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INSTITUTE FOR HUMANITARIAN
CONFLICT RESOLUTION

VOL. 1 · ISSUE 2
FALL 2026

Journal for

Humanitarian Conflict Resolution

Masthead & Mission

VOL. 1 · ISSUE 2
FALL 2026

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Journal for Humanitarian Conflict Resolution is a quarterly publication of the Institute for Humanitarian Conflict Resolution, founded by Dr. Alon Ben-Meir to advance peace, reconciliation, and human dignity in regions affected by violent conflict.

Each quarterly issue gathers insightful analysis from contributors, including scholars, diplomats, humanitarian practitioners, and frontline advocates. Subject areas span children's rights, climate change, criminal justice, discrimination, free speech, gun violence, healthcare, LGBTQ+ rights, migration and refugees, poverty, war crimes, and women's rights.

MISSION

"The Institute embraces a philosophy of peace and reconciliation to ensure that men, women, and especially children in conflict-ridden countries have hope for a better and more promising future."

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PUBLISHED QUARTERLY
FALL 2026

A LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER

Let our attention become a commitment we refuse to abandon.



Dr. Alon Ben-Meir
FOUNDER, IHCR

For much of my adult life, I have felt that the defense of human rights begins with a refusal to regard another person's anguish as someone else's concern. The millions who live in terror are not statistics; they are people whose lives matter no less than our own. Democracies, authoritarian regimes, and everything in between perpetrate or permit crimes against humanity, genocide, ethnic cleansing, persecution of minorities, online violence, and sexual violence in conflict zones. Climate change compounds this suffering, burdening ordinary people who bear no responsibility for its causes.

What troubles me most is not only the cruelty, but how readily the world accommodates it. Earlier generations could sometimes plead ignorance. We watch atrocities as they happen, yet those responsible so often remain beyond the reach of justice. What becomes of our humanity when witnessing another person's devastation no longer moves us to intervene?

I founded the Institute for Humanitarian Conflict Resolution to challenge that indifference. Through every available means of communication, we seek to reveal the breadth and severity of these abuses and turn public awareness into action. Hundreds of millions suffer while others enjoy the reassurance of safety. That distance must not become our excuse.

The journal grew from this same commitment. As with our inaugural edition, I invited leading scholars and professionals to bring their knowledge and judgment to these urgent questions. Their enthusiastic response has been deeply heartening. This edition brings together eight contributors, including me.

Writing across regions, disciplines, and forms of abuse, these authors reject the notion that suffering must simply be endured. They examine both the wrongs and the possibilities for redress. Our responsibility is to make those wrongs unmistakable, demand that perpetrators answer for them, and demonstrate that responding is a duty, not a choice. Abuses endure when public understanding is limited and indifference carries no consequence. Bringing them into the open challenges the protection that silence affords their perpetrators. I ask you to extend the reach of this work, at home and internationally. Understanding can disturb our complacency; that disturbance can move us to act. Nor can we separate our own security from the dignity of others: cruelty excused beyond our borders weakens the restraints against it within them.

Read these essays, circulate them, and help translate their insights into meaningful engagement.

The people whose suffering fills these pages deserve more than a passing moment of sympathy. Let our attention become a commitment we refuse to abandon.

With respect,

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir

FOUNDER, IHCR

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HEBREW UNIVERSITY

Jessica Montell has been a leading figure in the Israeli human rights community for over two decades, serving as Executive Director of B'Tselem until 2014, and then as Executive Director of the legal aid organization HaMoked. For her contribution to human rights, in 2023, Jessica was inducted as an Officer in the Order of Merit of the French Republic. Jessica is now pursuing a doctorate at Hebrew University, examining the role of human rights organizations in conflict resolution.



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HEAR HER STORIES

Anahita Thukral (Anna) is the Founder of Hear Her Stories, an organization advancing women's rights and empowerment globally through storytelling and programs. Her partners include UNICEF USA, UN Women, and Amnesty International UK. She is a recipient of the RBC Canadian Women Entrepreneur Award and a contributor to SheThePeople. She can be reached at anna@hearherstories.com.



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Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir is founder and president of the High Atlas Foundation, a Moroccan-U.S. not-for-profit organization dedicated to sustainable development. He is also currently a Visiting Professor of International Studies at the University of Virginia. In Morocco, he served as a Peace Corps Volunteer (1993-95), Associate Peace Corps Director (1998-99), researcher at the American Institute of Maghrib Studies (2003), and professor at Al Akhawayn University in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (2009-10). In 2026, he received the Sargent Shriver Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service for his work in sustainable development in several Arab countries, from the National Peace Corps Association.

Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir holds a PhD in sociology from the University of New Mexico (2009), an MA in international development from Clark University (1997), and a BA in economics from New York University (1991). He has authored 160 articles on sustainable development in Morocco, the Middle East, and the United States.

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Dr. Nadia Akseer is an Epidemiologist-Biostatistician and Associate Scientist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, with over 12 years of experience leading research, evaluation, and population health analytics in fragile, conflict-affected, and humanitarian settings. She serves as Lead of Mission Afghanistan 2030, a JHU working group dedicated to health systems research, policy evaluation, and evidence-based advocacy for Afghanistan. Dr. Akseer's research interests and extensive publication record, comprising over 88 peer-reviewed papers, generally span reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health and nutrition in Afghanistan as well as other low- and middle-income countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Dr. Akseer was identified as a Canadian Women Leader in Global Health by The Lancet, Government of Canada and Canadian Society for International Health in 2018; was awarded the Emerging Public Health Leader Award from the University of Toronto in 2019; and was awarded the 2023 Sommer Klag Advocacy Award from Johns Hopkins University for her dedicated advocacy for Afghanistan.



David L. Phillips

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David L. Phillips is an Academic Visitor at Oxford University. Most recently he was an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University's Security Program and Director of the Program on Peacebuilding and Human Rights at Columbia University, and held senior positions at other leading academic institutions. Phillips served as a Senior Adviser to the US Department of State during three different administrations, including the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, specializing in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. He was also a Senior Adviser to the UN Secretariat in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. He worked at think-tanks such as the Council on Foreign Relations and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Phillips has published twelve books on security issues and hundreds of articles in leading publications such as the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times and Foreign Affairs. He serves on the board of several not-for-profit organizations, including the International Rescue Committee and the Washington Kurdish Institute.

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Shiler Sido is a visionary peacebuilding specialist and community leader with over a decade of dedicated service in humanitarian response, human rights advocacy, and organizational development across conflict-affected regions. She is renowned for building institutional capacity, implementing trauma-informed interventions, and championing the rights of marginalized communities through evidence-based programming and cross-cultural collaboration. Sido is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Psychological and Educational Counselling at Amman University.



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Serap is an independent researcher, freelance project expert, social activist, and storyteller, born and raised in Lüleburgaz, Türkiye. She comes from a Macedonian-Turkish family whose roots trace back to Štip, North Macedonia.

She received her Ph.D. in Political Science and Sociology from the International University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2023. Her doctoral research examined forced migration, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and identity construction in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. From 2014 to 2023, she was engaged in higher education and academic research as a Senior Assistant in the Department of Political Science at the International University of Sarajevo.

She currently works as a freelance project expert and independent researcher. Her research interests include migration studies, women's and gender studies, memory studies, qualitative research methodologies, participatory and community-based arts, and post-conflict peacebuilding.



Alon Ben-Meir

PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER, INSTITUTE FOR HUMANITARIAN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is the President and Founder of the Institute for Humanitarian Conflict Resolution. He is a retired professor of international affairs, most recently having taught at New York University's Center for Global Affairs. Ben-Meir is an expert on Middle East and West Balkan affairs, international negotiations, and conflict resolution. Over the past two decades, Ben-Meir has been directly involved in various backchannel negotiations involving Israel, its neighboring countries, and Turkey.

Ben-Meir appears on a variety of television networks and regularly gives briefs at the U.S. State Department for the International Visitors Program. He writes a weekly article syndicated globally and hosts a weekly live podcast, "On the Issues with Alon Ben-Meir," discussing current global affairs. Dr. Ben-Meir has authored twelve books related to the Middle East. Ben-Meir holds a master's degree in philosophy and a doctorate in international relations from Oxford University.





CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Subjected to a Great Test: The Israeli Human Rights Community in the Gaza War

In "Subjected to a Great Test," Jessica Montell examines how Israeli human rights defenders responded to Palestinian suffering in Gaza after the October 7 Hamas attack. Despite personal trauma, public hostility, government pressure, and a weakened judiciary, Jewish and Arab activists documented abuses, pursued legal action, advocated internationally, and assisted Palestinians. Their efforts alleviated suffering, preserved evidence for future accountability, and brought international attention to Palestinian experiences. Montell underscores the indispensable role of human rights organizations in defending universal rights during war, when grief, fear, and political division make that commitment especially difficult.



Jessica Montell
HEBREW UNIVERSITY

Introduction

On October 7, 2023 Hamas launched a mass attack on communities and military bases in southern Israel. Over 1,100 people were killed on this one day, a majority of them civilians, and over 250 civilians and soldiers were taken hostage. Israel's airstrikes in the Gaza Strip began that same evening, and a largescale ground operation began three weeks later. Over 67,000 Palestinians were killed over the next two years. Israeli forces destroyed entire Gaza cities, internally displaced some two million people, and denied entry of fuel, food and other essential supplies to the civilian population.

Articles in the previous issue of this journal discuss the scale of the killing and destruction in the Gaza Strip, and the social psychology of Israeli society that enabled this devastation. This essay discusses the response of the Israeli human rights community to the extensive suffering and violations of human rights of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. I myself was part of this community during the Gaza war, serving until December 2025 as Executive Director of HaMoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual. The article focuses on the two years between the October 7 attack and the ceasefire of October 10, 2025.

The human rights community

I use the term human rights community here to refer to the Israeli non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who worked for the human rights of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, and for an end to the war. These organizations constitute a tiny subset of Israeli society. To give some perspective: there are some 20,000 non-governmental organizations active in Israel. About 5% of these, some 1,000 organizations, are advocacy groups, but the overwhelming majority do not address issues related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The New Israel Fund, which serves as the financial conduit for almost all Israeli social change organizations, enables donor-advised grants to some 80 organizations within the fields of human rights, peace, and resistance to the occupation. However, most of these groups do not work on the Gaza Strip. This article summarizes the work of 15 different groups, who together conducted the bulk of the work to aid Gaza Palestinians during the war.

The war in Gaza continues, albeit in a different form. So too does the crucial work of the Israeli human rights community.

JESSICA MONTELL

Some of these groups are classic human rights organizations, employing a framework based on international human rights law, and International Humanitarian Law (the laws of war). This includes the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, Gisha, and HaMoked. Others, like Breaking the Silence and Combatants for Peace, also address human rights issues, but do so through a peace, non-violence, or anti-occupation framework.

Like the rest of Israeli society, the human rights community was shocked and horrified by Hamas' mass attack on Oct 7. In fact, the human rights community was disproportionately affected, given the demographic make-up of the

communities that were targeted (many secular kibbutzim, founded by leftwing Labor-Zionist movements). The Executive Directors of two human rights organizations are themselves survivors of the October 7 attack. Many organizations had board members, volunteers, and family and friends of staff who were killed or taken hostage on October 7.

And like all Israelis, the staff of the human rights organizations had to contend with rocket and missile fire directed at their towns: Hamas rockets from Gaza in the first months of the war; Hezbollah missiles from Lebanon and Houthi missiles from Yemen throughout the war; and ballistic missiles from Iran in the summer of 2025. Organizations also had to safeguard their Palestinian staff in Gaza, and staff in the West Bank at risk of violence from the Israeli military and extremist settlers.

The challenges of a hostile climate

The horror of the October 7 attack and the two-year hostage crisis constituted a national trauma with pervasive, long-lasting effects.

Even before October 7, broad segments of the Israeli Jewish public had negative views regarding Palestinians, and viewed the human rights community as unpatriotic and even as "aiding the enemy."[1] Social psychologists explain these views as part of an "ethos of conflict" that societies in an intractable conflict inevitably develop. Two components of this ethos of conflict are particularly relevant to our discussion. The first is "opponent delegitimation," i.e. denying the humanity and morality of the opposing side in the conflict (the Palestinians in our case), providing a kind of psychological permit to harm them. This dehumanization intensified following the October 7 attack. In a survey conducted in August 2025, 76% of Jewish Israelis completely (42%) or partially (34%) agreed that "there are no innocent people in Gaza."[2]

The second component of the ethos of conflict relevant to this discussion is "the monopolization of patriotism" to demand unquestioning loyalty to Israeli society and to the aims of the conflict.[3] This sentiment also increased during the war. Israelis who questioned military conduct in Gaza were seen as disloyal, resulting in tremendous hostility towards the human rights organizations that defended Palestinians.

The government and its allies fanned the flames of this hostility. Throughout the war, the government continued its efforts to legislate restrictions on the human rights community, proposing 15 different laws, including severe limitations on organizations' funding, and criminal sanctions for working with the International Criminal Court. While these laws were not passed, they were a source of serious concern for the NGO community, and served to delegitimize and discredit the organizations. In speeches and media interviews, members of the government branded the human rights community as "subversive," as "foreign agents," and as "defenders of terrorists operating under the guise of human rights organizations."

Perhaps the site where organizations encountered the most hostility was at the High Court of Justice. The Court itself had been under attack from the government throughout the previous year, with the proposed "judicial overhaul" (or "judicial coup" in the words of the opposition), a package of legislation designed to politicize and weaken the judiciary. Wide-scale public protest

for the first ten months of 2023 succeeded in preventing much of this legislation from passing. However, the Court was weak and beleaguered as a result.

Prior to the war, ultranationalist groups would come to the Court to organize provocative and threatening activities against the human rights organizations. This continued and intensified during the war. Human rights lawyers required a security escort to leave the court after high profile hearings, with people spitting on them and wishing that they had been killed on October 7. During the war, ultranationalist groups also organized provocations and threats against the Court itself and the judges, disrupting hearings and holding threatening demonstrations outside the homes of the justices.

Ironically, the government and its ultranationalist allies attacked the Court as a leftist institution that sided with Palestinians against Israeli interests. This in spite of the very poor record of the Court when it comes to defending Palestinian rights.

Organizations conducted extensive risk analysis and developed safety protocols in response to this hostile public climate. They also engaged in selective visibility, reducing public engagement and refraining from publicizing certain aspects of their work out of fear of the backlash.

In addition to the immense challenges of advocating for Palestinians within Israeli society, the Israeli human rights community had to navigate global challenges as well. The international climate was highly polarized. At the extremes, support for Israel's narrative included categorical and uncritical support for Israel's mass killing, displacement and destruction in Gaza, while solidarity and support for the Palestinians included belittling, ignoring or even justifying Hamas crimes. The Israeli human rights community had to engage with both sides of this polarization.

The human rights toolbox

Amidst all these difficulties, the Israeli human rights community worked to alleviate suffering in the Gaza Strip, to halt war crimes and violations of human rights, and to hold perpetrators accountable. I have grouped our work into six modes of operation that constituted our "human rights toolbox."

Framing

Human rights organizations not only provide information; they shape the way we think about that information. The labeling of an act as a violation of human rights is a framing process. Beyond the application of a legal definition, it is also a "management of meaning" in sociological terms.[4]

The Israeli community engaged in such framing activities immediately after October 7, with categorical condemnation of the Hamas massacres and hostage-taking as grave crimes. This was important given the efforts of some international actors to minimize or justify these crimes. In those first statements, the organizations also warned about the brutality of Israel's expected response. Some organizations also engaged in additional framing activities, such as Breaking the Silence's framing of the Hamas attack and Israel's catastrophic security failure in the context of Israeli policy of "managing the conflict."[5]

Throughout the war, organizations used their social media platforms and media interviews to create shared understandings and interpretations of events. "Naming and shaming" is a central component of human rights advocacy around the world. Organizations that had lawyers visiting Palestinian prisoners and detainees warned of systematic torture in the prisons. Organizations labeled components of Israeli conduct in Gaza as war crimes, including indiscriminate airstrikes on residential areas (B'Tselem); systematic targeting of Gaza's healthcare system (PHR-I); mass evacuation orders from northern Gaza (5 organizations jointly); and starvation of the population and the weaponization of humanitarian access (Gisha). Two organizations – B'Tselem and PHR-I – issued reports concluding that Israel perpetrated genocide in the Gaza Strip.[6]

These framing activities were the starting point for the advocacy and public engagement.

Documentation

Israeli organizations had access to unique forms of information. Israeli attorneys were the only actors able to enter the prisons, taking affidavits from prisoners and detainees about the conditions and their treatment. Organizations collected information from official Israeli sources, such as responses to petitions submitted to the court, court judgements and Knesset hearings. Breaking the Silence took testimonies from soldiers; Physicians for Human Rights-Israel received information from medical personnel working in detention centers. These information sources supplemented traditional documentation methods, such as taking testimonies from Palestinian victims.

Organizations conducted documentation, research and analysis of various manifestations of the war:

— Israel's restrictions on humanitarian aid to Gaza;

— The inhumane conditions and torture in the prisons, including exposing the harsh reality in the Sde Teiman military detention facility;

— The phenomena of enforced disappearances and using Palestinian civilians as human shields;

— Civilian deaths and mass destruction in the Gaza Strip

Some organizations issued comprehensive reports. Others provided their documentation directly to the media and to other target audiences.

Litigation

Israeli human rights organizations filed hundreds of principled and individual petitions throughout the war, both to Israel's High Court of Justice (HCJ) and to lower courts. The bulk of this litigation addressed issues related to Palestinian prisoners and detainees held by Israeli forces, including enforced disappearances; detention without trial; lack of access to attorneys; torture and inhumane conditions; and denial of access to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Some petitions addressed government and military policy in Gaza. Perhaps the most important of these was a petition led by Gisha against the severe restrictions on humanitarian aid. Most of the principled petitions were filed jointly by multiple organizations.

The Justices were extremely hostile to petitions brought on behalf of Palestinians from Gaza. In the words of former Chief Justice Aharon Barak, "the judges do not sit in an ivory tower. They live amongst their people." So we must assume that they too were affected by the societal trauma of October 7, and the resultant dehumanization of Palestinians. The climate of incitement against the Court, the accusations that they were too "leftwing," likely compounded their unwillingness to accept the petitions of the human rights organizations and rule against the government and the military. Many petitions were summarily dismissed without even holding a hearing, a rare occurrence prior to the war.

The human rights organizations doggedly pursued litigation, in spite of the court's hostility. When principled petitions were rejected, they filed individual petitions to lower courts. When the Court rejected a petition claiming the facts were no longer relevant, they revised and submitted a new petition. This strategy bore some success. Petitions succeeded in improving detention conditions, in establishing a mechanism for lawyers to visit Gaza detainees, and in assisting in individual cases.[7] The broader picture, however, is of a court extremely reluctant to exercise judicial review in the context of the Gaza war.

International advocacy

The organizations conducted extensive international advocacy, briefing diplomatic missions in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Ramallah, and policymakers abroad in a "boomerang model" of human rights advocacy, where domestic human rights groups enlist transnational networks and foreign governments to apply pressure on their own government.

Thirteen Israeli human rights and anti-occupation organizations maintain a joint lobbyist in Brussels.[8] Both individually and collectively, members of this Platform regularly briefed the European Union and its member-state representatives in Brussels. They also conducted advocacy trips to other European capitals and to Washington D.C. Organizations also engaged with international organizations, including UN agencies and the ICRC.

This advocacy informed and shaped international conversations. On the issue of humanitarian aid, for example, Gisha continuously briefed U.S. and European diplomats about developments in the Court case, and they in turn pressured Israeli authorities to change policies to allow additional aid to enter Gaza.

Public engagement and protest

Engagement with the Israeli public took place on several levels. Many organizations used their social media platforms to communicate their messages regarding the war to the Israeli public: framing, facts, and analysis. Some organizations conducted public events and webinars on the reality in the Gaza Strip.

Standing Together, a grassroots political movement, began organizing public demonstrations in late December 2023. In January 2024, they joined with Women Wage Peace and other groups to protest the war under the slogan: Only Peace Can Bring Security. In 2025, larger demonstrations took place under the slogan: Refuse War.

The fate of the hostages held by Hamas in Gaza was the central focus of public protest in Israeli society. The faces of the hostages were omnipresent on posters and billboards throughout Israeli cities: young women and men, children, elderly grandparents whose fate was unknown. The Hostage Families Forum organized weekly, and then daily protests, attended by tens of thousands of people, calling for a deal to return the hostages.

Yet in these largescale protests taking place across Israel, there was virtually no attention to the tremendous suffering of civilians in Gaza. This changed after the breakdown of the second ceasefire and the resumption of the war in March 2025. A few Israeli women began standing in Tel Aviv with small pictures of Palestinian children killed in Gaza.[9] The initiative grew and expanded. Some organizations printed up bigger posters of the children to distribute at demonstrations. By summer 2025, a few thousand demonstrators held these posters in Saturday night hostage protests in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and other protest sites around the country. These posters with names and faces of babies, toddlers and elementary school children from the over 20,000 children killed in Gaza emerged as the defining expression of Israeli public protest against the Gaza war.

The details for the posters were taken from the "Involved Against Their Will" project of Adi Argov, one of the initiators of the Tel Aviv protest.[10] The project memorializes children killed on and since October 7, 2023, both Palestinian and Israeli, and opens with a quote from James Baldwin: "The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality."

Individual assistance

Human rights organizations provided paralegal and legal aid to individuals and families in Gaza. This work involved direct advocacy with military officials, government ministries, and prison service officials. Where direct advocacy failed, organizations turned to the courts.

The organizations were able to locate thousands of people in Israeli detention and inform their families. With the denial of information and access to the ICRC, and a ban on all family visits to Palestinians in the prisons, this was the only way families could learn the whereabouts of their loved ones. Lawyers visited hundreds of detainees and petitioned to improve their conditions. HaMoked and Gisha were also able to coordinate exit from Gaza for hundreds of people, primarily those with Israeli citizenship or residency; people requiring life-saving medical care; and students trying to reach studies abroad.

Discussion

Framing, documentation, litigation, advocacy, public engagement and individual assistance – these are the tools of human rights defenders around the world. However, the specific ways these tools were employed in the war were shaped by the constraints I have discussed above, and by the normative frameworks of the different organizations.

