

# A COMMUNITY THAT CARES

Taking Action Against Gender-Based Violence

A REFLECTION AND ADVOCACY  
GUIDE FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

A joint publication by



IJM

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# READING GUIDE

## A note to the reader:

When discussing gender-based violence, a number of extremely difficult subjects arise. Issues around violence, rape, abuse, suicide, infanticide, and more are discussed in this publication. Please exercise caution when reading.

As much of the content within this document is highly sensitive, some names have been changed and will be indicated with an asterisk(\*). All interviews and photos are shared with the informed consent of the subjects.

## Disclaimer:

The views expressed throughout this guide are those of the authors and their respective organizations and are not necessarily views or positions that are shared by all three publishing organizations.



# FOREWORDS

One in three women globally experience violence.  
Pause and read that again: one in three women.

These aren't just statistics. Behind every number is a real life: a woman who wakes up each day fearing that the violence she's already endured might find her again. Over half of them live with this fear, and yet the justice they so desperately need feels unreachable.

We studied the rates of sexual violence across four cities in Bolivia. Of 321 reported cases of sexual violence, only 13 resulted in a conviction after years of waiting. The gap between the hope for justice and the painful reality is staggering. The majority of women (81%) and nearly all adolescents (92%) remain silent, not because they want to, but because a system designed to protect them has instead failed them.

**When safety and dignity are at risk, justice isn't just a process: It's a lifeline.  
It must be swift, compassionate, and trauma-informed. And it cannot wait.**

It's time for us to rise up. To pray. To report. To advocate. To give. Lives are at stake, and there's no time to lose.

Thank you for joining us in these 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. As you read these stories, may your heart be open to God's leading. May he move and mold you through every word.

By the end of this journey, you'll know what next step you're called to take. And together, we'll stand with you.

**Anu George Canjanathoppil**  
**CEO, International Justice Mission Canada**

*International Justice Mission Canada (IJM) is a global organization that protects people in poverty from violence. IJM partners with local authorities in 33 programs offices in 18 countries to combat trafficking and slavery, violence against women and children, and police abuse of power.*

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In recent years, Canada has been recognized for its leadership in refugee protection and gender equality. Despite its reputation as a "safe" country for migrants and refugees, there remain significant gaps in the Canadian immigration system that facilitate and exacerbate experiences of gender-based violence (GBV). We want Canada to be a safe place for people who are coming to seek asylum and for those who are already living here.

Citizens for Public Justice has two areas of concern for migrants and refugees when it comes to GBV. The first is creating a safe and accessible space for those who are fleeing GBV, and the second is protecting those who are coming to Canada to work from experiencing abuse. As a national, faith-based, policy organization, we also want to acknowledge the prevalence of GBV in Canada, specifically towards Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit individuals.

**A meaningful approach to preventing and responding to GBV must be intersectional.  
It must pay close attention to the ways multiple systems of oppression complicate  
and shape GBV for those who live, work, and seek asylum in Canada.**

**Willard Metzger**  
**Executive Director, Citizens for Public Justice**

*Citizens for Public Justice (CPI) is a national, progressive organization of members who are inspired by faith to act for social and environmental justice in Canadian public policy. Their work focuses on three key policy areas: poverty in Canada, climate justice, and refugee rights.*

World Renew’s key scripture verse, Micah 6:8, calls each of us into a right relationship with God and with each other. This is not a way of “calling each other *out*” that further isolates us from one another and even casting shame on our already heavy hearts. Instead, it is a call *in* to what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would call the Beloved Community.

Micah calls us into a beautiful vision, opening our eyes to the goodness that can be renewed when we truly see one another. Walking humbly requires a posture that is not one where we hang our heads and stare at our feet, but an attitude of admirably looking upwards at one another.

As we behold one another in this upward gaze of admiration and wonder for all those God has created as image bearers, we are compelled to act justly and love mercy. This call is especially pertinent as we consider those who are marginalized and overlooked. It challenges us to reflect on how we can advocate for those whose struggles are not fully prioritized in programs and policies.

In our broken world, we see a painful reality: women, girls, individuals with disabilities, the elderly, youth, and indigenous populations often bear the heaviest burdens of crises that arise from climate change, conflict, economic turmoil, and political instability. The disparities in their experiences highlight the urgent need for justice and equality—values that are deeply woven into the fabric of our faith.

World Renew embodies this mission by creating pathways for marginalized groups to lead lives filled with dignity and equality. By acknowledging the unique barriers these groups face—be it social, economic, or political—we can foster an environment where everyone is afforded the opportunity to thrive. This is our most sacred call: to love wholeheartedly.

You can be an inspired champion for gender equity and social inclusion. By doing so, we not only fulfill God’s command but also bring light into the shadows of inequality.

**Wherever gender-based violence is found, we must band together to confront it, mindful of the God-given dignity and equality of all.**

Whether it’s changing sinful attitudes, rejecting harmful practices, righting power imbalances, modelling respectful relationships, or working for policy change, we each have our roles to play. Together, let us walk humbly, act justly, and love mercy.

May this guide invite us closer to the heart of God to see how Scripture urges us, and how the Spirit equips us, to stand for dignity with prayerful advocacy and action. 16 Days are not enough to uproot injustice, but they provide a place to start.

**Carol Bremer-Bennett and Jamie McIntosh**  
**Executive CoDirectors, World Renew**

*Compelled by God’s deep passion for justice and mercy, World Renew joins communities around the world to renew hope, reconcile lives, and restore creation.*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This reflection and advocacy guide, *A Community That Cares*, was created for the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. This annual global campaign shines a light on the 736 million women and girls whose lives have been changed or lost by violence.<sup>1</sup> The campaign provides an opportunity for a diverse array of actors such as activists, charities, and governments to raise awareness and take action against violence towards women and girls in all their intersectionalities. It is a unique annual rallying point for individuals and organizations worldwide to stand up and call for action to protect these vulnerable communities experiencing violence. Beginning on November 25, the campaign ends on International Human Rights Day, December 10, to emphasize that violence against women and girls remains one of the most prevalent and pervasive forms of human rights abuses in the world.

*A Community That Cares* is necessary and timely for the communities that World Renew, International Justice Mission Canada, and Citizens for Public Justice serve. These three organizations seek to address gender-based violence through community dialogues, economic empowerment programs, advocacy, and multi-sectoral partnerships. We advance advocacy and programming work with communities and governments at grassroots and policy levels to establish vital prevention, response, and accountability measures that protect and empower marginalized communities experiencing violence. These collaborations on a domestic and international scale serve a crucial role in addressing the root causes of gender-based violence and address the impacts everyday practices, norms, policies, and laws have on survivors' well-being and ability to feel safe and have access to justice. It is essential to note that GBV is caused and exacerbated by a complex interplay of both interpersonal and structural factors.

This year, we have partnered to collect sixteen reflections highlighting different forms of gender-based violence in multiple geographical contexts and combined them with a prayer and calls to action that can be applied in our communities. Our emphasis on the need for community care reflects the complexities and intersectionality of gender-based violence and acknowledges that experiences and stories of GBV transcend borders for survivors, victims, and women and girls, and therefore requires multisectoral partnerships to address.

GBV is a silent yet vicious crisis. Its adverse effects on the dignity, lives, and economic contributions of women and girls are escalating. Rates of abuse against women and girls continue to rise globally. Economic hardships have intensified early and forced marriages and increased the sexual exploitation of children. Women and girls fleeing conflict and natural disasters often face additional trauma and abuse due to limited response and prevention services. Rape as a weapon of war remains a grim reality. Even in stable democracies, harmful cultural practices, structural barriers, and patriarchy undermine the value of women and girls, leading to various forms of abuse including femicide, early child and forced marriages, and female genital mutilation. The era of digital technology has brought with it new and unregulated forms of technologically facilitated forms of GBV including increased trafficking for sex purposes, doxing, stalking, and trolling. These have led to physical harm, lost lives and mental health deterioration.

It is also important to note that community care moves beyond the principle of medical care or health. We must care for our communities by providing outlets such as accessible and inclusive ways to report violence, culturally and religiously competent mental health resources, economic opportunities that reduce the vulnerability of women and girls, gender-based violence education campaigns for young girls and boys, access to childcare, advocating for women and girls' access to education and dignified economic opportunities, trauma-informed law enforcement, affordable housing, food security, and policies built on survivor's recommendations.

We believe that faith communities are called beyond empathy to prevent, respond, and take action against gender-based violence. Over the next sixteen days, you will read stories that explore the complex nature of GBV around the world. We hope you will uncover new ways you can join with the community that cares for women and girls in all their intersectionalities experiencing violence, some of whom you will meet in the following pages. Your voice, action, and support matter.

Thank you for joining us and for using your actions and influence to make the world a safer place.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization

# MORE THAN FISH | UGANDA

Day 1: November 25

As I stood at the top level of a four-tiered tilapia pond system in Uganda, I thought about the adage: “Feed a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.” The designer and owner of these ponds had no need to learn how to fish. What Julius needed was to learn how to own and build the ponds so that he could have unfettered access to the fish. Thousands of fish!

I grabbed my notebook to hear about how Julius had built up his fish farm and how he was feeding not only himself and his family, but also his community. I was not the only owner eager to learn; school children on the far side of the lowest pond were also scribbling in their notebooks as part of a science field trip.



I asked Julius how these ponds changed his life. His answer had nothing to do with fish. As he stood with his mother and his son, he told me of the transformation that God was doing within him. He shared how, before the ponds, he mistreated his wife, and she left him. I could tell that, while this was a wound that he had inflicted upon her, he carried the pain as well. Julius explained the hunger that came from a family that struggled to survive and therefore turned inward with desperation resulting in gender-based violence. He lamented the scenes his children watched and how he disgraced his mother through it all. She stood next to him, nodding slightly as she recalled the sores.

