



International Women's Day 2025: No Cause for Celebration for Women Living Through Armed Conflict and Oppression

International Women's Day is often marked by celebrations—panels highlighting women's achievements, campaigns showcasing progress, and corporate statements pledging support for gender equality. But for millions of women around the world, this is not a day of celebration. For women living under armed conflict, occupation, and authoritarian rule, their hard-won rights are not advancing; they are being stripped away. Their voices are not being amplified; they are being silenced.

In Palestine, Sudan, as well as other countries in the Arab States region, women are enduring unimaginable suffering, their lives shattered by conflict. Millions have been forced to flee their homes; many are left without the basics to survive: food, water, shelter, and health care. Hundreds of thousands are subjected to gender-based violence, as women's bodies become collateral damage of wars.

These women do not need symbolic gestures or empty promises. They need action.

The Weaponization of Women's Bodies in Conflict

One of the most devastating and consistent realities of war is the use of sexual violence as a weapon of oppression and control.

In The State of Palestine, reports of rape, forced public nudity, and sexualized torture at the hands of Israeli forces have surfaced, yet these crimes remain largely ignored by the international community¹. In Sudan, women fleeing conflict face horrendous sexual violence from the warring parties, their stories overshadowed by political negotiations that rarely prioritize their safety². In Syria, women and girls have been subjected to systematic sexual violence by multiple parties to the conflict, including in detention centers, checkpoints, and besieged areas, where rape has been used as a method of torture and intimidation³. In Iraq, the legacy of sexual violence committed by ISIS against Yazidi and other minority women continues to shape survivors' lives, with many still in captivity or facing deep societal stigma and inadequate support⁴. In Libya reports of rape, sexual exploitation, and trafficking of migrant and displaced women have become disturbingly common, yet accountability remains extremely limited⁵.

¹ OHCHR: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/07/un-report-palestinian-detainees-held-arbitrarily-and-secretly-subjected>

² UN Women: chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/sudan-gender-alert-no_excuse_en_2024.pdf

³ Human Rights Council: chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/<https://policehumanrightsresources.org/content/uploads/2025/01/A-HRC-58-CRP-3.pdf?x62992>
SNHR: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/international-day-elimination-violence-against-women-snhrs-12th-annual-report-violations-against-females-syria-en-ar>

⁴ UNFPA: chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/<https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/19-255-MHPSS-Case-IRAQ-2019-10-04-1308.pdf>

⁵ MSF: <https://www.msf.org/libya-migrants-face-extreme-violence-and-exclusion-healthcare>

While international conventions condemn these acts, accountability is elusive. The world watches, statements are issued, but for women on the ground, nothing changes.

The failure to act sends a dangerous message: that women's bodies remain battlegrounds in war, that their suffering is secondary to geopolitical interests, and that impunity will continue unchecked.

The Systematic Erosion of Women's Rights

Even outside active war zones, the rollback of women's rights is accelerating. In the United States, reproductive rights have begun to be stripped away, forcing women into conditions reminiscent of a bygone era⁶. Across Europe, far-right movements are aggressively dismantling gender equality policies, weakening protections against domestic violence, and restricting access to reproductive healthcare⁷.

In Yemen, increasingly oppressive interpretations of religious and customary laws are being used to suppress feminist movements, framing women's rights as a threat to so-called traditional values. For example, the Mahram requirement—which mandates women to be accompanied by a male guardian—is being used to restrict their participation in civil society, further eroding their fundamental rights and freedoms.

In Libya, women's rights organizations are facing systematic shutdowns and restrictions imposed by authorities and militias under broad pretexts such as "national security" or "morality." This is part of a broader crackdown on personal freedoms, particularly targeting women's rights and autonomy.

These trends are not isolated—they reflect a global backlash against gender equality, threatening decades of progress. The erosion of women's rights is not just a legal or policy shift; it has real and devastating consequences for women's safety, autonomy, and participation in public life. The international community must recognize that this is not just a localized regression but a coordinated global push to silence women and roll back their rights. Urgent and collective action is needed to resist these setbacks, protect gains, and defend women's fundamental freedoms.

Nowhere is this rollback clearer than in Iraq, where a new draft of the Personal Status Law threatens to lower the legal age of marriage for girls to just nine years old under certain interpretations of Islamic law⁸. If passed, this legislation would strip away protections for young girls and effectively legalize child marriage, sanctioning a future where girls are robbed of their childhood, denied an education, and subjected to sexual violence under the guise of marriage. This move is not an isolated incident, it reflects a broader pattern of legal regression that puts women's and girls' rights under direct assault.

