing+25 Really Leaves
No One Behind



Photo: David Belluz/IRC

March 2020

International Rescue Committee | [Rescue.org](https://www.rescue.org)

When the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were written in 1995, the drafters remarked that “the threat of a global armed conflict has diminished, while international relations have improved and prospects for peace among nations have increased”. [1]

Unfortunately, the ensuing 25 years have not continued the trend those drafters so hopefully laid out. In fact, the world has moved in the opposite direction; more countries faced some form of violent conflict in 2016 than at any time in the previous 30 years. [2] Climate change is also driving conflict and fragility, with roughly 500 million people living in areas experiencing desertification and vulnerable to being displaced or caught up in local conflicts over scarce resources. Climate change resulted in the displacement of around 16.1 million people in 2018; by 2050 that figure could be between 150 to 200 million people. [3] Today, over 135 million people, over half of them women and girls, live in humanitarian need. [4] Over 70 million people lived in displacement in 2019, which is double the number forcibly displaced 20 years ago. [5] The average length of displacement is now over 10 years and the majority of displaced persons originate and live in low-income countries.



Photo: David Belluz/IRC

The world, in short, has changed since Beijing. Despite some progress towards gender equality, women and girls living in humanitarian contexts face grave violations of their human rights on a daily basis. Pre-existing gender inequalities and deeply engrained patriarchal attitudes that disempower and marginalize women are exacerbated during a crisis as infrastructure, public services and social networks collapse. [6] In humanitarian and displacement settings, the space for women and girls’ voices contracts. In refugee camps - designed to offer shelter and safety - women and girls often literally cannot find a safe space to recover, to learn, and to connect, making it more difficult for women to be agents of change and seek opportunities. This creates a vicious cycle where emergencies further isolate and marginalize women, which in turn reinforces the unequal power dynamics that are the root cause of inequality, increases the likelihood of fragility, and perpetuates violence against women and girls.



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Despite documents like the Beijing PfA helping to pave the way for women’s and girls’ robust inclusion in critical international agreements like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the failure to meaningfully include commitments to women and girls affected by humanitarian crises in many of these standard-setting documents means that women and girls in humanitarian contexts are some of the least likely to achieve the promise of the Beijing PfA or the SDGs and thrive.

They are - quite literally - left behind.

The Beijing+25 process must acknowledge the impact of increased global conflict and fragility in this changed world and secure commitments for women and girls affected by crisis from the highest levels. It will not be enough to simply mention these women and girls in lists of those who are “particularly vulnerable” and in need of additional support. Instead, **the commitments and actions plans must actively mitigate the barriers crisis affected women and girls face to their safety, resilience and empowerment. At a minimum this means a concerted effort to create a safe space for every woman and girl – a safe space to live, recover, learn, earn, and be heard.**

Actions and commitments are **needed across all 6 Action Coalitions** to meet the needs of these women and girls. To do this, leadership **must meaningfully involve feminist humanitarian experts from the Global South** and, just as critically, **listen directly to and take action on the voices of women and girls affected by crisis.**



INCREASED YET UNMET NEED

Within humanitarian contexts, the realities for women and girls are even often starker than for those living in relative stability, and women and girls affected by crisis have increased and unique needs. Maternal mortality in humanitarian crisis or fragile settings are estimated to comprise 61% of global maternal deaths.[8] Whether because of man-made or natural disaster, gender-based violence (GBV) increases in all humanitarian settings. It is estimated that around 1 in 5 refugee or displaced women have been subjected to sexual violence, which would translate to over 14 million women worldwide at current levels of displacement[9] and research shows that intimate partner violence is as high as 73% in some humanitarian contexts.[10] While the climate crisis impacts all living things, the impacts are not felt evenly; for instance, child, early and forced marriages of girls increase in times of drought[11] and flood.[12] In countries in protracted conflict, fewer than 2 in 10 women work for pay or profit, compared with 6 in 10 women in post-conflict countries.[13]

Despite commitments and technical innovations in the field, women and girls are still not being valued and their needs in humanitarian contexts are not being met, as evidenced by the lack of funding to women and girls in humanitarian response. Only 0.12% of humanitarian funding from 2016-2018 went to preventing and responding to GBV.[14] This is often because not nearly enough funding is even requested in humanitarian response plans to support the needs of the affected populations, due to a lack of experts to conduct needs assessments based on feminist analysis.[15] And while women are more likely to live in poorer households globally than men, and countries where this is evident are predominantly fragile or conflict-affected, the latest data shows only 1% of aid to economic and productive sectors had gender equality and women's empowerment as the principal objective in 2015 – 2016, a decrease on the previous year.[16]

THE WAY FORWARD - A SAFE SPACE FOR EVERY WOMAN AND GIRL

Even as gender equality and feminist analysis are increasingly viewed as a central concern in high-level political initiatives, the voices of women and girls caught up in crises themselves continue to go unheard, often because they are not reached out to meaningfully and because it is unsafe to speak out. It is fundamental that every woman and girl exist in a space that is safe – socially, politically, economically, physically and emotionally. Safe spaces help women and girls to recover and rebuild from violence, to learn and build self-reliance and resilience, and foster economic independence. Safe spaces allow women and girls to come together and connect. When safe, women and girls can tap into their potential, find their voice and demand change. To get to gender equality, we must ensure that every space is a safe space for women and girls; until we actually deliver these spaces, commitments and strategies will remain in the world of rhetoric.