While the courts remained open to petitions on Palestinians' rights, their extreme hostility affected which petitions were brought. The bulk

of the litigation was devoted to the situation of Palestinian prisoners and detainees. These were very clear human rights violations (and violations of Israel's own laws), which should have been easy for the court to address. The fact that even many of these petitions were rejected discouraged the organizations from filing more complicated petitions, such as challenges to the conduct of the hostilities in Gaza.

There was also relatively little documentation and research into the mass casualties in Gaza. With no field research staff on the ground, it was difficult to investigate these incidents.

As a result of these factors, the human rights organizations were not able to address some of the most widespread and horrific suffering in the war. The public protest focused on the killing of children filled this vacuum. These protests were driven by a normative framework that some activists called Political Motherhood, which differs from the human rights framework.[11] The tactic of public protest is also not subject to the limitations of litigation and research. However, this strategy also has its limitations; due to the extremely hostile public climate, it took 18 months before these protests emerged.

Conclusion

The October 7 attacks took place without warning, catching Israelis completely by surprise. Veteran activists understood that the scale and horror of October 7 would result in an extremely harsh Israeli response, but few imagined in October 2023 a war that would last for years (and is in fact still ongoing). So with no time to prepare for the massive escalation, organizations largely responded with the strategies that had proven effective in the reality before the war. This raises the question of whether there was there an alternative: was there a potentially more effective set of tactics than those employed by the human rights community during the war?

Had it been a matter of the erosion of one tool or another, organizations could have shifted their strategy – say building an Israeli constituency against the war rather than petitioning the court. However, in a reality where all the tools were less effective than they had been in the past, the organizations may have had no real alternative to continuing with their existing tactics.

The position of Israeli human rights defenders was further complicated by the immense polarization within the international community. In their efforts to mobilize foreign government officials and the global human rights community, Israeli human rights defenders had to navigate uncritical defense of Israeli crimes from certain audiences, and denial of Hamas crimes from others.

The Israeli reality during two years of war is not the usual situation to evaluate the work of a human rights community. People under rocket and missile fire, grieving and fearful for their own safety and that of their loved ones, Jews and Arabs, worked together to document atrocities taking place amidst an armed conflict, to aid victims from the other side of the conflict, and to try to stop or mitigate those atrocities. While we were powerless to halt mass killings and immense destruction, our efforts informed and shaped the international agenda, created a public record for future accountability efforts,

and alleviated suffering for tens of thousands of people.

The war in Gaza continues, albeit in a different form. So too does the crucial work of the Israeli human rights community. All of the obstacles remain: the hostility of the public, the weakness and even cowardice of the courts, and the attacks by the government and its ultranationalist allies. For these reasons, the engagement of the international community is crucial: to protect civilians and to hold all actors accountable for crimes committed. The human rights community needs allies who share our commitment to universal human rights, in order to advance a future where Palestinians and Israelis alike can live in safety and dignity, with full respect for their rights.

Notes

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READ THE COMPLETE ARTICLE
ihcr.institute/writing/subjected-to-a-great-test-the-israeli-human-rights-community-in-the-gaza-war/



WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Witness Gap: Why the Age of Storytelling Has Not Become the Age of Justice for Women

Anna Thukral identifies the "Witness Gap": the distance between hearing women's stories of war, displacement, and violence and achieving meaningful institutional change. Drawing on her work founding Hear Her Stories, she argues that humanitarian storytelling too often produces emotion and visibility without accountability. Women's experiences may reach millions while their demands for justice, political participation, and policy reform remain unanswered. Thukral calls for measuring storytelling's success not through views and shares, but through its ability to connect women's voices with institutions and decision-makers capable of delivering lasting change.



Anahita (Anna) Thukral
HEAR HER STORIES

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

We are told we live in the golden age of storytelling. Never before have more stories reached more people with greater immediacy. A woman describing her displacement from a conflict zone can reach millions in real time. A survivor of gender-based violence can publish her testimony without an editorial intermediary. Documentary filmmakers distribute their work globally within days of production. By every measure of reach and volume, we have never had more access to women's stories.

And yet the numbers tell a different story entirely. Women and girls account for the vast majority of those forcibly displaced by armed conflict — UNHCR data consistently shows that women and children make up approximately 80 percent of the global refugee and displaced population.[1] The World Health Organization estimates that one in three women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence, with rates substantially higher in conflict-affected settings.[2] Gender-based violence remains among the most underreported human rights violations globally. The stories are present. The accountability is not.

This is what I call the Witness Gap: the measurable distance between knowing and acting, between emotional response and systemic change. Dr. Alon Ben-Meir, in founding this journal, named it precisely — why do the experiences of women in conflict and crisis "struggle to receive sustained public attention"? The implicit assumption is that the problem is volume: if only more stories were told, more often, to more people, something would shift.

> *We have been building audiences. We need to be building architecture.*
>
> ANAHITA (ANNA) THUKRAL

After a decade building Hear Her Stories — an organization dedicated to advancing women's rights and visibility through storytelling, working alongside UNICEF USA, UN Women, and partners across five continents — I am no longer sure that is true. I think we have been solving the wrong problem. The barrier to justice for women is not a shortage of stories. It is the architecture through which stories are told, received, and — critically — forgotten.

This article argues that the humanitarian storytelling ecosystem, as currently designed, is optimized for emotional consumption rather than institutional accountability. It identifies three structural failures that explain the Witness Gap, draws on lessons from Hear Her Stories to propose an alternative model, examines how international institutions have both advanced and constrained the storytelling agenda, and offers concrete recommendations for practitioners, funders, and policymakers.

II. ANALYSIS: THE CATHARSIS ECONOMY AND ITS STRUCTURAL FAILURES

When a story makes us weep, we feel we have done something. This is not a moral failure — it is how narrative has functioned since human beings first gathered around fires. Stories

provoke feeling; feeling motivates action. The causal chain is ancient and real.

But modern humanitarian storytelling has broken that chain between feeling and action. It has created what I call a catharsis economy: a system in which emotional response is the product, not the precursor. Audiences consume stories of suffering, feel genuinely moved, and experience something that functions like moral resolution. The story has completed its work on the audience. Whether it has done any work for the woman whose story was told is, structurally, beside the point.

This is not a criticism of audiences. It is a criticism of architecture. The platforms through which most humanitarian stories now travel — social media feeds, streaming services, viral video — are optimized not for accountability but for engagement. Psychologist Paul Slovic coined the term "psychic numbing" to describe the paradox at the heart of this system: our emotional response to suffering does not scale linearly with the number of people affected.[3] Statistical lives move us less than individual ones, and the same individual story, told repeatedly, moves us less with each telling. The algorithm that surfaces a devastating portrait of women displaced by conflict in Sudan will, within seventy-two hours, replace it with the next devastating portrait from the next crisis.

The result is a landscape of humanitarian storytelling that has more in common with entertainment than advocacy. We produce beautiful, heartbreaking, award-winning work that confirms our compassion — and then lets us rest.

Structural Failure One: Stories Designed for Emotional Resolution, Not Obligation. The canonical humanitarian story follows a recognizable arc. We meet a woman in crisis. We are taken through her suffering. We end with either a note of hope — she survived, she is rebuilding — or a call to donate. What this structure rarely does is implicate the audience in what happened or in what happens next. The woman's story is complete. Our relationship to it is that of witness, not participant. As Susan Sontag observed in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the act of watching suffering at a distance carries within it a built-in exemption: "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering."[4] Sympathy, in other words, is a form of moral alibi.

The most powerful social movements in history have not operated this way. They have told stories that made audiences complicit — that made the injustice feel close, personal, and demanding of response. The gap in humanitarian storytelling is not more suffering. It is more obligation.

Structural Failure Two: Trauma Extraction Disguised as Voice. Much of what passes for women's storytelling in conflict and humanitarian contexts is, on close examination, trauma extraction. We approach women in crisis, document their worst moments, and place those moments before audiences who find them moving. The woman becomes the object of the story. Her interiority — her analysis, her demands, her specific vision for what justice requires — is rarely what the audience retains, because it is rarely what the story centers. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's landmark warning about "the danger of a single story" applies with particular force here: when we tell only the story of a woman's suffering, we

participate in reducing her humanity to her wound.[5]

Trauma narratives are powerful at generating sympathy. They are poor at generating the specific attention that leads to policy change. Sympathy is generalized; advocacy is specific. When we listen only for suffering, we miss the politics — the particular demands women in conflict zones are making, the specific policy failures they can name, the concrete changes they need. We receive the wound but not the diagnosis. The result is that even well-intentioned storytelling can leave a woman more visible but no less powerless.

Structural Failure Three: Visibility as a Substitute for Accountability. Somewhere in the last two decades, the humanitarian sector adopted the implicit belief that making something visible was itself a form of justice. If enough people saw it, something would change. This belief is not entirely wrong — visibility is necessary. But it is not sufficient, and treating it as sufficient has allowed institutions to celebrate media coverage as an outcome rather than a means.

The Global Media Monitoring Project, which has tracked gender representation in news media since 1995, has documented persistent and significant gaps in coverage of women — including in conflict and humanitarian reporting, where women's voices and perspectives are consistently underrepresented relative to men's.[6] And yet even when coverage is substantial, it does not automatically produce institutional response. A story about a woman's suffering that reaches ten million people and triggers no institutional accountability has not advanced her cause. It has advanced the story's reach. These are not the same thing.

III. HUMAN IMPACT: WHAT THE GAP LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

The Witness Gap is not an abstraction. It has a texture, and women living through it can describe it precisely.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, where sexual violence has been systematically used as a weapon of war for more than two decades, the international media has produced thousands of stories, countless documentaries, and numerous award-winning investigations.[7] The International Criminal Court has issued indictments; NGOs have published reports; advocacy campaigns have trended globally. And yet the International Committee of the Red Cross has documented that access to justice for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in the DRC remains profoundly limited, with impunity rates for perpetrators estimated at above 90 percent.[8] The stories were told. The accountability did not follow.

This pattern — abundant storytelling, insufficient accountability — appears across conflict contexts. In Afghanistan, the catastrophic reversal of women's rights following the Taliban's return to power in 2021 occurred in full view of a global media that had spent twenty years documenting Afghan women's lives, aspirations, and resilience. In Sudan, reporting on the systematic targeting of women by armed factions has accompanied years of international diplomatic paralysis. Visibility, in each case, was not the obstacle. Accountability infrastructure was.

At Hear Her Stories, I have witnessed this gap from a practitioner's position — and nowhere more acutely than in our work with Afghan women. Beginning in 2021, following the Taliban's return to power, we began amplifying the voices of women living inside Afghanistan: women losing their right to education, to work, to appear in public, to exist in civic life at all. The stories circulated widely. They generated international response — media pickup, expressions of solidarity, audience messages from across the world. And yet the women inside Afghanistan who had shared their voices with us remained inside the same structures of constraint. Their visibility had increased. Their conditions had not.

That recognition forced a question we could no longer avoid: what would actually change something? The answer, when it came, was structural. We launched the Afghan Women's Initiative — a mentorship program connecting women living inside Afghanistan to Afghan diaspora mentors globally, offering not just emotional solidarity but professional guidance, networks, and navigational knowledge that visibility alone could never supply. We began with twelve mentors. By October 2026, we are scaling to thirty, with plans to deepen the program further. The stories we told did not produce this directly. But the relationships built through telling those stories — the trust, the understanding of what women inside Afghanistan actually needed, the network of diaspora women who wanted to do more than bear witness — made it possible. The story was not the intervention. It was the foundation for one.

IV. BROADER CONSEQUENCES: WHAT THE WITNESS GAP COSTS

The consequences of the Witness Gap extend well beyond individual women whose stories go unacted upon. They reshape the landscape of humanitarian advocacy in ways that deserve direct attention.

First, repeated exposure to stories of suffering without observable change produces what researcher Susan Moeller termed "compassion fatigue" — a documented psychological phenomenon in which audiences, overwhelmed by relentless accounts of crisis, progressively disengage.[9] The catharsis economy, by design, generates this fatigue. When audiences learn — even implicitly — that feeling moved does not produce change, they begin to protect themselves from feeling moved at all. This is not moral failure. It is rational adaptation. But its effect on the long-term sustainability of humanitarian advocacy is corrosive.

Second, the structural marginalization of women's voices in humanitarian storytelling reinforces, rather than challenges, the political conditions that produce their marginalization in the first place. Research consistently demonstrates that when decision-makers — in governments, international organizations, and civil society — do not hear women's political analysis, their specific demands, and their concrete prescriptions for policy change, those demands are less likely to shape outcomes.[10] Stories that reduce women to their suffering make it easier, not harder, to design humanitarian responses that treat them as beneficiaries rather than agents.

Third, the mismatch between storytelling investment and accountability infrastructure represents a significant misallocation of humanitarian resources. Organizations and funders spend enormous sums producing and distributing stories of women's experiences. Far less is invested in the connective tissue — the institutional partnerships, the advocacy pipelines, the sustained follow-up — that would allow those stories to produce consequences. The result is a field that is media-rich and accountability-poor.

V. INTERNATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

The international community has not been indifferent to women's experiences in conflict and crisis. A substantial body of legal and institutional architecture exists specifically to address gender-based violence, women's political exclusion, and gender inequality in humanitarian response.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, was a landmark achievement — the first resolution explicitly recognizing the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and calling for their meaningful participation in peace processes.[11] The subsequent Women, Peace and Security agenda, expanded through a series of resolutions, has created normative obligations for member states and provided civil society organizations with legal and political frameworks to advance accountability claims.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by 189 states, provides a binding legal framework for gender equality and obligates states to address gender-based violence including in conflict settings.[12] UN Women, established in 2010, exists specifically to advance this agenda institutionally.

And yet there is a significant gap between these frameworks' normative power and their operational impact. Implementation of Resolution 1325 commitments has been widely acknowledged as uneven at best. Women's participation in peace negotiations — one of the resolution's central demands — remains the exception rather than the norm. A 2019 UN Women analysis found that women comprised an average of 13 percent of negotiators and 6 percent of mediators in major peace processes between 1992 and 2019.[13] Gender-based violence in conflict settings persists at scale across every region where armed conflict occurs.

The storytelling ecosystem has a specific and underexamined relationship to this institutional failure. International frameworks create obligations, but obligations require political will to enforce — and political will is shaped, in significant part, by what the public and decision-makers know and care about. Humanitarian storytelling is theoretically the mechanism that closes that loop: stories build public awareness, public awareness generates political pressure, political pressure drives institutional action. The Witness Gap is precisely the failure of that theory in practice. Stories that produce emotional response without institutional connection do not reliably generate political pressure. They generate sentiment, which is something different.

Where the theory has worked — where storytelling has contributed to traceable institutional change — it has consistently done so through

organizational infrastructure that connected the story to specific decision-makers and created conditions in which inaction had consequences. The campaign to address rape as a weapon of war in international humanitarian law succeeded not because the stories of survivors were more compelling than other stories, but because advocates built sustained relationships with international legal bodies and used testimony strategically within those institutional processes. The story and the institution were coupled. That coupling is what made the difference.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS: TOWARD ACCOUNTABLE STORYTELLING

Addressing the Witness Gap requires changes at the level of practice, organizational design, funding, and institutional architecture. The following recommendations draw on both the research literature and the lessons of a decade of work at Hear Her Stories.

1. Shift from broadcast storytelling to relational storytelling. Stories produced primarily for maximum reach and emotional impact — broadcast storytelling — are poorly suited to generating accountability. Organizations should invest in relational storytelling: stories produced within specific, structured relationships between storytellers and the institutions that have obligations toward them. This means identifying, before a story is told, what specific change it is meant to produce, and in what institutional context it needs to land. The story is not finished when it is published. It is finished when something changes.

2. Center the storyteller's analysis, not only her experience. Women affected by conflict and human rights abuses are not only witnesses to their own suffering — they are analysts of their own situations, with specific demands and concrete prescriptions. Storytelling practices should create structures that allow these political analyses to be heard as prominently as personal testimony. This means investing in long-form, collaborative storytelling processes that give women the time and editorial power to articulate their demands, not only their pain.

3. Measure success by change, not reach. The metrics currently dominant in humanitarian media — views, shares, impressions — are measures of consumption. They say nothing about outcomes. Funders and organizations should develop and adopt accountability metrics that track institutional responses a story generated, policy changes it contributed to, and specific material improvements in the lives of the women depicted. These are harder to measure. They are the right things to measure. Without them, the field will continue to optimize for what it can count rather than what it is trying to achieve.

4. Invest in the connective tissue between stories and institutions. The gap between a story's publication and an institution's response is not filled by better stories. It is filled by sustained relationships between advocacy organizations and the decision-makers who have the power and obligation to respond. This requires organizational capacity — staff whose role is to build and maintain those relationships, to follow up when stories generate response, and to hold institutions accountable when they do not. This work is

unglamorous. It is what actually moves outcomes.

5. Fund longitudinal storytelling projects. The novelty imperative that governs most media funding — the pressure to find the next story rather than deepen the current one — systematically undermines sustained attention. Funders should deliberately create incentives for storytelling projects that return to the same communities and individuals over years, building the kind of ongoing narrative that makes it harder for audiences and institutions to look away. Accountability requires repetition. Justice is not a one-time event.

6. Build women's storytelling capacity, not only their visibility. Sustainable change requires that women affected by conflict and crisis can tell their own stories — not as objects of others' documentation, but as producers of their own narrative. Investment in training, platforms, and institutional access for women journalists, advocates, and storytellers in conflict-affected communities creates a fundamentally different kind of story: one in which the woman is not dependent on external intermediaries to make her voice heard. At Hear Her Stories, our most durable partnerships have been those in which women became the storytellers, not only the stories.

A current example of this model in practice is Project Silent Campus, a joint initiative between Hear Her Stories and Amnesty International UK launching in August 2026. The campaign documents the experiences of racialized women and Muslim female students in UK universities who face administrative intimidation and disciplinary action for exercising their right to dissent on human rights issues. Critically, the project is not designed as broadcast journalism — it is structured from the outset around Amnesty's institutional accountability machinery, with storytelling formats calibrated to specific advocacy outcomes: the adoption of a Defend Dissent Charter by student unions nationwide, a published policy briefing, and direct engagement with university governance structures. The story and the institution are coupled from the beginning. That coupling is what distinguishes advocacy from content.

VII. CONCLUSION

Dr. Ben-Meir, in the letter that opens this journal's inaugural issue, wrote that "silence is the oxygen of impunity." It is a formulation of striking clarity, and I believe it is right. What I want to add, from the standpoint of someone who has spent a decade trying to break that silence, is this: noise without direction is still just noise.

The Witness Gap is not a storytelling failure. It is an architecture failure. We have built a powerful, sophisticated, emotionally resonant machine for producing stories about women's suffering. We have not built, with anywhere near equivalent investment, the institutional infrastructure through which those stories produce accountability. The result is a field that generates enormous feeling and insufficient change — one that serves the audience's need to witness more reliably than it serves the woman's need for justice.

What is at stake is not abstract. The women whose stories circulate in our media landscape — displaced, surviving violence, fighting for legal recognition, demanding political inclusion — are making specific claims on the world. They

are not asking to be seen in the general sense. They are asking for concrete responses from specific institutions that have identifiable obligations toward them. The question for humanitarian storytelling is whether we are building the connections that allow those claims to land — or whether we are building more beautiful, heartbreaking, award-winning content that confirms our compassion and then lets us rest.

The answer requires honesty about what we have been optimizing for, and courage to optimize for something harder. Empathy is available in abundance. What remains scarce is accountability — the institutional response, the policy change, the sustained follow-through that turns a story from an emotional event into a political one.

We have been building audiences. We need to be building architecture. The voices in these pages, and the millions of voices they represent, are not waiting for more witnesses. They are waiting for what comes after witness: the structural response that makes silence, when it finally falls, the silence of a wrong addressed rather than a woman ignored.

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POVERTY

Reconciling a “Two-Speed” Morocco Requires a Shift in National Consciousness

Morocco’s development frameworks prioritize local communities, yet the divide between urban progress and rural poverty persists. Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir argues that the central failure lies in implementation: inadequate decentralization, limited community participation, and insufficient commitment to rural development. Drawing on decades of experience, he calls for investment in locally driven projects, stronger support for rural women and youth, and accessible community financing. Bridging Morocco’s “two-speed” divide requires more than policy reforms and resources; it demands a national commitment to confronting rural poverty and empowering communities to determine their own futures.



Yossef Ben-Meir
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Executive Summary: Morocco has formalized a dynamic development model over the past quarter of a century to guide sustainable growth in rural and urban areas. However, its inadequate implementation, particularly in rural areas, does not reflect the model's excellent quality, underscoring the need for local community management and decentralization. Intractable rural poverty is more a matter of a national, urban-centered consciousness and the insufficient commitment of associated public and private classes to support codified charters for community planning and action, and the necessary access to funding programs to accomplish project goals. The essay suggests a practical way forward to effectively apply the established charters that compose Morocco's overall vision for rural development, which emphasizes locally driven approaches and instills broader awareness to enhance community mobilization.

MARRAKECH

To be born and live in rural Morocco comes with a shared joy in heritage, yet also with depressive personal and collective conditions for growth. One's gender, of course, defines the rural life experience, but for all members of small landholder farming families, the health, education, and economic trajectory is most likely a mere remnant of that of urban citizens. Decades ago, rural infant mortality was mortifyingly worse than it is today, but it remains multiple times higher than in urban places. Furthermore, the livelihood prospects remain inescapably dismal overall—particularly for youth and for the people in the country's vast mountain regions.

Morocco has a divide between the infrastructural and managerial achievements within and between cities and with chronically overbearing rural poverty. This societal condition was aptly characterized in 2025 by the nation's King Mohammed VI as two speeds.[1] Of course, reconciling this divergence in Morocco involves multifaceted, multi-tiered, and multisectoral actions and the flexible allocation of the necessary resources for locally directed projects to uplift rural communities' future. But I fear that there will not be fair and widespread rural fulfillment any time soon—even though Morocco has had appropriate plans for many years and has a helpful measure of financial dedication to implement them, yet still has unsatisfactory local sustainable growth that generates new revenue for reinvestment.

Morocco's best days are already captured in its development design, and it awaits the people's will, consumed by national care, to see it through.

YOSSEF BEN-MEIR

If urban-rural stratification were just a matter of necessary, strategic roll-out adjustments in programmatic and financial application, the "two speeds" would at least be better aligned than they are, narrowing the gap during generations of lost potential and bounty. After all, the divide does not exist for lack of an integrated model, policy, framework, roadmap, charter, or constitution. To Morocco's truly laudable credit, such critical principal development guides are ratified in place—with communities at the center of action and change—and they require accomplishment and scale in rural places.