*Why should you be beaten anymore?*

*Why do you persist in rebellion?*

*Your whole head is injured,*

*your whole heart afflicted. (Isaiah 1:5)*

I kept waiting for the fish to surface in the story.

Julius revealed that it was through holistic training and a glimpse of a promise that God had a different story, a different life in mind for him—this would be his call: to be a fisher of his family, one who would cast his net to capture his entire community.

*Wash and make yourselves clean.*

*Take your evil deeds out of my sight;  
stop doing wrong. (Isaiah 1:16)*

Julius' engagement with the local church and World Renew set him on a new trajectory.

**Yes, he figured out how to dig ponds, engineer drainage, and raise tilapia, but he mostly took on the call to be in right relationship, without violence in his own home.**

His transformation resulted in his wife returning and reconciling as a true partner with purity and dignity in their marriage. His children could now rise up and call him blessed. His mother could see wrongs buried so that good could flourish once again.

*If you are willing and obedient,*

*you will eat the good things of the land. (Isaiah 1:19)*

As we walked away from the tilapia ponds, the fish were forgotten; they served as a daily meal, but the real food was a lasting change that cannot come from fish alone. Julius had been filled with the spirit of a living God, one that rebuked evil and reconciled with children who had turned away from evil.

Julius is now the gender champion for his village. As we walked past his next project—a passion fruit tree farm—I didn't ask about the saplings. Julius wanted to talk about a different fruit that was being produced in him. He told me about his intervention months before with a drunken neighbor who badly beat his wife. Julius was called to assist, and he reported his friend to the police, who now work with the community to seek justice for women when they would have previously looked the other way.

*“Come now, let us settle the matter,”  
says the Lord.*

*“Though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;*

*though they are red as crimson,  
they shall be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)*

Julius watched the police take his friend away while his wife tended to the woman's wounds and made sure she felt safe. The next morning, Julius arrived at the police station to visit his neighbour and ensure that this low point would be used by God for good. He continued to visit over the following days until he was confident of repentance and assured his neighbour would be held accountable. Then Julius paid the bail for the neighbor to be released.

As we face the evil of gender-based violence and actively work in each person to turn from the wrongs and heal the wounds, may we become like Julius: not just a fisherman, but a fisher of men and women. We cast our nets to pull in those lost in the waves of desperation and tossed by a sense of powerlessness. We are called to be defenders of the beaten down and advocates for the oppressed. May we level more than the ponds: We must level the power imbalances to restore all God's children—oppressed and oppressor alike. Like Julius, cast your nets far. There is no one outside of the transformational power of the Spirit.

*Learn to do right; seek justice.*

*Defend the oppressed.*

*Take up the cause of the fatherless;*

*plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)*

**Carol Bremer-Bennett is the Executive CoDirector of World Renew.**

#### **PRAYER:**

*Lord, teach us to do right. Nurture our desire for justice. Show us how to defend the oppressed in effective ways and to always be mindful of the most vulnerable of our neighbours, next door and around the world. Amen.*

#### **CALL TO ACTION:**

Support a trusted agency financially. To seek justice for vulnerable women and girls, we need to address gaps with flexible funding. Choose an organization that directly addresses systems of inequality and violence, but that also delves into the related challenges of economic empowerment.



# THE FIRST TO SEEK JUSTICE: COURAGE IN THE FACE OF STIGMA AND UNFAIR LEGAL SYSTEMS | KENYA

Day 2: November 26

At age 13, Mwanaidi\* was a vibrant and joyful child. She cherished her school, teachers, and friendships, working hard to pass her Class 8 exams and attending *Madrasas*, special classes that provide Muslim children with a foundation in Islamic knowledge and practices.

One of Mwanaidi's neighbours began to take notice of her as she walked past his shop on her way to attend *Madrasas*. He would stop her and said she could take anything she wanted from the shop without paying, and that he also had a beach resort she could visit. At first, the interactions seemed innocent but then the man began waiting for her after class, beckoning her to join him on his motorbike.

One day, the man forcibly put Mwanaidi on his motorbike and drove her to a nearby abandoned house where he sexually assaulted her. He threatened her, saying he would harm her and her parents if she told anyone about what had happened. Overwhelmed with fear and threats, Mwanaidi remained silent.

The abuse continued until Mwanaidi decided not to attend her *Madrasas* classes. "Because of what he did to me, I could not face people, even my teachers and other pupils at school. I felt ashamed," says Mwanaidi, explaining why she opted to drop out of school.

Her teacher went to her house to find out why she had missed classes. Her mother, aunt, and uncle confronted her, also bewildered by her actions. Finally, Mwanaidi confessed the truth about the man's repeated abuse. Upon hearing her harrowing account, her parents swiftly took her to the hospital for a medical examination and later to the police station, where the abuse was reported. The neighbor was later arrested.

News of the incident spread throughout her village. Mwanaidi became a target of gossip and ridicule. The man who hurt her had a powerful, rich family and boasted that no action could be taken against him. Mwanaidi and her family faced intimidation from members of their community and relentless attempts to silence them.



When IJM counsellors met the little girl, she had recoiled from socializing and lost her courage, burdened by the weight of society's judgment. IJM aftercare officers provided counselling sessions to her, while a team of lawyers worked to ensure that the case was properly presented in court.

And though it was difficult for Mwanaidi to face the man who had caused her so much pain, she bravely identified him in court and explained what had happened. Eventually, her bravery led to a conviction, and the perpetrator is currently serving a 12-year jail term. The magistrate who found the perpetrator guilty said his conviction should serve as a lesson to others who take advantage of children.

Unfortunately, his conviction worsened the situation for Mwanaidi and her family. In their pursuit of justice, they met with fierce opposition and criticism from the community, who sided with the perpetrator. The community prefers families to physically fight to resolve issues rather than take someone to court.

"We were the first family in this community to pursue justice, and this has brought a lot of hatred towards us. Even our neighbours distanced themselves from us," says Mwanaidi's mother. Despite all this, her resolve to get justice for her daughter was unshakable.

Mwanaidi, now 17, has chosen not to let this moment in her past define her future. She has decided to pursue a career as a tailor, channeling

her love for sewing into creating beautiful garments for brides in her village. “I want to specialize in making wedding dresses,” says Mwanaidi, excited to start her new life. She has become a source of inspiration for other young girls in her village.

IJM survivor service coordinator, Kalisto Awara, who has been working with Mwanaidi, says the case has had a huge impact on justice work in the region. “It established a precedent that, no matter how powerful or wealthy you are, you can never escape the law. As long as the criminal justice system is involved and abuse has been proven, the victimized community can receive justice,” adds Kalisto.

He believes that the trial and conviction of the perpetrator has also disproven the notion held by the locals that justice in the republic is reserved for the wealthy and powerful. It showed that justice can be granted to the underprivileged, especially for young girls like Mwanaidi.

***Written by International Justice Mission, based on interviews with Mwanaidi and her mother. All materials used with consent.***

#### **PRAYER:**

*God who sees, we thank you that Mwanaidi's teacher noticed her absence in class and checked to see if she was safe. Thank you for the conviction in a landmark case, proving that no one has the right to abuse a child. Please help us to be observant caregivers, ready to support children experiencing injustice and pain and give us courage to stand up to those who would do otherwise. Forgive us when we have let these opportunities pass by and give us grace and hope to try again. Amen.*

#### **CALLS TO ACTION:**

- Research your community safety programs and what services they offer, particularly for young women.
- Consider starting or joining a neighbourhood watch program in your area.
- If you are a teacher or interact with children, ask about what policies are in place to notice and report child abuse in a trauma-informed and child friendly way.

# GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND THE SYSTEMS THAT SUPPORT IT | CANADA (TURTLE ISLAND)

Day 3: November 27

When we think of gender-based violence, we typically envision the perpetrator as a person—most often a man. While such violence is committed by individuals, it is rooted in harmful and entrenched systems.

To better understand the history of these systems and their role in exacerbating and perpetuating gender-based violence around the world we can turn to the experience of Indigenous women in Canada. While this reflection focuses on the Canadian context, the continuous violence of colonization is experienced globally. The use of patriarchy as a tool for colonial powers continues to harm women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals everywhere.



photo credit: Howl Art Collective

Before settlers came, Indigenous groups on Turtle Island functioned in economic and social systems very different to those that we have today. Many societies were matriarchal and matrilineal, with women were in positions of leadership and prominence in their communities. Women were seen as wise and respected individuals. Two-spirit individuals who possessed both masculine and feminine energies were also revered in their communities. Matrilineal systems traced family lineage through the mother. In Haudenosaunee culture, Clan Mothers had the authority to choose the chief and if a chief failed to represent the community effectively, the Clan Mothers could remove him from his position.<sup>2</sup> The teachings of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation in northern Manitoba shared that women were sacred and

should be involved in decision making because they nurtured families and therefore knew what was best for the whole village.<sup>3</sup> The ability of women to bring life into the world and carry two heartbeats made them revered.<sup>4</sup> Women and two-spirit individuals were spiritual leaders, knowledge keepers, and warriors in their various communities, and their contributions were vital.<sup>5</sup> And despite their significant contribution to the functioning of society, their roles and work were not the only things for which they were respected.

**They were respected because their lives had inherent value. While violence did occur in Indigenous societies, records show it was very rare that violence was perpetrated against women based on their gender.**

When gender-based violence did occur, the perpetrators were held accountable.<sup>6</sup>

The systems of the European colonizers stood in stark contrast. Rather than systems that valued, protected, and included women, British and French colonization brought with it its patriarchal systems. Patriarchy is defined as a system where men control a disproportionate amount of power. The colonizers forced their systems, including patriarchy, on the Indigenous people through treaties, laws, and violent force. Indigenous groups, including the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, sent women to represent the communities and speak to the settlers. Most settler men refused to speak to the women, demanding they send men instead. Colonial men saw their own settler women, and by extension, Indigenous women, as mentally and physically weak and inferior to them.

