



# Protection from violence against women in forced displacement: Integrating religion into intersectional and socioecological approaches

## Executive summary

The research project that informed this brief deployed intersectional and socioecological analysis of violence against women (VAW) in forced migration and identified two aspects of religious influences on survivors' experiences as: 1) a vulnerability intersecting with other factors, and 2) a resilience resource.

The study indicates humanitarian and forced migration policy and practice insufficiently account for internal and external religious factors intersecting with gender, race and other identity markers in VAW experience. Practitioners engage with religion selectively across a religious dis/engagement continuum: from avoiding religion, reacting to religion in instrumentalist and pragmatic ways, to actively working with religion.

The extent of faith sensitivity of humanitarian responses impacts on the effectiveness of interventions and on displaced women. Interventions overlooking survivors' religious worldviews can undermine their coping capacities and psychosocial wellbeing by failing to draw on their religious coping mechanisms to address spiritual struggles (emerging from experiences of abuse) and to mitigate against the risk of violence intersecting with religion.

To ease the socio-economic costs of VAW, recommendations include:

1. Humanitarian policy and practice to recognise the significance of religious influences on displaced women's resilience and vulnerability and to integrate religious factors into interventions to mitigate risks and build resilience more effectively.
2. Integrate religious risk and resilience factors as cross-cutting issues into age, gender and diversity policy and programmes, including gender analysis, intersectional and socioecological approaches.
3. Develop faith-sensitive strategies to reduce intersectional vulnerabilities and prevent VAW by drawing on religious resources, for example, by engaging with informal female leaders/women's faith organisations.
4. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) practitioners to recognise and support the religious coping mechanisms of survivors.

## Introduction: Why religion matters

Religion remains an overlooked and under-theorised category in humanitarian and forced migration research, policy and practice. Yet, it remains an important concern for many people, with 8 in 10 people from the general population maintaining some religious affiliation globally.<sup>1</sup>

With VAW being widespread across regions and 1 in 3 women experiencing violence in her lifetime, and increased risks of VAW in forced displacement (with up to 7 in 10 women subjected to sexual violence in countries of refuge<sup>2</sup>), innovative and integrated approaches are needed to prevent, respond and mitigate a continuum of VAW in

the forced migration experience (from conflict, transit to refuge).

This briefing presents evidence that religion is an important matter for forced migrant women survivors of VAW, shaping their resilience and vulnerability, yet religion remains an overlooked category in humanitarian policy, research, and practice.

Practical approaches to VAW, such as intersectional and socioecological approaches, have the potential to account for religion, as intersecting with gender and other factors at micro, meso and macro levels, in shaping vulnerability and resilience.

## Understanding religion

There is no single universal definition of religion. Herein, religion is referred to as a system of belief or practices regarding a supernatural power.<sup>3</sup> But, as this study shall show, in lived experiences of forced migration, religion often manifests as personal and non-organised. Individual religious beliefs and practices may or may not depend on an organised belief system or any religious institution. Religion does not exist in isolation, it intersects with many factors, including culture, politics and power. In real life, it is enacted by social actors and can contribute to, or counter, VAW. Yet, religion can help marginalised social groups assert and resist power.

This briefing uses a pragmatic approach to religion, allowing it to be understood from displaced woman's perspective. It adopts a hybrid definition of religion to combine the function and substance of religion and account for 'what religion is' and 'what religion does'.

## Methodology: About the research

The influences of religion on the continuum of violence in forced migration have been under-researched. Situated at the intersections of VAW, religion and displacement, this four-year study, "*Religion, forced migration and the continuum of violence: an intersectional and ecological analysis*", explored religious influences on forced migrant experiences of VAW. It examined how religion shapes the vulnerability and resilience of displaced women subjected to VAW and how humanitarian practitioners account for religion when supporting survivors.

Drawing upon empirical research with 36 humanitarian practitioners and 38 displaced Muslim and Christian women in Turkey/Türkiye (Ankara) and Tunisia (Medenine and Zarzis) and mixed methods (primarily qualitative and secondarily quantitative tools), the study demonstrates how experiences of VAW, discrimination and exclusion are influenced by, and in turn influence, religious constructs over time and place. Using an intersectional and socioecological framework (Figure 1), the study unpacked multiple vulnerability and resilience factors, centring on religion as an intersecting category.

