Young displaced women – Conflict, gender and generational trauma

Globally approximately 117.8 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced at the end of 2025, according to UNHCR. Throughout the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe, many people are forcibly displaced due to prolonged and unresolved conflicts and active war. Young women are especially affected while also underrepresented in peacebuilding processes. This paper is based on a consultation that brought together seventeen young displaced women aged 18-35 from across the region to discuss their experiences. For the full policy brief and findings, see Young displaced women – Conflict, gender and generational trauma

Key findings

1. Displacement – an ongoing condition

Findings show that displacement is dynamic and intergenerational. Prolonged displacement reshapes identities, social relations and perceptions of belonging and since no conflicts in the area are resolved, the risk of this increases. Several young women also described a frustration over the burden of carrying their parents' and grandparents' trauma from the war. As one young woman said: "It feels like our future was taken away from us.".

2. Gender-specific discrimination and violence

Displacement has been shown to affect women and men differently. Women are often expected to take additional responsibilities as both providers and caregivers. Participants reported an increased pressure to take care of the family. Research also shows that young women and girls face increased risks of disrupted education, economic dependence, and sexual harassment and violence.

3. Legal limbo and documentation barriers

Displacement can leave young women in legal limbo. Participants described how the institutions that issued their original legal documentation no longer exist or are not accessible for them, leaving them without recognised documentation. Lack of legal documentation can prevent women from accessing support services or reporting abuse. A participant described this complex situation: "I am considered a refugee in Armenia but not in other countries. I cannot open a bank account in Europe since I don't have an address (formally anywhere).".

4. Housing insecurity and inadequate services

Housing emerged as one of the most universal concerns across contexts. Across the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe, displaced people continue to experience significant housing and service-access problems long after active conflict has ended, while women, traditionally seen as responsible for caring for the extended family, bear a heavy burden. People with disabilities and elderly are also particularly affected, as housing is often not adapted to their needs. Participants highlighted the stress on mothers when the family must leave their house. One participant describes this: "My mother was responsible for packing and unpacking suitcases during three years in Nagorno Karabakh, it was her responsibility to make sure we got everything with us when we would have to leave". Inadequate or insecure housing can reinforce dependence and make it harder for young women to establish stable, independent lives and a sense of belonging in their new communities.

5. Economic exclusion and loss of livelihoods

Displacement disrupts livelihoods, especially for women whose skills are not always easily transferable. A participant describes the situation: “People from my region worked with agriculture. In the settlement there was no place for agriculture, a lot of women did not know what to do. Their job was working in the garden, growing and selling vegetables. In settlements that was not possible”. The loss of livelihoods creates economic dependence, which increases displaced women’s vulnerability by limiting their choices, opportunities, and meaningful participation, as well as making it more difficult to leave an abusive relationship.

6. Social exclusion, misrepresentation and hate-speech

Young women repeatedly described feeling like outsiders, aliens or strangers in their new environments. Participants also raised concerns about stereotypes of young women in social media and the high prevalence of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Several participants shared personal experiences of hostility and discrimination and described how members of the host community would call them names intended to humiliate them.

7. Ongoing trauma, loss of identity and belonging

Beyond immediate humanitarian needs, displacement creates profound and long-term psychological and identity-related impacts. War and displacement reshape women’s lives, affecting their social relationships, sense of security and future prospects, making the effects of trauma particularly long-lasting. Being viewed solely as ‘victims of conflict’ can undermine young women’s agency and lead them to conceal their backgrounds to pursue their wider interests.

8. Political exclusion from decisions affecting young women’s futures

Participation emerged as a key concern, with participants reporting that decisions are often made about young women rather than with them. Social and structural barriers restrict their inclusion in education, employment, social networks and decision-making. Displaced communities may also be politically instrumentalised instead of recognised as active stakeholders, contradicting research and international policy commitments. This perspective captures a broader message emerging from the consultations: Young displaced women do not simply want to be consulted, they want meaningful influence over decisions, resources and policies that affect their communities and futures.

Recommendations

- Ensure young displaced women’s meaningful participation in decisions on peace, security and displacement. The EU, OSCE, governments and other international actors should systematically include young displaced women in peacebuilding, conflict-resolution and policymaking processes that affect their lives, rather than treating displaced populations as a homogeneous group. Their experiences of conflict and displacement provide important insights for peacebuilding, social cohesion and reconstruction, yet young women remain particularly underrepresented.

- Adopt long-term, intersectional responses to displacement, grounded in human security and gender equality. Policies should recognise that

displacement can last for years or generations and that being young, a woman and displaced creates intersecting barriers. Responses therefore need to go beyond short-term humanitarian assistance and address the interconnected challenges displaced young women face in accessing rights, livelihoods, housing, healthcare, social integration and political participation.

- Strengthen protection, rights and socioeconomic inclusion throughout displacement. Governments need to address the structural conditions that keep displaced young women insecure, including gender-based discrimination and violence, legal and documentation barriers, inadequate housing and services, economic exclusion, and social exclusion and hate speech.

- Address trauma, belonging and social cohesion as part of sustainable peace and security. Regional organisations and governments should recognise the long-term and intergenerational consequences of conflict and displacement, including unresolved trauma and challenges around identity, integration and belonging. Sustainable peace requires human security and gender equality at its core, benefiting both displaced populations and host societies. Excluding displaced young women from political discussions can allow their experiences to be instrumentalised through anti-gender and discriminatory narratives that further fuel conflict dynamics.