Similar to Indigenous ways, settler women and men had distinct roles to help society run. The key difference was that in Indigenous cultures, these roles were considered different yet equally important, while settlers deemed women's roles inferior. This European introduction of patriarchal systems on Turtle Island substantially altered the

lives of Indigenous women and subsequent generations. The colonizers forced their systems on the Indigenous people through treaties, laws, and violent force. Some of those laws that limited the rights and roles of women, such as the Indian Act, still exist today.

When people hold patriarchal beliefs that see women as inferior, it often leads to mistreatment. This mindset is one reason why violence against women happens. It's not just that these systems perpetuate acts of violence; they also contribute to a culture where governments, organizations, and even individuals do not often believe or support women survivors of violence.<sup>7</sup>

It's crucial to keep these systems in mind when we consider those who perpetrate violence against women. Their actions are supported by a system that views women as inferior, placing the women in vulnerable positions. This was not the case just in Canada. European colonialism introduced patriarchal structures worldwide, contributing to the alarming global issue of gender-based violence, which affects one in every three women in their lifetime.<sup>8</sup> To this day, Indigenous women and girls are murdered and go missing at alarming rates. The colonial assault on women has not stopped.

***Anna Miedema is the 2024/2025 Public Justice Intern at Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) working in refugee and migrant rights advocacy. She holds a Bachelors in Peace and Conflict Studies and Legal Studies.***

## PRAYER:

*Creator God, We come before you with heavy hearts, acknowledging the pain caused by both violence and the systems that perpetuate it. We ask for your guidance and strength as we seek to challenge the systems and beliefs that have led to the mistreatment of women.*

*May we honor the wisdom and sacredness of women, recognizing their vital role in our communities. Help us to create spaces where their voices are heard, valued, and respected.*

*We pray for healing for all survivors of violence, that they may find support and strength in their journey toward recovery. Grant us the courage to stand against injustice and to advocate for those who have been silenced.*

*As we confront the legacies of colonization and patriarchy, may we work together to foster understanding, compassion, and equality. Let us strive to build a world where every person is treated with dignity and where violence has no place.*

*In your name, we seek justice and peace. Amen.*

## CALLS TO ACTION:

- Consider signing up for information on upcoming opportunities to participate in Hearts Exchanged, “a learning and action journey designed to equip Reformed Christians to go beyond the headlines into deep work that wrestles with how our churches can become places of belonging and embrace God’s call to reconciliation with Indigenous neighbours.” [crcna.org/hearts-exchanged](https://crcna.org/hearts-exchanged)
- See if your church or denomination has resources that can help you learn more about the experiences of Indigenous people in your region and work towards truth and reconciliation.
- Take time to learn more about how various systems such as patriarchy and capitalism affect women (and men) across the world.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.onondaganation.org/government/clan-mothers/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.criaw-icref.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Local-Women-Matter-4-How-Colonialism-Affects-Women.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Monchalin, *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on Crime and Injustice in Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016), 176.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.onondaganation.org/government/clan-mothers/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.onondaganation.org/government/clan-mothers/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10387730/>

<sup>8</sup> World Health Organization



# INCREASED POWERLESSNESS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN INSECURE ZONES | SAHEL

Day 4: November 28

In many countries in West Africa, women have always been considered inferior to men. This consideration is felt in almost every ethnic group in the country. As soon as we speak of women, we allude to procreation, men's pleasure and labor. When a woman gives birth to many daughters without a son, she is frowned upon by her husband and in-laws. She hasn't provided her husband with any offspring. One day, I met a woman leaving a medical consultation who was crying. She said she had three daughters, and her husband had warned her that if she gave birth to another girl in her fourth pregnancy, he would abandon her. When she had the ultrasound, the result showed another girl. A woman who only gives birth to girls is considered in this culture to be a woman in infinite pain, and if her husband doesn't divorce her, he is likely to take on another wife.

Among one ethnic group that World Renew works with in the Sahel region, women are hard workers, doing all sorts of activities, often more than the man. For example, a woman takes care of the children, bringing water from the community well or borehole, going into the bush to find firewood, pounding millet and then making food. She actively works in her husband's field, and also in a small plot he has allotted for her, as she doesn't have her own field. But one woman in World Renew's development program often works in her savings group's community garden during the cooler dry season. In addition, she has started a small business, thanks to the loan she was able to access from her savings group. She raises animals with the money she received when her group cashed out their savings after a year.

But for several years now, since about 2018, insecurity has gripped the area and community life has been turned upside down. Armed extremist groups now control much of the area, imposing their own laws and taxes on the villagers. This has had a major negative impact on the lives of both men and women.

The armed extremist groups started by attacking schools, burning some and forcing all of the others in the villages to be closed. Only the schools in the two towns in the area remain open. This means many young people and children had to stop going to school. Some young people, with a desire to continue going to school, leave their homes to go live in town and attend school there. Living conditions are becoming very difficult, especially for young girls. Lacking sufficient means, they often find themselves on their own, with little support or backing from their families. Ill-intentioned boys or men end up taking advantage of their vulnerability. As a result, many of these girls become pregnant. The babies that are born are sometimes killed at birth. Others suffer the worst treatment at home, hidden from other people, not being taken to health care. As a result, many will grow up without love or respect, even from their family. Throughout their lives, they will be regarded as failures.



This year, the armed extremist groups have come back with more rules. They have forced women to wear black hijabs, which is not the custom among all of the ethnic groups. They have forbidden women to work or leave the home. They sometimes take young girls as wives when they visit a village. The extremists pay the girl's parents a paltry dowry and take the girls away against their will.

In many villages, they have begun issuing ultimatums for believers to leave Christianity and adopt their form of Islam, pay large taxes to them for every male above a certain age in the family, have one of their children taken away to join the extremist groups, or leave their home without taking anything with them. Hundreds of families have been forced to flee with almost nothing. Among internally displaced peoples, women find themselves increasingly vulnerable.

Just as Christ was moved with compassion for the discouraged crowd behind him in Matthew 9:36, we must be moved with that compassion, thinking of these women and girls. We need to feel their pain and sorrow to show them mercy. 1 John 3:17 tells us: "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?"

Let us not forget these girls and women taken by force by extremist groups to serve as their wives, for they need our prayers.

***This reflection was written by a member of World Renew's West Africa team.***

#### **PRAYER:**

*Father, you who are loving, compassionate and alive, I call on you. Listen to the cries of pain of these people. See the pain of these women and girls in this situation of insecurity and bring them your grace, your peace. Help us to support these people with what you give us, to feel as much compassion for them as you feel for us, and to show them your love. Amen.*

#### **CALLS TO ACTION:**

- Pray for the women and girls throughout the Sahel region, for God's protection and provision.
- Intercede for peace in their areas by making your voice heard in letters, social media posts, or throughout your community circles.
- Support organizations like World Renew who work in the areas of peacebuilding and justice, youth equity, community health volunteer training so mothers and babies are supported, and trauma healing for those who've experienced gender-based violence.

# NO LONGER AFRAID TO STAND ON HER OWN | UGANDA

Day 5: November 29

At her stall in Cereleno Market near the Gulu-Kampala highway in Uganda, Alice sits under an umbrella, surrounded by sacks of foodstuff. The sun is blazing. She is sorting legumes when we arrive for an interview. Alice wants to share her experience as a survivor of domestic violence. She is proud of how she bravely undertook the justice journey and is raising her sons without fear or intimidation.

Alice grew up in a family of nine children during the two decades of civil unrest in Uganda due to the Lord's Resistance Army, an extremist group. At the height of the war, Alice and her siblings dropped out of school because getting there was too dangerous. The rebel group killed thousands of civilians and abducted children, using them as soldiers or for sexual abuse. Alice recalls living in perpetual fear.



When she was 14, she met a man who was working with a human rights organization. "He was friendly. When he persuaded me to get into a relationship with him, I accepted and moved in with him. Then he told me that we would be moving to Arua district as he had been transferred there." Alice went with him without telling anyone. "For two years, my family did not know where I was."

The relationship became a harsh reality. "While he provided food and other basics, he locked me up when he went to work. He only let me out when he returned. I was not allowed to go out and talk to anyone. I felt like a prisoner, but there was nothing I could do." Now she believes that the man was doing

this to conceal the fact that he, a supposed human rights defender, was violating an underage girl.

"By the time I had my first child, my partner had been transferred," she says. "When we settled in Gulu, he lost his job, and life changed. He rarely came home, and I heard that he was having affairs. I tried to persevere, but it was tough. When I conceived my second child, I felt I had to get a job to sustain myself, so I started little by little, vending tomatoes, vegetables, and silverfish in the market."

In March 2018, Alice was home when her partner arrived after two weeks without any communication. The family had supper, and later Alice talked about the welfare of their children, who needed school fees. Her partner demanded to know why she was asking for money when she had a job. He told her, "If the money you're earning as a market vendor isn't enough, you should sell your body for a living!" "I could not believe my ears," Alice says. "I asked him, 'Are you really telling me this as your wife?'" The exchange escalated into a fight, leaving Alice severely bruised and swollen, and with a missing tooth.

"I was in bad shape. My partner disappeared. I called him to pay for my medical treatment, and his phone was not available," she says. "I reported him to the Local Council (LC) and the police. The LC Councilor supported me. He told the police that I wanted to access justice and rebuild my life, and the police contacted IJM."

IJM supported Alice in pursuing justice and provided her psychosocial support, including food supplies, a medical examination, and counseling for the family. "They cared about what I was going through," says Alice.