## Why integrate intersectional and socioecological approaches in the religion and VAW nexus?

Integrated approaches help identify causes of vulnerability and sources of resilience around different identity markers manifested at individual, family, community and societal levels in different locations and stages of forced migration.

A socioecological framework helps to understand the social context and factors shaping experiences of violence at different levels. An intersectional approach, in turn, enables the identification of the multiple layers of discrimination and risk factors associated with contextually marginalised social identity markers.

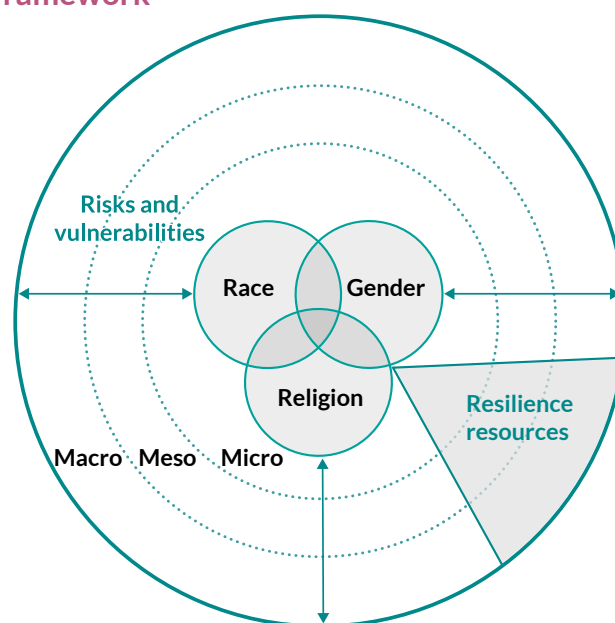
Social lives are complex. An integrated intersectional and socioecological approach provides a powerful lens to deconstruct multiple micro, meso and macro-level factors that accumulate around people's intersecting identities. The intersectional and socioecological factors shape experiences of vulnerability and resilience in the specific contexts of forced displacement.

In humanitarian crises, the integrated approach helps unpack the wider social context in which protective and risk factors manifest in armed conflict, transit and refuge.

In diverse social contexts of forced migration, intersectional and socioecological approaches enable the identification of the risk and protective factors in the changing stages of forced migration.

- An integrated framework in this study explored the two dimensions of religion - resilience and vulnerability - and accounted for multidimensional religious influences across the socioecological framework.
- Accounting for religious identities as well as their intersections with other identity markers (such as gender, age, race etc.) improves the understanding of risk and protective factors in addressing VAW.

**Figure 1** Intersectional and socioecological framework



## Findings: A continuum of VAW in conflict and forced migration

Women of different backgrounds experience armed conflict and forced migration differently, facing a range of gender-specific vulnerabilities, including gendered violence.<sup>4</sup> Strong evidence indicates that the risk of gendered violence increases in forced migration due to multiple socio-economic causes, including loss of social connections, family and finance, poor mental health and lack of language skills.<sup>5</sup> Forced migrants are subjected to a continuum of violence – the incidents of violence at different time and locations.<sup>6</sup>

- Forcibly displaced women reported repeated and intersecting types of victimisation by different perpetrators (including smugglers, traffickers, persons in authority, militia, other migrants, partners and spouses).
- Different forms of VAW continued across their lives and accumulated in the continuum of violence in forced migration: the longer the displacement, the more incidents of abuse.

- VAW included direct violence at the interpersonal level (e.g. harassment, rape, beating, domestic violence), cultural violence at the community level (e.g. racism, xenophobia) and structural violence at the societal level (e.g. institutional discrimination and socio-economic inequalities).
- Some religious (mis)beliefs from selective reading of religious texts were used by perpetrators (described as 'non-religious') to justify domestic abuse.
- A few women were advised by religious leaders to remain patient and endure domestic abuse.

## Two aspects of religion in experiences of VAW

Religion is an integral part of the forced migration experience; it travels with women across borders and influences their experiences of VAW and displacement. Religion can operate as a vulnerability factor across interpersonal, community and societal levels, intersecting with other disadvantaged identity markers such as gender, age, race and legal status. Religion can also serve as a resilience resource from which survivors draw enormous strength, indicating that the transcendent realm also mattered to them and shaped their experiences.