The Moroccan people have had, for at least a quarter of a century through a codified vision,

an exemplary opportunity to self-determine their priority needs, create local organizations (civil, cooperative, and business) that coordinate efforts to address them, raise funds, forge national and global private and public partnerships, replicate, federate, and pursue their development using democratic and direct participatory procedures.

At the same time, the long-lasting off-speed wedging of society is not primarily due to uncommitted resources that can be garnered to achieve a just development course with rural Moroccan families and communities. Certainly, raising funds for local human development is a strenuous and uncertain ordeal. Yet, during the process of empowerment, the people and their surroundings have become replete with known opportunities and projects for achieving generational sustainability in local livelihoods, food security, individual and institutional capacities, women's and girls' freedom, and income-generating artisanal, agricultural, and other enterprises. However, local growth movements that *can* be unleashed have not been nearly often or deeply enough.

CONSCIOUSNESS OF URGENCY

My greater concern, however, is a lack of consciousness among those fortunate people who have neither endured the denial of education beyond age 12 nor had their children endure it. Rural girls even just outside city centers disproportionately experience that reality.[2] Middle- and upper-class urbanites often demonstrate an observable disregard for rural others in their homeland, who endure the vast majority of poverty conditions.

University-educated urban youth (particularly at private institutions) seem to have a considerable lack of awareness—an absence of thought—about rural youth who are without prospects and means. Their educators and public officials with the responsibility to bridge the systemic harmful divide accept the two speeds and lack the interest, knowledge, or courage to assume what actions they are able and mandated to take. Morocco, for example, has codified decentralization of public administrations (sub-national decision-making and management) in its Constitution and a national Roadmap and Charter.[3] While some regional and provincial directors of human-service ministries exercise the authority they have to sign agreements and proactively promote local development, the majority continue to defer to the tiers above them and ultimately to Rabat, a key reason for the suppressed rural speed.

It is inspiring to see sub-national public officials making responsible decisions without delay and self-propelling opportunities for the rural people. It is also frustrating and even heartbreaking that these exceptional individuals (who I have observed in multiple regions and ministries over decades) are typically not given the authority they deserve and would use to promote community action. To help make Morocco's two speeds commensurate with one another, public personnel at lower tiers should be encouraged to perform with urgency for the people.

The national depth of denial and inability that makes rural poverty dense and the rural situation crushingly wasteful of enormous opportunities compels me to believe the situation will continue without an awakening of

consciousness. The pleas in the discourses of the King of Morocco are not getting through to the extent needed; the voices of the afflicted are not penetrating to get rid of the scourge within this generation, and the civil advocates doing their best with what they have will, in the aggregate, continue to provide only marginal community gains. Only a fraction of the nation's cooperatives and associations are economically viable, achieving financial independence, or sustainable human development benefits for their members.

The two speeds in Morocco are in fact two consciousnesses. The haves are the classes of detached public administrators, corporate leaders, and educators obligated to muster all they can in their positions and as citizens to assist the general welfare—beginning with the people who historically have been marginalized the most. The wealth display and public expenditures without significant rural poverty alleviation are appalling. This is especially true when we consider that a rural girl can go to middle school by covering the transport cost of $400 a year; or that $50,000 for water pipelines can transform community agricultural production and deliver safe drinking water, providing generational benefits of job security, food security, and girls' education for 250 farming families.

The apparent consciousness of neglect cements the poverty of rural people. Farming communities typically have neither the existing capacities nor empowerment to self-drive their development change nor the catalyst investments to create jointly identified initiatives that meet personal and collective needs. A plethora of Moroccan charters, ministerial strategies, and policies remain unfulfilled by local communities not planning and following through on development with sufficient public and private support to meaningfully address stunting poverty and transformational potential.

PROJECTS BY THE PEOPLE

Rural people can conceivably lift themselves out of constant economic and poverty-induced environmental hardship. However, the inescapable need to achieve sustainable projects requires harnessing empowerment's reflective and technical features and designing and creating locally prioritized human development projects. Communities of people who share a geographic space, culture, and local institutions and determine their development action plan must—individually and as a group—reckon with their own self-doubt, inhibiting relationships, emotional courage, unalienated production activities, consensus, and affirmation of a crystallized project vision. Launching and navigating this introspective process does not occur spontaneously, so it necessitates trained facilitators and an invitation from the participating community, which indicates their commitment to seriously challenge themselves and achieve their self-described development.

These self-determined projects, carried forward with hard work over dedicated time, are then in a position to deliver consistent financial self-reliance and reinvestment in their growth goals. Without external support or local people deciding to equip themselves for this personal, collective, and, yes, Moroccan-prescribed way, communities usually won't move to pursue their own change with new, widely uplifting benefits.

Morocco is a truly inspiring example of every essential legal allowance being in place for each

village and neighborhood to decide and carry out their goals of improving education, agriculture, well-being, and natural conditions. Yet, the insufficient level of enactment is disheartening, as the principal model to guide development is now itself cast as the problem. The King of Morocco's Roadmap vision for decentralization through subnational private-public cooperation to assist local community projects is an integrative, creative part of Morocco's model.[4] However, if the vast majority of provincial and regional public agencies' directors have a consciousness that reverts to the central level and do not assert their discretion, no matter the excellence of the model, decentralization does not function. As a result, the realization of rural opportunities becomes anemic, as we have seen for years.

A national hesitancy exists toward decentralizing to local levels that are replete with economic, class, and social stratifications and are also without the standard, critical skills to justly wield heightened decision-making authority and assumed responsibilities that decentralization grants. As we will now see, lack of entrenchment of this essential and dynamic part of Morocco's development model results from the inefficacy of other key components.

MOROCCAN PATHWAYS FOR COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY

Morocco's municipal charter, for example, has at its center people's participation in the forging of local development plans. However, if elected council members have not been experientially trained to uphold this linchpin provision, then the Moroccan model becomes perceptively irrelevant in rural people's lives, as it sadly is.

Ministries' ten-year strategic plans to train their local personnel to spur community development are common and part of the Moroccan vision. But a translation into the tangible reality of local change is uncommon, and furthermore unlikely to emanate from centrally inclined and hierarchical mindsets and systems.

The experience of community empowerment sharpens the facilitators' ability to help create the basis for sustainable growth. Yet, participatory planning for future development launched with self-belief is just not happening with those for whom it is intended and most needed. Catalyzing empowerment and development movements across the countryside has the most widespread results when training is strategically concentrated with members of municipal councils, public guardians of the forests, agricultural and public health extension workers, teachers, members of civil organizations and cooperatives, and university students.

Pools of rural young people, many studying at their regional public universities, can strengthen their capacities to become powerful change agents. Universities unanimously seek learning-by-doing programs with their students that engage them in the process of alleviating poverty, but funds to support students' stays in rural places are highly infrequent. University students from rural areas (particularly females) who focus on applied learning about participatory action gain the chance to ignite their community's introspection toward a clarified path of projects and shared responsibilities, especially among women and youth who endure the brunt of poverty.

Using the nation's heritage of multiculturalism as a productive bridge to the people's development is a dynamic and exceptional element of Morocco's model for growth—though one without substantial, subsequent impact. Morocco's King has been a forerunner of this noteworthy vision for at least the past 20 years, and his direct support of opportunities has been excellent. The public and the government deeply appreciate the Moroccan Muslim-Jewish-Catholic historical experience, and the efforts to preserve this legacy as an indelible part of national and local identity.

However, these initiatives are too rarely found in thriving, integrated, and sustainable programs that lead to rural socio-economic growth and improved natural resource management. The High Atlas Foundation and the Moroccan Jewish Community, in partnership with the Moroccan government's National Initiative for Human Development at the direction of the King of Morocco, spearheaded the House of Life program, which is an excellent example of cultural preservation and agricultural development advancing at once.[5] This occurs through the Jewish Community's free lending of land near their historic cemeteries, where rural people can build their fruit tree nurseries and woodcutting farms for reseeding.

Unfortunately, this kind of innovative program design is exceedingly rare. Mostly, rural families express the sincere desire to preserve the diversity of their heritage, but that gives way to the reality of severe scarcity from joblessness. A rural community in the Taroudant province safeguarded its historic cemetery with fencing; both Muslim and Jewish people are buried side-by-side there, and pride in this heritage runs profoundly deeply. At the same time, they have to fetch clean drinking water kilometers away. Multi-stakeholder planning, grounded in local people's defined project goals and advanced with cultural specificities and preservation needs, can reverse these lost opportunities and build on the people's genuine will to uphold identity as a way toward livelihood.

COUPLING COMMUNITY PRIORITIES AND FINANCE

The effects of these and other fallouts or inadequate fulfillment in applying critical parts of the Moroccan model can only undermine other facets. Take the promising National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD), the more than 20-year-old, multi-billion-dollar program to finance the people's projects.[6] Its founding definition of sustainable development was pioneering in its time and integrating all the vital components of human life and mandating inclusion. Its core premise has thankfully informed public development policy in Morocco ever since.

Excessive barriers make NIHD inaccessible to most rural groups with highly viable projects. If the aforementioned mandates for community development planning remain incomplete, then project options for receiving finance have questionable sustainability. If communities jointly settle on a broadly shared initiative, NIHD's proposal application requires a higher literacy level than is often available in rural communities. This underscores the widespread need for proposal co-creation alongside those responsible at NIHD. Then, if these hurdles have been overcome and the proposal is selected, the funding recipients need to have 25 percent of the requested budget amount in their bank account

as their contribution, ready to dedicate to the proposed initiative. However, local buy-in to ensure project sustainability is best guaranteed by community participation, not as much by ability to contribute funds. The NIHD clause as it stands is therefore prohibitive, considering depressed existing rural income levels. Reducing the local contribution requirement to even 5 percent would secure the same commitment measure.

Perhaps most self-defeating of all is NIHD's recent decision to exclude local civic organizations (not-for-profit entities) from eligibility to receive funding. The rationale is to instead concentrate its resources to promote vital job creation and entrepreneurial enterprises for revenue generation, which is appropriately the realm of cooperatives and the private domain. However, civil institutions represent the whole community, and are the very ones that maintain water infrastructure and create agreements among all households for managing water distribution. The installation of water containment and delivery systems for drinking and irrigation (pipelines, basins, canals, catchments, terraces, solar water pumps, and wells) remains the most common top priority I have observed during my 33 years of involvement with development in Morocco. The NIHD should permit the local responsible parties (having no replacement with formal jurisdiction) to apply for funding for such a singularly important resource project as a course-corrective measure of decentralization.

In addition, as the custodians of agricultural communities' collective lands, local civil agencies can assist with their transition from herd animal grazing to fruit tree agriculture to significantly enhance livelihood benefits. One can hardly find a more viable enterprise for farming households—requiring water infrastructure investment, resilient and native tree saplings, and training—that provides a more sustainable income. Civil organizations are the gateway for this exceptionally life-enhancing opportunity.

Climate trends and forecasts have been devastating for Morocco, notwithstanding this rainy season that finally ended a bitter seven-year drought.[7] Indeed, if NIHD were to focus mostly on village-based water infrastructure with civil groups, it would achieve a world of service: a net water gain, new employment, heightened food security, and increased capacities to reinvest in human development. To suggest that these kinds of community water projects are being covered by the Ministry of Agriculture in conjunction with other public agencies may be correct in terms of expectations, but in reality, their impact on rural people is fractional compared to the pervasive need and urgency, and the benefit that NIHD can bring.

If NIHD makes these adjustments, accepts proposals year-round, and becomes more flexible about project types, with participatory community determination as the primary criterion, it will expand sustainable activities. NIHD depends on inclusive community planning, though, and it will not find its potential stride if the national strategies to accomplish this in rural places remain too hollow.

For the 2030 World Cup, Morocco will spend an estimated $40 billion on associated infrastructure projects.[8] Meanwhile, there are 1,282 rural Moroccan municipalities in need of unrelated infrastructure projects. If 10 percent of the total budget, approximately $4 billion, were

dedicated to completing locally created projects in the same timeframe, it would achieve outcomes that improve rural lives and will be felt for multiple generations to come. In this way, Morocco will continue to be a global example for not only embracing all ethnicities and religions that constitute its national identity, women's emancipation through their own propelled institutions and finance, decentralization constructed by the people's free association, and renewable energy as a dedicated way of life, but also become an example for anchoring the most illustrious sporting event with poverty eradication.

TRAINERS FACILITATE DEVELOPMENT MOVEMENTS

Of course, everyone in Morocco wants to end the scourge of rural poverty. But do not expect a national consciousness of concern for this dire matter, or the necessary energy from all parts, to see its alleviation. There are unbelievably dedicated, self-sacrificing, very hardworking people in all agencies wanting to majorly address the rural poverty menace, and I fear that they are concluding as I am—the national will is inexcusably short, and the regularly dull attitudes smother possibilities. The connections between urban and rural are too fleeting, and ultimate conviction too shallow.

We need a great awakening, a willingness where it matters most to do differently, exhaustion from the status quo, to find once and for all intolerable the toleration of rural youthful futures lost unproductive in their origins and alienated when their situations compel them to urban settings.

I adore the earth of Morocco. To traverse any of its roads for the first time and behold its lands mesmerizes me. Planting native seeds in Morocco is an indelible part of my life's pursuit. The conclusions I state sadden me, but they are what I honestly see.

THE PATH FORWARD FOR MOROCCO

Where does this leave us? Morocco has tried ranging measures to address this rural truth of intrinsic beauty and discontent. There are thoughtful and creative models and strategies, but clearly the people in positions to enact the models and engage communities need practical guides for implementation, and flexible purse allocations able to follow community determinations. Relentless directed focus on training of trainers to spark participatory community movements for their envisioned empowered development is a without-which, and their funding for translation into reality is the other parnone.

National service requiring the urban youth to work in rural places will help bridge the two speeds and consciousnesses. Providing rural youth with modest financial means to maintain themselves and build their capacities to focus on where they are from can be hugely meaningful for all involved.

After three decades of steadfast dedication to the Moroccan people's self-reliant development, I suspect voices will respond questioningly to what I am describing. Who am I—a non-Moroccan person from the United States, someone of Iraqi-Jewish heritage—to surmise about our society that has welcomed and given me a rewarding life's pathway beyond measure. I have one

beloved in my life who is not a person, and it is Morocco. The rural people, particularly in the mountains, who can be self-afflicting and divided, with difficult effects, have won my whole heart. Their practical dreams can birth a Morocco that its people intend and can guide the world with good and just rural renewal using its model that leaps developmentally by reconciling members of communities within themselves, each other, and urban classes. We know, time and again, that achieving their self-defined development course forges solidarity, sees all girls in school, brings the peace of water, food security, and renewable energy, and ushers clear meaning to life. It is a Moroccan-declared pathway for community sustainability.

Moroccan youth everywhere share a bond of mutual socio-economic difficulty: not seeing their individuality in their productive activities; achieving educational degrees without commensurate assurance of employability. The Moroccan model constitutes national strategies that recognize their intrinsic penchant and dynamism to advance associational and cooperative activities. Their role as facilitators of empowered community participation can be a powerful engine toward scale, in combination with attaching emerging locally-backed projects with adaptive NIHD finance.

Morocco is a world-class destination, hosting global events and conferences and preparing for a spectacular 2030 World Cup. Not reconciling the rural-urban divide is becoming increasingly inexplicable, adding to the agony of rural people, borne stoically by girls at home wanting to be in school, youth without satisfying recourse, and parents with highly limited options.

Regional officials act constrained while human service awaits. This must end if Morocco is to get past being a country with insufferable rural incompleteness despite its endowed resources and opportunities beyond communities' immediate dreams. It must become a country with its implemented model approach for local envisioning and rural people's undeterred pursuit of possibilities. Morocco's best days are already captured in its development design, and it awaits the people's will, consumed by national care, to see it through.

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WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Beyond Rights: The Health and Development Consequences of Restrictions on Afghan Women and Girls

Since the Taliban's 2021 return, restrictions on women's education, employment, medical training, and movement have threatened Afghanistan's health system and future. The article examines girls denied schooling, aspiring midwives barred from training, and mothers unable to access emergency care. It highlights projections that Afghanistan could lose 5,400 skilled female health workers by 2030, worsening maternal and child health crises. The authors call for protecting female healthcare workers, expanding community-based education and maternal care, sustaining women-led organizations, and securing humanitarian funding. They argue that restoring women's rights is essential not only to human dignity but also to Afghanistan's stability and long-term recovery.



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1 Introduction and Background

The return of the Taliban on August 15, 2021, brought significant changes to Afghanistan's social, political, and institutional landscape, with important implications for the progress made in advancing the rights and opportunities of Afghan women and girls over the preceding two decades [1,2]. Following the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan established constitutional and statutory frameworks to guarantee gender equality, including the 2004 Constitution, the 2003 ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the 2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) [3–5]. Supported by international partners, the expansion of primary and secondary healthcare through the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS) and Essential Package of Hospital Services (EPHS) significantly strengthened the health system, helping reduce the maternal mortality ratio from approximately 1,600 to 620–638 per 100,000 live births [6,7]. At the same time, female educational participation expanded dramatically, with female primary school attendance reaching 2.5 million and female literacy nearly doubling from 17% in 2001 to 30% by 2018 [2,8].

This institutional framework has been systematically dismantled since August 2021 through an escalating series of de facto edicts targeting women's fundamental rights [2,7]. Afghanistan is currently the only country in the world where girls are barred from attending secondary school beyond the sixth grade and women are banned from tertiary education [1,8–11]. This systematic exclusion culminated in December 2024 with directives suspending women's medical, nursing, and midwifery education [7,12–14]. These educational bans are compounded by stringent mobility restrictions, such as the mandatory male guardian (mahram) requirement for long-distance travel, strict public dress codes, and prohibitions on female employment in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations [2,8,9,15,16]. International human rights organizations and legal experts increasingly classify this systematic erasure of women from public life as gender apartheid [9,17].

> *The restrictions imposed on Afghan women and girls since August 2021 have consequences extending far beyond violations of fundamental human rights.*
>
> NADIA AKSEER

Beyond its severe human rights implications, this structural exclusion has catalyzed a profound public health and economic crisis [6,18]. In 2026, an estimated 21.9 million people, approximately 45% of the population, require humanitarian assistance [9,19,20]. The prohibition of female post-primary education directly severs the human capital pipeline, with projections indicating that key social sectors could lose up to 20,000 skilled teachers and 5,400 health workers by 2030, representing approximately 25% of the 2021 female workforce [19]. In a deeply gender-segregated society where male healthcare providers are culturally or legally restricted from treating female patients, the

absence of qualified female health professionals directly constrains healthcare access, threatening maternal, newborn, and child survival [6,12,14,21,22].

Moving beyond high-level policy analysis, this chapter examines the human impact of these education and mobility restrictions on the daily lives of Afghan women, households, and communities. It demonstrates how restricting girls' learning and women's agency impairs household financial resilience, accelerates economic losses, and transmits disadvantage across generations through heightened risks of malnutrition, child marriage, and maternal mortality [18,19,23]. Grounded in empirical evidence, this analysis underscores that while principled international advocacy remains imperative to challenge gender persecution, immediate, practical health-system mitigations are urgently required to preserve life-saving care for millions of Afghan women and children today [2,6,7,13].

2 Analysis of the Issue

Restricting girls' and women's education, employment, and mobility in Afghanistan contradicts international law, has attendant human rights violations, and has meaningful implications for Afghanistan's institutions that depend on funding from external sources.

The de facto authorities (DFA) have systematically eroded Afghan girls' and women's rights in myriad ways, including banning girls' education beyond 6th grade, banning women from working for the government, national NGOs, and international NGOs, banning women from public spaces such as parks, gyms and amusement parks, and requiring women to be accompanied by a mahram when out of the home. The legal basis for these developments is an amalgam of individual decrees and policies passed by the DFA at the national and provincial level resulting in confusion on the ground, but also a universal restriction on women's and girls' basic rights. Upon returning to power in 2021, the 2004 constitution was suspended as it was deemed by the DFA to be inconsistent with sharia law, and since then, the DFA have been ruling without a clear legal framework backing their decisions on the rights of girls and women [2].

The aforementioned laws contradict CEDAW obligations to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, including in public and political life, and to include women equally in education, employment and health care [2]. They are also in contradiction of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrine every person's right to equality and non-discrimination, including on the basis of sex and gender [24]. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on the discrimination against women and girls have described systematic and widespread discrimination against women and girls after interviewing Afghans and conducting site visits [24]. Although the DFA have claimed to be protecting women and girls through restrictions on their freedoms, the laws serve to perpetuate extreme gender-based discrimination and censorship [24].

Constituting a response to the DFA's human rights violations, international donors have frozen or withdrawn aid in order to avoid legitimizing the new regime [25,26]. The massive cuts to international funding are exacerbating issues within an already fragile system,

diminishing life-saving programming and disrupting service delivery [25]. International humanitarian aid cuts have deeply affected Afghanistan's women's organizations which have seen a rise in demand, but a decline in funding. Forty percent of women's organizations are expected to close within the year 2026, even as over one million girls and women lack access to critical services since January 2025 [27]. The human rights situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, in particular for girls and women [28]. UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk stated that "Women and girls are the present and the future, and the country cannot thrive without them [28]." It is high time that both the country's leadership and international community recognized this truth and worked to reinstate the rights and freedoms of girls and women in Afghanistan.

3 Human Impact

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has become the only country in the world that bars girls from attending school beyond grade six [29]. For nurses, midwives, and doctors-in-training, a second decree in December 2024 closed the one remaining door – private medical institutes – that had let young women keep studying after schools and universities shut their doors to them [30]. A third set of restrictions, requiring women to travel with a male guardian, or *mahram*, has meanwhile reached into one of the most urgent moments a woman can face: labour and delivery. Together, these policies are not abstract; they are reshaping individual lives in ways that are now well documented.

A stolen childhood. Kawsar (a pseudonym used to protect her identity) is 14 years old and lives in northern Afghanistan. She completed sixth grade in 2024, the year her classroom, and, with it, the ordinary texture of being a child, disappeared. She had 13 classmates; most are now strangers to her; their friendships arrested before they could properly form [31]. What replaced school is not a pause but a different life: household chores, long hours at home, and the daily ache of watching her younger sister walk out the door each morning to a Grade 3 classroom she herself can no longer enter. Kawsar still says she wants to become a midwife, to help women in her community and save lives, but she describes what confinement has done to her in stark terms: "Being at home has made me mentally ill," she says. "Most of the time I fight with my sisters."[31] Her distress is not an isolated reaction but a documented pattern: a 2024 survey of Afghan girls found that 87.6% showed symptoms of depression and nearly half reported suicidal ideation since the education ban began, a generation absorbing, in private, what a policy decided in public [32]. Kawsar is one of an estimated 2.6 million Afghan girls denied secondary education since 2021, out of roughly 3.8 million Afghan girls aged 7–18 who were out of school altogether in 2024, a cohort that grows by an estimated 250,000 more girls with every additional year the ban remains in force [19].

