

War on Women

The global toll of conflict
and violence



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Note:

The expert witness sections are condensed versions of longer interviews carried out for the purpose of this report.

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List of acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
DFID	Department for International Development
GBV	gender-based violence
IMF	International Monetary Fund
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
VAW	violence against women
VAWG	violence against women and girls

Foreword

We have come a long way since I began campaigning on gender justice and the elimination of violence against women. Recent years have seen campaigns such as the #MeToo movement, a greater willingness for women to speak up about the harassment and violence that they have experienced, and a media landscape more ready to highlight these injustices. These have come alongside significant advancements in legal and political frameworks for upholding women's rights, thanks to the tireless efforts of campaigners and women's civil society organisations all over the world.

The scale of the global toll of conflict and violence against the world's women remains hard to comprehend. For millennia, women have faced unimaginable horrors, predominantly at the hands of male perpetrators. They have been subject to terrible traumas, including forced abortions, rape, female genital mutilation and so-called honour crimes. The task of eliminating all instances of violence against women is a monumental one that will need us work together to go beyond our creeds, nations and genders. It requires each of us to move beyond our comfort zones, complacency and cultural limitations.

As this report shows, if violence against women is to be reduced, we must challenge those with power – all governments, multi-lateral organisations and faith institutions – to recognise there are some deep-rooted systemic issues that render women more vulnerable to violence. In addition, we must all recognise that while violence includes the horrific instances of individual violence, women also face structural violence.

In order to make a meaningful difference to the lives of women caught up in violence, governments, including the UK, must tackle some of the critical factors, such as increasing militarisation and the arms trade, and fundamental issues, such as the broken economic system that exacerbates the precarious situation in which many women find themselves. If we enable women to be more economically autonomous, more educated and more aware of their rights, while also working with communities to counter patriarchal narratives that subjugate women, we will be able to take steps forward in ending all forms of violence against women.

As people of faith, we must also acknowledge the painful reality that religious institutions have played a part in creating and upholding patriarchal and exclusionary structures and practices which have kept women unequal and more prone to being victims of violent acts and structural violence.

As someone who has advocated for gender justice within the Church, and beyond, for decades, I strongly agree with the report's recommendations for protocols for the prevention, detection and attention to gender-based violence inside churches and faith-based organisations.

We must work hard to put forward theological frameworks and understandings that highlight our belief that each and every person is made in God's image and worthy of inherent respect. Our theology must enable us to fight for the equality, dignity and justice of all, and

we must reject those theological frameworks which push us towards gender stereotypes that limit women's rights, bodily integrity and agency.

The Church – as with all other institutions – should have a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women. We must make no excuses for men who violate women, and should advocate for legal frameworks against rape and violence.

Dr Elaine Storkey is a writer, theologian and author of *Scars Against Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women*

Executive summary

Things have changed dramatically for the world's women since Christian Aid was founded 75 years ago. On the whole, this change has been for the better, with significant progress on women's rights and working towards gender parity. We have seen the decline of child marriage, a decrease in the number of women and girls who have been subjected to female genital mutilation, and more women represented in national parliaments.¹ We have seen historically unprecedented reductions in maternal mortality, gains in women's health and education, and progress towards gender equality through new legislation and the reform of existing laws.²

This progress is worth celebrating, but there is still a long way to go. Women and girls are over-represented among the world's poor.³ They are more likely to be denied the right to an education and to be victims of human trafficking.⁴ Patterns of violence and discrimination are often established in childhood, and gender-based violence (GBV) is perpetrated against girls, especially after puberty, when they are considered to be women in many cultures.⁵

The gender inequalities that exist globally manifest themselves differently, depending on the context. But wherever women and girls face violence and discrimination, it is symptomatic of wider power imbalances in society, including patriarchal norms and practices that render women 'less than'. Often, these norms and attitudes intersect with power imbalances based on race, caste and religion, and a broken economic system that creates vast disparities between rich and poor.

One of the most severe challenges we face in achieving gender parity is the prevalence of all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) globally. GBV is the wider concept of which VAWG is a component; it includes forced abortions, female foeticide, rape, female genital mutilation and femicide. This violence exists in every society around the world. Poor and marginalised women are particularly vulnerable to physical violence, exacerbated during times of conflict. GBV exists on a continuum, and includes sexual violence and other forms of violence that are gendered.

In this report, we argue that physical violence is a symptom of structural violence which is reflected in and reinforced by social, economic and political inequality. We believe that to reduce both structural and physical violence, those with power – governments who can change the systemic and structural causes of inequalities, and faith leaders – need to turn their attention to shifting structural inequalities, addressing societal power imbalances and building peaceful societies.

Violence against women and girls is a scourge on humanity. Every woman – just as every person of every gender – is made in the image of God and therefore is worthy of inherent dignity and respect. Any violence is contrary to this and shames us all. As people of faith striving for the dignity, equality and justice of all, we find the prevalence of such violence abhorrent. We must all work tirelessly to end it.

Christian Aid calls on governments to not view violence against women and girls in isolation from the structural problems that lead to

gender inequality. To do so would be merely to scratch the surface, leading to small gains rather than the monumental shifts needed to change the situation for the world's women. Women need delivery of the full spectrum of human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights. While there has been huge progress in policy changes on paper, and in some cases in practice, the lived reality of many women falls far short of these principles of gender equality. Tackling inequalities in power is required for real change for the most marginalised.