Beijing+25 presents a unique opportunity to be bold in our commitments to women and girls displaced by conflict and crisis to deliver transformative and lasting change, and create a safer world for women and girls. Through commitments across the Action Coalitions, we can make transformative change in specific sectors while ensuring that new and multi-year funding be secured across all sectors. Governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector should include at least the following considerations for crisis affected populations in the Action Coalitions*:

COMMITMENTS THROUGH BEIJING+25 ACTION COALITIONS

* We were surprised and disappointed to see that there is no Action Coalition specifically around Education, which is a critical intervention for not only achieving gender equality but also for women and girls to thrive. The IRC is proud to support education programming which supports women and girls in humanitarian settings and would encourage this oversight be rectified beyond Education being a "cross-cutting issue" as it currently stands.

1. Gender-Based Violence

Shift the vicious cycle of underfunding GBV prevention and response in humanitarian crisis to a virtuous cycle of met need. Triple global funding to meet minimum standards and deploy GBV experts from the onset of every emergency to ensure that GBV needs are accurately assessed and reflected in humanitarian response plans from the outset, leading to more accurate funding requests. This will, in turn, help ensure comprehensive approaches to GBV prevention and response create safe spaces for all women and girls in crisis settings to access case management, psychosocial support and other services, in line with SDG 5.

2. Economic Justice and Rights

Support sustained multi-sector interventions that build women's financial inclusion and economic self-reliance in crisis settings. Resource a transformative approach in line with SDG 8, through multi-year funding that addresses the additional barriers faced by refugee and displaced women to access safe economic opportunities, including a heightened threat of GBV, economic exploitation, discriminatory social norms and particularly onerous regulatory barriers. This must include commitments from national governments and the private sector to promote decent work and eliminate discriminatory legal and policy barriers for refugee women.

3. Bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

Uphold the universal implementation of sexual and reproductive health rights in order to safeguard the ability of women and girls in crisis settings to control their own health, bodies, sexuality, and fertility. Resource the full range of uninterrupted SRH services, in line with SDG 3, including access to contraceptive methods and safe abortion care, from the onset of every humanitarian emergency through to recovery and development.

Resource and empower women and girls to play an active role in designing how services are delivered to them in order to deliver high-quality, respectful and non-abusive SRH care in all settings.

4. Feminist Action for Climate Justice

Recognize the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and girls in fragile and least developed contexts by increasing interventions to support their resilience and adaptive capacity through climate-smart livelihood interventions that increase women's economic empowerment and equip displaced populations with the knowledge and skills to prepare for climate related shocks. Commitments must include strategies to address the barriers to women's participation in local early warning systems, pre-crisis planning, and natural resource management, as part of a holistic understanding of climate activism.

5. Technology and innovation for Gender Equality:

Take a gender transformative approach to the use of new technologies by addressing the unique barriers for women and girls to access and utilize technology; and putting in safeguards to mitigate the risks that technology might increase harm or GBV, even if unintentionally. Introducing technology and innovation into crisis contexts must include an understanding of the globally common and locally unique barriers to safety, access and usage and include robust commitments to responsible data and data stewardship.

6. Feminist Movements and Leadership

Prioritize the lack of predictable long term resourcing for local feminist movements to as a key barrier to their sustained development and growth. Include commitments to resourcing partnerships with local women-led organizations in crisis settings, both in their capacity as first responders and as local agents of change, by providing multi-year flexible funding to support local women's movement building. Institutional and private sector donors must commit to addressing barriers within current funding models related to compliance and risk that prohibit true partnership with local feminist movements and organizations in line with SDG 5.

GETTING THE CONVERSATION RIGHT THROUGHOUT BEIJING+25

For the above recommendations to become fully realized commitments, the Beijing+25 process has to prioritize the humanitarian needs of women and girls. To do so, organizers should ensure the following structural conditions by which the Generation Equality Forum are run:

1. Mandate inclusion of humanitarian contexts: Women and girls affected by humanitarian crisis are not a “cross-cutting theme” that can be discussed across Coalitions. They are a growing population of people who deserve specific attention and commitments, created through consultation directly with them and experts in humanitarian response. As such, all Action Coalitions should robustly consider women and girls living in humanitarian contexts within their discussions, commitments, and planning, with **at least 1 priority commitment of each Action Coalition specifically pertaining to humanitarian contexts;**

2. Include Feminist Humanitarians: All Action Coalitions, and not just the Coalition on “feminist leadership and movements,” should explicitly use a feminist analysis in considering the vulnerabilities brought upon women and girls because of current patriarchal systems. **Feminists, especially from the Global South, who are experts in humanitarian response should be explicitly included and supported to participate in each Action Coalition** to ensure discussions and feminist analyses of how the current humanitarian system perpetuates patriarchy and deprioritizes women and girls’ needs are included across Action Coalitions.