A profession lost days before graduation. For women who had managed to keep studying despite the university ban, nursing and midwifery institutes were, in the words of one student, "our last chance to continue our education."[30] Zohra (a pseudonym used to protect

her identity) was enrolled at the Abu Ali Sina Institute in Balkh province and was just days from completing her final semester of midwifery training when the December 2024 order shut the institute's doors to her. "I had set a new goal and worked hard, receiving good grades," she said. "I was on my way to becoming a midwifery graduate, to help my family, my country, and other women. Now, I've truly lost all hope for life."[30] Zohra's near-completion makes her case a stark illustration of a ban that shut out thousands of women mid-credential, at the moment Afghanistan's health system most needs trained female providers [30]. The stakes of that timing are structural, not incidental: in a society where cultural norms mean women largely seek and receive care only from other women, a ban on training the next generation of female nurses, midwives, and doctors does not just end individual careers like Zohra's, it closes off the only channel through which millions of Afghan women and girls can access healthcare at all [30].

A checkpoint, a stillbirth, a death. The mahram requirement has proven lethal even in obstetric emergencies. Nasrin, a mother of seven from Yangi Areeq village, went into active labour and was being rushed by her own mother, Zarin Gul, toward the nearest government hospital, roughly an hour away. At a Taliban checkpoint along the route, fighters refused to let the two women pass because no male guardian was travelling with them; one warned, "You must bring a mahram. Otherwise, we will not allow you to go to the hospital."[33] Zarin Gul lied, claiming their rickshaw driver was a relative, but the family lost precious time at that checkpoint and others before finally reaching the hospital. By then it was too late: doctors found that the baby had died in utero and that Nasrin's uterus had ruptured from excessive bleeding. Both mother and child died, leaving Nasrin's seven children motherless [33].

These three accounts, a girl locked out of a classroom, a midwife locked out of her own graduation, a mother locked out of a hospital, describe the same underlying mechanism: policies that treat women's presence in public space, in a lecture hall, or on a road to a delivery ward as a problem to be controlled, regardless of the human cost. They are not isolated tragedies; they are the predictable output of decrees that now govern the daily lives of millions of Afghan women and girls.

4 Broader Consequences

The human stories above are not endpoints; they are early signals of consequences that compound the longer restrictions remain in force. The Taliban's edicts on education, medical training, and movement do not only harm the individual women and girls they target, they degrade the systems Afghanistan depends on for health, security, and economic survival.

Health system collapse, short and long term. In the near term, barring women from nursing and midwifery training is emptying the pipeline of female health workers in a country where cultural and legal norms mean women can largely only be treated by women. Modeling by UNICEF Innocenti projects that Afghanistan's health sector could lose 5,400 skilled health workers by 2030 and 9,600 by 2035, roughly a quarter of the 2021 female health workforce, directly as a result of the education bans [19]. Longer term, the loss compounds through a

maternal-education channel: children of mothers with no education already have more than three times the odds of missing all vaccinations compared to children of college-educated mothers (30.3% versus 9.6% zero-dose), and stunting was projected to climb from 44.7% to 45.6% nationally by 2025 as the pool of educated mothers shrank, an additional 10,000 stunted children from this effect alone [19]. Because Afghanistan already has one of the world's highest maternal mortality ratios, and cases like Nasrin's show restrictions actively causing delivery-related deaths, the trajectory points toward a widening, self-reinforcing health crisis: fewer trained providers, fewer educated mothers, worse outcomes for the next generation, repeating.

Economic costs, compounding annually. The World Bank's 2018 global review estimates that failing to educate girls to the same level as boys costs countries between US$15 trillion and $30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings worldwide, a scale that underscores how structurally costly Afghanistan's policy is, even before country-specific modeling [34]. Afghanistan-specific data confirms the pattern: current restrictions on women's education and labour force participation are already costing the country at least AFN 5.3 billion (US$84 million) a year, equal to roughly 20% of annual economic growth [19]. If decrees remain in place through 2030, UNICEF Innocenti projects a potential long-term GDP loss of up to 12.5%, compared with a potential gain of up to 35% of GDP over women's working lifetimes if restrictions were reversed [19]. These are not one-time losses; each additional year subtracts further, and an estimated 100,000 women who were unable to resume university study in 2021 represent a stock of foregone skilled labour that a fragile economy, already reliant on shrinking remittances, can ill afford to lose [19].

Social, security, and humanitarian strain, short and long term. In the shorter term, excluding girls from education past age 11 or 12 is already pushing families toward child marriage as a coping response to lost prospects and economic hardship. UN Women projects that if current restrictions continue, Afghanistan will see a 25% rise in child marriage, a 45% increase in early childbearing among adolescent girls, and at least a 50% surge in maternal mortality by 2026 [35]. Child marriage means girls as young as 12 or 13 leaving whatever schooling remains open to them, entering pregnancy before their bodies or support networks are ready for it, and losing the independence that comes with earning an income. These outcomes compound the maternal health risks already illustrated by cases like Nasrin's. In the longer term, these patterns become self-perpetuating: child brides have less power to keep their own daughters in school or out of early marriage, so the practice spreads across generations rather than receding as the economy recovers.

Politically and in terms of security, the exclusion of women from public life is not merely a domestic policy with foreign observers watching from a distance, it is an active input into how the international community treats Afghanistan. At a UN Security Council session on Afghanistan in September 2026, member states and Afghan officials directly tied continued restrictions on women to blocked recovery, diminished international standing, and growing calls within the Council for formal

condemnation of the exclusion [36]. In practice, this is the mechanism behind isolation: donor governments and multilateral bodies treat the treatment of women as a live, ongoing test the Taliban is failing, which keeps formal recognition off the table, keeps aid flowing through parallel humanitarian channels rather than the state, and may risk giving the Taliban little incentive to reverse course. In the short term, this shows up as a humanitarian caseload: an estimated 21.9 million people, 45% of the population, are projected to need humanitarian assistance in 2026, a burden that a shrinking, less-educated female workforce is less able to help the country absorb [19]. In the longer term, an Afghanistan that cannot normalize relations or attract investment while half its population is excluded from public life risks locking in the isolation, and the aid dependency that comes with it, indefinitely.

Left unaddressed, these restrictions do not simply freeze women and girls in place: they actively erode the human capital, health infrastructure, and economic capacity Afghanistan will need for any future recovery, while compounding, year over year, the social and diplomatic costs of staying isolated.

5 International and Institutional Response

Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, the international response to restrictions of Afghan girls and women's education and mobility has been through diplomatic pressure, support for women led organizations, and taking legal action. In April 2023, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2681 calling for the reversal of restrictions on women's education, employment, freedom of movement, and participation in public life. They also condemned the DFA banning of Afghan women working for the United Nations [37]. In December 2024, the DFA suspended women's and girls' access to public and private medical institutes. In response to this nationwide decision, the Security Council members once again urged the DFA for the reversal of their decision [38]. Since August of 2022, the UN women, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) have been conducting consultations with Afghan women. These consultations are held ahead of UN Security Council meetings. In an early 2024 consultation, 745 Afghan women from all throughout Afghanistan's 34 provinces, were able to give their opinions about international engagement with the Taliban and recommendations on the implementation of women's rights. These consultations are one of few ways that Afghan women are able to have a say and an influence on politics in Afghanistan [39].

International agencies have also adapted their programs to maintain access to essential services because restrictions have made normal operations difficult. The first objective of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2025, was to prioritize the health of women and children. They implemented a "for women, by women, with women" approach and prioritized underserved areas [40]. UNICEF reported that in 2025, around 442,000 out of school children, 65% of which were girls, received an education through 14,000 community-based education classes [41]. In their 2025 report, UN Women describe sustaining 140 women's organizations across all 34

provinces. They have reached 16,000 women through raising awareness, skills training, livelihood assistance, and childcare [35].

International organizations and nations have also taken legal action against the DFA regarding girls' and women's education and mobility. In 2025, Amnesty International submitted direct evidence on violations against Afghan women and called for the DFA to reverse its decisions regarding women's education, employment, and political participation [42]. In 2024, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands, called for Afghanistan to be held accountable for its violation of Article 29 of CEDAW [43]. In 2025, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Taliban Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani. The warrants were on the grounds of committing crimes against humanity through persecution on the basis of gender [44].

Even with the efforts made by international organizations, they are limited by DFA restrictions and funding issues. In September 2025, Taliban forces prevented Afghan female UN workers from entering UN compounds in Kabul and other field offices [45]. Aid cuts have also affected these organizations. In 2025, 207 women-led organizations (WLOs) were surveyed, one in three said that they were unable to effectively reach women and girls in their regions any longer. Forty percent of the 207 organizations surveyed reported that donor-depended projects were all on hold and that they needed to let go of 25 percent of women staff [35].

6 Recommendations and Solutions

The restrictions imposed on Afghan women and girls threaten not only their fundamental rights but also Afghanistan's long-term health, educational, and economic development. While the restoration of girls' education and women's participation in public life must remain a central priority, immediate measures are also needed to mitigate the consequences of existing restrictions. The following recommendations focus on protecting essential services, preserving the female workforce, and expanding opportunities for women and girls.

Protect female medical education through a formal health-sector exemption. Afghanistan already has a shortage of female workers; by banning them from medical education, this shortage will increase as more women retire or leave their jobs. UNICEF projects that up to 5,400 health workers will be lost by 2030 and up to 9,600 will be lost by 2035, which is roughly equivalent to one-quarter of the workforce in 2021 [19]. The consequences are more than just workforce shortages—a 2025 report by UNICEF estimated that 1,600 maternal deaths and over 3,500 infant deaths will occur as a result of banning medical education for women [46]. An immediate priority should be securing a written exemption permitting women to pursue medical, nursing, midwifery, and other health-related education, complete clinical training, sit required examinations, and enter the health workforce. Where necessary, women-only classrooms, female instructors, and separate transportation arrangements could facilitate participation. These measures would also align with Afghanistan's National Health Policy 2025–2030, which prioritizes health

workforce development and improved access to healthcare [47].

Protect and strengthen the existing female health workforce. In addition to restoring medical education, immediate efforts are needed to retain female health professionals already working in Afghanistan. Female doctors, nurses, midwives, and community health workers are essential to ensuring women's access to healthcare, particularly where cultural norms and mobility restrictions limit interactions with male providers. Donors and implementing partners should prioritize the recruitment, retention, fair remuneration, and safe deployment of female health workers. Continued professional development, supportive supervision, and refresher training should be maintained, including through telehealth and digital learning platforms where feasible. Protecting the existing workforce is critical to preventing further deterioration in maternal, newborn, and child health services [48].

Expand women led communities and maternity health services. Afghanistan already has established community-based health models that could be expanded to reach underserved populations. In 2024, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) supported 533 midwife-led family health houses, providing access to reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health services for approximately four million people across 26 provinces. UNFPA also supported 263 mobile health teams and 28 static health facilities, providing health services to approximately seven million people [49]. In 2025, UNFPA established two women-only Midwifery-Led Maternity Care Centres in Kabul and Logar, reaching 89,447 beneficiaries [50]. These models could be expanded through greater investment in female community health workers, midwives, mobile health teams, and community-based service delivery, particularly in remote areas where women face substantial barriers to facility-based care [48].

Protect sustainable financing for essential health and nutrition services. Declining international assistance threatens the continuity of essential healthcare in Afghanistan. Donors should prioritize predictable, sustained financing for the BPHS and EPHS, which provide the foundation for maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent healthcare. Funding should also protect essential nutrition interventions, including the prevention and treatment of malnutrition among women and children. Greater integration of health, nutrition, and education interventions at facility and community levels could improve service delivery efficiency and reduce missed opportunities to reach vulnerable women and girls. Maintaining these services is particularly important as restrictions on women's education and employment increase demand for humanitarian assistance [48].

Strengthen referral systems and access to essential health commodities. Restrictions on women's movement, geographic barriers, and shortages of health services can delay access to life-saving care, particularly during obstetric emergencies. Health programmes should strengthen referral pathways between community-based providers, primary health facilities, and hospitals, including emergency transportation and communication systems. Engagement with local authorities and communities is also needed to facilitate women's timely access to healthcare, including during emergencies when

a male guardian may not be available. Reliable procurement and distribution systems should be maintained to prevent interruptions in essential medicines, vaccines, reproductive health supplies, and nutrition commodities. These measures could help reduce preventable maternal, newborn, and child morbidity and mortality.

Sustain community-based education and protect female teachers. While girls remain barred from formal secondary and higher education in Afghanistan, community-based education (CBE) provides an important complementary pathway for children who face barriers to accessing formal primary schools. Unlike formal schooling, CBE delivers education through locally based learning spaces, often closer to children's homes, helping overcome barriers related to distance, insecurity, poverty, and sociocultural norms. In 2025, UNICEF supported 442,011 marginalized children through 13,971 community-based classes and continued its Girls' Access to Teacher Education programme, supporting over 1,000 qualified female teachers to improve girls' enrollment and retention in schools [51]. However, restrictions on girls' education and women's employment threaten the sustainability of the female teaching workforce, with an estimated 20,000 female education professionals potentially lost by 2030. Sustained funding for community-based education, expanded opportunities to train female teachers, and continued support for existing female teachers are essential to maintaining access to primary education and preventing the long-term erosion of Afghanistan's female teaching workforce. These efforts should complement, rather than replace, efforts to restore girls' access to formal secondary and higher education.

Expand accredited alternate learning pathways for adolescent girls and women. While formal education remains restricted, alternative learning opportunities can help mitigate learning losses and preserve educational opportunities for adolescent girls and women. UNICEF has supported alternative learning approaches using television, radio, and digital platforms to reach out-of-school children, including adolescent girls [46]. In 2026, UNESCO and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) also partnered to expand alternative learning opportunities and strengthen pathways connecting education with employment and entrepreneurship [52]. These efforts should be expanded, particularly in underserved areas, with attention to accreditation, educational quality, and opportunities for progression into formal education when restrictions are lifted. Although alternative education cannot replace formal secondary schooling or university education, it can help sustain learning and skills development in the interim [48].

Engage male family members, Islamic scholars, and trusted community leaders. Male family members, religious scholars, and community elders can play an important role in supporting women's education, healthcare access, and participation in society. In 2023, a delegation of Muslim scholars from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) met with Afghanistan's education authorities and emphasized that education is an Islamic obligation for both men and women [53]. In 2025, the OIC and UNAMA also convened Afghan stakeholders around the Jeddah Document on the Rights of

Women in Islam, including women's right to education [54]. Such dialogue should be sustained and expanded to include Afghan and international Islamic scholars, community leaders, and local authorities. Community engagement should also address the importance of women's access to healthcare, including encouraging male family members to support timely care-seeking, maternal health services, and girls' education. These efforts should reinforce women's autonomy rather than make access to essential services dependent on male approval [48].

Strengthen women-led organizations and gender-sensitive humanitarian delivery. Women-led and women-serving organizations play a critical role in reaching Afghan women and girls who may otherwise be excluded from essential services. However, restrictions on female employment and declining donor funding threaten their continued operations. Donors and humanitarian agencies should prioritize sustained financial and operational support for these organizations, including flexible funding and mechanisms that enable female staff to participate safely in service delivery. Humanitarian programmes should work through locally trusted, gender-sensitive delivery channels and consult Afghan women in programme design, implementation, and monitoring. Protecting women's participation in humanitarian activities is essential to ensuring that assistance reaches those most in need [27,35,48].

These recommendations offer practical approaches to preserving essential services and opportunities for Afghan women and girls under current constraints. However, they are not substitutes for the restoration of women's rights to education, employment, freedom of movement, and participation in public life. Sustained international advocacy must therefore continue alongside investments in health systems, education, and locally led service delivery to prevent further deterioration in the health and wellbeing of Afghan women and future generations.

7 Conclusion

The restrictions imposed on Afghan women and girls since August 2021 have consequences extending far beyond violations of fundamental human rights. By limiting access to education, employment, healthcare, and freedom of movement, these policies are undermining decades of progress and threatening Afghanistan’s long-term health, economic development, and social stability. The exclusion of women from education and medical training is particularly concerning, as it threatens the future female health workforce and access to essential maternal and child health services. Combined with declining international assistance, these restrictions risk perpetuating cycles of poverty, poor health, and inequality across generations.

Addressing these challenges requires greater international awareness, sustained advocacy, and accountability for policies that systematically exclude women and girls from public life. Governments, international organizations, and donors must continue to advocate for the restoration of women's fundamental rights while taking immediate action to protect essential services and prevent further harm. Priorities include preserving the female health and education workforce, expanding community-based services, ensuring sustainable financing,

and supporting women-led organizations. While these measures can mitigate immediate consequences, they cannot substitute for the restoration of women's full participation in education, employment, and society. **The international community must move beyond expressions of concern toward coordinated, sustained action that holds decision-makers accountable, protects Afghan women and girls, and safeguards the country's future.**

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION · DISCRIMINATION

A Century of Betrayal and Abuse for Kurds in Turkey

David L. Phillips traces a century of Kurdish struggle, from unfulfilled promises of self-determination to repression, displacement, and armed conflict. With the PKK moving toward disarmament, he argues that Turkey faces a historic opportunity for peace—but ending armed struggle alone cannot resolve the Kurdish question. Lasting peace requires recognition of Kurdish political and cultural rights, legal reform, transitional justice, support for displaced communities, and reintegration of former combatants. Phillips contends that reconciliation must address the grievances underlying the conflict through democratization, accountability, and justice, rather than treating disarmament as the endpoint.



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Introduction

The Treaty of Versailles opened an age of broken promises. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points elevated self-determination into a universal principle, and the world's stateless peoples believed it applied to them. The Kurds were betrayed and paid the highest price.

Today roughly 40 million Kurds — the largest stateless nation on earth — live in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Their homeland has been carved in European capitals. The Sykes-Picot Agreement partitioned Kurdistan between Britain and France. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres affirmed minority rights and self-government. Three years later, the Treaty of Lausanne erased the promise. In that text, the words "Kurd" and "Kurdistan" do not appear. An entire people were legislated out of existence.

What followed was not merely political defeat but a century of erasure: Turkification and the National Pact, banning the Kurdish language and Kurdish names, the Resettlement Law of 1934, the slaughter at Dersim, forced displacement of hundreds of thousands, and measures that criminalized Kurdish identity itself. Resistance was met with repression and violence.

This essay traces that arc from Sèvres to the disarmament ceremony of the PKK at Sulaymaniyah in July 2025. Today's events offer a genuine opportunity, but only if disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration are matched by real democratization, transitional justice, and the restoration of rights denied for a hundred years.

End of the First World War

The Kurds were betrayed and paid the highest price.

DAVID L. PHILLIPS

The Treaty of Versailles signaled a struggle between the principle of self-determination, exemplified by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, and the forces of state nationalism. Decolonization movements further complicated this period of transition, setting the stage for a confrontation between emerging states and entrenched imperial powers.

Kurds were caught in the middle of these upheavals. Kurds are the largest stateless people. Approximately 40 million Kurds inhabit a region known as Kurdistan, spanning Turkey (North Kurdistan), Iraq (South Kurdistan), Syria (West Kurdistan), and Iran (East Kurdistan). Historically, Kurdish interests were managed under the Ottoman Millet System. At the end of the First World War, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was focused on state-building and had little interest in the social and economic development of the Kurdish region.

Most Kurds opposed inclusion in the newly formed Turkish national state. They rejected the partition of Kurdistan into British and French spheres of influence under the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. Kurdish independence was their preferred choice. There was discussion about creating a federation of Kurdish territories across Mesopotamia and Anatolia, but ultimately partition seemed unavoidable.[1]

Kurdish Divisions

About 22.5 million Kurds reside in Turkey, where kinship ideology and tribal organization play significant roles. Kurdish identity is defined by tribal, linguistic, and religious differences. Kurds in Turkey and Syria speak the Kurmanji dialect, while those in Iraq and Iran speak Sorani. Additional divisions exist between Kurds of Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) and Anatolia (modern-day Turkey).

Wilson's Fourteen Points formed the basis for the German armistice after the Great War. However, Turkish nationalists rejected the peace terms in a bid to retain control of former Ottoman territories.

Sivas Congress

When the Society for the Defense of Rights in Eastern Anatolia met in Erzurum in July 1919, the delegates dismissed Kurdish nationalist claims. They affirmed that Kurdish-majority regions belonged within Turkey's future borders. Atatürk, emboldened by the Erzurum and Sivas Congresses of 1919, promulgated the National Pact (*Misak-ı Millî*) on January 28, 1920, as a blueprint for Turkish nationalism. The Sivas Declaration affirmed:

— The integrity of all territories inhabited by "an Ottoman Islamic majority"

— Popular plebiscites to determine the future of territories whose status was in doubt (Kars, Ardahan, and Batum in the Caucasus, western Thrace, and areas with Arab majorities)

— "Protection" of the city of Istanbul and the Sea of Marmara and negotiation regarding trade and commerce in the Bosporus and the Dardanelles

— Recognition of minority rights, providing reciprocal rights that were extended to Muslim minorities in other countries

— Full independence and sovereignty for "the country" (i.e., Turkey)

Atatürk consolidated his nationalist agenda and policy of Turkification. Kurdish issues were a flashpoint. Kurdish efforts to realize their goal of self-determination were suppressed. A 1937 letter to British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden purportedly written by Kurdish political leader Seyit Rıza assessed Turkey's approach: "The government has tried to assimilate the Kurdish people for years, oppressing them, banning publications in Kurdish, persecuting those who speak Kurdish, [and] forcibly deporting people from fertile parts of Kurdistan to uncultivated areas of Anatolia where many have perished. The prisons are full of non-combatants; intellectuals are shot, hanged, or exiled to remote places. Three million Kurds demand to live in freedom and peace in their own country."[2]

Treaty of Sèvres

The Treaty of Sèvres was signed on August 10, 1920. It stipulated that within one year of the Treaty's entry into force, the Kurds could address the League of Nations to demonstrate that a majority of the Kurds desired independence from Turkey. Only the rump of Anatolia would remain under Turkish control.

