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Beyond Victimhood: Women as Agents of Change in Humanitarian Crises

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Abstract: This article challenges the dominant narrative portraying women in humanitarian crises and armed conflicts as passive victims. While acknowledging the gendered vulnerabilities women face—such as displacement, gender-based violence, and loss of livelihoods—the article foregrounds women's roles as active agents of change who contribute meaningfully to recovery, resilience, and peacebuilding. Drawing on case studies from Liberia, Colombia, Ukraine, South Sudan, Syria, and Bangladesh, the article highlights how women lead informal economies, initiate grassroots support networks, and rebuild essential social services where formal structures have collapsed. Women are shown to be central to sustaining education, healthcare, and psychosocial support while also serving as intergenerational caregivers and peacebuilders. Through these, cohesion and inclusive, adaptive systems that are critical to long-term recovery are developed. The article argues for a shift in humanitarian discourse and practice: from one that sees women primarily as aid recipients to one that supports and funds their leadership. It concludes by advocating for gender-transformative approaches in policy and humanitarian response, emphasizing that recognizing women's agency is a matter of justice and essential to effective crisis recovery.

Keywords: *Gender and Conflict; Grassroots Leadership; Post-Conflict Recovery; Social Cohesion; Peacebuilding.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the global discourse surrounding humanitarian crises and armed conflicts, women are too often portrayed solely through the lens of victimhood. Media narratives, policy frameworks, and humanitarian interventions frequently depict women as passive recipients of aid, focusing primarily on their experiences of sexual violence, displacement, and dependency [6].

Furthermore, the need for women to constantly prove their professional abilities, along with the increased suspicion and tendency toward criticism, leads to a state of continuous heightened vigilance, which predisposes them to the development of anxiety and/or stress-related personality symptoms [3].

Seeking and receiving psychological help after those stressful life events are associated with positive attitudes, especially in minority groups [8]. The clinical presentation varies, and several intrusive physiological reactions of distress are described regarding this matter [20].

While these vulnerabilities are real and deeply concerning, such portrayals risk obscuring the full spectrum of women's experiences and roles in crisis-affected settings. By emphasizing victimization over agency, dominant narratives contribute to a one-dimensional understanding of gender in humanitarian contexts—one that underestimates women's capabilities to lead, organize, and rebuild [7].

However, evidence from diverse conflict and displacement contexts reveals that women are not merely surviving these crises—they are shaping their outcomes. butivers, educators, community organizers, peacebuilders, and economic contributors, women play central roles in sustaining the social fabric of war-torn and displaced communities [15], [18]. From the grassroots peace movements in Liberia to the volunteer networks of Ukrainian women during the Russian invasion, and the resilience-building efforts of Syrian and Rohingya women in refugee camps, women are mobilizing knowledge, resources, and networks to protect their families and reconstruct their societies [12], [19], [16].

This article challenges the limited framing of women as passive victims and argues instead for a recognition of their transformative res in times of crisis. Drawing case studies from Liberia, Colombia, Ukraine, South Sudan, Syria, and Bangladesh demonstrates that women are essential agents of change in humanitarian settings. Change agitations to community resilience, peacebuilding, and the reconstruction of social and economic systems must be acknowledged in

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discourse and policy. A gender-r, policy,y-centered perspective is essential to creating more equitable and effective humanitarian responses [15].

II. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative, case study-based methodology grounded in a feminist and interpretive analytical framework. The research is primarily desk-based, relying on secondary data from academic literature, policy reports, and NGO publication firsthand narratives documented in scholarly and institutional sources. This approach enables a nuanced analysis of women's diverse humanitarian settings while challenging prevailing gendered assumptions embedded in dominant humanitarian discourse.

Case studies were selected purposively to reflect a broad geographical and crisis-specific diversity, including post-conflict and active war contexts (Liberia, Colombia, Ukraine, South Sudan, Syria, and Bangladesh). These cases were analyzed to identify recurring patterns in women's leading agencies in informal economies, peacebuilding, social service provision, and community resilience. Each case was examined using thematic analysis to extract insights into women's capabilities for recovery and transformation and the structural barriers they face.

III. WOMEN LEADING INFORMAL ECONOMIES AND GRASSROOTS SUPPORT IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

During humanitarian crises, women frequently emerge as pivotal actors in sustaining community life through informal economies, grassroots organizing, and the reconstruction of essential social services. These roles, often under-recognized by formal aid mechanisms, are crucial for household survival and community resilience.