The police arrested her partner in April. He was remanded to prison and charged with causing grievous harm and theft, having stolen some money on the night of the assault. "I was happy," reports Alice. "Finally, the person causing me problems was behind bars. He would not torment me anymore." In June, he was sentenced to three months of community service. If he failed to comply, he would be given a one-year custodial sentence. The court also mandated that he refund the money he had stolen and pay Alice's medical bills.

“Today, he is out of our lives. The children are doing well in school. I’m in a new relationship where I feel respected and appreciated. I am expecting my third child, and I want to grow my business,” Alice smiles. She has shared her story with a few women in abusive relationships and hopes to continue doing this. “There is one woman who was contemplating taking her own life. I used my story to tell her that it was possible to escape violence. Life is not all about men. Even on your own, you can do something. You can thrive.”

***This reflection was written by International Justice Mission based on an interview with Alice, a survivor of domestic violence.***

#### **PRAYER:**

*God of justice, we pray that judges in communities around the world will truly listen to the stories and evidence from women who have experienced violence. We pray that the verdicts they give will have the protection of the woman and family in mind and lead to lasting safety. We thank you for Alice and that the violence did not overcome her. We pray for her, her business, and the way she is supporting others in her community—may her life and story bring courage and healing to many more. Amen.*

#### **CALLS TO ACTION:**

- Know the signs of an abusive relationship.
- Research how and where you would report intimate partner violence, if experienced by yourself or someone close to you. Check out [shesacrowd.com/global-resources/](https://shesacrowd.com/global-resources/) for resources worldwide.
- Consider supporting businesses and initiatives by women, particularly if the proceeds will support women at risk of experiencing violence.



# ASYLUM IN SAFE THIRD COUNTRIES | CANADA

Day 6: November 30

Currently, the world is facing a poly crisis of climate, conflict, political instability violence, and economic turmoil. People are forced to flee their homes for a number of these reasons, so grounds for seeking refuge is often a combination of overlapping factors and can rarely be explained as a singular cause. Canada, like many other Western countries, is often seen as a safe haven for those seeking asylum. However, a piece of legislation called the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) makes it hard or even impossible for survivors of gender-based violence to find safety in Canada, specifically those who are fleeing from Central and South American countries.

In 2002, Canada and the United States signed the STCA, which took effect in December 2004.<sup>9</sup> The agreement requires refugees to seek asylum in the first “safe” country they enter, whether that be Canada or the United States. This means that most people seeking asylum at Canadian land borders are sent back to the U.S. to seek asylum there instead.



photo credit: Drew Morris

Despite the STCA considering the U.S. a “safe” country, many refugee advocates vehemently disagree. While Canada has an established tradition of offering asylum to survivors of gender-based violence, the United States does not have the same track record. In Canada, Immigration and Refugee Board guidelines ensure that gender is considered when assessing an asylum claim.<sup>10</sup> In the US, acceptance of claims can be arbitrary and vary greatly from judge to judge and state to state. From 2018 – 2023, judges

individual denial rates were extremely high, some as high as 100%.<sup>11</sup> Across all judges in a court, denials ranged from 31.8% to 99.6%.<sup>12</sup>

When gender-based violence survivors’ asylum claims are denied in the United States, they are often left with no option but to return to their home country, where they faced abuse, or begin the long and painful process of seeking asylum elsewhere.

In 2017, the Canadian Council of Churches, Amnesty International Canada, and the Canadian Council for Refugees launched a legal challenge against the STCA arguing that the U.S. immigration system fails to meet necessary Canadian and international legal standards. This failure makes asylum seekers vulnerable to detention, solitary confinement, and wrongful return back to a country where they face the risk of persecution. Unfortunately, in 2023 the Supreme Court of Canada failed to strike down the STCA, and as a result, refugee claimants are sent back to the United States, a country that has proven itself to not be in compliance with the international norms of protection.

Notably, the Supreme Court did not find the agreement to be constitutional, meaning that the legislation is contrary to the rights and freedoms that are guaranteed to us all in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Recognizing this, the case was sent back to the Federal Court to determine whether the STCA violates equality provisions with respect to claims of gender-based violence.

Psalm 82:3-4 calls us to “Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” It encourages us to take action with compassion and work to help those who are fleeing violence and oppression of all kinds, including those facing gender-based violence. With the STCA in place, Canada is denying these women the safety and security that they need.

***Anna Miedema is the 2024/2025 Public Justice Intern at Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) working in refugee and migrant rights advocacy. She holds a Bachelors in Peace and Conflict Studies and Legal Studies.***

## PRAYER:

*Dear God, we pray for women all over the world who flee their countries in search of reprieve from violence and abuse. We pray that you will open the eyes of lawmakers and fill their hearts with compassion for those who need the safety and security that Canada can provide. Watch over these women as they journey. Uplift them and use us, this country, and our resources to help them heal.*

## CALLS TO ACTION:

- Learn more read CPJ's joint report with IJM: "A Call to Strengthen Canada's Protection to Central American Survivors of Gender-Based Violence"<sup>13</sup>.
- Sign a petition calling on the government of Canada to rescind the STCA. Amnesty International Petitions can be found at [takeaction.amnesty.ca](https://takeaction.amnesty.ca)<sup>14</sup>.
- Reach out to your Member of Parliament (MP). Tell them that you have learned about the harmful effects of the STCA on women fleeing Gender-Based Violence and ask them to advocate that the government rescind this agreement. You can find your MP by entering your postal code into this website: [ourcommons.ca/members/en](https://ourcommons.ca/members/en)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/mandate/policies-operational-instructions-agreements/agreements/safe-third-country-agreement.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/legal-policy/policies/Pages/GuideDir04.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/judge2023/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://freemigrationproject.org/know-your-court-asylum-denial-rates-vary-depending-on-court-location/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://cpj.ca/report/a-call-to-strengthen-canadas-protection-to-central-american-survivors-of-gender-based-violence/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://takeaction.amnesty.ca/page/103088/action/1?locale=en-US>

# FOOD INSECURITY AS A DRIVER OF GBV AND EARLY MARRIAGES | UNITED STATES

Day 7: December 1

At Growing Hope Globally, an organization in the United States that supports World Renew's food security programming in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, we believe that in a world of plenty, no person should go hungry. Access to enough nutritious food is something that many of us take for granted, along with the associated privileges that come with having enough food.

When I think about hunger, I often think about a response I would get from my father when, as a child, I would say, "That's not fair!" My father would look at me intently and respond, "Life isn't fair, but YOU be fair." Unfortunately, that is the truth. Life isn't fair. But we can do something about it.

As someone who has had the unfair privilege of growing up in North America, born to parents from the United States and Canada, I have never, and likely, will never, experience what it feels like to not be able to feed my children. I have not had to keep my children from school because I am unable to pay their school fees, and I have never considered marrying off any of my daughters, as children, to older men, so that I may be able to feed my other children from the dowry I know I'd receive. I have always had enough, more than enough, to eat and feed my family. I haven't had to make the difficult decisions that so many families around the world must make every single day.

Child marriage itself is a form of gender-based violence and girls who are married off before they turn 15 are 50% more likely to experience intimate partner violence than those who marry after the age of 18.

**And while child marriage is also rooted in cultural norms and behaviors that perpetuate the idea that women have less value than men, families experiencing food insecurity are more likely to marry off their daughters as a coping mechanism.**

In some cultures, marrying off a younger girl will result in a higher dowry for the family. Even in the absence of a dowry, the girls' parents know that their daughter will have another family to take care of her, leaving them with one less mouth to feed.

With my unfair privilege comes responsibility. As Christians, we recognize our calling as outlined in Isaiah 1:17: "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." At Growing Hope Globally, we encourage communities to support ending global hunger and become aware of the challenges, often felt more acutely by women and girls, that accompany the reality of living without enough to eat. I recently attended a Sharing the Harvest event in Yakima, Washington. Where one small rural congregation brought a community of over 300 people together from churches across Washington and Oregon for collective action in support of vulnerable girls in West Pokot, Kenya.



These volunteers packed apples that were donated by local orchards and loaded them into cars and vans for their church members who had purchased them. Each person had a unique and valuable role in making the project work. It was exciting to see the parking lot of this small rural church on top of the hill filled with cars and people, all ready to do something for good. One of the project leaders shared, "We show compassion and care for each other, not only through fundraising, but also through sharing our stories and building relationships. This makes the world smaller and builds the faith of everyone involved."

The statistics and challenges around global hunger, especially for women and girls, are overwhelming. They aren't fair, and it can feel hopeless. But I feel hopeful. I feel hopeful because together we can accomplish much. I invite your church and community to find a way to come together, to pool resources, and to build collective action for something you care about: to seek justice and defend the oppressed. Remember the responsibility that we each have, not to make life fair, but to be fair in our own actions. These actions multiplied bring me hope. And for that I give thanks to God.

***Kaitlyn Slate is the CEO and President of Growing Hope Globally, a Christian response to hunger, that links the grassroots energy and commitment of rural communities in the U.S. with the capability and desire of smallholder farmers in developing countries to grow lasting solutions to hunger.***

#### **PRAYER:**

*Lord, we thank you for the ways in which we see the generosity of your people on display. Thank you for their hearts of compassion and for the good work of Growing Hope Globally. May our own desire for justice grow, and may we gain your vision for how to grow the hope of all people. Amen.*

#### **CALL TO ACTION:**

Start your own apple, or orange, or bake sale. Bring your community together around a cause that supports women and girls. Use the event to bring awareness and raise support for this important work.



# FINDING LAS COMADRES | EL SALVADOR

Day 8: December 2



Marta's expressive eyes and big smile can brighten your day as you stop by her food stand. At 62, she works daily making delicious tortillas at a local market in Western El Salvador. The payment she receives from the stand's owner supports her grandchildren and daughter-in-law.

The market where Marta works is part of an informal economy characterized by lack of basic services and poverty overall. Poverty-related challenges have been present for most of Marta's life, but the most difficult challenge has been violence.