This report sets out a number of challenges those in power must address to achieve tangible steps forwards in reducing the impact of violence and conflict on women's and girls' lives and stemming the rising tide of violence perpetrated against women in both war and non-conflict settings. In particular, we explore women's rights and experiences of violence through two case studies from Afghanistan and India, the countries that are the focus of Christian Aid's 2019 Christmas Appeal.

Our hope is that violence against women and girls has a chance of being eliminated in societies where women are truly seen as equal, which have policies that advance women's rights and are meaningfully implemented, and address the intersecting inequalities women face.

The big global gains we have seen in women's equality over the past 75 years risk being jeopardised unless we do more to tackle all forms of violence against women. We recognise this will take every area of society, including media, civil society organisations and the private sector, but in this report we propose a three-point action plan particularly for governments and faith leaders – as drivers of change for society as a whole – to tackle structural, physical and psychological violence against women.

Our recommendations are:

- **To all governments:** address the implementation gap in policies relating to gender equality and tackling violence against women and girls.
- **To the UK Government:** make peace not war – review military activity, recognising that violence against women increases in conflict settings and girls.
- **To faith leaders:** Take responsibility in tackling violence against women and girls.

Introduction

Great strides have been made in women's equality around the world since Christian Aid was founded in 1945. United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres remarked in April 2019 that the multilateral arrangements established at the end of the Second World War have 'saved lives, expanded economic and social progress, upheld human rights and, not least, helped to prevent a third descent into global conflagration'.⁶ The world has seen significant progress in international law, environmental protection and gender equality. The 1948 UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights became the landmark from which subsequent legally binding treaties, narratives, policies and laws considering the inherent dignity of all human beings – no matter their gender – would derive.

We have come a long way. In the last decade, there have been 274 reforms to laws and regulations, leading to an increase in gender equality.⁷ This includes the implementation of laws on workplace sexual harassment in 35 different countries, protecting nearly two billion more women than a decade ago.⁸ Similarly, it is notable that no charges of rape were brought at the Nuremberg trials, despite the systematic rape of women during the Second World War, yet today rape is now recognised as a means of perpetrating genocide under international law.⁹

However, progress is still unacceptably slow. The World Bank's global average indicates that most countries only give women three-quarters the rights of men.¹⁰ This is not unintentional. Although laws and international norms have improved on paper, the lived reality of many women has not. What is needed now is not more policies, but the implementation of existing policies, as well as a shift in power at all levels, and the right funding delivered to the right areas in the right way, to ensure improvements are felt by the world's poorest and most marginalised women and girls.

The pervasive nature of violence, particularly against women and girls, whether it results from armed conflict committed by state actors, structural violence committed by economic actors, or by individuals with high levels of impunity, demonstrates how far there is to go before true gender equality is achieved. The world's women and girls will never be equal while vulnerable to such high levels of violence.

Women and girls face consistently unequal treatment, discrimination and denial of their human rights globally. Social norms and factors, such as racial, ethnic, caste and class discrimination, often combine to make them even more vulnerable to violence and less able to access justice in the aftermath. This violence manifests from the home, to society, to legal/political/economic systems and is exacerbated within conflict and violence-enabling contexts.

Many women are being made vulnerable to violence in new ways, for example, by changing patterns of work or migration, in which climate change or forced displacement may be factors. In India, migrants, especially women and girls from socially excluded communities (including Dalits and Adivasis), face a high risk of labour exploitation or abuse at work and in migration. Women and

Expert witness

Dr Aisling Swaine

Violence against women manifests in different ways in different contexts globally. As our societies develop and as globalisation impacts how we relate to one another, we see the emergence of new ways in which violence against women manifests. However, the violence women experience should never be seen in isolation from its wider social context, and we need to focus on the relevance of gender and various other kinds of inequalities as the basis for much of women's experience of violence.

The violence and harm that women experience come from a much broader and longer trajectory of oppression against women. They come from centuries of structural inequalities. Those historic oppressions provide the context to how and why women experience violence. All of this is why women experience the high prevalence of the gendered and sexualised kinds of violence that we see in the world.

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girls who migrate in search of work are also at very high risk of trafficking, often for the purposes of sexual exploitation.¹¹

Unequal treatment is also prevalent across sectors such as health and education, particularly for women and girls from socially excluded communities. A recent report on caste noted: 'In South Asian caste systems, education has been regarded as the preserve of more privileged castes, and Dalit households still face many challenges in educating their children. A 2014 study in Bangladesh found that 28.5% of Dalit children were registered in school, in contrast to the national average of 96.7%, and reported that poverty, poor health and discriminatory practices within schools contribute to very high drop-out rates for Dalit children.'¹²

Economic hardship and the need for children to do paid work or unpaid household work frequently keep Dalit children, especially girls, from going to school, and Dalit girls face additional challenges, for example, sexual harassment at school or during the journey to school is a constant risk contributing to high drop-out rates and early marriage among Dalit girls in Bangladesh.¹³

In exploring VAWG, it is important to remember that women are often at greatest risk of violence in the home and in many wealthier countries there is an extremely high prevalence of VAWG, including intimate partner violence. VAWG is not only an issue for the global South. However, we recognise the choices that enable women to escape or avoid violence, and for survivors to access support and justice following violence, are much more restricted for women and girls in the global South, as we will explore later in focusing on the poorest and most marginalised groups in Afghanistan and India.

We are exploring the global toll of conflict and violence against women and girls at a time of increasing impunity for the prosecution of sexual violence in many countries (including the UK), a global rollback on women's rights (such as reproductive health) in many countries and under-funding of women's organisations. There is also a lack of funding for tackling VAWG, with just 0.12% of the total \$41.5bn given in humanitarian assistance between 2016 and 2018 earmarked for tackling GBV against women and girls.¹⁴

This is also a time of increasing militarisation and securitisation by states in response to conflict, which exposes women to further violence and undermines peacebuilding efforts. Increased conflict means more women and girls experience violence.