Sèvres was a forward-leaning document that included provisions for minority rights. It affirmed the multiethnic character of Kurdistan,

control over natural resources, and cultural rights, such as the use of minority languages. However, it was immediately denounced by Atatürk and never ratified by the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). It fueled national fervor among Turks and ignited the Turkish War of Independence from 1919 to 1923. Sèvres led to the National Pact, which served as a declaration of independence by nationalist Turkey.[3]

Ataturk called for new negotiations, which led to the Treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923.[4] The Allies – Britain, France, and Italy – betrayed the Kurds at Lausanne. In a dramatic departure from Sèvres, the words "Kurd" or "Kurdistan" did not appear anywhere in the text. Britain petitioned the League of Nations, ignoring Turkey's claim of racial unity between Turks and Kurds.

Kurdish language rights were restricted through ordinances that forbade Kurdish language in official proceedings. Newborn babies were not allowed to be given Kurdish names; Kurdish village names were changed to Turkish ones; Kurdish cultural festivals such as Newroz, the celebration of the Kurdish New Year, and the singing of Kurdish folk songs were forbidden. Republicanism actively promoted a cult of Atatürk, which was called "Kemalism."

Assimilation Policies

The TGNA passed the Resettlement Law on June 14, 1934, authorizing forced relocation of Kurds and seizures of their properties. Atatürk intensified crackdowns, especially in Dersim. In 1936, the name of Dersim was changed to Tunceli, and a new military governor, General Abd Allah Alp Dogan, was appointed to orchestrate the forced deportation of Kurds.

The army employed coercive measures, burned down Kurdish villages, and arrested men, women, and children. Abuse, torture and rape of women and girls were widespread. Families who escaped the villages and hid in caves were attacked with chemical weapons and murdered. Said Raza and other Dersim leaders surrendered and were executed. The number of Kurds killed in Dersim is estimated at around 40,000.

A nationalist constitution establishing Turkey's second republic was adopted by referendum on July 9, 1961. It enshrined "Turkishness" and the supremacy of the state. It defined the Turkish republic as a nationalist, democratic, and social state (Article 2). The Turkish state is an indivisible whole comprising its territory and people. Its official language is Turkish (Article 3). Similar language would reappear in Article 301 of the Penal Code, which justified a crackdown against the PKK in the 1980s.[5]

The PKK

Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), was part of the widespread leftist movement sweeping the country in the 1960s. Öcalan understood the value of class warfare to mobilize grassroots Kurdish support against oppressive Kurdish feudal landlords.

The PKK charter called for a Marxist proletarian revolution and envisioned the PKK as the "vanguard of the global socialist movement," in which the revolution's fundamental force would be a "worker-peasant alliance." The charter condemned "the repressive exploitation of the Kurds" and called for a "democratic and united Kurdistan." With an ideology blending radical Marxism-Leninism and Kurdish nationalism, its

founding charter enshrined armed struggle to support a worker-peasant alliance. Öcalan viewed the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in Southeast Anatolia as the first step towards a "greater Kurdistan" embracing Kurds from Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq speaking different languages – Kurmanji, Sorani, and Zaza.

The PKK's popularity surged after the December 1978 Maras massacre, in which over 100 Kurds and Alawites were killed amid escalating political violence. Öcalan emerged as a protector—his name, meaning "avenger," took on symbolic power. Maras became a turning point, radicalizing Kurdish youth and fueling recruitment into the PKK.

Banners and billboards echoed Atatürk's nationalist message: "Happy is he who can call himself a Turk."[6]

Öcalan fashioned the PKK as a rigid hierarchical organization that operated with Stalinist discipline. Öcalan cultivated a cult of personality, brutally suppressed dissent, and purged opponents. In response, Turkey declared martial law in several southeast provinces in the late 1980s, using the rule of law to justify its crackdown. Article 14 of the constitution heralded "the indivisibility of the state." Article 125 of the penal code stipulated, "Any person who carries out any action intended to destroy the unity of the Turkish state or separate any of its territory shall be punishable by death." Article 8 of the Law for Fighting Against Terrorism was broadly interpreted to suppress free speech and discussion of Kurdish issues. Southeast Turkey became a security zone. Army camps, police checkpoints, and military airports spread from the Semdinli Mountains in the southeast to Siirt near the border with Syria.

Öcalan evolved over time, preferring politics over armed struggle. The PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire on March 20, 1993. Öcalan challenged Turkey to give up military operations and emphasized cultural rights such as free press and media, as well as the use of the Kurdish language in education. He also demanded freedom of expression and association, constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity, and legalization of Kurdish organizations. Öcalan also proposed compensation for Kurds who were driven from their homes and whose property was confiscated or destroyed.

Meanwhile, the Turkish government adopted a displacement policy to deprive the PKK of shelter and local support. About 378,000 villagers were forcibly evacuated, and cities such as Diyarbakir, Cizre, and Nusaybin more than doubled in size. After Öcalan fled Turkey in 1979, the PKK found safe haven in Syria. Turkey threatened to cut off water supplies from the Atatürk and Birecik Dams on the Euphrates River unless Syria severed ties with the PKK. In October 1998, Syria signed the Adana Memorandum, which designated the PKK a terrorist organization, and committed to expelling it from Syrian territory. Öcalan then began an odyssey through Moscow, Rome, Amsterdam, Athens, and Nairobi, where Turkish Special Forces, working with U.S. intelligence, finally apprehended him.

Öcalan realized that the best way to end the PKK's armed struggle was through negotiations. "The democratic option is the only alternative to solving the Kurdish question. Separation is neither possible nor necessary. We want peace,

dialogue, and free political action within the framework of a democratic Turkish state." He pleaded, "Give me a chance. In three months, I will bring all Kurdish fighters down from the mountains." While in prison, Ocalan realized that political mobilization was more effective than armed struggle.

Peace Partner

Erdoğan wasn't looking for a partner; he was looking for a subservient Kurd he could control. Erdoğan focused on Selahattin Demirtaş, who was so charismatic that people called him the "Kurdish Obama" and the "Kurdish Mandela." He was also known as the "thousand hopes candidate" for inspiring the party's rank and file. Demirtaş was far from subservient. He was the HDP's presidential candidate in the 2014 election, finishing third with 9.77 percent of the vote.

During the Turkish general election in June 2015, the HDP placed fourth with 13.12 percent of the vote. The HDP broke the 10 percent electoral threshold for the first time and won 80 out of 550 seats. Demirtaş was a real threat to Erdogan's hegemonistic pursuit of power. Demirtaş was sentenced to 40 years in prison for allegedly inciting the deadly Kobani riots in 2014.[7]

In April 2024, Devlet Bahçeli, the head of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), offered an olive branch by inviting 76-year-old Öcalan to renounce "terrorism" in exchange for possible parole. Dialogue ensued that led to a decision by Öcalan to order the PKK to disarm.

The PKK issued a statement that it had "completed its historical mission" and would "end the method of armed struggle." The statement affirmed that the Kurdish issue "can be resolved through democratic politics." From his prison cell on Imrali, Öcalan called on the organization to lay down its arms and dissolve. He wrote, "There is no alternative to democracy in the pursuit and realization of a political system. Democratic consensus is the fundamental way." The first group of PKK fighters to surrender their weapons arrived during a solemn ceremony in Sulaymaniyah, northern Iraq, on July 11, 2025. One by one, they lined up and deposited their arms in a giant fiery cauldron.

According to the theory of "ripeness," armed conflicts end when the fighters are exhausted and decide they have had enough. The key to a successful resolution of conflict lies in the details of proposals for a solution.

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

Erdoğan's political future rests on his ability to resolve the Kurdish issue. As a violent armed conflict comes to an end, countries confront the challenge of how to handle armed combatants. DDR programs (disarmament, demobilization, reintegration) emerged as a response to this challenge. The United Nations defines DDR as a process that contributes to security and stability in a post-conflict recovery context by removing weapons from combatants, removing them from military structures, and helping them integrate socially and economically and find livelihoods.[8]

— **Disarmament** is the collection, documentation, control, and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives, and light and heavy weapons from combatants and also from the civilian population.

— **Demobilization** is the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or armed groups. The first stage of demobilization may extend from the processing of individual combatants in temporary centers to their cantonment in designated areas.

— **Reintegration** is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is a social and economic process with an open timeframe, primarily taking place at the local level, thereby making local communities stakeholders in peace.

DDR requires Turkey's continued democratization and improved living standards for all citizens. Full implementation of political and cultural reforms and the abolition of regressive legislation, such as the Anti-Terror Act and Article 301 of the Penal Code, are needed. These reforms will address Kurdish grievances and strengthen the rule of law by advancing Turkey's overall democratization.

Turkish media has spent years demonizing the PKK as terrorists and "baby killers." Normalizing relations will be a hard pill for the Turkish public to swallow. Terminology is critical: the term "General Amnesty" *(Genel Af)* is too contentious. Instead, the term "Winning to the Society" *(Topluma Kazanma)* would be a more palatable way to refer to the DDR process.

Any amnesty program would need to proceed in phases. First, eligibility should be offered to PKK members who joined after 2002. Cadres without command responsibility would be next. PKK leaders will scuttle the DDR package unless it has an advantage for them. While senior commanders who have been given "red bulletins" by Interpol would not be eligible for amnesty, they could apply for asylum in their country of residence. To create and implement a successful amnesty program, it would be useful for Turks to study the experience of other countries that have faced post-conflict challenges.

Peacebuilding

Turkey faces a difficult legacy from its conflict with the PKK. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) could help build confidence and end the cycle of violence. It would also combat the culture of impunity and help entrench the rule of law. Adapted to Turkey's requirements and culture, a balance between accountability and truth-telling can advance society's needs.

Getting to the truth will not be easy. "Multiple truths" often exist. Both sides have their own version of "what really happened" and are adamantly convinced they have the only answers. Rather than wait for the post-conflict phase, Turks should start studying how other countries have developed systems for transitional justice following a period of protracted violence. An examination of relevant international experience could begin by sending Turks overseas on fact-finding trips and bringing TRC experts to Turkey.

Parties often focus on the initial disarmament and demobilization phases. They must be careful not to shortchange reintegration, which is less glamorous but essential. Additional investments in the Southeast could enhance social services such as health and education and subsidize return and resettlement efforts targeting civilians displaced by conflict.

Projects should aim to evolve the tribal and feudal character of Kurdish society, which impedes development. Women can play a crucial role in improving social welfare services and enhancing civil society. Efforts should be made to help women shed the oppressive yoke of the patriarchal system. Girls would benefit from expanded educational opportunities that offer them more choices. Activities should emphasize women's employment. Financial support through rural credit would generate small-scale industries benefiting women. Given the large family sizes, population-planning programs are also needed.

Assistance would support the Back to Village Program and compensate homeowners if their property has been destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. The special administrative status of provinces in the Southeast should be revoked and the village guard system abolished. With international donor support, projects should focus on reintegrating the village guards and providing pensions.

The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the PKK represent an extraordinary opportunity to move from conflict to coexistence. The DDR implementation board met on August 24, 2026, and agreed to establish four subcommittees covering legal affairs, monitoring, social integration, and disarmament.

Conflict in Turkey with the PKK is inextricably linked to developments in Syria. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced dissolution on August 25. Mazloum Abdi was appointed a Syrian presidential adviser on August 28. After decades of war and oppression, the Kurds and other Syrians are ready for peace.[9]

What can realistically be done?

Realism means separating what is achievable within existing legal and institutional channels from what would require redrawing borders that no state would accept. Kurdish Statehood is off the table. Redress is not. Here are six measures that can be adopted within the current governing authorities in Turkey:

1. Convert the disarmament law into rights, not just clemency

Turkey's parliament passed a framework law on August 10, 2026, providing legal protections and suspended sentences for former PKK members. Still, it deliberately left out expanded Kurdish political and cultural rights, anti-terror law reform, and Ocalan's status. The parliamentary commission that preceded it likewise recommended freedom-of-expression measures and an end to the trustee system while insisting "the report is not an amnesty arrangement." The goal of peacebuilding would be advanced through expanded Kurdish-language education and public services; repeal of Article 301 and anti-terror provisions; and constitutional language recognizing Kurdish identity.

2. Empty the prisons of political cases and honor the Strasbourg judgments.

The ECtHR ruled again on July 8, 2025, in Demirtaş v. Türkiye (No. 4) that his detention violated the Convention and exposed systemic judicial abuse of political dissidents. Yet, a Turkish court refused to order his release days later. Devlet Bahçeli has since called release

"advantageous" for Turkish courts and the Ministry of Justice. The judgment can be leveraged by the EU accession framework.

3. Truth-telling: Dersim, the mass graves, and the disappeared

Erdoğan's 2011 apology for Dersim was a gesture without a mechanism; Kurdish civil society still demands the archives, the restoration of the name Dersim, and disclosure of Seyit Rıza's burial site. Turkey's prior transitional-justice experiments were narrow and state-protective. Parliament must create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with forensic exhumation and involvement by the International Commission on Missing Persons, archival declassification by the General Staff and Interior Ministry, and a documentation partnership with the Human Rights Association (İHD) and the Diyarbakır Bar Association.

4. Restitution, demining, and the actual return of the displaced

Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were displaced in the 1980s and 1990s, and the 2004 Compensation Law (No. 5233) proved "unjust, restrictive, and inconsistent." Ankara must reopen and reform Law 5233 with a fresh filing window, presumptive proof standards, and compensation for material loss. It should abolish the village guard system and offer pensions and reintegration. The EU, UNDP, and the World Bank can co-finance return, housing, health, and education in the Southeast — conditioned on measurable outcomes.

5. Make reintegration humanitarian, not merely security-driven

DDR collapses when reintegration is treated as an afterthought. The needs are concrete: psychosocial and trauma care for ex-combatants and villagers alike, civil registration for children born in camps and mountains, family reunification for fighters returning from Iraq and Syria, and targeted programs for the large cohort of women in PKK ranks who cannot return to patriarchal village structures. Resources should be provided to the DDR implementation board and its four subcommittees: (i) UNDP and IOM for reintegration financing and case management; (ii) the ICRC for family tracing and detainee visits; (iii) the KRG for those demobilized on Iraqi soil; and (iv) Turkish medical and bar associations with access to Kurdish-majority provinces.

6. Extend redress across borders

Kurdish suffering was never confined to Turkey. Anfal killed roughly 180,000 Iraqi Kurds, including some 5,000 gassed at Halabja, and survivors are still waiting: Kurdish leaders renewed reparations demands to Baghdad as recently as August 2026. In Syria, Mazloum Abdi announced on August 20, 2026, that civil and military integration with Damascus was complete, which makes monitoring and written guarantees a priority. Baghdad should support Anfal reparations and survivor pensions; Damascus should constitutionally guarantee Kurdish language, decentralized administration, and full citizenship for the stateless ajanib and maktumin. The UN, US, and EU should serve as guarantors of the integration agreement so "integration" does not become a euphemism for renewed erasure.

Every one of these measures is less expensive than conflict. None requires a new border. They require states to emphasize cooperation rather than confrontation.

Conclusion

No people in the modern Middle East have been betrayed as consistently, or as casually, as the Kurds. They were promised a nation at Sèvres and denied a name at Lausanne. They were bombed at Dersim and gassed in caves where their families had gone to hide, and some 40,000 died there while the world looked away. Their villages were burned, their language outlawed, their newborns forbidden Kurdish names, their new year criminalized. Some 378,000 villagers were driven from their homes to starve the guerrillas of shelter. When Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign turned chemical weapons on Iraqi Kurds, Ankara said nothing, because a dead Kurd across the border served the same purpose as a silenced one at home. Their most gifted democratic leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, has languished in prison since 2016 for the crime of being electable.

A century of suffering has been inflicted not by accident but by policy—deliberate, legislated, and enforced by the state. The fires at Sulaymaniyah consumed weapons, not grievances. If Turkey now offers the Kurds nothing more than silence in exchange for their disarmament, it will be another betrayal of Kurdish aspirations for peace and social harmony.

Appendix

Necessary reforms in Turkey

Turkey's ongoing challenges revolve around its democratization. Sustainable peace requires reforms strengthening the rule of law and the administration of justice.

Independence of the judiciary is paramount. Today, the judiciary has been captured and serves to preserve the regime's power. This trend became more pronounced since the so-called coup in 2016. Institutions of the Turkish state – the courts, prosecutors, broadcast regulator, central bank, and electoral commission -- have been used by Erdogan to preserve his power, rather than as an effective system of checks and balances.

The 2022 disinformation law and Article 299 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes insulting the president, are routinely used to restrict freedom of expression. Turkey ranks 159th out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. Turkish authorities have suppressed dissent by shutting down more than 1,500 foundations and civil society associations since 2016.

Opposition leaders, especially advocates of Kurdish rights, are convicted on politically motivated charges. Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party, has been jailed since November 2016 and the CHP leader Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu was arrested in March 2025.

The Interior Minister arbitrarily removes elected mayors accused of aiding terrorism. Turkey's trustee system allows elections to be overturned by administrative fiat. Between July 2016 and July 2018, more than 130,000 public

servants have been dismissed, losing not only their jobs but their passports, pensions, professional licenses, and social security.

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WAR CRIMES

The Witness Who Stayed

Syrian Kurdish peacebuilding specialist Shiler Sido recounts fleeing Afrin with her young daughter after Turkey's 2018 Operation Olive Branch and spending a year in a displacement camp. Her account documents the devastating toll of war on Kurdish communities, including what she describes as forced displacement, demographic change, and political erasure. She challenges the international community's failure to turn evidence of abuses into accountability, arguing that geopolitical interests repeatedly eclipse civilian protection. Drawing on her humanitarian work and the organization she founded, Sido calls for psychological healing to anchor post-conflict reconstruction: lasting peace requires confronting trauma, not merely rebuilding what war destroyed.



Shiler Sido
PEACEBUILDING SPECIALIST AND COMMUNITY LEADER

Shiler Sido was born in Afrin, in the olive-covered hills of northern Syria, where 95 percent of her neighbors were Kurdish, and a fragile experiment in pluralism briefly took root. Then came 2018, Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, and what she describes not as counter-terrorism but as demographic engineering: 18 million olive trees felled, 10,000 homes confiscated, streets renamed, and a people scattered into camps. She walked out over the mountains with her baby in her arms. She lived a year in a tent in Tal-Rifaat, studied international law from inside it, and founded ACES to treat the trauma that makes peace impossible. She has fled four times. In January 2026, a single drone strike killed seven of her husband's relatives. Her question is not why the world failed to notice, but why, having noticed, it chose to do nothing. This is her testimony — and her refusal to disappear.

My name is Shiler Sido, a visionary peacebuilding specialist and community leader with over a decade of dedicated service in humanitarian response, human rights advocacy, and organizational development across conflict-affected regions. I was born in 1989 in Afrin, Syria. I studied English Literature at the University of Aleppo. I am now a Master's Degree student at Amman Arab University, majoring in Psychological and Educational Counseling. Before the war and the displacement, I enjoyed a very successful life full of goals and achievements. I was a teacher, a translator, a writer, and a researcher about ancient Middle Eastern languages.

Then the war came.

The Syrian conflict, which erupted in 2011, is often described as a civil war that spiraled into chaos. But for the Kurdish people of northern Syria, the war has always followed a clearer logic: the logic of demographic engineering, forced displacement, and political erasure.

Among the most emblematic chapters of this ongoing tragedy is the story of my home — Afrin.

> *I am not just a Kurd who survived. I am a Kurd who is still becoming.*
>
> SHILER SIDO

Before the war, Afrin was one of the most homogeneous Kurdish districts in Syria, with a population of roughly 500,000. It was a region of small farmers, olive oil producers, and tightly knit communities. Our olive groves were legendary — golden-green hills stretching as far as the eye could see, supporting generations of families. When the Syrian government withdrew from the area in 2012, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration established civilian governance. They built schools, women's cooperatives, and local councils. Women held positions of power. Religious and ethnic minorities were protected. Afrin became a quiet symbol of what a different Syria could look like — a Syria based on democracy, pluralism, and human dignity.

That experiment came under direct assault in January 2018, when Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch. The Turkish government claimed that our political and military structures were terrorist organizations. But what happened on the ground was not counter-terrorism. It was an invasion aimed at destroying Kurdish self-governance and remaking the demographic map of northern Syria.

2018

Occupying Afrin paved the way for Neo-Colonialism in Syria, led by Turkey

An unforgettable year — because what followed changed everything. I thought I knew about who I was, what I could lose, and what I could still become. It was the beginning of an orchestrated demographic transformation. Turkey and its Syrian allies began repopulating Afrin with Arab families — including, in a deeply controversial move, Palestinian refugees from other parts of Syria.

So many reports proved that, but a study done by Lund University stated in detail what happened in Afrin:

> *Before the Turkish operation, 95 percent of the population in Afrin was Kurdish, but everything changed drastically, especially after 2018-2019. Until 2018, Arabs and Kurds lived together peacefully. However, after that year, the demographics in Afrin shifted, with the majority of the population now consisting of Arabs and Turkmen. The olive fields in Afrin were destroyed; 18 million trees were cut down, although reported numbers vary across sources, from 500,000 to 13 million. In place of these trees, new settlements and residential buildings have been constructed with funds coming from Kuwait or sometimes Qatar for the new settlers, facilitated most likely by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic Jihad, and also Hamas. After the occupation, around 10,000 homes and 7,000 shops were destroyed or confiscated.*[1]

The biggest process of refugees took place under the pretext of Turkish National Security. More than 38 new housing units were built. These housing units are built by international organizations controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood, either in Qatar or in Kuwait, or by some Palestinian organizations controlled by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and others loyal to Turkey. They began renaming the territory, including streets, squares, and villages, switching everything from Kurdish to Turkish.

The symbolism was unmistakable: our land was being resettled by others, and we, the original inhabitants, were scattered across camps in a bombed-out landscape. The Kurdish identity of Afrin was being systematically erased. There was more evidence posted by The Insight International, which also published a piece "Turkey settles 10,000 Palestinians in Afrin in Syrian Kurdistan." In that piece, it was stated clearly that Turkification and Arabization of Afrin city were systemic and funded by Muslim Brotherhood organizations in the region.