In displacement, women often assume new economic responsibilities to support their families and communities. *Among Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon*, for example, women have established informal home-based businesses—such as sewing, catering, and teaching—to supplement household income. These activities not only contribute to economic survival but also create community ties and emotional resilience [16]. In the Za'atari refZa'atarip in Jordan, Syrian women formed peer networks to organize informal education spaces and childcare support, filling critical gaps where formal services were either overwhelmed or absent [11].

In Liberia, the post-civil war recovery period highlighted the transformative role of women in peacebuilding and community reconstruction. The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) mobilized thousands of Christian and Muslim women across ethnic lines to engage in nonviolent protests, demanding an end to the conflict and the involvement of women in peace negotiations. Their persistent activism led to the 2003 Accra Peace Agreement, which ended the second Liberian civil war [12]. Key among these activists was Leymah Gbowee, who later received the Nobel Peace Prize for her leadership in mobilizing women to pressure warlords and influence formal peace processes.

Liberian women played a central role in rebuilding the informal economy after the war. Many returned to market trading, small-scale agriculture, and cooperative farming to restore household incomes and revive local economies [4]. These economic activities provided material stability and a renewed sense of agency and visibility for women in public life. In addition, women volunteered extensively to reconstruct essential social services—rehabilitating local health clinics, establishing community schools, and providing care for war-affected children and older people [10]. These grassroots efforts often filled critical gaps left by weak state institutions and underscored women's capawomen's lead in both emergency and recovery phases.

In South Sudan, amid ongoing conflict and displacement, women's agriwomen cooperatives have also been instrumental in reestablishing food security and social cohesion. Groups such as Mama Lucy's WomenLucy'spWomen's in Yei River State have transformed abandoned plots into productive gardens, supplying food to markets and local families. These initiatives often accompany shared childcare, trauma-healing sessions, and advocacy for local peace processes [9].

In Colombia, women's graswomen's networks have played a critical role in the post-conflict peace process following decades of armed conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The organization *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* (Women's PeacWomen's) became a leading voice in documenting sexual violence during the conflict and advocating for justice and historical truth. Through grassroots organizing, women conducted healing circles, legal workshops, and memory-building activities that addressed both individual and collective trauma [15]. Economic initiatives were also central to women's postwomen's efforts: artisanal and agricultural cooperatives were established to reintegrate former female combatants and displaced women into community life. These cooperatives supported economic recovery and fostered reconciliation by building trust and social cohesion among groups affected by the conflict.

The experiences of *Rohingya women in* the Cox's Bazar Cox'see camps in Bangladesh further illustrate the multifaceted agency of women in crisis. Despite restrictions on movement and limited economic opportunities, many Rohingya women have become community health workers, peer educators, and informal traders. Women in the Rohingya Women Empowerment and Advocacy Network advocate for gender inclusion in camp governance and raise awareness about gender-based violence (UN Women, 2021).

In Ukraine, women have been central to civil resistance and humanitarian response since the beginning of Russia's fulRussia'sinvasion in 2022. Through grassroots volunteer networks, women have organized evacuation efforts, delivered essential supplies, and created safe spaces for displaced families and survivors of violence [18]. Women-led initiatives such as *Zemliachky* and *Women's*

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PersWomen'ss have filled gaps in medical aid, protection services, and psychological support, particularly for female soldiers and internally displaced women [13]. In addition, Ukrainian women have led informal economic efforts — producing camouflage gear, food, and emergency goods — while sustaining essential services such as education and childcare even under bombardment [14], [17]. These actions underscore the depth of women's leadership crisis and their role in defending not only the territory but the civic and emotional infrastructure of the nation.

These examples challenge the dominant victim-centric narratives in humanitarian discourse and highlight the necessity of recognizing women as essential contributors to both immediate survival and long-term recovery. Their leadership in informal economies and grassroots organizing underscores the need for gender-responsive humanitarian policies that prioritize and fund local women-led initiatives.

IV. WOMEN FOSTERING RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL COHESION IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

A humanitarian crisis represents a state of escalation in which the local population, governments, and specialized institutions lack the necessary resources to cope with the resulting damage [2]. In humanitarian crises, women play a critical role in sustaining the social fabric of communities through their engagement in education, healthcare, caregiving, and psychosocial support. Beyond immediate survival, women contribute to long-term recovery by fostering resilience and promoting social cohesion across generations and social groups.

