



# UNHRC: Gender-Based Violence in Displacement and Migration

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Dear Delegates,

My name is Lily, and I will be your chair for the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) committee at CAMUN this year! I'm currently a junior and have been involved in Model UN since freshman year; through my involvement, I'm boundlessly grateful for the opportunity it granted me to broaden my perspective on pressing global issues, articulate my ideas with confidence and clarity, and foster meaningful connections with peers from genuinely all corners of the world. I am excited to lead this particular committee on gender-based violence in the context of displacement and migration, given its pressing relevance both domestically and internationally, and the unique opportunity it provides to explore the lived experiences of individuals facing compounded marginalization—including women and members of ethnic, racial, and other historically marginalized communities.

As you prepare for discussion, I encourage you to reflect on not only the immediate impacts of gender-based violence in displacement and migration but also the deeper social, economic, and political factors that shape people's experiences. Please also consult the committee background guide for pertinent details and remember that position papers should clearly present your country's perspective, supported by evidence and thoughtful policy recommendations. Feel free to email us if you have any questions. See you in April!

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# Background

## Gender-Based Violence as a Human Rights Crisis in Displacement

Gender-based violence (GBV) is any injurious act that is perpetrated against a person's will on the basis of their actual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. While people of all genders can experience GBV, women on a global scale are disproportionately prone to and affected by it. The issue is systemic, rooted in gender inequality and entrenched social norms that normalize control and unequal distribution of power. GBV manifests in numerous forms—including sexual, physical, mental, and economic abuse inflicted in public or private settings. It can take on forms including, but not limited to, intimate partner violence, conflict-related sexual violence, rape and sexual slavery, forced and early marriage, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and female genital mutilation. The repercussions of GBV are often severe and enduring, ranging from physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies to long-term reproductive health complications, profound psychological trauma—including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety—and deep social consequences such as stigmatization, family rejection, and exclusion from education or economic participation.

Displacement refers to the forced movement of people from their homes or habitual residences, often due to conflict, violence, persecution, human rights violations, or disasters. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, forcibly displaced and stateless people experience GBV at significantly higher rates. Estimates indicate that up to 70% of women in crisis settings are subjected to GBV, which is disproportionately higher than the global average of 35%. It is imperative to recognize that GBV in the context of displacement functions as both a cause and consequence of displacement, as individuals may be forced to flee due to GBV while simultaneously facing heightened risk of violence throughout displacement. Moreover, GBV and its continuation is systemic, not incidental. Displacement erodes legal protections, fractures social networks, and weakens accountability mechanisms; as a result, not only does the perpetration of GBV become more feasible, but its continuation is also enabled, as survivors often lack access to support services and effective avenues for justice, while perpetrators frequently operate with impunity.

## Across the Displacement Continuum

Women are prone to GBV at every stage of displacement, from initial flight to resettlement. Gender persecution in home countries could serve as a push factor for migration. Forms of gender-based

persecution include forced marriage, conflict-related sexual violence, or honor violence—which is when in order to restore a family’s perceived honor an individual is abused for violating a sociocultural or religious norm. After deciding to migrate, female displaced persons seeking asylum face significant challenges due to systemic gaps in asylum recognition for gender-based claims, including legal frameworks that do not recognize gender-based violence as grounds for asylum and biases in processing procedures.

While in transit and at border checkpoints, women are vulnerable to human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Nearly 80% of internationally trafficked victims cross through official border points, such as airports and land border controls, according to the International Organization for Migration. An estimated 23% of all human trafficking victims are in sexual exploitation, where 78% of victims in those cases are women and girls. In addition to this, displaced individuals at border crossings frequently face abuse at the hands of smugglers and border officers, including coercion into transactional sex as a means to secure food, transit, or official documentation. Migrants, particularly those who are undocumented, are often reluctant to report abuse for fear of deportation or retaliation, considering the perpetrators could be state officials.

Displacement camps and informal settlements are also environments in which GBV may occur. The disintegration of family and community ties, rule of law, and security infrastructure makes individuals, especially women and girls, highly vulnerable. Overcrowding, lack of sufficient lighting, and shared sanitation facilities create environments conducive to sexual assault. Violence is perpetrated by a range of individuals, including intimate partners (the most prevalent in many settings), family members, strangers, armed insurgents, and, once again, police or military personnel. Intimate partner violence specifically is propelled by poverty and unemployment, as it often leads to men losing their traditional provider roles, resulting in frustration and the instrumentalization of violence as a means of exerting control.