The Structural Paralysis of the International Community, Including the UN

The situation in Afrin and its aftermath represents a textbook case of violations that international law defines as war crimes and crimes against humanity. These patterns are not accidental — they follow a deliberate logic. But the big question that has always been in my head is: Why are the UN and the international organizations that call for justice and human rights silent, and why don't they take any action? Activists like me and Kurdish bodies sent tens of documents to the UN agencies describing with

evidence what is happening in Afrin, but these documents were completely dismissed.

In fact, the United Nations' response to the crisis in Afrin — and to the broader demographic engineering of northern Syria — has been marked by a profound disconnect between documentation and action. Various UN mechanisms have acknowledged the severity of what has transpired. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has documented patterns of forced displacement, property destruction, and the transfer of populations into occupied areas — acts that fall squarely within the definition of war crimes and crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute.

Yet the UN Security Council, paralyzed by geopolitical divisions and the veto power of permanent members (notably Russia, a key ally of the Syrian government, and the complex positioning of member states vis-à-vis Turkey, a NATO member), has been unable to authorize meaningful enforcement measures. No Chapter VII resolution authorizing intervention, no referral to the International Criminal Court, no targeted sanctions regime specifically addressing the Turkification and Arabization of Afrin. The UN's humanitarian agencies — OCHA, UNHCR, and UNICEF — have operated in the region. Still, the competing territorial claims of the Syrian regime, Turkish-backed forces, and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration has constrained their access. The result is a humanitarian apparatus that can document suffering but cannot stop it.

The response from the broader international community reflects the same structural paralysis. The United States, under both the Trump and Biden administrations, maintained a military presence in northeastern Syria primarily to counter ISIS, not to protect Kurdish civilian governance. When Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch in January 2018, the U.S. did not intervene militarily, despite the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces having been Washington's primary ground partner in the fight against the Islamic State.

The message was unmistakable: Kurdish lives could be leveraged for counterterrorism but not defended against a NATO ally. European nations, while rhetorically supportive of human rights in Syria, have largely deferred to Turkey on matters concerning northern Syria, mindful of the 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal and Ankara's leverage over refugee flows. Individual states have offered asylum to some Syrian Kurds, but no coordinated diplomatic strategy has emerged to hold Turkey accountable for the demographic transformation of Afrin.

Arab states, for their part, have been largely silent — some because of their own Kurdish minorities, others because of alignment with Turkey or the Syrian government. On the whole, the international community's response has been one of selective attention: ISIS atrocities generate military coalitions; Syrian regime barrel bombs generate diplomatic outrage; but the quiet, systematic erasure of Kurdish Afrin has generated little more than statements of concern.

The Challenges of Achieving Accountability

I realized later the following fact:

First, the obstacles to accountability are layered and interlocking. Legal jurisdiction is fragmented. Turkey is not a state party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, so the ICC cannot prosecute Turkish nationals for crimes committed in Afrin unless the UN Security Council refers the situation — a near-impossibility given the geopolitical dynamics described above. The International Court of Justice could theoretically hear a state-to-state case, but no state has brought one. The Syrian regime's own judicial system is both complicit and compromised. This leaves universal jurisdiction prosecutions in European courts as the most plausible legal avenue, and indeed cases have been brought against Syrian officials in Germany, France, and Sweden — but these have focused overwhelmingly on the Assad regime, not on Turkey or its allied factions.

Second, documentation challenges persist despite the efforts of groups like Human Rights Watch and local documenters like me. The destruction of physical evidence, the displacement of witnesses, the difficulty of verifying mass graves and destroyed olive groves in active conflict zones — all of these impede the construction of evidentiary records that would hold up in international courts.

Third, political reality is the most formidable barrier. Turkey is a NATO member with a powerful military and significant diplomatic leverage. It controls migration routes into Europe. It has economic relationships with major powers that dwarf the political weight of the Kurdish minority. The international community has repeatedly demonstrated that it is unwilling to sacrifice strategic relationships with Ankara for accountability in Afrin. The fundamental challenge is that the Kurdish people of northern Syria lack the geopolitical relevance necessary to compel action. As I always say, “To be Kurdish is to live in a house where you are perpetually unwelcome.”[2]

One Corridor Left

Going back to my story: I carried my baby in my arms. My husband held my hand. We walked for tens of kilometers across mountains while the sky burned behind us. I cannot tell you how many family members I lost. Even forming the number feels like tearing through the scar again. We ended up in Tal-Rifaat — a place that had been bombed flat, the earth still seeded with mines left by ISIS. Nearly 300,000 displaced Kurds arrived there. I lived in a tent with my husband and my two-year-old daughter.

One night, I was gripped by relentless diarrhea for eating food my body rejected, never known before. No medicine. No clinic. The toilets were a kilometer away through the mud. My husband held my hand and walked me there — back and forth, all night long, through the rain — because there was nothing else to do. No doctor. No help. Just rain and mud and a man who refused to let me suffer alone.

I stayed in that tent for a year, still thinking of the nightmare the children in the Camp are enduring. I volunteered with the Kurdish Red Crescent. I documented the lives of the displaced in three languages. I sat with women who had survived horrors. I listened; I wrote. I shared the truth with the world, only to be met with deafening silence. But one of my reports reached the U.S. Congress.

2021

Columbia University offered me a nine-month course in international law and humanitarian documentation. I attended from inside a tent.

Imagine that: a woman who had walked through a massacre, who had spent a year in a refugee camp with no medical care, who had buried too many names to count — searching for a bar of signal on her phone, squinting at a screen, learning international law so she could fight for her people with more than just her grief. I finished the course despite the strain; I carried the weight instead of my complaints.

2022

Healing Trauma as a Foundation for Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding in Syria

In 2022, I founded ACES — Action for Community Empowerment in Syria — with a simple mission: to show broken people that the strength within us is greater than what the war inflicted on us. My focus was mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for traumatized communities. I trained doctors and nurses at the region's only hospital to care for the traumatized, especially the young, and I served and empowered thousands of displaced people. But the scale of the collective trauma I witnessed convinced me to go further, for the following reasons:

We know that trauma fuels conflict; mentally and emotionally regulated people can easily build dialogue and have peace talks. That is why I always link good mental health in any community, especially in a conflicted one, with social cohesion and peacebuilding. Furthermore, when individuals are trapped in cycles of fear, grief, hypervigilance, and unresolved anger, social trust erodes, intercommunal tensions rise, and the capacity for reconciliation collapses. By providing trauma-informed care, Psychological First Aid, and sustained psychosocial support, ACES created and still creates the psychological groundwork upon which social cohesion can be rebuilt. A person who has healed enough to trust again is a person who can engage in dialogue, cooperate across ethnic lines, and invest in shared community life.

I had been broken myself. I knew exactly what healing required — and how easily the world forgets to try. I knew that trauma can be transformed into inner power. That's what I did, and what I continue to do through my NGO because I genuinely believe that **sustainable peace cannot be built on traumatized communities.**

2023 to 2026

Working More with the Minorities, but WHY

By 2023, I had moved to Northeast Syria, expanding my work across three governorates. I ran workshops on mental health, education, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. I worked with Armenians, Yezidis, Christians, Syriacs, Arabs — every community that war had tried to erase. I had lived in their tents, held their hands in the rain, documented their daughters' suffering to ensure that someone, somewhere, read the truth. For four years, I brought hope to places where hope had died. My greatest award was earning their trust.

In conflict-affected settings, minorities are often the first to be scapegoated and the last to receive support. ACES prioritizes these communities because we understand that the resilience of the whole society depends on protecting its most vulnerable parts. By strengthening the psychological and social resilience of minority individuals and families, we are building bulwarks against the forces of division, extremism, and communal violence. A Yazidi woman who has regained her sense of agency through psychosocial support, a Kurdish teacher trained in trauma-informed education, a Syriac community leader equipped with Psychological First Aid skills — these are the building blocks of a peaceful, pluralistic Syria.

January 2026

The new ruler in Damascus turned on the minorities. Alawites and Druze were massacred first. Then the Kurds. In Aleppo, two neighborhoods — home to half a million Kurds — were attacked overnight. Seven members of my husband's family died in a single drone strike while trying to escape, including his sister, her husband, their daughter, his sister-in-law, and their three small children. Many others simply vanished with no trace, which is all too familiar following such violence. I was in Qamishli when the Autonomous Administration areas came under attack. There was no safety anywhere. For the fourth time in my life, I fled.

Now I am in Amman, Jordan, with my husband and our three daughters. We sold our furniture to pay the rent. We struggle, but we survive. Nothing about the present tells us to go back. People often ask me: How do you endure this without becoming bitter, without becoming hard?

I do not have a colorful answer. I only know that I have never surrendered to my reality. I am still here — fighting, working, empowering myself and others toward a better present and a better future. I have been bombed, and so has every Kurdish Mountain. The bombs have fallen on Qandil, on Shengal, on Afrin, on Kobanê, on Kirkuk — dropped from foreign jets, fired from domestic mortars. The soil of Kurdistan does not remember a time without craters. I say this not as a statistic, but as a body that has absorbed the shockwave and kept walking.

Despite the hardships, ACES and I continue working

Today, ACES continues to expand its integrated programming across Syria, with a growing presence in northeast Syria from its main office in Qamishli and plans for a second office in Damascus. We are currently implementing programs in MHPSS, GBV prevention, child protection, and trauma-informed education — reaching thousands of participants across eight governorates.

Our 2025 forums on sustainable peace and educational transformation have brought together over 260 stakeholders, generating actionable recommendations for local and international decision-makers. We are deepening our partnerships with academic institutions, including Columbia University, Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security, and Fordham University's Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs, ensuring that our work remains evidence-based, globally informed, and locally grounded.

But the scale of need far outstrips our capacity. The international community cannot afford to look away from Syria — not when Kurdish communities and other minorities continue to face threats to their very existence, not when a generation of children is growing up in the shadow of unaddressed trauma, not when the infrastructure of social cohesion has been systematically destroyed.

We call on governments, international organizations, and humanitarian actors to act — not with empty resolutions, but with sustained political will, flexible funding, and genuine partnership with local civil society. Accountability for past and ongoing crimes must be pursued. Human dignity must be placed at the center of every intervention. Peacebuilding must be understood as inseparable from healing. And the women, minorities, and communities who have held Syrian society together through its darkest years must be recognized, protected, and empowered.

A peaceful, inclusive, and resilient Syria is possible — but only if we build it together, from the ground up, starting with the psychological and social well-being of every person.

I am Shiler Sido.

My story is every Kurd's story. The maps erased us. The censuses didn't count us. The chemical weapons tried to dissolve us. And yet, we are still here. My story represents a nation of itself. What really makes it hard is the lack of justice and accountability.

I am not just a Kurd who survived. I am a Kurd who is still becoming. And that becoming — that stubborn, unbreakable, endlessly creative insistence on being — is the only thing the bombs have never been able to destroy.

Çiya dikarin bitefin, lê milet namire. (in Kurdish)
The mountains can be destroyed. The people will not die. (Its meaning in English)

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MIGRATION AND REFUGEES

From Representation to Recognition: The Theatre Stage as a Space of Rights and Belonging

Through I Want to Live, a participatory theatre project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dr. Serap Fišo explores how displaced women express experiences of war, motherhood, loss, and belonging without being reduced to their suffering. She distinguishes visibility from recognition: women must control what they share, how they express it, and what remains unspoken. Their experiences should also inform humanitarian practice and public policy through ethical, voluntary participation. Women do not need others to give them voices; they need institutions to listen and ensure their recognition extends beyond the stage into decision-making.



Serap Fišo
INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

SERAP FIŠO[1]

Abstract

In December 2024, the Bosnian-Herzegovinian NGO Bosanskohercegovačka inicijativa žena (BHWI) developed *I Want to Live*, a participatory theatre initiative involving migrant women from Palestine, Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye living in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through theatre, lullabies, song, somatic movement, and other verbal and non-verbal forms of expression, the performance brought different experiences of womanhood, migration, war, displacement, family, and belonging into a shared creative space.

This article examines *I Want to Live* through an interdisciplinary qualitative approach combining autoethnography with qualitative content analysis. Drawing on the researcher's dual position as participant and observer since 2024, the analysis uses experiences from rehearsals, performances, and backstage encounters alongside selected media coverage, institutional statements, and public reflections by participants and practitioners. Rather than approaching migration primarily through security, vulnerability, or institutional categories, the article considers how participatory theatre can make women's lived experiences publicly present while allowing them to retain agency over what and how they communicate.

The findings reveal that the theatre stage can function as a relational space where different identities, languages, memories, and experiences coexist without being reduced to a single narrative of the "migrant woman." Expression occurs not only through verbal testimony but also through voice, lullaby, embodied performance, silence, cultural elements, and decisions about what remains undisclosed. The article therefore distinguishes visibility from recognition and argues that participatory theatre can create a space in which migrant women move beyond being represented by others towards actively shaping how their experiences are expressed and publicly encountered. Such creative practices can make dimensions of displacement visible that institutional categories and data may not fully capture. Where women choose to share these experiences beyond the stage, their lived-experience knowledge can complement existing humanitarian knowledge and contribute to more participatory forms of institutional dialogue.

The stage cannot correct the structural inequalities or human rights violations associated with displacement.

SERAP FIŠO

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina; participatory theatre; migrant women; BHWI; I Want to Live.

1. Introduction and Background

Migration and forced displacement are more than geographical movements; they are lived experiences that shape human security, rights, identity, belonging, dignity, and social recognition. In this article, migration and displacement is not only understood as legal categories or demographic movements, but as lived and

relational experiences shaped by different social positions, histories, and everyday realities. Therefore, I combine autoethnographic reflection with qualitative analysis of local media coverage to examine participatory theatre as a creative and relational practice and explore its potential contribution to more inclusive policy-making. I explore the creative process of a participatory theatre project developed collaboratively with nine adult women who resettled in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a distinctive case [2] that brings together two distinct migration realities within the same geographical space: the historical experience of a post-war society profoundly shaped by mass displacement and migration movement and the contemporary experience of receiving people in transit from contexts marked by war, political and economic instability, and insecurity. Hence, this intersection makes Bosnia and Herzegovina particularly relevant for examining migration and women in migration not only as demographic mobility, but as a lived experience that continues to shape identity, belonging, and social relations.

Migration and displacement profoundly affect social, economic, and psychological life while intersecting with sex, class, age, legal status, and pre-existing inequalities (Fleury, 2016). For women, these conditions may intensify patriarchal norms, care responsibilities, economic dependency, discrimination, and social exclusion. Yet recognising these vulnerabilities is different from defining migrant and displaced women primarily through trauma and victimhood, which can obscure their capacity to interpret, express, and shape their own experiences.

This distinction is particularly important given that women have long constituted a substantial proportion of migration, while their numerical presence has not necessarily translated into adequate recognition within migration research and data collection (Piper, 2005; Fleury, 2016). Being statistically visible, therefore, does not necessarily make women's lived experiences visible.

This raises a broader question for the present study: how do migrant women become visible, what forms of expression are recognised, and who participates in shaping their representation? These questions are especially relevant when women are approached primarily through humanitarian categories of protection, vulnerability, and need. Although such categories are important for identifying risks and allocating assistance, they capture only part of how women understand and represent their own experiences (De Smet et al., 2024; Misra, 2020). Public narratives may similarly reduce refugees, displaced, and migrants to contrasting images of "vulnerable individuals" or "dangerous collectives" (De Smet et al., 2024, p. 554).

These representations can overlook the complexity of everyday life during displacement. Separation from homes, communities, cultures, friends, and family networks can generate isolation, loss, and difficulties in communicating distress (UNHCR, 2025). At the same time, displacement does not suspend everyday responsibilities. Women caring for children may face uncertainty about their own futures while continuing to raise children, sustain family relationships, manage daily responsibilities, and create stability under unstable conditions. Vulnerability and agency are therefore not mutually exclusive:

experiences of insecurity and loss can coexist with caring, decision-making, participation, and creative expression.

The importance of this study lies down that participatory theatre provides a space for examining this relationship because experience does not have to be communicated through verbal testimony alone. The presence of migrant experiences on stage may create visibility, encourage reflection, or challenge how audiences encounter migration, but the consequences of that encounter depend on what follows beyond the performance. As Nguyen argues, literature does not change the world unless people move beyond reading and act upon the conditions represented within it (Nguyen, 2018, as cited in Ercişli, 2025, p. 37). Any specific things like song, lullabies, movement, silence, cultural practices, and embodied performance can offer different ways of expressing and negotiating migration, womanhood, identity, and belonging. Misra (2020), reflecting critically on participatory theatre with people on the move, illustrates the tension between institutional narratives of vulnerability and participants' own forms of self-representation. While migration systems may require credible accounts of persecution and trauma, some participants resisted being represented primarily as traumatised individuals or victims and instead sought recognition through their abilities, creativity, and capacity to contribute.

Importantly, participation does not require the disclosure of every difficult experience. Choosing silence or withholding parts of one's story may itself represent agency and control over personal narratives (Andonov & Wolfe, 2021). Expression is also relational. As Schwartz and Melzak (2005) describe storytelling as "a relational phenomenon," what matters is not simply whether someone speaks, but how that expression is encountered and responded to by others. From this perspective, agency in participatory theatre lies not simply in becoming visible, but in having greater control over what is expressed, how it is expressed, and what remains unspoken.

2. Analysis of the Issue

Theatre can provide a public space in which experiences of migration and displacement are represented, encountered, and interpreted beyond their institutional or statistical framing. In this sense, artistic representation is not politically or socially neutral. Gallien conceptualises migrant literature and art as forms of both "poetic and political intervention" (Gallien, 2018, as cited in Ercişli, 2025, p. 37). Applied to theatre, this perspective draws attention to the capacity of performance to bring experiences that may otherwise remain private or socially marginal into a shared public space. Through voice, movement, character, narrative, silence, and embodied performance, migration can be encountered not simply as a policy issue or humanitarian category, but through the lived experiences of those affected by it.

Yet representation alone does not produce social or institutional change. A similar distinction can be applied to participatory theatre: performance can create a space for representation and recognition, but its broader significance depends on whether listening and encounter generate dialogue, participation, or institutional response. The question is therefore not only whether migrant women become visible on stage, but

whether that visibility creates opportunities for their lived experiences to be recognised within the social and institutional spaces that shape their lives.

The distinction between representation and recognition is central to this analysis. Representation can make migrant and displaced women visible; recognition concerns their capacity to participate in shaping how their experiences are understood and their needs meet in the policy making practice. Theatre writer and critic Aleks Sierz describes the 2000s as a period in which, in response to the British media's often accusatory and unsympathetic portrayal of asylum seekers, theatre practitioners increasingly took on the task of engaging with and making visible the lived experiences of asylum seekers and other migrant communities in Britain (Sierz, 2011, as cited in Ercişli, 2025, p. 44). Miramonti et al. (2025) describe participatory theatre as having the potential to contribute to the "rehumanising of the Self and Other" and the "re-authoring" of narratives. In this context, re-authoring does not mean changing the past, but gaining greater agency over how lived experience is expressed and shared. Participatory theatre can create such a space by enabling women to communicate through speech, storytelling, embodied performance, creative expression, or silence.

This distinction matters in humanitarian contexts, where categories such as refugee, migrant, displaced person, or vulnerable woman may be necessary for identifying protection needs but cannot capture the complexity of individual lives. Participatory theatre does not remove legal insecurity, discrimination, economic inequality, or the material consequences of displacement. Its significance lies elsewhere: in creating conditions in which women can participate in how their experiences are represented and encountered. The movement from representation to recognition therefore occurs not simply when women become visible, but when they gain greater agency over what they express, how they express it, and what they choose to leave unspoken when these expression do not meet their own needs.

3. Human Impact

The well-known phrase attributed to Dostoevsky, "We all came out of Gogol's *Overcoat*," points to more than the emergence of a literary tradition. Gogol's *The Overcoat* brought the ordinary person into a literary world largely occupied by remarkable heroes, aristocrats, and lives considered worthy of being written about. It demonstrated that an apparently insignificant life could also be worth telling, hearing, and remembering. From Pushkin's *The Stationmaster* to Gogol's *The Overcoat*, literature created a space of representation for the "ordinary person" whose life might otherwise have remained at the margins of history.[3]

Yet the question is not simply whose stories are told, but what is lost when certain lives remain untold. Wars, forced displacement, borders, and political decisions enter historical records, while the fears, losses, silences, lullabies, and everyday struggles of ordinary people caught within these events can easily disappear from view. If history is predominantly written through those who hold power, make decisions, or emerge as victors, how can we understand the experiences of those who lived through history without having the power to write it?

This is where representation becomes significant. Creating a public space for someone's story does more than make that person visible; it can open a pathway toward recognition of experiences previously treated as private, ordinary, or unworthy of public attention. Literature achieved this by bringing the ordinary person into the centre of the narrative. Participatory theatre may create a similar possibility—not by speaking on behalf of migrant women, but by creating a space in which they can shape what is expressed, how it is expressed, and what remains unspoken.

I Want to Live (Želim živjeti), written and directed by Dubravka Zrnčić-Kulenović, was first performed in December 2024. The production involved Marijana Dinek and Daria Vujić, performers Alena Džebo and Mehmed Pašić, choir leader Dragana Glumac, and eight migrant women who had settled in Bosnia and Herzegovina following different migration journeys. It is important to note that all of these local artists experienced displacement during the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The theatrical narrative centres on the life of a migrant woman who, while staying in a humanitarian reception setting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, seeks psychological support. Through her sessions with a psychologist, different layers of her life gradually emerge: her experiences as a woman, early marriage, the births of her daughter and son, family difficulties, war, the killing of civilians, displacement, and the search for safety. These experiences are presented not as a linear account of suffering, but through shifts between distress, memory, resistance, and hope. The protagonist speaks, cries, sings, dances, screams, and remembers. Memories of her mother, children, childbirth, home, and earlier life become intertwined with her present experience of displacement and her attempt to reconstruct a sense of self and possibility for the future.

Alena Džebo's performance gives embodied form to these emotional and biographical transitions, while the migrant women's choir creates a collective presence around the protagonist through voice, song, lullabies, and movement. Their presence does not suggest that they have experienced the same events as the fictional character. Rather, the performance brings different women and different histories into a shared theatrical space where aspects of womanhood, loss, displacement, family, memory, and hope can coexist without being presented as a single migrant narrative. Mehmed Pašić, as the only male performer, plays the psychologist and occupies a different position within this encounter. Through his dialogue with the protagonist, he listens to and responds to experiences that challenge him to confront questions of gender, displacement, family relations, and the realities faced by women during migration. The psychological session thus functions not only as a narrative device through which the protagonist's experiences unfold, but also as a relational space in which those experiences are spoken, heard, questioned, and encountered.