A. Women as Pillars of Education, Healthcare, and Psychosocial Support

Women have been central to preserving essential social services in times of collapse. Teachers, health workers, counselors, and community mobilizers often step in where institutions have failed or been destroyed. In Ukraine, for example, women educators have sustained children's air raids, displacement, and digital divides by teaching in shelters and maintaining remote classrooms [17]. Their efforts help preserve education and a sense of normalcy and hope for children amid trauma.

Similarly, in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, women trained as community health workers have filled critical gaps in reproductive healthcare, child health, and mental health support, often becoming trusted first responders for other women in crisis [18]. In South Sudan, women have led peer support groups for trauma healing, nutrition programs for mothers and infants, and health outreach in areas inaccessible to formal aid actors [9].

Psychosocial support, especially in post-conflict or displacement settings, often relies on women as emotional caretakers and community connectors. These informal networks can be essential for managing collective grief and stress, rebuilding trust, and preventing social fragmentation [10].

B. Mothers and Caregivers as Drivers of Intergenerational Healing

Women, especially as mothers and grandmothers, are often at the heart of intergenerational recovery in post-crisis settings. Through caregiving, storytelling, and cultural transmission, they provide continuity and emotional stability to children growing up in environments marked by violence and displacement [12]. In Liberia, many women-led "healing dia "rogues" and informed "education circles for war-affected youth, using shared narratives and local rituals to restore a sense of belonging and moral order [10].

In Colombia, female survivors of conflict led memory-building initiatives that included youth in documenting the past and shaping narratives of justice and reconciliation [15]. Such intergenerational efforts are critical for preventing cycles of trauma and violence, promoting civic identity, and fostering long-term peace.

C. Women Building Inclusive and Adaptive Recovery Systems

In the rebuilding phase of humanitarian crises, women often lead the creation of inclusive, community-based systems that are more responsive to local needs. They frequently innovate under pressure by establishing schools in tents, organizing food-sharing networks, or launching trauma support circles—often before formal aid systems arrive.

Ukrainian women, for instance, have built volunteer-run shelters and centers offering education, legal aid, and psychosocial support for internally displaced people, particularly women and children [19]. These women-led hubs operate as adaptive spaces where community members co-create recovery solutions, strengthening horizontal ties and reinforcing social cohesion.

In South Sudan and Syria, women have also played a key role in bridging ethnic and sectarian divides by framing recovery efforts around shared needs such as food security, healthcare, and child welfare [9], [16]. This inclusive approach helps reduce tensions and rebuild trust in deeply fragmented societies.

V. CONCLUSION

The dominant portrayal of women in humanitarian crises as passive victims fails to capture the depth and diversity of their roles in navigating, surviving, and transforming crisis-affected settings. While it is crucial to acknowledge the disproportionate burdens women bear in war and displacement—such as exposure to gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods, and family separation—these experiences must not obscure the reality of women's abilities. Several articles have demonstrated through multiple case studies from Liberia, Colombia, Ukraine, South Sudan, Syria, and Bangladesh that women are not only responding to crisis—they are reshaping their societies through leadership, care, and community innovation.

Women have taken the lead in informal economies, grassroots peacebuilding, and rebuilding essential services. Women's involvement helps tap into a broader talent pool, creates new job opportunities, and contributes to the economic

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development of coastal and rural regions. Their participation also encourages sustainable practices, ensuring the long-term success of all kinds of industries [1].

Whether through market trading, forming cooperatives, organizing education and healthcare services, or advocating for justice and reconciliation, women have consistently filled gaps left by weakened or absent institutions. Their contributions are not auxiliary but central to the survival and recovery of crisis-affected communities. Moreover, their work fostering social cohesion and intergenerational healing—often as mothers, educators, and community leaders—lays the foundation for long-term peace and resilience.

These realities necessitate a reorientation in both humanitarian discourse and practice. Policy frameworks must go beyond gender-sensitive approaches to adopt gender-transformative strategies that actively support and fund women-led initiatives. Donors and humanitarian actors should prioritize including women at every level of crisis response—from needs assessment and planning to implementation and evaluation. Doing so is not only a matter of justice but of effectiveness: communities recover faster, more equitably, and more sustainably when women's leadership is recognized and empowered.

Finally, future research should continue to center women's life experiences and leadership in humanitarian settings, moving beyond statistical invisibility to document their strategies, networks, and innovations. By shifting the narrative from victimhood to agency, the international community can better understand—and support—the vital role women play as agents of change in the world's contexts.

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