A focus on women and girls does not negate the human rights abuses and inequalities that the world's poorest and most marginalised men face; nor does it mean we do not recognise that gender is a nuanced concept and that there are specific injustices faced specifically by LGBT people. A focus on the violence that women experience directly as a tactic of conflict or violence and at the hands of male perpetrators in domestic contexts does not ignore the reality that men and boys are victims of violence too – and on a much larger scale than women and girls are, in reality. For example, the Peace Research Institute Oslo has found that men are more likely to die during conflicts, but women are at higher risk of death after a conflict is considered officially over.¹⁵ However, the point remains that while most homicide victims in the world are male, most perpetrators – regardless of the gender of the victim – are men.¹⁶

The key difference is that women and girls experience this violence as part of a wider global reality of structural inequalities, power imbalances and oppression, which are forms of violence in themselves. In this report, we use the expansive definition of violence in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to include not only the physical or psychological harm that comes to women and girls, but also the structural and human rights abuses that make women and girls more susceptible to marginalisation and vulnerability.¹⁷

Across the globe, power within and between countries lies within patriarchal structures that can rob women and girls of their dignity and lead to the denial of access to their rights, access and control of resources, peace and a life of fulfilment.

Women's rights under attack

The past decade has seen tumultuous change in the global political and economic landscape. The elections of populist governments and a rising tide of social intolerance have led to a rolling back of women's and girls' rights, as gender inequality is squeezed out in favour of toxic narratives of patriarchal structures that incite violence. As a result, a growing number of states are questioning established standards of women's rights in venues including the Commission on the Status of Women and the UN Security Council.¹⁸ At times, this phenomenon has been enhanced by economic changes, including liberalisation and indebtedness that led to austerity measures and a rollback on public services, social protection and, more widely, the social contexts which affect women and girls disproportionately.

Global cooperation on issues of women, peace and security, climate change and peace is under threat from populist and nationalist movements that are gaining traction worldwide.¹⁹ For example, the resurrection of the 'global gag rule' has limited US funding for any organisation worldwide that performs, promotes, provides information about, or provides referrals for abortion. This limits the ability of organisations to provide crucial reproductive and health services which is crucial to women and girls. We believe that this example is not unique, nor is it detached from wider anti-rights movements that portray civil society as opposition nor can it be separated from the wider context where governments are limiting the political, economic and social space for civil society actors.²⁰

At a global level, fundamentalist trends are also clearly felt either through the de-funding of the UN system or through targeted rolling back of hard-won rights and previously agreed-upon language.²¹ For instance, the recent UN Security Council resolution 2467 on conflict-related sexual violence stripped all mention of sexual and reproductive health after the US threatened to veto this over previously agreed language that could implicitly include abortion.²² This represents a rupture in policy coherence as the US had been an initial champion of ending sexual violence in conflict.

Of course, fundamentalism (be it religious, social or economic) does not operate in a void. The severe systemic crisis provoked by the 2008 global financial crisis further deepened income inequality across the world, and led to a rejection of social and political gains associated with the current economic system. This has resulted in an increase in systematic attacks on human rights in general, and

Expert witness

Irene Mwendwa

Violence against women is a human rights violation of pandemic proportions. The African Union declared 2019 the Year of Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Towards Durable Solutions to Forced Displacement in Africa. This meant a focus on member states and humanitarian actors finding lasting solutions, efforts by governments to resolve conflict, empowering survivors by ensuring justice and fulfilling the needs particular to women and girl refugees, internally displaced people and migrants.

At the heart of humanitarian accountability is the wellbeing of communities – particularly people affected by crisis. A lot has been achieved towards gaining access to sexual and reproductive health rights for girls and women in conflict. However, cases of physical and sexual violence remain unresolved, with few or no prosecutions. The suffering has to end now. Governments must ensure stronger punitive measures are in place to curb sexual violence, prioritise health services and provide quality sexual and reproductive services for women, including in emergencies and conflict settings.

We must raise awareness of sexual violence on digital media and global movements such as #MeToo. We cannot underestimate the role of digital media in information sharing and agenda setting. The media remains a powerful tool for dialogue, problem solving and speaking out, which will help tackle violence against women globally. It is crucial for governments to take a stand for a safer generation.

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women's and marginalised groups' rights in particular, by neo-conservative governments (with the crucial support of religious conservatism) and well-resourced and globally well-connected fundamentalist faith-based organisations.²³

VAWG: The global toll and why it matters

Violence against women and girls occurs in both conflict and non-conflict settings. This is not acceptable. Those with power, such as governments and faith leaders, must do more to bring about change for the women and girls who suffer from multiple types and forms of violence.

CEDAW describes the range: ‘Violence takes multiple forms, including acts or omissions intended or likely to cause or result in death or physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, threats of such acts, harassment, coercion and arbitrary deprivation of liberty.’²⁴

One in three women worldwide has experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.²⁵ Some 87,000 women were intentionally killed in 2017, an estimated 58% of whom were killed by intimate partners or family members (137 women per day).²⁶ The World Bank estimates that 200 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation; the majority of these victims are girls who are cut before the age of five.²⁷ Women and girls account for 71% of all human trafficking victims detected globally, with girls representing nearly three out of every four trafficked children.²⁸

In our report *Gender Based Violence Programming in Contexts Affected by Violence and Conflict*, we mentioned the omnipresence of psychological and physical violence in women’s lives.²⁹ We believe the full and adequate implementation of instruments, such as CEDAW and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), is fundamental for the reduction of GBV.

