



## Keeping Women and Girls **Safe from the Start Act**

Armed conflict, natural disasters, and climate change often have the greatest impact on the poorest countries and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, including women and girls. Globally, an estimated 70 million people are currently displaced, causing the largest refugee crisis in recorded history. On top of this crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted women and girls worldwide, putting displaced women and girls at a unique risk of harm.

Conditions in refugee camps often expose women and girls to greater security risks due to inadequate lighting, lack of gender-appropriate sanitation facilities, and needing to travel long distances to access firewood, water, or other basic commodities. Sexual abuse by humanitarian workers has also become a well-recognized concern, prompting action by the international community. COVID-19 has exacerbated these problems, particularly as already stretched humanitarian resources are spent on stemming the health crisis. An estimated 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence could occur in six months of the COVID-19 lockdown and another 15 million more for each additional three months.

Despite the severe impacts that emergencies have on women and girls; they are often excluded from leadership and decision-making regarding humanitarian response. By not including women and girls in the design and implementation of humanitarian programs, the United States and others that generously provide humanitarian relief risk ignoring or exacerbating the needs of women and girls in our response efforts.

### **Safe from the Start Act — A Policy Solution to Address Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Emergencies**

Safe from the Start is an existing program implemented by the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian emergencies and protect survivors or those at risk for gender-based violence. This program supports training, toolkits, personnel, and accountability measures to improve our ability to adequately prevent and respond to GBV from the start of the crisis. The programs implemented under Safe from the Start are critically needed: nearly 1 in 5 women report experiencing sexual violence during a humanitarian emergency and the risks of domestic/intimate partner violence, child marriage, and human trafficking all increase during crises. Despite this, only .12% of all humanitarian funding goes to address GBV.

The Safe from the Start Act will formalize and expand this vital program to make it even more effective.

The bill will ensure that:

- Humanitarian response organizations are better equipped to prevent GBV and support survivors through training, guidelines, and the deployment of specialized experts to close gaps that make women and girls vulnerable to violence and abuse;
- Efforts are coordinated for greater efficiency and accountability of response and recovery efforts, and that humanitarian relief activities address GBV risks from the very beginning;

- Girls and women who experience GBV during crises receive appropriate care and that survivors and those at risk for GBV have access to empowerment opportunities that will help them recover from or prevent GBV; and
- Local stakeholders, including women's groups and others from the impacted communities, have funding, support, and skills to help lead efforts within their communities to prevent and respond to GBV.

Specifically, the Safe from the Start Act will:

- Formalize the State Department's and USAID's existing Safe from the Start program, thus ensuring attention and resources for GBV in humanitarian emergencies;
- Update the goals of Safe from the Start, including protecting and empowering of women and girls in emergencies, and partnerships to improve and scale-up capacity;
- Establish a reporting requirement to ensure accountability towards the goals and objectives of the Safe from the Start initiative; and
- Recognize that the U.S. Government should provide assistance and protection where needed, but also build the capacity of women and women-led local organizations to act as first responders, community leaders and drivers of sustainable change.

### How does CARE address girls' and women's needs and involve them in emergency response?

CARE implements programs that improve women's and girls' access to education, health, housing and other essential services. When disaster strikes, CARE and our local partners provide humanitarian assistance to address urgent needs while

also working to support long term efforts to rebuild after the emergency has subsided. In carrying out these activities, CARE takes a comprehensive approach that prioritizes the perspectives of women and girls, including:

- Prior to the start of emergencies, CARE works with communities to increase their resilience, preparedness and capacity to mitigate the effect of disasters when they occur.
- CARE routinely conducts gender analyses to understand the ways in which gender roles are impacted by emergencies. Throughout the crisis, the gender analyses inform our program design and implementation. We monitor the different impacts of our responses on women, men, boys and girls so that we can quickly course-correct when needed.
- CARE works with local partners who are committed to empowering women and girls and provides training and guidance to strengthen approaches to advancing gender equality.
- We put forward the voice and priorities of women and girls in emergency response, recovery planning and decision-making.
- As communities start to emerge from crises, CARE works with survivors, especially women and girls, to help them recover and rebuild after the emergency has passed.

### H.R. 571 Original Sponsors

1. Rep. Grace Meng (D-NY-6)
2. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-FL-25)
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### Story from the Field

Seno Wara lives in a refugee camp for Rohingya who have fled Myanmar. She says the living situation in the camp is dire. It is overcrowded, unsanitary, and the food rations are insufficient. She is also concerned with the uncertainty of the future and the safety of her daughters – particularly from human trafficking. Seno Wara has seen girls that were “forced or convinced” to leave the camp. As a result, she is afraid to send her children to school, worried they might be kidnapped.

**“Sometimes they [traffickers] get caught at the check post, but some leave silently,” Seno Wara says. “Girls are trafficked, girls are tortured. We feel anxious.”**



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