Listening to Marta's joyful laugh, you wouldn't imagine how much pain she endured for decades. "I suffered for 32 years," she remembers. "The father of my children used to humiliate me frequently and say I was worthless."

As Marta goes back in time, the expression in her eyes changes. "He used to hit me every time he got drunk." The worry and anxiety from those days is still fresh in her mind. "Every Saturday was the same. He would get drunk. This made me so worried that I would lose my appetite. Every time he arrived home drunk, he would use his machete to beat the door and the walls of the house. Then he would start threatening me. I used to lock up myself and my children to protect all of us. Other times, I would lock my children so he wouldn't hit them. Then, he ended up hitting me."

Without anybody who would hear or help her, Marta endured the beatings in silence. "I was suffering, and I had no support from my family." In constant anguish and fear, Marta's life went on without hope for a change. Tears fill Marta's eyes as she recalls one of those dreadful nights. "One time he beat me with the flat side of his machete about 15 times. Then, he went to bed and fell asleep."

That night, Marta's heart was in despair. "I got up in the middle of the night and went outside. I sat in the darkness and said to myself: 'This isn't a life worth living. This is too much suffering.' In that moment I thought the best scenario was to no longer be alive. I prayed to God and told him that dying was my last resource."

Marta's experience is a common one for many women in El Salvador. A 2023 study conducted by IJM in the country found that over a third (33%) of Salvadoran women have experienced sexual or physical violence at least once in their lifetime.

Even worse, violence against women is not limited to certain ages. It is present throughout their lives. According to INFOSEGURO, as girls turn into teenagers and then adults, violence persists and manifests in various forms.<sup>15</sup> Social norms portray aggressiveness towards women as acceptable behavior, so many women accept suffering as their fate.

Marta bore physical pain and the trauma for over three decades until her partner passed away. The wounds of violence have left a mark on her, but today, she can share her story.

In 2019, Marta was contacted by ASAPROSAR, an IJM community partner in El Salvador. Marta's grandchildren are beneficiaries of one of the projects in ASAPROSAR's portfolio. Only this time, the invitation was especially for her. They told Marta about a group of women called Las Comadres.

Created as part of a project supported by IJM and co-designed with ASAPROSAR, Las Comadres sounded like a safe place for Marta. Specially designed for women who have experienced physical or sexual violence, Las Comadres helps their members connect, share, and heal from their trauma. Marta knew she needed this.

Marta joined the group and received psychological attention from IJM's partner and emotional support from other survivors. She regained her self-confidence and joy in life. She learned that it was possible to move forward and overcome the fears and doubts in her mind. "Las Comadres helped me a lot. I found great support in them. They came and hugged me and cried with me. I thank God for finding this program. I don't know where I'd be without it." Marta, like other women, began her journey of healing.

Today, Marta is the director of one group belonging to Las Comadres. She is committed to helping other women seek justice and feel appreciated and restored. As she continues working at her food stand, she exclaims with a smile, “I used to be told that I was worthless, but now I know my worth! I know I am valuable. Today, I feel free, happy and confident. I know that I can help other women.”

***Written by International Justice Mission, based on an interview with Marta.***

#### **PRAYER:**

*God of redemption, thank you for giving Marta years of joy after years of much suffering. We pray for those currently experiencing violence, that you would surround them with your love and bring others alongside them to hear their stories and support them through their pain. We ask for humility to learn from our elders and apply their wisdom and understanding in our own lives. Please give us the bravery we need to be vulnerable and build strong communities. Amen.*

#### **CALLS TO ACTION:**

- Take the opportunity to tell the women and girls in your life how much they mean to you; you don't know what they are going through and how much your words might impact them.
- Consider starting or attending an intergenerational group for women in your community. Create a welcoming space for older and younger women to share stories and learn from each other.

<sup>15</sup> <https://infosegura.org/region/el-continuum-de-la-violencia-contra-las-mujeres-la-region-centroamericana>

# HOUSING AND SETTLEMENT SUPPORT FOR THOSE FLEEING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE | CANADA

Day 9: December 3

Canada has long maintained its reputation as a country that is welcoming to refugees. We have been recognized globally as a leader in refugee resettlement, with programs that provide life-saving pathways for those who need protection overseas. Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs), Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugees (BVORs) and Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) receive essential financial, social and settlement support to facilitate a fulsome welcome to their new home. However, no similar system exists for refugee claimants—those who arrive seeking protection at or within the Canadian borders. Without a comprehensive national plan for refugee claimants that provides housing and settlement support, claimants are left with inadequate assistance and made vulnerable to exploitation and homelessness.

In the summer of 2023, hundreds of asylum seekers were forced to sleep on the streets of Toronto, many of whom were women or LGBTQ people and a majority of whom were racialized people from East Africa. The city, which saw a record number of refugee claimants, was unable to keep up with the demand for shelter and has repeatedly called on the federal government for a coordinated and comprehensive response for those who are seeking asylum. Currently, the federal government relies on costly hotel rooms for housing and ad-hoc funding injections into the Interim Housing Assistance Program. These actions are primarily reactive measures that have proven time and time again to fall short of the support that municipalities need and do not consider the diverse needs of refugee claimants.

The impacts of this negligence are compounded for claimants fleeing GBV in search of asylum. According to the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), 18% of finalized asylum claims in 2019 and 2020 were due to GBV. Once a claim is made, it can take approximately two years to receive a decision from the IRB. In this period, claimants must navigate complex legal, housing, and employment systems with very limited assistance. Research shows that housing instability can be the result of trauma and can contribute to trauma. This is of concern for women and gender-diverse refugees who have pre-migration experiences of trauma that are then exposed to the traumatic stress caused by housing insecurity upon arrival in Canada. Without a comprehensive plan for refugee claimants, Canada fails to provide essential support for those fleeing persecution. The lack of culturally appropriate and adequate trauma-informed support fails women and gender-diverse individuals seeking sanctuary in Canada and keeps survivors in a cycle of violence.

The Canadian government needs to implement a comprehensive plan that supports the housing and social needs of refugee claimants. This plan must be informed by organizations that work directly with refugee claimants as well as refugee claimants themselves, who are best positioned to articulate their needs upon claiming asylum in Canada. Including the voice of organizations that serve refugee claimant populations is essential as they must navigate and pay close attention to the complex social inequalities present in their clients' lives. A policy response that is intersectional and wide-reaching is not possible without the expertise of organizations that serve refugee claimant populations.

***Asvini Uthayakumaran is the 2023/2024 Public Justice Intern working on migrant and refugee rights at CPJ. She holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science and a master's degree in Global Development Studies.***



photo credit: John Englart

## PRAYER:

*Loving and compassionate God, we pray for all those suffering from precarious housing situations—whether they be on the street, in shelters, or moving from place to place. We pray especially for those women, and in some cases, their children, who have come to Canada to seek freedom from violence and find themselves sleeping on sidewalks. We pray that you protect them and their families from the trauma that comes from living in shelters and on the streets, or from being precariously housed in temporary situations. Draw near to them and give them hope.*

*We admit that we often take for granted the blessing of a safe and warm place to call home, especially in these winter months. Please forgive us.*

*We pray that you would open the eyes of policymakers to see this injustice and that they would be compelled to act and ensure that everyone has a safe place to call home. Amen.*

## CALLS TO ACTION:

- To learn more about the intersection between GBV experienced by refugees and immigrants and homelessness in Canada, read “Exploring the Intersections: Immigrant and refugee women fleeing violence and experiencing homelessness in Canada” at [gbvlearningnetwork.ca](https://gbvlearningnetwork.ca).<sup>16</sup>
- Support the Canadian Council of Refugees (CCR) Asylum with Dignity Campaign by reading and signing CPJ’s interfaith call to action: [cpj.ca/asylum](https://cpj.ca/asylum)
- Support local organizations that provide critical settlement and shelter support to refugees. Volunteer with them, pray for them, or support them financially.

<sup>16</sup> [https://gbvlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/reports/report\\_17\\_1.html](https://gbvlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/reports/report_17_1.html)



# SEEKING SOLUTIONS TO INFANTICIDE | WEST AFRICA

Day 10: December 4

In one area within the Sahel Region, many vulnerable people have fled to communities, displaced by surrounding conflicts. World Renew and our local partner have been delving into the vast array of challenges confronting women and girls in these areas to teach us how to come alongside them with effective support.

What sort of challenges are we talking about? A sentence from a recent gender assessment of World Renew's programming paints a picture of life's gauntlet for many girls and women: "Retrogressive cultural practices continue to widen the gap in inequality and expose more women, girls, and youth to sexual abuse, exploitation, early and child marriages, femicide, abductions, kidnappings, and recruitment into militia groups."

Read that sentence again, slowly. Now imagine civil unrest or terrorist activities breaking out in your city or county, and you becoming immersed in these as the daily realities of your family, church and community. How vulnerable might you feel? As a woman? As an adolescent girl or child? How enraged, desperate, or resolved to change these realities might you be? How might you go about sounding the awareness alarm?

A rising concern in the region is the killing of illegitimate newborns, also known as infanticide. In one account, a girl chose to keep her child with counsel from her pastor, yet "her family killed the baby." Rather than being an exception, there are "numerous cases where a mother takes her daughter to the hospital to give birth, only for the baby to be 'eliminated' on the way home."

While driven by a variety of social, cultural or economic factors, infanticide, or child abandonment is exacerbated by the use of rape as a weapon of war. Ethno-religious or inter-tribal conflict can see militants or soldiers sexually assault girls and women as an exercise of power, and impregnation as a means of sowing discord. The United Nations has indicated in a report highlighting the prevalence of sexual violence in Ukraine, Haiti, and Ethiopia, that "the horrifying use of sexual violence to torment civilian populations; punish ethnic, political or cultural rivals; and assert and maintain control" is a common thread. Chad's government has put some of its own soldiers on trial for alleged rapes in Niger, including one of an 11-year-old girl.