Structural violence against women is widespread. According to the World Bank, there were 274 reforms to national laws and regulations, leading to an increase in gender equality in 131 countries in 2019.³⁰ However, despite this progress, women continue to be left behind by both residual (or pre-existing) and new challenges, such as the growing role of multinational corporations and the financial sector.

Christian Aid believes gender justice is more than achieving equality and fairness between women and men. Gender is a spectrum, which includes transgender women and men, as well as anyone who identifies outside of these definitions.³¹ We also understand that people in poverty often face several intersecting inequalities based on their identities and that these experiences need to be better understood and appropriately addressed in all action to address GBV. We strive for a more inclusive world where identity – gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, class, sexual orientation, disability and age – is no longer a barrier to equal treatment.³² We know that we cannot stamp out poverty, improve the dignity of women or enable them to live peaceful lives free from violence without addressing such inequality.³³

Expert witness

Prof Fionnuala Ni Aolain

Over the past 20 years, many governments have taken an important symbolic stance in recognising the systemic harms that violence against women causes in many parts of the globe. But it is clear that no government is doing enough.

One of the things that concerns me, as a feminist and human rights activist, is that there is often focus on the violence, but not the causes of the violence. We say violence against women is unacceptable, but we do not talk about human rights or the rights of equality that underpin the right to be freed from violence. If women do not have equal pay and are not economically emancipated, if they do not have equal access to education, water and housing, then they are fundamentally much more vulnerable to the sexual and traditional forms of violence that pervade their lives. If you are not in a situation of equality, it is a situation of vulnerability and exposure.

Unless we are prepared to address the fundamental linkage between inequality and violence, we are only scratching the surface of the forms and the causes that produce the violence and it is there that governments have to be most attentive. It is pretty cheap to say ‘do not engage in sexual violence in armed conflict’ – not unimportant, but it can only be meaningful when there is a willingness to address the causes that produce the vulnerability and exposure to that violence in the first place.

Fionnuala Ni Aolain is Regents Professor, holder of the Robina Chair in Law, Public Policy, and Society, University of Minnesota Law School, and Professor of Law at Queen’s University of Belfast School of Law

VAWG in conflict settings

Today, there are around two billion people living in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence and it is estimated that by 2030, 46% of the world's poor will live in such countries.³⁴ These nations are falling behind, with poverty rates 20% higher than in non-conflict-affected areas. In our report last year, *Resourcing War and Peace*, we demonstrated the immeasurable impact on people's lives of human rights violations and the failure to respect international humanitarian law in contexts of violence.³⁵

In 2018, global military spending was \$1,822bn – its highest level since 1988. This is up from an estimated \$1.74tn spent on weapons and military in 2017 – a year that saw the first real terms increase in global military spending since the end of the US occupation of Iraq in 2011.³⁶

In times of crisis – whether humanitarian, socio-political or technological – the situation becomes even worse for women and girls because already-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities are compounded. As the UN reports: 'Conflict spurs much higher rates of sexual violence. It renders women acutely vulnerable to poverty, the loss of jobs and the destruction of assets such as homes. Essential health services crumble, underlined by a maternal mortality rate that is 2.5 times higher on average, in conflict and post-conflict countries.'³⁷

Time and time again, we have seen how instances of violence against women and girls increase during periods of conflict. For example, while around 379 million women worldwide experienced intimate partner violence in 2018, the rates were one-third higher in areas affected by conflict, according to Georgetown University's Women, Peace and Security Index.³⁸

Instances of GBV rise in the aftermath of conflict and displacement. One in five refugee or displaced women and girls – those fleeing their homes for reasons that include war and humanitarian disasters – have experienced sexual violence.³⁹

Women living in war-torn, post-conflict and post-crisis countries are disproportionately affected by poverty, unemployment, corruption and lack of governance. They find themselves among the most vulnerable and insecure segments of their communities. Overall insecurity and crisis allow decision makers to overlook the special needs and vulnerabilities of women. The political, economic and social decision making powers of women are among the first inalienable rights to disappear from family and public discourse. Drivers of conflict can sometimes use the threat of VAWG as a weapon to create panic. Conflict and violence against women are inextricably linked. Therefore, it follows that the more the world spends on military conflict, the more we will see women and girls used as weapons of war; victims caught in the crossfires of battles not of their own making.

The world's women know this. In a global study on the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, which looked at the progress made on improving women's participation and protection in conflict and post-conflict settings, women were united in their call to end the cycle of militarisation.⁴⁰

Women from Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East spoke with one voice to bring a message to the UN Security Council: 'The United Nations must take the lead in stopping the process of militarization and militarism that began in 2001 in an ever-increasing cycle of conflict. The normalization of violence at the local, national and international levels must cease. Networks of women peacebuilders and peacemakers must be expanded and supported to come to the fore.'⁴¹

Christian Aid believes that more resources should be dedicated to peacebuilding, and women civil society actors should be included in the processes of bringing about peace. Our hope is that if the international community, including the UK Government, emphasises that military responses should be used sparingly and that the priority should be on non-violent means, the instances of violence against women within conflict settings will be reduced.