GBV continues to persist in host states and resettlement contexts. Displaced persons often face significant barriers to accessing justice due to their precarious legal status, and similarly encounter obstacles in obtaining appropriate healthcare. In shelters and urban environments, women, girls, and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual harassment. Like displacement camps, detention centers—with their overcrowded and often deplorable living conditions—further exacerbate these risks. These circumstances illustrate that displacement does not end with flight and rather remains a persistent threat throughout the resettlement process.

## **Populations at Heightened Risk**

Certain populations face disproportionately higher risks of GBV during displacement due to intersecting vulnerabilities. Adolescent girls, pregnant women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and ethnic or religious minorities often experience compounded risks that existing protection mechanisms fail to adequately address. Social stigma, language barriers, and limited access to legal and healthcare services can amplify these vulnerabilities, leaving many survivors without support or recourse. Recognizing these intersecting factors is essential for understanding why standard protection measures frequently fall short in preventing and responding to GBV.

## **Prior Action on the Topic**

International efforts to address GBV in displacement and migration contexts are grounded in a combination of human rights law and coordinated operational frameworks. One of the earliest and most influential instruments is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979. While the convention itself does not explicitly reference GBV, the CEDAW Committee has since clarified that violence against women constitutes a form of discrimination. This interpretation was strengthened in General Recommendation No. 35 (2017), which recognizes GBV as a systemic human rights violation and emphasizes state obligations to prevent, investigate, and remedy such violence, including in contexts of displacement and migration.

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) further established an international consensus by explicitly defining GBV and affirming that states have a responsibility to exercise due diligence in preventing and responding to violence against women regardless of setting. While not legally binding, the declaration has served as a normative foundation for subsequent international and regional action.

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, beginning with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), has also shaped international responses by recognizing the disproportionate impact of conflict and displacement on women and girls. Subsequent resolutions have highlighted conflict-related sexual violence and called for accountability, protection of civilians, and women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery.

At the regional level, legally binding instruments such as the Belém do Pará Convention in the Americas (1994) and the Istanbul Convention adopted by the Council of Europe (2011) have set comprehensive standards for preventing violence against women, protecting survivors, and prosecuting perpetrators. These treaties explicitly address harmful practices, sexual violence, and state responsibility, and have influenced national legislation and policy beyond their respective regions.

More recently, global partnerships have sought to translate norms into action. The Spotlight Initiative launched by the United Nations and the European Union in 2017 represents one of the largest international investments to end violence against women and girls.

These policies and initiatives together reflect sustained international recognition of GBV as a critical human rights concern in displacement contexts while not forgetting to highlight persistent gaps between normative commitments and implementation on the ground.

## **Possible Blocs**

### **Conflict-Affected and Displacement-Origin States**

Countries experiencing protracted conflict and internal displacement often emphasize the urgency of, as already mentioned, addressing GBV as both a driver and outcome of instability. States such as Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, and Myanmar have documented widespread use of sexual violence, forced marriage, and trafficking during conflict and flight. These countries frequently advocate for stronger international accountability mechanisms and survivor-centered humanitarian responses.

### **Frontline Host States**

States hosting large refugee populations often prioritize protection capacity and international burden-sharing. Uganda, Bangladesh, Türkiye, Jordan, and Chad manage densely populated camps or urban refugee settings where GBV risks are heightened. While some host states maintain progressive asylum frameworks, funding shortfalls and domestic pressures can weaken GBV prevention and response systems.

### **Transit States**

Transit countries such as Mexico, Colombia, Libya, Greece, and Tunisia confront GBV risks linked to smuggling, detention, and informal border crossings. Delegations from these states often call for

regional cooperation and shared responsibility, highlighting how weak protection in transit exacerbates abuse.

### **Destination and Donor States**

High-income destination states, including Germany, France, Sweden, Canada, and the United States, as well as the European Union, typically emphasize legal frameworks, asylum screening, and funding for GBV programming. Tensions may arise between border enforcement priorities and human rights obligations toward displaced survivors.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. How can host states and the international community strengthen protections against GBV for displaced persons without undermining state sovereignty or border control frameworks?
2. To what extent should gender-based violence be explicitly recognized as grounds for asylum, and how can asylum systems address bias and evidentiary barriers in gender-based claims?
3. How can accountability mechanisms be strengthened in displacement contexts—such as camps, transit zones, and detention centers—where rule of law is weakened or fragmented?
4. In what ways can protection mechanisms be adapted to address intersecting vulnerabilities among displaced populations, including age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and minority status?
5. How can responses to GBV balance immediate protection and humanitarian needs with long-term access to justice, healthcare, and social reintegration for survivors?

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