My autoethnographic reflexivity provides a different but complementary perspective. I entered the project in late 2024 as a participant rather than as a researcher, without a research question, observation plan, or methodological framework. This was my first social activist step into migration movement standing. I have felt that during the early rehearsals, communication

did not always depend on a shared language; sometimes a few words, a gesture, a melody, or another woman's lullaby was enough to create connection. One of the most intense moments for me occurred when we performed lullabies in our own languages.

"Here I am on the stage, looking at my chair. It differs from the others in colour and form, just as the experiences of the women sitting on those chairs, mine is red wooden one, differ from one another. As I watch the representation of a migrant woman's life from the artist, I begin to cry. Her story confronts me with my own experiences of womanhood and with burdens I have carried for years.

After hearing lullabies in Ukrainian, Bosnian, and Arabic, I sing mine in Turkish. This lullaby carries a deeply personal meaning for me as a migrant, a student, and a mother who lost her first child in this country. As I sing, I find it difficult to open my eyes. I am aware that someone from my professional or social life may be sitting in the audience, and I feel uncomfortable being seen in such a vulnerable moment. Yet I have chosen to let my voice be heard. I am afraid of being seen, while at the same time allowing myself to be heard."

This tension became central to my understanding of participation. I did not explain what the lullaby meant to me, nor did I turn my personal history into a narrative of suffering. I did not need to tell the audience what had happened to me. Yet something of that experience was communicated through my voice, body, and song. For me, this moment revealed that participation can make personal experience present without requiring its full verbal disclosure.

When examining the human impact of this participatory theatre initiative, participants' own reflections provide an important perspective on the significance of *I Want to Live*. One Ukrainian choir member, who performed on stage for the first time, described her experience with the words, "Ovo nije igra" ["This is not a game"] (Faktor, 2025). In her account, the stage contained pain and emptiness, but also women's strength. She connected her voice, Ukrainian songs, and elements of traditional clothing with survival, self-preservation, and dignity (Faktor, 2025). The public presentation of the project similarly emphasised women's abilities, capacities, and aspirations rather than presenting them solely through vulnerability (Grad Mostar, 2025). At the PitchWise Festival, the Federal Ministry of Culture and Sports highlighted a question at the centre of the performance: "Šta nikada nisu rekle, a htjele su?" ["What had they never said, but wanted to?"] (Federalno ministarstvo kulture i sporta, 2025). Read together, these accounts suggest that the significance of participation was not limited to narrating difficult experiences. Song, clothing, movement, cultural references, and performance also enabled participants to present aspects of themselves that exceeded the category of the "vulnerable migrant woman."

The human impact of the performance is also visible in the reflections of audience members who connected what they witnessed on stage with their own experiences of displacement. Hasija Borić Stojić, herself displaced during the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, recognised aspects of her own history in the central female character. She describes the character as encompassing both the Bosnian

and the "universal" woman struggling to find her place in the world, recalling her own experience of fleeing the war with her two young daughters (Borić Stojić, 2025, p. 8). Her reflection moves beyond personal identification to a broader human-rights argument: "Human rights are human rights, regardless of which vulnerable community is concerned. They cannot be selective" (Borić Stojić, 2025, p. 8). She extends this argument through the striking metaphor that "human rights are not a buffet from which we choose only what appeals to us" (Borić Stojić, 2025, p. 8). Her response illustrates how the performance can move beyond representing migrant women on stage and become an encounter through which an audience member relates another woman's displacement to her own history and to wider questions of dignity, rights, and recognition.

These experiences do not provide sufficient grounds to describe participatory theatre as therapeutic or to claim that it produces "healing." After performances, I sometimes experienced a sense that something had been expressed, completed, or simply made easier to carry, but this remains an autoethnographic reflection rather than evidence of a general therapeutic effect. What the material does show is that human impact can take forms that are less definitive but still significant: being able to participate without explaining everything, encountering others without having identical experiences, communicating through forms other than testimony, and retaining control over what remains private. The women on stage did not share the same histories of war, migration, loss, or womanhood, and their participation should not be interpreted as evidence of a common migrant experience. Rather, *I Want to Live* created a shared space in which different experiences could coexist and be expressed without being made equivalent. Its human significance therefore lies not in repairing what has been lost, but in creating possibilities for expression, connection, dignity, and participation while leaving room for difference, silence, and individual boundaries. It captures the power of being represented and recognized.

4. Broader Consequences

"Koliko kola, od dola, do dola, koliko bola, od kola do kola. Koliko jada, od grada do grada, koliko greba od brega do brega..."["How many circles, from valley to valley; how much pain, from circle to circle. How much sorrow, from town to town; how many graves, from hill to hill..."] (Dizdar, as cited in Borić Stojić, 2025, p. 9)

The broader significance of *I Want to Live* lies not only in making women visible on stage, but in the social encounters that such visibility can generate. Recognition requires moving beyond seeing a person primarily through categories such as "refugee," "migrant," "displaced person," or "aid recipient" and encountering her as an individual with a history, culture, abilities, preferences, and the capacity to articulate her own position. Andonov and Wolfe's (2021) observation that participants could see themselves as "individuals with an identity, a culture and wishes" captures this dimension of recognition. Importantly, this process also involves those who witness the performance. Following the production in Jajce, journalist Melida Travančić described it as creating a space in which society could confront realities it might otherwise prefer not to see, writing: "Neka riječ bude

izgovorena. Neka priča bude kazana" ["Let the word be spoken. Let the story be told"] (Travančić, 2025). Viewed through Schwartz and Melzak's (2005) understanding of storytelling as a relational phenomenon, the public significance of these stories emerges not only through their expression but through what happens when they are encountered by others. The audience is therefore not simply a passive receiver of representation; its presence creates the possibility of witnessing, responding, and recognising experiences that may otherwise remain socially distant or institutionally categorised.

The relational significance of the project also extended beyond the staged performance. During the performance in Jajce, I witnessed a Palestinian member of the group receive a telephone call and begin to cry while speaking in Arabic. We subsequently learned that her brother-in-law had been killed in Gaza. What followed was not part of the script: other women stayed with her, held and comforted her as she moved through the immediate shock and grief. For me, this moment revealed something that cannot be adequately explained through the performance alone. The women involved did not share the same things like war, language, migration trajectory, nationality, or personal history, yet these differences did not prevent care and connection. Belonging in this context did not depend on sameness. It emerged through the capacity to remain present with another person's experience without claiming it as one's own. Miramonti et al.'s (2025) concept of "rehumanising the Self and Other" is useful here because it directs attention to encounter across difference rather than the construction of a homogeneous migrant identity. Such moments should not be romanticised: participatory theatre cannot reverse loss, change legal status, eliminate economic insecurity, transform border regimes, or remove unequal power relations within participatory processes (Misra, 2020). What it may create, however, is a social space in which people whose lives have been shaped by different forms of displacement can encounter one another beyond the institutional categories through which they are commonly identified.

This has broader relevance for humanitarian and conflict-resolution practice. Humanitarian realities are necessarily documented through legal classifications, statistics, needs assessments, and categories of vulnerability, but these forms of knowledge cannot fully communicate how displacement is lived, interpreted, and carried into relationships and everyday life. Participatory creative practices can complement—not replace—such institutional forms of knowledge by bringing lived experience into public encounter. Their contribution to conflict resolution should therefore not be understood as a claim that theatre itself "resolves" conflict, but as the creation of conditions in which different experiences can be expressed, witnessed, and recognised without being treated as equivalent. In this sense, the movement from representation to recognition extends beyond visibility: it concerns whether people affected by displacement can participate in shaping how they are encountered and understood by others and bring practicality to policy making process.

5. International and Institutional Response

From its inception, *I Want to Live* was connected to an institutional humanitarian framework. The performance was developed by the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Women's Initiative (Bosanskohercegovačka inicijativa žena), with the support of UNHCR Bosnia and Herzegovina, as part of a project providing psychosocial support and individual protection to refugees, asylum seekers, and persons with similar protection needs (Grad Mostar, 2025). The involvement of UNHCR therefore positioned the initiative within an existing humanitarian protection structure rather than as an independent artistic production.

The performance subsequently moved beyond its original project setting into wider cultural and public spaces. After its first presentation in Sarajevo during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, *I Want to Live* was presented at theatre, arts, and women's rights events in Sarajevo, Mostar, and Jajce (Grad Mostar, 2025; Faktor, 2025). This wider circulation brought the experiences represented through the performance into contact with different audiences, cultural organisations, civil society actors, and public institutions.

A more direct institutional response occurred in August 2026, when *I Want to Live* became the subject of a meeting involving Sarajevo Deputy Mayor Mirela Džehverović, representatives of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Women's Initiative, director Dubravka Zrnčić-Kulenović, and actress Alena Džebo. The discussion addressed possibilities for institutional cooperation and support for initiatives using culture and the arts to generate public dialogue on gender-based violence (City of Sarajevo, 2026). The significance of this meeting lies in the fact that an initiative developed within a humanitarian context and subsequently presented in public cultural spaces entered direct discussion with a local government institution.

This meeting should not be interpreted as evidence that *I Want to Live* produced a policy change. The available evidence demonstrates institutional attention and dialogue, rather than policy impact. Nevertheless, it documents a movement beyond the stage: from a UNHCR-supported humanitarian initiative, to public performances in several cities, and subsequently to discussion with the City of Sarajevo concerning possible institutional cooperation. In this sense, the institutional response to *I Want to Live* provides a concrete, although limited, example of how participatory creative practice can move from public representation toward institutional recognition without assuming a direct or automatic pathway from theatre to policy.

6. Recommendations and Solutions

Humanitarian organisations and public institutions should create structured opportunities for migrant and displaced women to contribute their lived experiences to institutional discussions following participatory artistic initiatives. Post-performance consultations could bring together willing participants, humanitarian organisations, women's organisations, local authorities, and relevant service providers to identify concerns related to protection, discrimination, access to services, belonging, and participation. As Miramonti et al. (2025)

demonstrate, participatory theatre can connect lived-experience expertise with other forms of knowledge used in research and policy development.

Such consultations should treat lived experience as complementary evidence, not as a replacement for legal, scientific, administrative, or professional knowledge. Their purpose should be to identify aspects of humanitarian interventions and policies that may not be visible through formal data alone. Most importantly, priorities should be identified with women rather than for them. Institutions should also provide feedback on how participants' contributions were considered and whether they resulted in further consultation, programme adjustments, or other institutional responses.

Participation must remain voluntary and ethically protected. Women should decide whether they wish to participate beyond the performance, what they want to share, and how their contributions may be documented or used. They should never be required to disclose traumatic experiences in order to be heard or recognised (Misra, 2020; Andonov & Wolfe, 2021). The central recommendation is therefore to establish ethical, participatory, and accountable mechanisms that connect creative spaces with institutional consultation while allowing women to retain control over their own experiences and narratives.

7. Conclusion

This study examined *I Want to Live* to explore how participatory theatre can create a space in which migrant and displaced women express and negotiate lived experiences that are often approached through the institutional categories of migration, vulnerability, and protection. The analysis in the article shows that such expression is not limited to verbal testimony. Lullabies, songs, somatic movement, silence, cultural elements, and decisions about what remains unspoken can communicate experiences of migration, loss, womanhood, identity, and belonging. At the same time, sharing a stage does not make women's experiences equivalent. Different histories, languages, memories, and forms of expression can coexist without being reduced to a single narrative of the "migrant woman."

From a human rights perspective, this distinction is important. Forced displacement may expose women to intersecting forms of insecurity, discrimination, gender inequality, loss of social and economic rights, and restrictions on their ability to participate fully in the societies in which they live. Humanitarian responses are necessary for protection, but protection alone does not address questions of dignity, participation, self-representation, and recognition. *I Want to Live* illustrates how a creative space can allow women to engage publicly with experiences that affect their lives while retaining some control over what they communicate, how they communicate it, and what they choose not to disclose. Participatory theatre cannot restore a lost home, secure legal status, eliminate discrimination, repair the consequences of war, or substitute for institutional responsibility. Its contribution lies elsewhere: in creating possibilities for expression, encounter, participation, and recognition.

What happens after these experiences are expressed is equally important. Lived experience cannot replace legal evidence, protection

monitoring, needs assessments, or other forms of humanitarian knowledge. Yet these mechanisms do not always show what displacement means in everyday life: how insecurity, loss, discrimination, care responsibilities, or the struggle to belong are actually experienced. Listening to these experiences can therefore add something that institutional data alone cannot provide. The challenge is to ensure that such knowledge does not remain on the stage. Where women choose to share it, there should be ethical and voluntary ways for their experiences to enter humanitarian and institutional discussions without losing their control over what is told and how it is interpreted. Moving from representation to recognition, then, means more than making migrant women visible. It means recognising that they can interpret their own experiences and contribute to discussions about the conditions that shape their lives.

The central argument of this study is therefore straightforward: women already have voices. The humanitarian task is not to "give voice" to migrant and displaced women, but to create conditions in which their different forms of expression can be heard without requiring them to translate themselves exclusively into narratives of trauma, victimhood, or humanitarian need. *I Want to Live* demonstrates both the potential and the limits of such an approach. The stage cannot correct the structural inequalities or human rights violations associated with displacement. It can, however, create a space in which women are encountered not solely as recipients of protection or subjects of humanitarian concern, but as individuals capable of expressing, interpreting, withholding, and giving meaning to their own experiences.

Recognition begins when this capacity is taken seriously—and acquires broader significance when listening extends beyond the stage into the humanitarian and institutional spaces where decisions affecting their lives are made.

Ethics and Author's Note

This article is based on the author's autoethnographic and reflexive account of her own participation in *I Want to Live*, complemented by qualitative analysis of publicly available media reports, institutional publications, festival materials, and public statements related to the performance. No interviews, surveys, or other forms of research data collection were conducted with the women participating in the performance.

As a matter of transparency, prior to publication the author informed the organisation, the director, and members of the theatre group, including those involved both on and off stage, about the preparation of this article through the group's established Viber communication channel.

The names appearing in the article had already been publicly disclosed in media reports, institutional publications, festival materials, or other publicly accessible sources documenting *I Want to Live*. The article does not disclose private or sensitive information about other participants obtained through personal communication or backstage interaction. Where participants' statements or identities are discussed, the analysis is limited to material already available in the cited public sources.

Terminological Note

For the purposes of this article, the term *migrant and displaced* is used as a broad analytical term to refer collectively to people on the move, including refugees (locally: izbjeglice), asylum seekers, and people in regular or irregular migration situations. This usage is adopted for analytical clarity and does not imply that these categories are legally equivalent.

Under international refugee law, an asylum seeker is a person seeking international protection whose claim has not yet been finally determined, whereas a refugee is a person who meets the criteria for refugee status under applicable international or national law, including the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Other migrants may move under different legal and administrative circumstances and do not necessarily fall within the international refugee protection framework.

Accordingly, where the specific legal status of an individual or group is relevant to the analysis, the terms *refugee*, *asylum seeker*, or *migrant in a regular or irregular situation* are used as appropriate. The broader term *migrant* is otherwise used throughout the article as an analytical umbrella term and should not be understood as replacing or altering the distinct legal protections attached to particular cases.

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Notes

1. Independent Researcher, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8918-5555.
2. The 1992–1995 war produced one of the largest forced displacement crises in Europe since the Second World War, displacing an estimated 2.2 million people, around 1.2 million of whom sought refuge outside the country (UNHCR, 1993, 1998, 2009; Fišo, 2026).). Approximately twenty-five years later, the country's position within the European migration landscape had shifted considerably. Since 2018, Bosnia and Herzegovina has become an important transit area along the Western Balkan route, with 25,284 irregular migrants recorded in 2024 (Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025).
3. This autoethnographic reflection was inspired by Alper Hasanoğlu's book Hayat Bilgisi discussion of compassion (Hasanoğlu, 2024, pp. 183–185).

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CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Child Sex Trafficking and Child Marriage are a Moral Cataclysm

Child sex trafficking and child marriage share one moral catastrophe: reducing children to commodities for others' benefit. Both strip away dignity, autonomy, and the conditions that make meaningful choice possible. Yet millions of children endure exploitation while the world responds with indifference rather than sustained outrage or decisive action. This essay challenges that silence, arguing that protecting children is not merely a humanitarian obligation but a test of civilization's legitimacy. A society that tolerates the systematic destruction of its most defenseless members cannot credibly claim moral authority.



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This essay treats child sex trafficking and child marriage as a single moral catastrophe: the reduction of a child to a commodity, a transaction, a means to someone else's end. Both destroy the very conditions under which choice, dignity, and personhood become possible — and both survive on our averted eyes. What is at stake is not only the fate of the world's most defenseless children, but whether a civilization that cannot protect them can claim any moral legitimacy at all

INTRODUCTION:

There are crimes that shock a society into action, and there are crimes so vast that they numb it into silence. Sexual abuse of children—child sex trafficking and child marriage—belong to the second category. Every year, millions of children are sold, coerced, married off, or worked into oblivion—and the world barely stirs. There are no emergency sessions, no sustained outrage, no leaders who stake their reputations on it. There is only a low, steady hum of statistics that we have learned to read without flinching.

The numbers should be unbearable. Children now make up approximately 25 percent of all detected trafficking victims worldwide;[1] from 2019 to 2022, the number of child victims rose 31 percent over pre-pandemic levels.[2] Victims have been identified as coming from more than 160 countries; no society is exempt. Six hundred fifty million women and girls alive today were married as children, and 12 million more girls are married off every year.[3] Thirty-nine million children are forcibly displaced around the world from conflict, persecution, and other serious human rights violations,[4] and displacement is a trafficker's hunting ground. Child marriage remains legal, in some form, in most American states. And the United States is still the only country on earth that refuses to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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We face not a policy gap but a moral cataclysm. A child is not a smaller adult; a child is innocent, placing openness, dependence, and trust into the world. They are where the future enters the world. Kant insisted that no human being may be used merely as a means, yet trafficking makes the child nothing but a means, and child marriage completes the inversion by dressing the transaction in the language of family and custom.

Freedom, as Arendt understood it, requires a world where alternatives can even be imagined. Grooming, hunger, drought, debt, and war destroy that world before a girl is old enough to name it. To call her fate a choice is not analysis but an alibi.

Nor is personhood a private possession. Taylor, Honneth, and Butler remind us that we become subjects through recognition — through being seen, named, and counted. The trafficked child and the child bride are not merely harmed; they are socially erased, their suffering left to unfold in a moral vacuum.

That is why silence is not incidental to these crimes but constitutive of them. Traffickers need darkness; buyers need anonymity;

complacent governments need our distraction. Simone Weil called attention to the purest form of generosity, and Levinas located ethics in the moment another's suffering interrupts us. The first act of justice, then, is to let ourselves be interrupted. If we fail the child, we fail everywhere.



THE PLAGUE OF CHILD TRAFFICKING

Child sex trafficking is not just another societal problem waiting for legislative tinkering or bureaucratic reform. It is a moral outrage and a fundamental rupture in the ethical fabric of our being. The very fact that children are bought, sold, coerced, and abused for sexual purposes is evidence of a profound philosophical crisis, not merely a criminal one. It forces us to confront what dignity means, what freedom requires, and what becomes of a society that fails the most vulnerable beings entrusted to its care.

Globally, children represent a significant portion of those caught in human trafficking: according to UNICEF and the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking (ICAT), about 38 percent of identified trafficking victims worldwide are children.[5] In some regions, especially parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean, that proportion rises dramatically: in those regions, children account for around 64 percent and 62 percent of known trafficking victims.

The latest global overview from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) — the 2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons — shows a sharp rise in the detection of human-trafficking victims. Compared with pre-pandemic 2019 levels, the number of detected victims rose by 25 percent in 2022.[6] Strikingly, child victims increased by 31 percent, and children made up 38 percent of all detected victims.

Sexual exploitation remains a major dimension of child trafficking. Though exact numbers are hard to verify due to the clandestine nature of trafficking and underreporting, international agencies estimate that millions of children worldwide are coerced into sexual exploitation yearly.[7] The victims are often drawn from among the world's most vulnerable: displaced persons, refugees, migrant children, or those fleeing poverty, conflict, and family instability; albeit not all victims of sexual exploitation are victims of trafficking.

Child trafficking is not limited to the global South — it affects every region of the world. Detectable victims account for 162 nationalities in 128 destinations countries, showing that no society is immune.[8] One persistent challenge is under-identification. Many child victims remain invisible for reasons including fear of traffickers, social stigma, lack of trust in authorities, migration status, or simply ignorance of available protections. Consequently, the actual number of trafficked children is

likely much higher than official statistics suggest.

Moreover, trafficking rarely occurs in isolation — it is bound to larger social problems. Socioeconomic inequality, displacement due to conflict or climate change, weak social services, and breakdown of community structures all contribute to creating fertile ground for traffickers. Traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities, often using coercion, deception, or manipulation — and once children are entrapped, the physical, psychological and social damage is nearly impossible to quantify.

In short, the most recent global data paints a grim picture: hundreds of thousands of children documented as trafficking victims, with dramatic increases in detection, and evidence that children remain a disproportionately large share of all trafficking victims. The official figures are likely to represent only a fraction of the real toll.

The Bearer of Inalienable Vulnerability

A child is not simply a smaller adult. A child is defined by openness, dependence, and trust. Philosophers as different as Aristotle, Kant, Levinas, and Arendt understood the child as morally primary: a symbol of potential, a bearer of inalienable vulnerability, the face that calls us into responsibility before we can even formulate a principle. A child is all expectation and all becoming; they are the place where the future enters the world. To harm such a being—let alone to systematize that harm through trafficking—is not just wicked. It is a desecration of the conditions that make moral life possible in the first place.

The crime of trafficking is often described in sociological or legal terms, but its deeper horror is philosophical. Trafficking transforms a person into a commodity. A child is turned into an instrument of gratification or revenue, their subjectivity erased and replaced with market value. Kant warned that no human being should ever be used merely as a means, yet child trafficking represents the total inversion of that moral law: the child becomes nothing but a means. This is more than exploitation; it is a metaphysical assault on the distinction between person and object. It reveals a society in which the intrinsic worth of human beings has not only been forgotten but also actively violated.

Some still cling to the damaging notion that adolescents caught in trafficking “chose” it. But the idea of choice collapses under even minimal philosophical scrutiny. Freedom requires knowledge, maturity, safety, and the absence of coercion. Trafficked children have none of these. Their so-called choices are shaped by lies, grooming, threats, hunger, homelessness, family instability, addiction, or emotional manipulation.