Within conflict settings, the inequalities women and girls face more broadly mean they are particularly vulnerable – before, during and after the conflict. The violence women and girls face during conflict includes that which is sexual in nature. The UN states that conflict-related sexual violence refers to: 'Rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict... The term also encompasses trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual violence or exploitation, when committed in situations of conflict.'⁴²

The past decade has seen more recognition of conflict-related sexual violence and its effect on and relationship to peace and security; but there is more work to be done to recognise and tackle the systemic inequalities faced by women and girls all over the world that make them more prone to being victims of such violence.

Gender equality policies: the implementation gap

There are many good policies on women's rights and gender equality, but these are frequently not resourced or the institutional mechanisms established for their implementation are insufficient.

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, approached from an intersectional feminist perspective, provided an improved and strategic framework whereby women's rights were put front and centre to enforce CEDAW. It identified 12 priority areas for changing the situation of women and girls in the world, establishing the methods by which all actors are to eradicate the persistent and increasing burdens of gender discrimination and poverty on women by addressing many of its structural causes, ensuring equal rights for all. While most countries have ratified the CEDAW framework and adapted laws and policies accordingly, progress towards making CEDAW a reality remains a serious challenge in many countries.⁴³

Agenda 2030 for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commits all countries to achieving gender equality and ensuring no one is left behind in delivering the 17 goals, but progress is not on track.⁴⁴ In fact, the world is furthest behind in achieving SDG 5 on gender equality, and overall progress is being undermined by a lack of headway in areas such as legal discrimination, patriarchal social

norms and power imbalances. Of course, gender equality must also be addressed across all the other goals and targets. To help achieve this, Christian Aid has recommended that UN Women's Addis Ababa Action Plan on Transformative Financing for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment should be integrated into national plans for the implementation of the SDGs.⁴⁵

War on Women: Country focus

Afghanistan



Above: Bibi Aisha and her two children are supported with cash and tent assistance by Christian Aid partner RAADA, outside Herat, Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, extreme poverty is widespread. Between August and October 2019, it is estimated that a total of 10.23 million people (33% of the total population) were in severe acute food insecurity and in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.⁴⁶ Hunger is related not only to conflict but also to the effects of natural disasters, such as drought, which are exacerbated by climate change.⁴⁷ There have also been rising numbers of casualties among civilians. In the first nine months of 2019, 41% of the civilians killed were women and children. Over that period, there were more than 8,200 civilian casualties, with 2,563 people killed and 5,676 injured.⁴⁸

This lack of security also impacts on women's and girls' rights in other ways – for example, by preventing their access to essential services or reinforcing social norms that severely restrict their freedom of movement outside the home. Although acceptance of women working outside of the home is gradually growing, at least in urban areas, women's participation in the labour force is still very low (officially just 29%).⁴⁹

The protracted conflict has also devastated Afghanistan's economy, resulting in growing unemployment among both women and men and a general weakening of rule of law. Some commentators have suggested that this has contributed to more conservative attitudes and violence against women. Practices such as the trading of women and girls in marriage exchanges between families (called *badal*), and giving away girls to settle disputes (known as *ba'ad*) continue to be reported and may in part be perpetuated by conflict and lack of security.⁵⁰

Intimate partner violence is common in conflict settings around the world.⁵¹ According to Georgetown University's Women Peace and Security Index, 46% of Afghan women surveyed had experienced physical or sexual violence committed by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months.⁵² In addition, fewer than 25% of women

VAW in Afghanistan

Bibi's story

In Afghanistan, decades of war, insecurity and civil unrest, lack of good governance, weakness in state institutions and corruption have pushed people further into poverty and contributed to a rising sense of frustration. Women are still considered to be lesser humans in Afghan society, denied access to basic services and rights.

For three decades, Christian Aid has been supporting organisations in Afghanistan that work to empower, liberate and rehabilitate women, to raise awareness about GBV, human rights and provide access to social justice.

Christian Aid works in Afghanistan towards a society without war and conflict, where women, men, boys and girls can access their human rights and live with dignity. We do this through strengthening national and local civil society organisations and supporting communities to embed culturally suitable and locally acceptable methods of gender empowerment. We encourage women and men to speak out about their communities' needs and take collective action to reduce poverty, marginalisation and vulnerability.

Bibi Aisha is a 25-year-old widow who was displaced due to conflict and drought in Bagdhis province. She lost everything when she fled with her daughters to a camp for internally displaced people.

'Christian Aid was the first to help us. I would have died without Christian Aid. I feel safe in the camp, but the Taliban are fighting the government troops at night,' she said.

'I don't believe in double standards. We should be treated equally'

Bibi Aisha

surveyed said they felt safe at night. This feeling of insecurity compounds further inequalities, with knock-on effects on the freedoms Afghan women have or their ability and willingness to take advantage of opportunities outside the home.⁵³

National commitments to gender equality have been made in policies and frameworks since 2001, but implementation has been slow. Afghanistan ratified CEDAW in 2003 and passed a law on the elimination of violence against women in 2009, but this has been rejected by parliament – something that remains a key concern for our partner, Afghan Women’s Educational Centre. The law provides for Elimination of Violence Against Women Commissions at national and local levels, prosecution units, women protection centres and a progressive increase in recruitment of policewomen and gender response units run by women of the Afghan National Police. If this law was properly implemented and resourced, it could make a huge difference.

Among the most marginalised women and girls who are a focus for Christian Aid’s programmes are those who have been forced to leave their homes as a result of conflict. Many find themselves in insecure settlements where they can be stuck for long periods of time and the risks of violence are high. Although Afghanistan has a good national policy for internally displaced people that falls under the remit of the Department for Refugees and Repatriation, the implementation of this policy, which is comprehensive and consistent with UN guidelines, is poor.