While World Renew and our partners respond to the immediate crisis through the provision of basic necessities, these situations highlight the urgent need to address the immediate humanitarian crisis while finding ways to sustain long-term development and initiate peacebuilding and justice. We are working to find ways to engage youth for psychosocial support and empower them to become change agents in their communities, steering them away from militant or criminal activities.



Some solutions we are working on to address the escalating violations of women and girls' rights include efforts to equip women and girls with knowledge of and recourse to legal rights and protections; the establishment of youth clubs to keep displaced boys and girls active; and teaching healthy relationships and life skills. We are seeking to engage community health volunteers to provide services to pregnant women and new mothers. There is also the critical need to develop safe shelters and enhanced mental health support for displaced communities.

As is evident by just a glance at the situation, the work ahead in supporting local communities as they rise to overcome these challenges is monumental. By becoming aware of these daunting realities ourselves and raising awareness in our churches, schools or places of business, we can begin to spark reflection leading to action. Awareness is like oxygen fanning the flame of activism. How will people care about the plight of others if they remain in the cold?

***Jamie McIntosh is the Canadian Executive CoDirector of World Renew.***

**PRAYER:**

*Lord, help us to learn with faith and love to spark the light and warmth of hope in action. Amen.*

**CALLS TO ACTION:**

- Raise awareness about the use of rape as a weapon of war and assertion of dominance.
- Educate men and boys about consent, power, and the value of women and girls and address harmful norms of machismo, male dominance, and power over women.

# OUR STORIES MATTER | GUATEMALA

Day 11: December 5

I grew up in a dysfunctional home where alcohol and mistreatment of women were common. I don't remember how old I was when the abuse began. By the age of five I was sexually assaulted repeatedly by someone at home. Later in life, I realized that all the girls of the family went through sexual and physical violence at home, because it was "normal," it was an everyday thing that happens to everybody.

When I was seven years old, my mom decided to leave my father because she could no longer tolerate his violence. But she had seven children and no means to provide for them nor for herself, thus she decided to leave me with some relatives. After three years living with them, I started suffering sexually abuse again by somebody in the house.

The abuse lasted until I turned 14. As a result of it, I became pregnant. It was scandalous when the neighbors found out. How could a girl known as the one who always stayed home be pregnant? Something was wrong. As I revealed who the aggressor was—my relative's husband—I was blamed of the situation and kicked out of that house.



I turned to my mother for help. All she could do to help me was to file a complaint against the abuser. My mother could not provide for me, and I would not return to my relative's house, so I looked for a job—babysitting—because that was what I had done when I lived with my relatives. But no one gave me a job since I was 14 and pregnant.

Fortunately, I found an elderly and gracious couple who wanted to help. They hired me and encouraged me to continue my studies and find a better job. I continued studying and working, and found a place for me and my son. I finished

high school and got my bachelor's degree in administration. Those years were exhausting but worthwhile because I continued with my life and cared for my son, who became my reason to move forward.

In 2018, I joined Mi Historia Importa (My Story Matters), and it changed my life. The group is a movement that brings together people who have suffered distressing experiences such as sexual violence. It's a community, a safe place where survivors of violence are warmly welcomed into a family where we all understand, motivate, and care for each other. Here, I found an emotional remedy I hadn't found anywhere else, and I was able to grow both in knowledge and spiritually. Most importantly, I learned to stop being a victim.

The group trained me to advocate for children in my society. Sexual violence in my country is taboo: It is both kept silent and perceived as "something normal." People don't talk about it and society doesn't even measure the impact and the wounds it can have on a girl's life. By telling my story, I want to stop this harm; I want to prevent this from happening. There are many stories like mine in this country, so by sharing mine, I want to bring hope. Although it still hurts, I have overcome. Most importantly for my life, I forgave. Why? Because I could not live with such a burden. I could not have experienced a good life if I had kept that pain inside. The solution was to forgive and see the hope that the elderly couple brought to my life. They were sent by God! They showed up because God put them there.

My story might be a breath of hope for a victim, but the main reason why I choose to share my story is prevention. Protection comes from knowledge. If you do not know your rights, you cannot protect yourself or others. It is essential to advocate and inform people about their rights. Information will help communities protect women and children.

I want to tell girls who have suffered and are going through a healing process, "Be brave. There is a solution. Take the lead in your life because no one else will do it. Ask for help. There will be somebody near you to help you, but you need to speak up and tell them what you are going through. Be brave! You will overcome this!" To the women who are victims, I want to say, "Give

yourself grace. Love yourself, know yourself, and give yourself the chance to be happy—because it is possible.” That is who I am and what I do in Mi Historia Importa.

Since our movement is supported by International Justice Mission, we feel IJM has our backs. I feel confident to share my story, and I want to do it to eradicate violence in Guatemala. I’m sure that we can do it.

***Betzy\* (70 years old) is a volunteer and a survivor of sexual abuse, and part of the Mi Historia Importa (My Story Matters) movement in Guatemala. Interview conducted by International Justice Mission.***

#### **PRAYER:**

*God of grace, thank you for showering Betzy with love and acceptance through the elderly couple and Mi Historia Importa. Please help us to become more and more like you, showing up generously in our communities. Help us to overcome evil with good always, finding ways to prevent violence in our communities. Thank you for always being with us. Amen.*

#### **CALLS TO ACTION:**

- Know your rights. Read this reflection and advocacy guide and share it with your community.
- Is there someone you can open up your home, resources, or network to? Your act of generosity may change the trajectory of their life, like the elderly couple did for Betzy.
- How can you help others take the lead in their own lives? If you are in a position of power, are you allowing others to make their own choices, or are you making choices for them?



# THE NATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE AND ACTION ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN | CANADA

Day 12: December 6

On December 6th, Canada recognizes the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women. Many of these stories come from countries far away. It is important to remember that horrific acts of violence against women also occur in Canada.



photo credit: Shane T. McCoy

This day was set in memory of the École Polytechnique de Montreal massacre in Canada. In December of 1989, a man entered a mechanical engineering class and separated the men from the women. He let the men leave the room. He then opened fire on the women. He proceeded to move through the campus, injuring and traumatizing 27 women and killing 14. "I am fighting feminism," he said and proceeded to spray bullets from his semi-automatic rifle.

This attack, the second deadliest shooting in Canada's history, was motivated by one man's deep hatred for and anger toward women. Unfortunately, he was not alone in his violent and hateful actions. In 2018, a woman was killed every 2.5 days in Canada. Between 2011 and 2021, 21% of the women killed were Indigenous, despite Indigenous women comprising only 5% of the female population.

Unfortunately, femicide, the killing of women for no other reason other than them being female, is a practice that continues to increase globally. In 2024, it was reported that over 100,000 women were intentionally killed. Six women are killed every hour by men around the world, most by men in their own family or their partners.

John 13: 34-35 tells us how to respond to such senseless violence: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

It is easy to love those who we deem as worthy of love: those who are victims, those who suffer, and those close to us. Harder, however, is to love those who are harming the victims and causing the suffering. Matthew 5: 43-44 tells us: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." This is an important reminder. As we pray for the victims and survivors of this violence, let us also pray for those who are perpetrating this violence. Let us pray that their hearts will be changed and softened to the calls to love their neighbour.

**Today we remember and lament the intentional killings of Geneviève Bergeron, Hélène Colga, Nathalie Croteau, Barbara Daigneault, Anne-Marie Edward, Maud Haviernick, Maryse Laganière, Maryse Leclair, Anne-Marie Lemay, Sonia Pelletier, Michèle Richard, Annie St-Arneault, Annie Turcotte, Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz, and all other femicide victims across the world.**

***Anna Miedema is the 2024/2025 Public Justice Intern at Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) working in refugee and migrant rights advocacy. She holds a Bachelors in Peace and Conflict Studies and Legal Studies.***

**PRAYER:**

*Dear God, today, we remember the lives lost at École Polytechnique and all women affected by violence. We also remember the lives of hundreds of missing and murdered Metis, Inuit, and First Nations women and girls, the original caretakers of the land we now benefit from. We hold their memories close and pray for their families, wishing them comfort and strength. We pray that those stolen sisters who still have not been found will be returned to their families.*

*Help us to be voices for change, to stand up against violence, and to create a safer world for all women. May we turn our pain into purpose and work together for love and justice. Amen.*

**CALLS TO ACTION:**

- Wear a white ribbon today to show that you are remembering and taking action against gender-based violence.
- Observe a moment of silence at 11:00 am.
- Attend a vigil in your community.
- Consider supporting, with time, money, or other means, local organizations in your community that support victims of gender-based violence.

# GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN CRISIS: LESSONS FROM THE NANJING MASSACRE | CHINA

Day 13: December 7

The ways that horrors repeat themselves through history give us reasons to lament. Yet when we reflect on Scripture and look at responses to those horrors, we can also find reasons to hope and ways to learn. Today, we reflect on the Nanjing Massacre, a mass killing, looting, and rape by the Japanese army that took place in China in 1937. We also reflect on current humanitarian crises and Isaiah 1:17: “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.”

The parallels between Nanjing and contemporary conflicts are stark and sobering, yet God grants us divine compassion throughout history and today. Today, God weeps with us as we continue to witness sexual violence used as a weapon of war. As we work with students, alumni, and charities around the world, we see reports from conflict zones such as Sudan, Haiti, Myanmar, and Ukraine that highlight the persistent use of rape and sexual assault as tools of terror and control. Intimidation with weapons, exploitation of chaos during conflict, and the targeting of vulnerable populations are tactics used by perpetrators both then and now.