They are often controlled through fear, violence, or psychological conditioning so total that they cannot even imagine an alternative. The philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that totalitarian systems destroy the very space in which freedom can appear. Trafficking does the same: it creates a world in which autonomy is not merely absent but unimaginable. A child cannot choose exploitation because exploitation annihilates the conditions of choice.

Nor can trafficking be understood as the work of a few monstrous individuals acting in isolation.

It arises in the cracks of social and economic systems: poverty, homelessness, migration crises, war, family collapse, and the failure of public institutions. Traffickers prey on desperation. They look for children who have been abandoned by the social contract, children who have fallen through the floorboards of public concern. These children are not hidden; they are simply unseen. And this invisibility has philosophical weight. Social philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, and Judith Butler argue that personhood is not merely an inner quality but a social achievement. We become subjects through recognition, care, and participation in a shared world.

Trafficking destroys that network of recognition. The trafficked child becomes socially erased—not dead but stripped of the relational context in which dignity is affirmed. Their suffering persists in a moral vacuum.

And then there is the demand side—the men who buy access to children. This reality is the most disturbing of all, because it forces us to examine not only criminal behavior but the collapse of moral imagination. What kind of desire is this? What kind of rationalization permits it? Buyers must actively suppress empathy, must refuse to see the child as a being with a future, a story, or a world of their own. They must numb themselves against the suffering in front of them.

The Moral Decadence of the Powerful

There is a further dimension of this catastrophe that decency itself tempts us to leave unspoken, and that is precisely why it must be spoken. Among those who purchase access to children are not only the desperate, the deranged, or the socially marginal. They include men of standing: figures who have held high office in governments, commanded corporations, been celebrated as artists and intellectuals, and been honored in the institutions that shape public life. The most notorious trafficking scandal of our era, built around one financier's network of procurement and hospitality, revealed a clientele drawn from the very summit of political, financial, and cultural power. These were not men in the shadows of society. They were its ornaments.

This fact deserves more than outrage; it demands philosophical reckoning. We are accustomed to believing that moral corruption follows deprivation, that cruelty grows in the soil of want. Here the opposite is displayed. Men who possessed everything, who wanted for no pleasure, no comfort, no admiration, sought their ultimate gratification in the violation of children. What does this reveal? Not appetite but something closer to metaphysical boredom, an exhaustion of the ordinary that drives the sated toward the forbidden. Their satisfaction lay not merely in the act but in the transgression, in the demonstration that nothing, not even a child, lies beyond the reach of their entitlement.

This is decadence in its exact meaning: the rot that sets in when power is severed from any conception of restraint. And it is compounded by a monstrous arithmetic of self-regard, in which a man weighs his own fleeting appetite against the annihilation of a child's life and finds the child weightless.

Yet the deeper scandal is not the appetite but the architecture that protected it. Around such men there assembled, over decades, an apparatus of

concealment: lawyers who negotiated silence, investigators who declined to look, prosecutors who chose accommodation over indictment, institutions that accepted donations and asked nothing, employees and associates who saw what was happening and understood that seeing was not permitted. Files were sealed. Complaints were discouraged. Victims who spoke were discredited as unreliable, unstable, opportunistic. The machinery of cover-up did not merely follow the crime; it made the crime sustainable. Without it, no such network could have operated for years in plain sight of the powerful. The Epstein Files is a classic case that speaks volumes about the depth of the moral decadence of these powerful.

This is why the systematic concealment is, in a sense, the graver offense. The individual predator violates a child. The cover-up violates the child a second time, and then violates something larger: the possibility of justice itself. It tells every abused child that the world's institutions are not for them, that testimony will be weighed against reputation and found wanting. Each act of concealment is an official communication about whose humanity registers and whose does not. It converts private depravity into a public verdict.

And it implicates far more people than the abusers. Every silent accomplice — the one who signed the agreement, closed the file, took the money, changed the subject — participated in the desecration without ever touching a child. This is Arendt's insight extended to its uncomfortable conclusion: evil of this magnitude requires functionaries, not monsters. It requires ordinary professionals to do their jobs competently while declining to consider what their competence serves.

The Moral Collapse of the Legal and Institutional Machinery

If a civilization permits its most honored citizens to buy children and then builds legal and institutional machinery to ensure they are never held to account, it has not merely failed to enforce its laws. It has revealed what its laws were always for. Nothing will change until the cover-up is treated as what it is: not a lesser crime adjacent to the abuse, but the condition that makes the abuse possible.

In this sense, child exploitation is not merely a crime of desire; it is a crime of indifference, a crime of dehumanization. Arendt's "banality of evil" is relevant here: atrocities are often committed not by flamboyant villains but by ordinary men who stop thinking, stop imagining, stop seeing the other as human. To purchase a child is to participate in a form of moral nihilism—the collapse of moral boundaries that protect the dignity of persons.

When a society allows children to disappear into trafficking networks, it reveals itself to be unjust in a deep philosophical sense. Aristotle argued that justice is giving each what is due to them by nature. And what is due to a child? Safety, nurture, education, and time to grow. Rawls insisted that the least advantaged members of society deserve the strongest protection. If trafficked children do not qualify as the least advantaged, then the concept has no meaning. A society that cannot protect its children cannot claim moral legitimacy, no matter its material wealth or political rhetoric.

There is, however, another dimension to this crisis: the ethics of attention. The philosopher Simone Weil said that attention is the purest form of generosity. Levinas argued that ethics begins when we allow another's suffering to interrupt us. But child trafficking thrives in precisely the places where attention fails—where the child's suffering is too distant, too painful, or too inconvenient for the public to face. Traffickers need darkness. Buyers need anonymity. Institutions fail most easily where no one is watching.

The first moral act, then, is to refuse the comfort of ignorance. Attention is not a passive state; it is the beginning of justice. It is the willingness to let the reality of another person's suffering intrude upon our complacency. And if enough of us let ourselves be interrupted, the political, legal, and social changes required to combat trafficking would follow.

Child sex trafficking is a wound in the body of civilization. It is a test of our collective soul. The measure of our humanity will be taken not by how we treat the powerful, the wealthy, or the competent, but by how fiercely we protect those who cannot protect themselves. If we fail the child, we fail ourselves. And if we fail here, we fail everywhere.

CHILD MARRIAGE—A GLOBAL SCOURGE

Child marriage is another horrific practice that robs millions of girls of their childhoods and basic human rights. It is a global scourge that persists despite international efforts to combat it. It survives on a single fiction—that a child can consent. Locke, who grounded all legitimate authority in consent, understood that consent requires a will mature enough to bind itself; where that capacity is absent, an agreement is not a contract but a conveyance.

A girl of twelve handed to a man three times her age has not entered a marriage. She has been transferred. From that admission everything else follows, including Kant's inescapable demand that we treat humanity, in our own person and in every other, always as an end and never merely as a means. Child marriage is the exact inversion of that maxim: a child converted into an instrument for someone else's debt, dowry, honor, or appetite. In various corners of the world, from the United States to the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, young girls are being forced into marriages against their will. Here we delve into the alarming factors fueling this crisis and underscore the urgent need for international action to protect children's rights and futures, which no one has the right to rob.

The Crisis of Conscience in Its Sheer Scale

The facts regarding child marriage are staggering and shameful. According to the United Nations Population Fund, one in five girls globally are married before 18 years of age—one every three seconds. As the International Women's Health Coalition reported, "Child marriage effectively ends a girl's childhood, curtails her education, minimizes her economic opportunities, increases her risk of domestic violence, and puts her at risk for early, frequent, and very high-risk pregnancies."[9]

That sentence is a catalog of amputations. Amartya Sen taught us to measure deprivation not in income but in capabilities—the real freedoms a person possesses to be and to do—and

Martha Nussbaum named the most elemental of them: bodily integrity, health, education, imagination, affiliation, the capacity to form and revise a plan of life. Child marriage does not trim those freedoms at the margin. It severs all of them at once, before the girl has exercised a single one. This is precisely why the harm cannot be offset by a well-fed household or a gentle husband. What is stolen is not comfort. It is authorship over one's own life.

The theft compounds across borders. By the end of 2022, 43.3 million children across the globe were forcibly displaced, according to a June 2023 UNICEF report—a number that has doubled over the past decade: "Of the 43.3 million children who were forcibly displaced by the end of 2022, almost 60% (25.8 million) were internally displaced by conflict and violence."[10] Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has alone forced nearly 2.6 million children to flee, internally displacing another 1.8 million children.[11] Hannah Arendt, writing about the stateless of her own century, identified the deprivation at the heart of these figures: what the displaced lose first is not this or that entitlement but the right to have rights—membership in a political community obliged to answer for them.

A displaced girl has not surrendered her dignity; she has lost the address at which her dignity can be claimed, and it is into that vacuum of obligation that brokers, traffickers, and "husbands" step. These displaced children, denied entry into many countries, may end up in either a forced marriage or forced labor. Every border sealed against a child is therefore not a neutral exercise of sovereignty. It is a decision about who will collect her.

Once a person can be collected, she can be priced. The BBC reports that according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), an estimated 50 million people—that is, "one out of every 150 people alive—are trapped in forced labor or forced marriages."[12] This is a staggering number by any measure, and even more alarming and tragic is that it is roughly 10 million more than estimates from five years ago. Twelve million girls annually are affected by child marriage globally, with one in five girls in the world married before the age of 18—over 650 million women married as children alive today.[13]

Listen to the grammar of the trade itself and the moral transformation becomes audible: girls are given, taken, exchanged, received. Kant drew the sharpest line in all of moral philosophy through exactly this point—whatever has a price can be replaced by an equivalent, while whatever admits of no equivalent has dignity. A child bartered for cattle, for a debt, or for a sack of grain has been assigned a price and, in that instant, moved from the class of persons to the class of things. Six hundred and fifty million such transfers are not a cultural variation to be respected. They are the largest standing repudiation of human dignity the international community still tolerates. Ending this horrible phenomenon must start with passing laws that ban child marriage, then empowering women and educating girls.

The Pervasiveness of Child Marriage

Where crisis strikes, the pricing accelerates and the excuses multiply. In 2022, UNICEF published an alarming report on the rising rates of child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the Horn of Africa, fueled in part by the worst

drought in 40 years.[14] Girls as young as twelve are being forced into marriage, while in regions of Ethiopia, in the past year, child marriage has more than doubled. According to UNICEF, "The number of children at risk of dropping out of school across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia...has tripled within three months [an estimated 3.3 million children] – leaving vast numbers of adolescent girls at greater danger of a number of child protection risks, including undergoing FGM and being forced into marriage."[15]

Some countries in the Middle East also have high levels of child marriage. According to the Statistics Center of Iran, over 31,000 girls aged 10 to 14 were married in the country in 2020, an increase of 10.5 percent from the previous year.[16] Furthermore, in a single six-month period of 2021, 791 babies were born to girls in this same age group.[17] Consider what that second figure means: children delivering children, their bodies conscripted before their lives began.

In Syria, babies are being abandoned and left outside of mosques, hospitals, and on the streets. According to an Al Jazeera report, "between early 2021 and late 2022, more than 100 children, 62 of them girls, were found abandoned across the country."[18] Emmanuel Levinas, who lost nearly his entire family to the Nazis, built an ethics on precisely this moment—the encounter with the face of another human being, which commands before it explains and obligates before we consent.

The infant left on the steps of a mosque is that face in its most defenseless form. She advances no argument, invokes no treaty, belongs to no constituency. She simply appears, and her appearance is the demand. A civilization is measured not by what it grants those who can bargain with it, but by what it gives those who cannot. By that measure, a ledger of one hundred abandoned children is a verdict on all of us.

But make no mistake, child marriage is not limited to poor and underdeveloped countries. In the United States, child marriage remains legal in 32 states—only 18 states, plus the District of Columbia, the US Virgin Islands, and American Samoa, have banned the practice entirely, with California becoming the eighteenth in 2026; Mississippi and New Mexico still set no minimum marriage age whatsoever.[19] According to a 2025 study, nearly 315,000 minors were legally married between 2000 and 2021, the majority of whom were girls.[20] Defenders of these statutes invoke parental rights and religious custom, and neither survives the simplest test in political philosophy.

Ask, with Rawls, what rules we would write behind a veil of ignorance, not yet knowing whether we would be the parent signing the license or the daughter handed across the counter. No one reasoning from that position would authorize a regime in which a girl of sixteen may be married with a parent's signature yet cannot file for divorce, sign a lease, or retain a lawyer—a legal order that grants a child the obligations of a wife and none of the powers of an adult.

Mill's harm principle disposes of the appeal to custom just as swiftly: liberty is the right to conduct one's own life, never the right to dispose of someone else's. A parent's freedom ends exactly where a daughter's personhood begins. Within

the US, state legislators must make every effort to fully ban marriage for children under the age of 18.

The Manufactured Rationale Behind Child Marriage

The defense offered is always necessity—the rains failed, the herds died, the family had no choice—but necessity is the oldest alibi for cruelty, and Judith Shklar's answer to it remains definitive. Her liberalism of fear begins from the recognition that cruelty is the worst thing human beings do to one another, and that the first obligation of any decent political order is to stand between the powerless and those who would hurt them. Drought does not marry a twelve-year-old. Adults do, and governments permit it. To call a girl sold during a famine a casualty of the weather is to grant moral agency to the climate while withholding it from the men who signed the contract.

Climate change is one of the many factors fueling an increase in child marriage. Women and girls suffer the most, even from climate change—people in poverty suffer the most, and women make up 70 percent of the global poor. According to a Global Citizen report, climate change-induced poverty makes girls more susceptible to child marriage: "Climate change also leads to geopolitical instability which, in turn, results in greater instances of violence—which we know disproportionately impacts women and girls."[21] What this exposes is the moral arbitrariness of the entire arrangement.

Rawls called the distribution of birth circumstances a natural lottery and insisted that a just society refuses to let its outcome dictate a person's life prospects. No girl chose her village, her gender, or the rainfall of the region into which she was born, and not one of those facts carries a particle of moral weight—yet together they now predict, with brutal reliability, whether she will finish school or be married at thirteen. A world that permits accidents of birth to function as sentences has not merely failed at charity; it has abandoned justice. That is why it is very important for development projects to focus on the education of women and girls globally, as education has been proven to reduce poverty.

Disaster zones and crisis zones are also potentially hotbeds for child abuse. Two months after two devastating earthquakes hit Turkey and northern Syria, UNICEF warned that 2.5 million children in Turkey remained in need of humanitarian support and were at risk of falling into poverty, child labor, or child marriage.[22] People in the disaster zone accused the government of a tardy and inadequate relief effort. Over 55,000 people died in this catastrophe.[23] Infrastructure has been Erdogan's main selling point, yet poor construction could not withstand the earthquakes, resulting in greater damage.

Hobbes, no friend of liberty, nevertheless grasped the terms of the bargain better than today's strongmen do: obedience is owed the sovereign in exchange for protection, and when protection fails the obligation dissolves along with it. A state that cannot shelter its children forfeits the authority it claims over them, and a regime that leaves 2.5 million of them exposed to labor and marriage has broken the only promise that justified its power. His failure to respond to the catastrophe has mobilized the opposition, civil society, and the Kurdish minority for the first time against this ruthless

dictator—not because the earth shook, but because the covenant broke.

Countries with poor records of women's rights also have more child marriages. Women are suffering under Afghanistan's Taliban rulers. "The Taliban have allowed very few women, with the exception of medical workers, to continue their work," according to CBS News.[24] Most women have been totally banned from returning to work. "Many professional women have fled the country or given up on their careers, and girls and young women have not been allowed to return to school beyond the elementary years."

For Aristotle, a human life goes well only when its capacities are developed through years of practice, so that potential never exercised is potential destroyed. For Sen, development is itself freedom—the widening of what a person is genuinely able to choose. A regime that bars girls from school is thus not restricting an opportunity; it is manufacturing dependence, and dependence is the raw material out of which forced marriage is made. Mill exposed the circular logic a century and a half ago in *The Subjection of Women*: subordinate a class of people by law, deny them every means of independence, then point to their condition as proof they were never fit for anything else. Keeping girls out of schools will not help alleviate the problem of child marriage, but only make it worse.

Child marriage increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, and UNICEF estimated that 10 million additional child marriages might occur before 2030.[25] That figure is a forecast, which is to say a description of harm that has not yet happened and can still be prevented. Hans Jonas argued that modern power generates an entirely new ethical duty—an imperative of responsibility toward those who will inherit the consequences of what we do and fail to do, and who can neither vote, sue, nor protest today. Ten million girls fall squarely within that duty, and Kant's rule that "ought" to presuppose "can" cuts in the same direction: because we are able to prevent these marriages, we are obliged to.

Child marriage is a violation of human rights, and we must pressure governments to take action to prevent and reduce this phenomenon that is on the rise globally. The COVID-19 pandemic affected children on an unprecedented scale. A December 2021 report published by UNICEF showed that the number of children who are hungry, out of school, abused, living in poverty, or forced into marriage was growing. "The COVID-19 pandemic has been the biggest threat to progress for children in our 75-year history," said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore.[26] Political will is needed to help millions of children. World leaders must act now to prevent further devastation.

What Can Be Done?

UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore observed that governments and international development banks need "to prioritize investments in programs that can get children out of the workforce and back into school, and in social protection programs that can help families avoid making this choice in the first place."[27] Child labor takes away from millions of children the chance for an education; it robs them of leisure time; it often leads to injury, both physical and mental; it limits their future opportunities; and it "leads to

vicious inter-generational cycles of poverty and child labor."

Every remedy carries its own principle, and the principle is what makes the remedy obligatory. Ban marriage before eighteen without exception, because consent demands a capacity a child does not possess. Fund girls' schooling, because a life must be developed before it can be lived. Extend social protection to families in crisis, because no parent should ever face a choice between a daughter's childhood and a household's survival. Prosecute the brokers, the officiants, and the clerks, because cruelty tolerated is cruelty licensed. Grant asylum to displaced children, because a person with no community to claim her rights has no rights at all.

Finally, it is unconscionable that the United States is the only country in the world that refuses to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the primary international treaty on the rights of children. The CRC outlines protections for children worldwide, and there is little excuse for the United States' failure to ratify it. US state laws fall woefully short of the standards set by the Convention. The deeper offense, however, is philosophical. The entire force of a right lies in its universality, and a principle binding on everyone except the party proclaiming it is not a principle but a privilege.

Kant held that a genuine moral law is one we can will to be universal, and that any cosmopolitan order depends on nations accepting for themselves the obligations they demand of others. A country founded on the self-evidence of human equality, which then declines to sign the single treaty affirming that children are equally human, has exempted itself from its own creed. Child marriage will not end because the world grows sentimental about girls. It will end when we finally concede what we have always claimed to believe—that a child is a person, that persons are not property, and that no tradition, scripture, hardship, or statute confers the right to sell one. Until then, every exception left standing in the law is a signature we have all placed on the contract.

CONCLUSION

A Call to Conscience

Let us be clear about what we are living beside. In every region of the world, at this very hour, children are being sold for the pleasure of adults and girls are being handed over in marriage before their bodies or minds have finished becoming their own. This is not a rumor from a distant century. It is the present tense. And it continues not because it is hidden, but because we have agreed, tacitly and comfortably, not to look.

Indifference is a decision. Arendt taught us that the greatest atrocities are rarely the work of monsters; they are made possible by ordinary people who stop thinking, stop imagining, stop seeing the other as human. That is precisely the machinery at work here. Every day we do not speak, we cast a vote. Every budget that funds everything but child protection, every legislature that leaves a marriage loophole intact, every prosecutor who charges the exploited girl and releases the man who bought her, every one of us who reads the numbers and turns the page — all of it is consent, and consent is a political act. The trafficker requires darkness. The buyer requires

anonymity. Both require a public that cannot be bothered.

So let the outcry begin where the silence has been loudest — and let each demand rest on a principle we claim already to believe.

Ban child marriage outright, in every American state and every country, with no exception for parental consent, judicial approval, pregnancy, or custom. Freedom, as Arendt understood, requires a world in which alternatives can be imagined; a twelve-year-old bride has been denied that world before she could name it. Consent extracted from a child is not consent, and a loophole is simply a legal permission slip for rape.

Ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Rights are not gifts bestowed by the strong upon the weak; they are the recognition of a dignity that precedes the state. That the United States remains the only nation on earth refusing this recognition is not a technicality but a confession — and it should be spoken aloud until it becomes politically unbearable.

Prosecute the demand. Kant's injunction that no human being may be used merely as a means is not an abstraction; it is the moral floor beneath every criminal code we have. The buyer deliberately steps through that floor. Treat him, not the child, as the criminal. No sixteen-year-old is a prostitute; she is the victim of a felony, and every law that says otherwise must be repealed.

Fund what actually protects children—schools for girls, shelters, caseworkers, cash support for families on the edge, legal aid in refugee camps and drought zones where traffickers recruit openly and unopposed. Aristotle held that justice gives each what is due by nature, and Rawls insisted that the least advantaged deserve the strongest protection. If a trafficked child does not qualify as least advantaged, the concept is empty, and our politics are a performance.

Demand accountability, not declarations. Governments and international institutions must be measured by the number of children they return to safety, not by the eloquence of their communiqués. Where power escapes measurement, it escapes morality.

Refuse the comfort of ignorance. Do the one thing that **costs nothing and changes everything**. Simone Weil called attention to the purest form of generosity; Levinas located ethics in the instant another's suffering interrupts us. Attention is not a mood—it is the first political act; the moment a private conscience becomes a public force. Speak of this at dinner tables, in classrooms, in pulpits, in city councils, in editorials, in the offices of the people who represent us. Make it impossible to discuss human rights without first naming these children.

We become persons through recognition — through being seen, named, and counted. That is why the trafficked child and the child bride are not merely harmed but erased, their suffering unfolding in a moral vacuum we built by looking away. To see them is already to begin restoring what was taken.

A civilization is judged not by its wealth, its weapons, or its rhetoric, but by the ferocity with which it defends those who cannot defend themselves. On that measure, we are failing — and we know it.

The children cannot cry out. We can. And if we will not, then no one should ever ask why the world is sick as it is.

Notes

1. "125,000 Trafficking Victims Worldwide, 30,000 Children: IOM Chief Calls for Global Action." UN Migration, February 12, 2026. https://www.iom.int/news/125000-trafficking-victims-worldwide-30000-children-iom-chief-calls-global-action.
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VOL. 1 · ISSUE 2 · FALL 2026