Progress on women’s rights in Afghanistan is thus hampered by conflict, the resurgence of extremism, conservative social norms and economic collapse. These factors are compounded by very limited access to justice for women (despite the fact that many women are imprisoned, accused of ‘moral crimes’, such as leaving unlawful forced marriages or fleeing from domestic violence).⁵⁴ Barriers faced by women include weak rule of law (especially in rural areas), insensitive policing and disapproval of women accessing formal justice systems. Women who cannot access formal justice systems often depend on informal community-based systems of justice. Christian Aid is working to ensure access to both formal and informal justice systems is strengthened and better aligned with women’s rights. We are also working with women in prison, many of whom are facing charges of ‘moral crimes’.

While violence against women persists – as it does in every society around the world – we must recognise that progress has been made on women’s rights in recent years.⁵⁵ Since 2001, women and girls have started to reclaim their basic human rights, have returned to work, school and the ballot box – having been prevented from doing so under Taliban rule. Women now also make up 28% of the Afghan National Assembly.⁵⁶ Things have changed dramatically – at least for some Afghan women – and violence against women is increasingly the subject of public and media discussion. However, the current peace deal being brokered between the Taliban and the US risks setting women’s rights and security back many years by not making assurances to protect women’s rights, including in employment, education and participation in government, and civil society groups in Afghanistan working on women’s issues.

Recommendations

The UK should use its aid budget and diplomatic influence in Afghanistan to:

- Ensure that women’s rights defenders are supported and given platforms to make their voices heard, in Afghanistan and internationally.
- Invest in organisations and interventions that have a proven track record of protecting women and girls from GBV.
- Safeguard gains for women and girls, in any peace deal brokered in the country.
- Push for any peace process to meaningfully include women, as well as support broad social movements for change with women at the centre that successfully address root causes of violence and act to transform them with justice.

We echo the plea from Jamila Afghani of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom-Afghanistan, who said: 'The international community must stand with us at this crucial moment and ensure that our rights will not be compromised for a political peace deal or after a settlement is reached.'⁵⁷

Christian Aid urges that any peace process must meaningfully include women. It must also support broad social movements for change with women at the centre, which successfully address root causes of violence and act to transform them with justice.

With women in Afghanistan still experiencing high levels of GBV, any peace deal which does not proactively protect their rights risks putting their safety in jeopardy – in particular those women living in extreme poverty.

India



Above: Christian Aid partner, ARUN runs the self-help group, the Safai Karmachari Liberation programme. It is committed to the total eradication of manual scavenging and the rehabilitation of all scavengers for dignified occupations.

Despite India's rising economic power, and important gains in living standards for many people, stark inequalities persist, including on the basis of gender, caste, ethnicity and religion, and between rural and urban areas. In much of India, poverty is disproportionately rooted in socially excluded communities, including Dalits, indigenous peoples and Muslims, who face discrimination and other barriers in employment, access to education, and resources.

These horizontal inequalities have been exacerbated in recent decades by patterns of economic growth that have widened overall inequality. For example, job creation has been insufficient, and new employment opportunities have been concentrated in urban centres and sectors demanding a high degree of education or skills. Growth has also tended to concentrate wealth among the richest few.⁵⁸

Millions of India's women and girls continue to be subjected to GBV in their daily lives. In those communities most left behind, high levels of deprivation and social exclusion can increase the risk of family violence, and practices such as forced or early marriage, which are

frequently a response to poverty and concerns about girls' safety and security. Many women in these communities are also facing multiple layers of discrimination, on the basis of their caste, religion or ethnicity as well as their gender.

The risk of violence outside of the home is particularly high for Dalit women, who may be subject to violence perpetrated by members of dominant castes and people in positions of authority. This may be opportunistic instances of sexual violence or meted out to maintain an unequal status quo by humiliating women, their families and communities, especially when Dalits seek to assert their human rights. In India, this violence takes many forms, including rape and public humiliation.⁵⁹

The intersecting inequalities faced by Dalit women and girls and those from other socially excluded communities are complex and deeply impact their opportunities, access to justice, and risk of violence, both within the home and in the wider community.

However, there are many signs of hope. Violence against women has become a major political issue in recent years, in the wake of terrible sexual attacks, some fatal – such as Jyoti Singh, who died following a brutal attack on public transport.⁶⁰ Major campaigning movements, led by women, are calling for perpetrators to be punished, challenging norms and demanding public spaces are made safe. Although there are many progressive policies and laws being enacted to protect women and girls, it will take longer to change societal mindsets and practices.

While India is waking up to the horrors of such acts of violence, there is less attention on the inequalities and discrimination that renders women and girls more vulnerable to violence. In rural areas especially, these discriminatory norms and practices mean violence remains very common. Although the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 includes special measures to promote access to justice for some of the most socially excluded groups, including women and girls affected by violence, many crimes still go unreported because survivors fear stigma and harassment by police and conviction rates for these crimes are low. Recent data suggests very high levels of violence against Dalit women persist, including sexual violence, and that conviction rates remain low.⁶¹

Violence is a risk in many aspects of life. In rural areas of India, for example, it is often women and girls who are responsible for fetching household water supplies. Dalit women are often barred from using communal water sources because they are considered 'impure' by dominant castes. These restrictions are often enforced through threats or actual violence. Women and girls from low-income families, and particularly those from socially excluded communities, frequently lack access to a safe toilet or latrine. The dangers associated with lack of safe sanitation came to international attention in May 2014 when two young Dalit girls were raped and murdered after they had gone out to the fields to defecate.⁶² The fact that caste-based discrimination and violence continue around water and sanitation has serious implications for women's and children's health and wellbeing.⁶³

VAW in India

Khalida's story

Khalida was just two-and-a-half years old when a brutal acid attack killed her 16-year-old sister and disfigured her for life. The perpetrator was her sister's 18-year-old fiancé, who wanted revenge because Khalida's sister had refused to marry him. He saturated Khalida and her sister in acid. They were taken to hospital, but her sister died two months later.