In the painful weeks of the Nanjing Massacre, faithful women like Minnie Vautrin and Tsen Shui-fang became tireless beacons of hope. They collaborated with others to protect and provide humanitarian aid to women and children at Ginling College. The college, once filled with the laughter and dreams of aspiring young women, became a solemn sanctuary for thousands of refugee women and children fleeing the violence. At its peak, Ginling College sheltered up to 10,000 women and children.<sup>15</sup>

In Tamaki Matsuoka’s book *Torn Memories of Nanking*, Zhang Xiuhong recalls being an 11-year-old child during the Nanjing Massacre and shares her traumatic experience. She did not make it into Ginling College for protection. She endured sexual assault and witnessed death and torture all around her. Zhang Xiuhong shared her experience with the hope that the next generation of Chinese and Japanese people will reconcile and build peace.

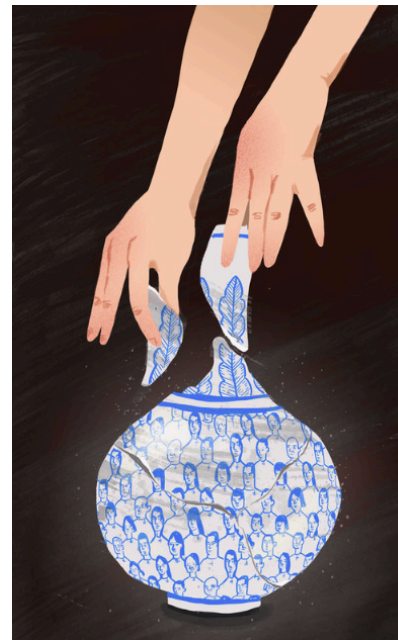
In their experience in 1937 and how they responded then and after, Tamaki Matsuoka, Minnie Vautrin, and Tsen Shui-fang embody that Isaiah verse: Learn to do right. Seek justice.

Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow. This biblical mandate points us toward key areas to address sexual violence, with learning from research and history that we can apply to contemporary contexts (see below).

For those of us who aren’t doing these actions directly, we can encourage, support, pray, and continue to listen for the ways that allow us to live Isaiah 1:17 as individuals, families, churches, communities, and organizations so that we grow as caring communities.

***Joy Lee, Kent Annan, and Jamie Aten are part of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute (Wheaton College), which offers an M.A. in Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership that includes an Anti-Human Trafficking and Gender-based Violence course. Joy also writes and speaks about GBV issues and faith.***

**“Asia’s history sits like a porcelain vase that has been broken...But it is still possible to piece it back together with the cooperation of all countries and citizens involved.”**



Josephine Guan, *Piecing Together Peace*, 2015, illustration, ALPHA Education, History + Art = Peace Art Contest

## CALLS TO ACTION

### **Learn to Do Right - Establish Safety**

People like Minnie Vautrin and Tsen Shui-fang at Ginling College find their modern counterparts in humanitarian workers who establish safe spaces and provide aid in current conflict zones. Organizations can deepen their understanding of guidelines for integrating gender-based violence interventions in humanitarian action to prevent and mitigate gender-based violence and promote resilience and sustainable solutions.

### **Seek Justice - Document Eyewitness Testimonies**

The role of documentation and testimony, exemplified by Tamaki Matsuoka's work to collect survivors' and perpetrators' stories from the Nanjing Massacre, remains crucial for addressing sexual violence in modern conflicts. Often at great risk, international organizations, human rights groups, and courageous individuals continue to gather evidence and testimonies. When done in a trauma-informed and culturally responsive approach, these efforts are vital for seeking justice, raising awareness, and preventing future atrocities.

### **Defend the Oppressed - Close the Gap Between Policy and Practice**

Despite international laws and UN resolutions condemning these crimes against humanity, the gap between policy and practice remains wide. Research by Hana Salama suggests that policymakers should consider that most sexual violence testimonies include the threat of a weapon—and thus address the correlation between small arms and light weapons (SALW) and sexual violence in conflict with practices like targeted arms embargoes in sanctions.

### **Take Up the Cause - Provide Trauma-Informed Care**

As we witness in Zhang Xiuhong's testimony decades after the Nanjing Massacre, the long-term impact of conflict-related sexual violence underscores the need for sustained survivor support and empowerment. In addition to immediate medical and psychological care, long-term efforts should address stigma and harmful cultural norms, provide economic support, and facilitate collective healing.

<sup>15</sup> Undaunted Women of Nanking



# GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE EXPERIENCED BY MIGRANT WORKERS | CANADA

Day 14: December 8

It is important to remember that gender-based violence doesn't just occur in countries far from our own. It happens in our country, province, city, and neighbourhood. While Canada can provide a haven for refugees fleeing gender-based violence, it can also expose migrants to that very same violence.

Currently, 1.3 million people are in Canada on temporary work permits.<sup>16</sup> Many of them come to Canada through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). These temporary foreign workers work in various essential sectors, such as healthcare, the restaurant industry, the construction industry, and the agricultural industry.

TFWPs like the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) are structured in a manner that fosters an environment ripe for abusive work conditions. Programs such as the SAWP are, by and large, employer-specific work permit regimes. The tying of a migrant worker to their employer facilitates a power imbalance that gives way to rampant abuse. Agricultural workers often live in accommodations provided by their employers, making their access to work and housing reliant on their employers. Tomoya Obokata, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery calls this system "a breeding ground for contemporary slavery."<sup>17</sup> TFWPs are subject to abusive conditions such as unsafe housing, violence, surveillance, and the denial of basic rights such as minimum wage and overtime pay. Many migrant workers are unable to freely voice their concerns and assert their rights to employers due to fears of deportation.

Abuse experienced by TFWs at the hands of their employers is compounded for those who occupy multiple intersections of oppression. It is no surprise that most of this abuse is experienced by women and gender-diverse individuals. Special Rapporteur Obokata



photo credit: Lance Cheung

spoke with migrant workers in the agriculture sector in Canada. His report confirms that women and gender-diverse migrant workers reported sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse. These acts of violence were often accompanied by threats that the employer would withdraw their work contact if they reported the abuser. If their work contract and permit were revoked, they would have no choice but to return home or wait six months without income in hopes of receiving a new contract with a new employer.

Many of these women and gender-diverse migrant workers harvest the food we purchase and eat daily. We must not forget that while Canada is part of the solution for those fleeing gender-based violence, it is also part of the problem. Creating accessible pathways to permanent residence for all migrants and immediately implementing open work permits to all migrant workers, regardless of national origin or occupation, are two critical steps in ensuring that the rights of women and gender-diverse migrant workers are protected and upheld.

***Anna Miedema is the 2024/2025 Public Justice Intern at Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) working in refugee and migrant rights advocacy. She holds a Bachelors in Peace and Conflict Studies and Legal Studies.***

## **PRAYER:**

*Dear God, we pray today that you will be with all those who have traveled and are seeking work in Canada. We pray that their employer will treat them as equals, with compassion and respect. We pray for the women stuck in abusive situations. We pray that they will be able to seek help, that their abusers will be held accountable for their actions, and that their hearts will be changed. We pray that you will work in the hearts of decision-makers to make the necessary changes to protect those seeking work in Canada, specifically women, from gender-based violence. Amen.*

## **CALLS TO ACTION:**

- To learn more, read our policy brief on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, “Canada’s Disposable Workforce: Addressing Abuses Against Migrant Workers” at [cpj.ca/report/canadas-disposable-workforce](https://www.cpj.ca/report/canadas-disposable-workforce)
- Join in on the #StatusForAll campaign. Advocate to your Member of Parliament for broad regularization. This would grant temporary foreign workers an accessible pathway to permanent residency, entitling them to a minimum standard of rights such as family reunification, choice of residence, the ability to switch employers, and equal access to health care. It would also allow them the freedom to leave and report abusive employers. See this resource from Kairos Canada: [kairoscanada.org/what-we-do/migrant-justice/take-action](https://kairoscanada.org/what-we-do/migrant-justice/take-action)
- Learn about and support organizations that provide resources and services to migrant workers in Canada and fight for their justice. See how you can support these organizations. Find a list of organizations across Canada here: [migrantworker.ca/for-migrant-workers/organization](https://migrantworker.ca/for-migrant-workers/organization)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/liberal-temporary-foreign-worker-changes-1.7304556>  
<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/liberal-temporary-foreign-worker-changes-1.7304556>

# SILENCE KILLS BUT COURAGE BRINGS LIFE | BOLIVIA

Day 15: December 9

My father abandoned our family when I was little, so my mom, my sister, and I lived with relatives. My mom worked, and my aunt supervised my sister and me. Her husband seemed kind to us, he was always interested in playing with my sister and me. He would hug and kiss us. As an eight-year-old who never received much attention from the rest of the family, I wasn't feeling comfortable with his level of affection, but I kept trying to convince myself that maybe it was normal—maybe that was the way people showed love. I tried not to worry when he touched me in certain places I didn't like. But things changed.

One afternoon, I was home with just my uncle. I was bored and went to his room to ask if I could play a video game. He answered, "Ok, but first, we will need to do something." Then he forced me to do horrible things that hurt me. He [sexually] abused me that day. After that, I tried to avoid him, but he always found ways to catch me alone to continue hurting me.

When I was 14, my seven-year-old sister asked if it was normal to "play" in a certain way. When I heard her describe the things our uncle forced her to do, the memories of my abuse hit me like a tsunami, and profound guilt overwhelmed me. I believed that what happened to my little sister was my fault for not saying anything. I thought if I had spoken up, I could have protected her.

My mom filed a complaint and confronted my uncle, but the rest of the family begged her not to press charges. My mom agreed—if my aunt and my uncle would pay for therapy. After a few months of therapy sessions, my sister seemed to forget everything. And that is how the rest of the family pretended nothing had happened. I remained silent.