3. Ensure Policy Coherence and Additive Commitments: Before commitment discussions are undertaken, Action Coalition leads must ensure an understanding of commitments already made to women and girls as well as if and where these commitments have succeeded or fallen short. Action Coalition commitments, in addition to having the goal of being transformative, should fill commitment gaps or allow for the achievement of previously-made commitments through the creation of truly enabling environments. Women and girls in emergencies and protracted crisis are often rendered invisible in the political discourse – due to their gender and the divide between traditional “development” and “humanitarian” contexts. The Sustainable Development Goals are perhaps the most glaring example and result of this divide; the SDGs largely overlooked[17] people living in humanitarian crisis, arguably among the most vulnerable populations on the planet. Where gaps in commitments exist, Action Coalitions should fill them. Where gaps in implementation of commitments exist, Action Coalitions should spur actions. And where the division between humanitarian and development goals and commitments exist, **Action Coalitions should bridge the divide to ensure that no woman or girl, regardless of where they live, is left behind by Beijing+25.**

A Note on Data

The humanitarian sector is shifting towards a data-intensive environment, valuing data as a basis to inform decisions, program design and interventions. Coupled with burgeoning data standards and increasing data availability, there will be continued calls for greater volume, velocity and quality of data to fuel more robust data analysis. Privacy and related ethical concerns will be the biggest challenge to the increasing volume of data and its safe use. “Do no harm” will need a new interpretation in the digital age, as data mining becomes more regular, larger volumes of data are collected, and the sector is unprepared to recognize the harm that comes from unethical data collection, management or sharing. While the demand for data collection, use, and sharing grows, the humanitarian community lags behind in its approach to responsible data. Just as program staff have additional proficiencies in finance in order to manage budgets, so too, is there a need for a leveling up in proficiency in data stewardship. Frequently, donors and governments use mandates to require sharing of sensitive data, even in the absence of consent and outside of international standards and best practices - - any dilution of this standard by service providers has a harmful impact on individual trust in services and the broader help-seeking behavior of the affected population.

Humanitarian System Change through Beijing+25

It is often pointed out that while the most affected by disaster and conflict are women and children of the Global South, most aid agencies are led by men from the Global North and that unequal power structures have led to egregious abuses of power, including but not limited to sexual exploitation and abuse. Many have already begun questioning the current system's patriarchal and neocolonial roots, how power and decision-making structures are created and wielded within the current system, how feminist analysis and practice could improve humanitarian aid delivery and outcomes, and how the current system puts women and girls at increased risk.

To truly achieve gender equality, the aid sector itself must be reformed, concentrating efforts in analyzing and redistributing power, ensuring diverse representation at all levels and supporting organizational culture change so that gender equality is a key value across the sector. In this way, we can help ensure that humanitarian aid actually contributes to the creation of safe spaces for women and girls. The Beijing +25 process is an opportunity to drive reform of the humanitarian sector itself and for the system to learn from the feminist and transformational aspirations of the Beijing+25 process. Humanitarian agencies and organizations, coordination mechanisms, and donors should use the conversations around Beijing+25 to connect broader development and human rights goals to humanitarian work, apply feminist analysis and ensure linkages between Beijing+25 commitments and commitments and advancements made in the humanitarian field since 1995. This will help to maintain not only consistency but also ensure accountability to commitments across these multiple processes. For instance, the humanitarian system could commit to an SDG 5 action plan for every humanitarian response, linking the SDGs and humanitarian action to better support women and girls.[18]

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16. For as much progress as the SDGs can spur, people in humanitarian crisis are under-represented in SDG language and accountability processes. For instance, of the 42 countries that submitted 2019 Voluntary National Reviews, just 13 mentioned refugees as even meriting specific attention and not one VNR included data on refugees to measure progress towards the SDGs. SDG 5 makes no specific mention of women and girls living as refugees, in displacement, in conflict, crisis or other emergency and sets no target for these women and girls. According to Equal Measures 2030's 2019 SDG Gender Index, which measures gender equality across the Goals, 40 percent of the world's women and girls live in states which are failing on gender equality—and the bottom 10 countries in the Index are fragile and conflict affected countries. This seriously jeopardizes the success of the principle to "Leave no one behind".
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