Poverty is rife in India and the country is home to a third of the world's poor. Systemic inequality means that those most affected are women and socially excluded groups (Adivasis, Muslims and Dalits), who continue to face discrimination. Acid attacks are a problem worldwide, but India has some of the highest rates, with 250 to 300 cases reported annually.

Christian Aid's partner organisation Sakhi Kendra defends and gets justice for victims of gender- and caste-based violence and rape, and fights for gender equality and gender justice. Neelam Chaturvedi, the founder of Sakhi Kendra works to raise awareness about gender and caste violence in India and to build networks to combat violence against women. The women become empowered and trained to help others. They go on to become human rights defenders, counsellors and Barefoot lawyers.

Khalida came to Sakhi Kendra for assistance with her safety and security and help with reconstructive surgery. She has received counselling and is now more confident and empowered. 'I want to stand on my own feet so that I can help my family and others,' she says.

'My heart cries from the inside'

Khalida

Gender inequality is inextricably bound up with caste discrimination and other forms of social exclusion which increase the likelihood that women and girls will face poverty and be subjected to violence.⁶⁴

Gender inequalities and social exclusion are exploited in the workplace, trapping affected women in low-status jobs, including agricultural labour, garment manufacturing and domestic servitude, with a high risk of verbal abuse and physical and sexual violence. Women's labour force participation in India is generally very low, but this is not the case among the poorest communities, where women and men often have little choice but to take up some of the most undignified, dangerous and exploitative work.⁶⁵ These issues must be addressed if the benefits of India's economic progress are to be enjoyed by all.

The voices of Dalit and other marginalised women need to be more strongly heard and their diverse experiences better understood. Their participation in measures to address GBV and promote sustainable development is essential to ensure the multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantages they face are adequately addressed, whether these are because of their caste, class, gender, ethnicity, religion or migratory status – all factors that intersect and reinforce one another. Any meaningful action to end violence against women and girls must be informed by their experiences and priorities.

The role of faith actors in tackling violence against women

As a faith-based organisation, Christian Aid is acutely aware that religious institutions are among those that have shaped patriarchal structures, gender norms, and contributed to power imbalances. We recognise the disservice this has been to women and girls through the centuries.

As we wrote in *Of The Same Flesh: Exploring a Theology of Gender*: 'Experience... reveals how the language of faith and social norms is often key, shaping women's and men's expectations of who they should or could be. They show how sometimes language and stories from Scriptures and faith traditions are shaping meaning and reality, sometimes in ways that are far from life giving or holy.'⁶⁶

We believe that faith actors are crucial in the quest for dignity, equality and justice for all. As Amina Mohamed, the UN's deputy secretary general, told Christian Aid in June 2019: 'Long before the SDGs, faith-based organisations and their leaders embodied the principle of leaving no one behind and led the fight for social justice, human rights and sustainable development.'⁶⁷

We are committed to calling on faith actors to promote more progressive gender norms, challenge harmful practices, amplify the voices of historically marginalised women and girls, such as black, indigenous and Dalit women and girls, and address their multiple inequalities.

The 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action comes at a time when we are facing great challenges: populism, securitisation and mass migration, and women and girls stand at the crossroads of these trends. This anniversary creates the space for movements promoting gender equality to strengthen joint work and open conversations with other faith groups and social movements, as we move towards global gender equality and ensure no one is left behind.

In response to the reality of violence against women and girls and the moral imperative for faith groups to tackle it, there have been a number of successful initiatives from faith actors.

In Brazil, for example, the Anglican Service of Diakonia and Development, a Christian Aid partner, decided to tackle the country's shockingly high levels of GBV. It developed a course for churches, which addresses what makes violence possible and the stigma associated with it for sufferers. The toolkit describes GBV as a sin against humanity and, significantly, recognises that a faith community commits violence against women by doing nothing about violence. It explains that Bible stories portraying violence against women should not be used to condone such actions, but rather should be used to challenge them. It recognises that violence against women is a consequence of a culture that believes that there are 'natural' differences between the sexes, which are then expressed in terms of gender inequality. The course celebrates the ways in which church communities can be safe havens, but urges that there is much more that the Church could and indeed should do.

Expert witness

Patricia Schulz

No country has taken sufficient measures to ensure the security of women (and their children) faced with violent partners or ex-partners. Gender-based violence against women (GBVAW) increases greatly in conflict situations. Arms exports, which contribute to the increase in VAW, should be curbed drastically, in view of the number of civilian victims of conflicts, with women and children the large majority of internally displaced people and asylum seekers exposed to dangerous situations. The judicial system must also ensure safety for women who denounce acts of violence.

There are some signs of hope. There is greater awareness of the extent and gravity of the GBVAW, and some local and courageous actions by women and also some groups of men who refuse that masculinity means being violent. It is very difficult to overcome gender stereotypes making it normal for men to have access to the bodies of women even against their will and/or for men to be entitled to beating them.

What is really needed is co-ordinated action, which is well-funded, well-planned, and monitored narrowly. We must also continue commuting poverty, which is a risk factor for women and girls. It is extremely important to discuss the economic, environmental and migration policies of the rich countries that expose people from poorer countries to unacceptable levels of violence, especially women.