This regression is a well known pattern that we have witnessed in many parts of the world; it is not incidental, it is deliberate. Women's rights have always been one of the first casualties of

⁶ Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/22/the-us-war-on-reproductive-rights-should-concern-women-everywhere>

⁷ Oxfam: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.oxfamfrance.org/app/uploads/2024/03/Note-contextuelle-Gender-equality-in-Europe-back-or-the-future.pdf>

⁸ Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/iraqs-amended-personal-status-law-could-make-9-year-olds-brides?>

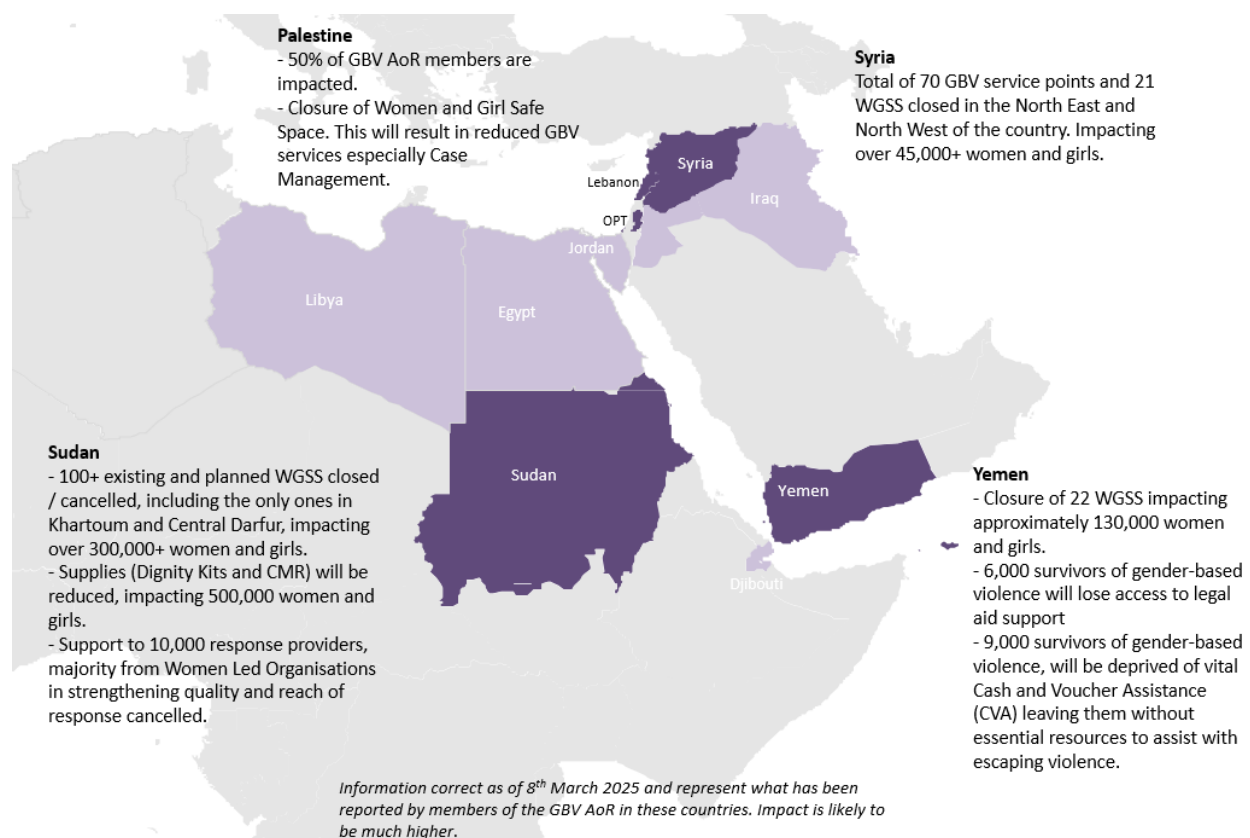
conservatism, authoritarianism and militarization. The erasure of women from public life, the control over their bodies, and the silencing of their resistance are calculated moves by those who benefit from oppression.

The Cost of Lost Support for GBV Survivors

As this crisis deepens, lifesaving gender-based violence (GBV) services across the Arab States region are also under attack, not only by armed actors, but also by funding cuts. The recent suspension of U.S. funding for GBV programs in the region has left a devastating gap in resources for women and girls who desperately need support. Safe Spaces, counseling services, life-saving health services, emergency response teams, and legal aid programs that once provided survivors with a path to safety, health and justice are now being forced to shut down or operate on a shoestring budget.

For women in conflict zones, the loss of these programs means there is often nowhere to turn. From Sudan to Syria, to Lebanon and Yemen, GBV case management services have been severely disrupted, leaving survivors without essential medical care, psychosocial support, or safe spaces, as vital GBV response services are forced to close. Across the region, frontline workers - who have spent years building trust with communities - are being laid off, eroding the already fragile support system that women and girls rely on in times of crisis.

Snapshot: Regional Impact of US Defunding



These cuts are not just numbers on a budget sheet; they are the difference **between life and death** for countless women. The international community cannot claim to stand for women's rights and gender equality while simultaneously **defunding** the very programs **that protect and empower the most at risk women**.

A Call to Action, Not Celebration

International Women's Day should not be an exercise in selective feminism, one that celebrates progress in boardrooms while ignoring the suffering of women under bombs, bullets, sexual violence and lack of essential resources. It cannot be a day where the world turns a blind eye to the women whose rights are being dismantled before our eyes.

Instead, it must be a day of reckoning. A day where we amplify the voices of women in war zones. A day where we demand justice for survivors of sexual violence. A day where we stand against the growing authoritarianism that seeks to erase decades of hard-fought progress. And a day where we hold governments and donors accountable for ensuring that critical GBV services **remain funded and functional**.

Until all women, regardless of geography, race, or class, can live in dignity and freedom, International Women's Day is not a celebration. It is a reminder of how much work remains. And it is a demand for permanent change.

For more information on The MENA/Arab States Regional GBV in Emergencies Working Group contact Anna Stone, REGA, stone@unfpa.org

