



## Panel Session

### From Asking to Action: A Global Consultation Ensuring the Voices of Women Affected by Conflict are Heard



This powerful session, moderated by independent development professional and researcher **Themrise Khan**, brought together voices from conflict-affected regions to reflect on women-led data collection and what it reveals about lived realities in Sudan and Iraq. **Fatima Ahmed** (Executive Director, Zenab for Women in Development) and **Aram Shakerm** (Country Director for Iraq, Women for Women International) presented findings from participatory research with internally displaced and conflict-affected women, while **Marie Clarke** (Acting Chief Executive Officer, Women for Women International) shared cross-country insights from Women for Women International's broader data set, covering 14 countries. The conversation underscored how women are not only victims of conflict but also frontline responders, data gatherers, and agents of change. Grounded in lived experience, their insights challenged traditional humanitarian paradigms and highlighted the need to reimagine aid through the lens of women's leadership and resilience.



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The discussion began with **Fatima Ahmed**, who painted a stark picture of Sudan's humanitarian emergency. Two years into a devastating war, Sudanese women face widespread violence, including systematic sexual violence, with little international attention or support. Fatima highlighted that in the absence of international mobilisation, local women-led and youth organisations have **stepped in as frontline responders**, working with almost no resources. Operating now from Gadarif, her team has been providing essential support to internally displaced women and children.

She emphasised that women are not just victims in this conflict, but are collecting data, organising relief, and **rebuilding fragmented communities**. One such initiative was a participatory survey conducted with displaced women, many of whom reported rape, daily harassment, and a persistent sense of insecurity. The data revealed that **67% had experienced sexual violence**, and over half said they felt unsafe even in displacement areas. Fatima underlined that these numbers reflect deep trauma and unmet needs, particularly for **psychological support and justice**. Worryingly, many of the rape survivors were underage and now raising children born of this violence, often without any formal humanitarian infrastructure.

**Aram Shakerm** added insights from Iraq, where the survey was conducted with similar participatory methods - women not only shaped the questions but were also consulted

on the findings. A key theme that emerged was the need for meaningful follow-up: women's concerns must translate into donor action and policy change. While the data provided vital insight, Aram stressed that true accountability lies in the response to what women are voicing. **Themrise Khan** steered the conversation towards the application of this data. Fatima reiterated that data must become the basis for programme design that addresses **immediate needs - safe spaces, trauma care, and legal redress**. She pointed out that while grassroots groups are innovating solutions, they **lack both visibility and funding**.

Meanwhile, Aram flagged a regressive development in Iraq since the survey's completion: amendments to the **personal status law** that now allow marriage for girls as







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young as nine and strip women of some inheritance rights. This shift has prompted civil society to pivot towards family and community-level prevention efforts.

The panel also explored how international attention - or the lack thereof - shapes the dynamics of response. Themrise noted the disproportionate focus on certain global conflicts. While Iraq had once received media and political attention, it has now faded into obscurity. Sudan, by contrast, **remains barely covered** despite harrowing levels of violence. Aram echoed this concern, warning that without sustained global engagement, humanitarian actors may disappear just when crises intensify again. **Marie Clarke**, representing Women for Women International, shared findings from across 14 countries and focused on a particularly striking data point: when asked about their hope for the next five years, the most optimistic respondents came from Afghanistan and Palestine - two of the most **historically marginalised and war-torn regions**. In contrast, Ukrainian respondents, particularly those displaced abroad, were among the least hopeful. This surprising insight suggests that long-term exposure to systemic oppression may generate more robust forms of resilience and collective solidarity. Marie also highlighted how older women - often invisible in both policy and programming - are playing **expanded caregiving roles** in conflict settings, particularly where younger generations have been lost or displaced. She assured the audience that Women for Women



International will make the full dataset accessible to all local partners, enabling them to use it for **advocacy, programming, and further research**. During the closing moments, Jane Buchanan of HelpAge from the audience, asked what kind of global solidarity the women surveyed were seeking. Fatima responded unequivocally: the top demand was for a **collective international effort to stop the war in Sudan**. Women are calling not just for visibility, but for meaningful action to **halt the violence, secure justice, and enable humanitarian relief**. Aram added that programming must be adapted to reflect women's lived experiences, not imposed as pre-designed solutions. In her concluding remarks, Themrise captured the essence of the session: that in hearing directly from women, especially those in conflict zones, we learn not just about suffering but about **courage, leadership, and clarity of purpose**. These voices are not only documenting injustice - they are charting a path forward.



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*"If there's anything we need right now, it is hearing more voices. And if this is one way to do it, I think that's where the focus should be"*

**Themrise Khan**

Independent Development Professional

*"This war actually also is fought on the bodies of the women. The women who are really faced with unbelievable situations since the war started. What is happening to the women of Sudan does not matter."*

**Fatima Ahmed**

Founder, Zenab for Women in Development



*"One of the key findings was about the importance of participation... going back to women with the results and just cross-checking, does this resonate with the issues that you are facing?"*

**Aram Shakerm**

Country Director for Iraq, Women for Women International

*"The two countries where there was the greatest percentage of respondents that felt hopeful about their future... were the respondents from Gaza and the West Bank and Palestine and Afghanistan. Hope, it turns out, is not just a feeling. It's survival."*

**Marie Clarke**

Acting Chief Executive Officer, Women for Women International





## Critical Action Steps



**Advocate for an end to conflicts** and highlight the urgent need for action in Sudan and other war-torn regions.



**Support women-led organisations** in conflict zones with resources and international backing to scale their efforts.



**Ensure the voices of women in conflict** are prioritised by actively involving them in the decision-making process.



**Use collected data for policy advocacy** to push for systemic changes in women's rights and humanitarian response.



**Address gender-based violence** through comprehensive support systems and trauma-recovery programs.



**Challenge harmful legal changes** such as the amendment in Iraq's personal status law, advocating for stronger women's rights protections.