Patricia Schulz is a former expert member of the UN CEDAW committee and former Director of the Swiss Federal Office for Gender Equality. She presently is a Senior Research Associate with UNRISD.

It affirms the message at the heart of the Christian faith that God became a human equal to any one of us.

Through our work in some of the poorest communities around the world, Christian Aid has a profound experience of the depth of gender injustice and of the real possibility of bringing change, including ending violence against women and girls in all its forms.

As we said in *Of the Same Flesh*: 'A first response can only be to weep for girls denied education, young women driven into early marriage, those who are cut or enslaved, those women who are denied the tools of education or their rights in law. As project after project tells us again and again that gender has become a means of oppression, the only first response must be to grieve that this should be so.'

Recommendations

Violence against women and girls is a scourge on humanity. Every woman – just as every person of every gender – is made in the image of God and therefore is worthy of inherent dignity and respect. Any violence is contrary to this and shames us all. As people of faith striving for the dignity, equality and justice of all, we find the prevalence of such violence abhorrent. We must all work tirelessly to end it.

We recommend a three-point action plan to make the vision of ending violence against women and girls a reality.

1. To all governments: Address the implementation gap

There are countries that lack the right policies to address VAWG. But there are others where policies for gender equality and the prevention of VAWG do exist, and they have signed CEDAW and UN Security Council Resolution 1325. However, these are not being fully implemented, often because they are not well-enough resourced. Christian Aid is calling for sustained commitments to Official Development Assistance, as well as measures to enhance public financing through progressive, transparent and accountable tax and fiscal policies to ensure money is available for their implementation, as well as on gender-sensitive public services and infrastructure that reduce women's risk of violence and widen their economic opportunities. In particular:

- All governments, especially those mentioned in this report, should include women in determining the roadmap for the implementation of CEDAW.
- Governments should give renewed emphasis to the implementation of the CEDAW for women and girls everywhere.
- The UK Government should ensure the Department for International Development reviews and benchmarks its spend across the breadth of the CEDAW convention and aims to monitor and improve progress across the board.
- The UK Government should progressively enhance levels of domestic resources available for public spending on measures that promote women's rights. It should implement gender-responsive budgeting and institute mechanisms for women's participation in this.

2. To the UK Government: Make peace not war

Violence against women and girls increases in conflict settings, with the poorest and most marginalised women and girls suffering the most. We believe less military conflict will lead to less violence perpetrated against women. We also believe that creating sustainable and just transitions from war to peace, that protect women's and girls' rights will ultimately reduce the toll of violence against women. As we said in our *Resourcing War and Peace* report, the UK Government should commit to significantly more spending on peace and less on militarisation.⁶⁸ Christian Aid acknowledges the importance of defence and security to peace. However, the UK Government needs to make a choice to change

the trajectory towards peace. An overly militarised response is more likely to result in war. The UK Government needs to:

- Prioritise structural or longer-term approaches to preventing armed conflict that address the underlying causes of war and violence. It should aim to bring about a reduction in the potential for armed or political violence over time and promote non-violent means to address acute need and rights entitlements.
- Champion the meaningful inclusion of women in peacebuilding initiatives around the world.
- Ensure that its spending on peacebuilding is transparent, accountable and used to restrain rather than reinforce armed actors. It should ensure that increases in UK diplomatic capacity include prioritising skills in conflict analysis and mediation.
- Make efforts to address structural inequality and violence, respect international law and human security, and engage in demilitarisation, disarmament and reduction in spending on armaments.
- Spend significantly more on peacebuilding than military responses. It should do this with funding mechanisms that not only clearly state their objectives and how they will contribute to reducing violence and conflict, but also how they will build peace.
- Reflect on its own experience of conflict and military intervention and incorporate these lessons into a clear policy.

3. To faith actors: Take responsibility in ending violence against women

We recognise the influence that faith actors – including faith-based organisations such as Christian Aid – have in changing opinions, making change happen and speaking truth to power. Our work in engaging churches in the UK and beyond, as well as working with faith leaders in the communities in which we work gives us hope for the impact that can be made by faith actors in ending violence against women and girls. Christian Aid is committed to and urges other faith-based organisations, coalitions, alliances and actors to work in partnership with governments and commit to:

- Acknowledge that religious institutions have played a part in creating and upholding patriarchal and exclusionary structures and practices that have kept women and girls unequal and more prone to being victims of violent acts and structural violence.
- Engage in dialogue based on achieving gender equality and human rights for women and girls.
- Build love, trust and transparency, within networks and with partner organisations and churches to strive towards a change in societal norms and harmful attitudes related to gender roles.
- Encourage and accompany the creation and implementation of protocols for the prevention, detection and attention to GBV inside churches and faith-based organisations.
- Promote and strengthen strategies for pastoral and community actions in coordination with different stakeholders, in the prevention, reduction and eradication of all forms of violence against women and girls.

- Work on theological and faith understandings, which are critical to deconstructing gender stereotypes that limit women's rights, bodily integrity and agency. Build narratives that contribute to equality and justice for all genders.
- Promote awareness and information strategies for overcoming existing taboos and resistance in addressing comprehensive human rights education and education for gender equality.
- Support the work of UK faith-based organisations working to tackle violence against women.

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- ⁶⁴ *Dalit Women Speak Out: Caste, Class and Gender Violence in India*, A Irudayam, JP Mangubhai and JG Lee, Zubaan, 2011.
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- ⁶⁸ See note 35.

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