When my sister turned 12, her memories of the abuse resurfaced. She became anxious, depressed and even developed eating disorders. My aunt paid for more therapy, but my sister didn't improve. She told us the pain was too much. Sometimes she hurt herself. With grief and love, I hugged her and said, "We will get through this together. If I am trying to overcome it, so can you." She insisted that our uncle belonged in jail and asked why she was worth so little that nobody had done anything. I always made excuses for why the case would never go forward, like that we didn't have

money for a lawyer. At the time, we were living in my grandfather's house, so if we reported my uncle, we risked being kicked out.

One morning, I opened my sister's bedroom door. That's when I saw her body. My sister had been asking for help in so many ways, and nobody was able to hear her.

[After my sister's suicide] and living in depression for months, I was tired of my lack of courage. I started seeking help to report my uncle but the process was a nightmare. Many officials didn't want to receive my complaint, so I went from one place to another. The people I encountered lacked empathy towards my situation. Finally, my complaint was received, and I was referred to a psychologist for an evaluation. This was the first time I was sharing the details of my abuse, at the age of 23.



The psychologist directed me to IJM, where I met with the leader of Phoenix Group [Global Survivor Network Group in Bolivia]. He listened to me and said, "You have two options: you can either cry or move forward." I responded that I choose to move forward, and he replied, "I invite you to our Phoenix Group's meeting today at 5pm."

Sharing my story with Phoenix Group was not easy, but the [survivors] held my hand, hugged me, and cried with me. I was amazed at how they smiled, and how inclusive they were. I wonder how different things might be if my sister had found IJM before.

I have been doing group therapy sessions for a while, and more recently, with our Phoenix Group leader. Yes, I still need support, but I also

see the progress I made. I'm getting ready to defend my thesis and finish my degree. Yet, as I see all the gaps and injustice in our society, I am also considering studying law or psychology because I want to help people.

I want to say to anyone experiencing sexual violence, "It wasn't your fault, you didn't ask for anything bad to happen to you. And the fact that you didn't say anything to anyone, or that you didn't scream or resist, does not mean you consented. It was not your fault. Your heart should be at peace because you didn't deserve it. You will find the path to healing and overcome."

***Billie's\* story is told in first person, based on an interview conducted in March of 2024 by IJM Bolivia. The perpetrator has been apprehended and the legal case is ongoing. Billie is being supported by an attorney who partners with IJM Bolivia. She is still waiting for justice for her and her sister.***

#### **PRAYER:**

*God of healing, listening to Billie share about her life and her sister's death leaves us without words. We sit in silence like Job's friends (Job 2:13) unable to imagine the depth of suffering someone so young has been through. We pray for deep healing for Billie and a swift conviction, allowing the abuse to truly be put into the past. May hope for the future fill Billie's heart and mind today and always. Amen.*

#### **CALLS TO ACTION:**

- Gender-based violence can have long term mental health consequences, including self-harm and suicide. If you or a loved one you know is facing these challenges, seek support immediately and create a long-term mental health plan.
- Email your regional or national government representative to advocate for specialized training for judges, police and government officials who interact with cases of gender-based and intimate partner violence.
- Support organizations like International Justice Mission Canada who provide legal aid and psychological supports to victims of gender-based violence around the world.



# WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS | GLOBAL

Day 16: December 10

30 years ago, a conference room in Beijing, China, was filled with over 17,000 representatives from 189 countries chanting these five words: "Women's Rights are Human Rights!" What new hope! What joy! The Beijing Platform for Action was created, serving as a landmark framework for advancing women's rights and gender equality worldwide. After five decades of trying to find a global framework, the world had found the magic wand that would reevaluate the position of women in society and bring gender equality issues into the mainstream to accelerate sustainable development and peace. One of the action areas of the Beijing Platform for Action was protection of women from violence and abuse.

Today is International Human Rights Day, and it is also the last day of 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence. International Human Rights Day is commemorated globally to celebrate the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a universally accepted rights and responsibilities framework born in 1948 from the ashes of World War II and under the shadow of the very worst of humanity with the promise of equal and inalienable rights. Yet today more than ever, this ideal of universal rights enjoyed equally by all people everywhere remains a pipe dream. Our world is grappling with various crises—climate, conflict, post-pandemic economic downturn, pushback and backlash on women's rights, poverty, and inequality—all of which affect women and girls everywhere disproportionately.

These crises keep many awake in the night, trying to answer these two questions:

- What do women and girls need to do to be free from violence?
- What is the role of Christian communities and development organizations like World Renew in eliminating this scourge?

Here's how I attempt to answer these questions.

What do women and girls need to do to be free from violence and abuse? The answer to this ought to be quick and simple: Nothing!



**Women and girls, just like all other human creations of God, are born with inherent dignity and freedom from abuse, which they earned automatically for being human beings.**

But we live in a broken world, where human rights are far from being a reality for millions of women and girls, their bodies battlefields and weapons of war. They are often viewed merely as economic assets, sold and exchanged to save their families from famine or for the pleasure of men in instances of sex trafficking. They are to be seen but not heard. They are subjected to harmful cultural practices that they did not shape.

In the next number of paragraphs, you will get to read about the global context of Women's rights abuses and GBV with examples from World Renew's programs. In remote villages in Lao, customary law prevails and is driven by patriarchal and cultural norms. In the Hmong ethnic group, married women leave their birth homes and move in with their husbands' families. They are then embedded in their husband's family in multiple ways, and they are often not able to take part in decision-making in the home. When these women experience violence, they have no recourse to justice as local laws prevail. Furthermore, they often feel unable to speak out in their context. At most, the village mediation unit would moderate in cases of disputes, but it is dominated by men. The other barrier is that they are unable to return to their birth homes or villages as the belief is that their spirit has left already after marriage.

Women are significantly lacking at decision-making tables. Currently only 13 countries out of 193 have female heads of government. Although the number of females in legislatures is slightly higher, it's still far less than would be equitable.

**How then do we expect the laws created in these predominantly patriarchal contexts to have the best interests of women and girls in all their intersectionalities when they are absent from decision-making tables?**

In many contexts across the Global South, gender inequality and patriarchal norms have led to significant disparities in opportunities and resources between men and women. This imbalance manifests in low female representation in decision-making roles, limited access to employment and social services, and high rates of teen pregnancy, child marriage, and intimate partner violence. The situation is exacerbated by environmental challenges such as drought, which disproportionately affects women and girls in rural areas. As water sources dry up, women and girls are forced to travel longer distances to find water, increasing their vulnerability to gender-based

violence. The scarcity of resources also leads to desperate measures, such as early marriages and transactional sex as families struggle to survive.

In October, World Renew participated in a Women's Human Rights Training for ecumenical partners in Geneva, Switzerland. During the training, participants visited the proceedings of the CEDAW Committee (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). CEDAW is the human rights body responsible for holding states accountable for implementing women's rights and achieving gender equality. Each country is obligated to report progress to the CEDAW committee every four years.

It was shocking to learn at the CEDAW committee that despite their economic status, some countries, like Japan, are still lagging in enacting laws and practices that protect women and girls. It was only in 2023 that Japan raised the age of sexual consent from 13 to 16, leaving girls vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.

Throughout the week, we heard gripping accounts of neglected conflicts and their effects on women. Participants from South Sudan questioned whether women and the people of Sudan were even considered human due to the complex challenges they face, which remain invisible to the rest of the world.

Women from Papua New Guinea shared how marginalized Indigenous communities continue to suffer multiple human rights abuses and restrictions as they pursue their full independence. Femicide and sexual violence continue to increase in Latin and Central America, compounded by gang violence in countries such as Honduras and Haiti. In Guatemala, discrimination against Indigenous women persists, with these women remaining underrepresented in leadership positions at all levels. In East Africa, sexual and physical abuse within intimate relationships is alarmingly high. East Africa also has significant rates of child marriage, with around 35% of girls married before the age of 18, exposing them to early pregnancies and domestic violence.

### PRAYER:

*Loving Creator, the prophet said in Isaiah 1:17, "Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." Make us courageous in speaking out and taking action against gender-based violence. May we push for progress and not be discouraged when conflict, harmful cultural practices, and politics push back. Give us hope, renewed creativity, and passion to continue to defending the vulnerable. Amen.*

### CALLS TO ACTION:

- Take approaches that are survivor-led, participatory, and multisectoral. Leaving out those who are most impacted by GBV from the decision-making table is treating the symptoms rather than the root cause. We must work in a holistic way, seeing each of these challenges as parts of the whole and addressing each of them in collaboration.
- Accountability is key. Hold yourself, the charitable sector, and governments to account to ensure we all fulfill our obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of women and protect them from violence.

Economic crises, political turmoil, retrogressive cultural norms, and mental health crises have escalated femicide in these contexts.

So if women's rights are indeed human rights, and if the world continues to ignore those rights in so many contexts, what does that mean for Christians?

**The idea of dignity, which is the basis of any human right, has a long history that goes back to the fundamental Christian teaching that all human beings have an intrinsic value and are created morally equal.**

(Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28-29)

David McIlroy, a Christian and barrister, notes repeatedly in his work *The Theology and Philosophy of Human Rights* that justice matters enormously to God. Jesus, upon his return to Nazareth from 40 days of prayer and fasting, was very deliberate in selecting the scripture that he shared:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:14-21)

This is Jesus's blueprint for our mission on earth as Christians. Armed with this truth and having demystified that human rights and our values as Christians are in fact complementary, let us go out there and proactively and with courage, to uphold, protect and respect the rights of women and girls, especially their right to safety from violence and abuse.

***Kagwiria Muturia serves as Head of Justice and Peace Programs (Interim) at World Renew. This reflection was written with contributions from regional gender advisors Helen Catton, Wendy Vado, Mwenya Chiti, Melissa Yakubu, and Ruth Kayima.***



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