## Religion as intersectional and socioecological vulnerability

Multiple dimensions of women's identity shape intersectional vulnerability to VAW. In this study, religion-related vulnerabilities intersected with, and were compounded, by factors such as perceived marital status, age, race, legal immigration status and aid conditionality.

A perceived religious identity based on how people look can escalate the intersectional vulnerability of displaced women to discrimination and persecution because of perceptions about their religious identity.

- African respondents, as minorities in Tunisia, were vulnerable because of intersecting racial and religious discrimination.
- Levantine respondents, who self-identified as Sunni, were vulnerable to religious persecution (based on their perceived religious belonging as suggested by their religious attire) in conflict due to being the majority group in Syria, and a minority group in Iraq, which in both instances prompted their displacement.

Religion also intersected with gender, race, legal status and ethnicity in the continuum of violence over time and place.

- Women who identified with oppressed religious and ethnic groups experienced increased vulnerability to violence in internal displacement and transit.
- In Tunisia, Christian and Muslim women felt discriminated against in housing and employment because of their race. Christian women also felt disadvantaged because of their religion.
- In Türkiye, Arab Syrian women were more disadvantaged than Turkoman Syrians in informal aid distributions, while Iraqi forced migrant women, under international protection, could not access aid made available to Syrians under temporary protection, due to their legal status and nationality.

The gender-culture-religion nexus shaped experiences of interpersonal and domestic violence among half of respondents from Syria and Iraq before and during displacement.

- Some religious beliefs, such as in destiny and patience being rewarded in the afterlife, deterred women from seeking help, and compounded their vulnerability.

In Türkiye, experiences of sexual harassment and transactional sex offers by males from host and refugee communities increased with the length of time in settlement and were associated with women's aid dependency, and lack of income and work. For single, widowed and separated women, their nationality, unregistered legal status, administrative delays, changes in marital status and having too few children restricted the aid for which they were eligible, or else disqualified them from receiving aid.

## Religion as resilience and coping resource

Displaced women valued and relied on their faith and religion as primary coping mechanisms in the absence of other support. Mothers also mentioned bringing up their children and working toward better future for themselves and their children as a source of motivation.

For many women religion remained the only available resource in displacement. Personal religious resources (beliefs, practices and experiences) strengthened their resilience and coping capacities. Communal religious resources (e.g. places of worship and religious leaders) in displacement were less available due to physical barriers (among Christian respondents) and distrust of religious institutions (among Muslim respondents). In some circumstances, however, e.g. sexual trafficking and detention, women could not use their religious coping methods, e.g. prayers and reading religious scriptures, due to fear of oppression, physical barriers and lack of religious accessories. Only one survivor of sexual trafficking accessed pastoral care remotely.

During extreme hardship, displaced women scored high in the religious coping scale<sup>7</sup> and adapted religious coping strategies with buffering negative effects of VAW on their mental health.

- Survivors relied on cognitive, behavioural, and spiritual/emotional adapted religious coping strategies derived from their religious beliefs, practices, and experiences, respectively.
- Religious coping strategies enabled them to make sense of their experience, build resistance to their abusers, keep calm, connect with the divine, find empowerment and patience, and heal.
- Positive religious coping methods supported women emotionally, while negative religious coping intensified spiritual struggles, e.g. self-blame, feelings of guilt and that God was punishing them.
- Religious coping often coincided with self-reliance and a sense of 'stronger self'.

High psychological distress and high religious coping coincided among displaced women survivors. Both migration and violence related stressors accumulated and compounded women's psychological distress, which was buffered by their religious coping strategies, potentially preventing further mental health problems.

## The religious dis/engagement continuum in humanitarian practice

Humanitarian protection, VAW, gender-based violence (GBV) and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) practitioners engaged with religion along the religious dis/engagement continuum, using inactive, reactive and active approaches. Inactive approaches reaffirmed previous studies demonstrating the privatisation, marginalisation and instrumentalization of religion, inadvertently excluding displaced survivors' religious needs.<sup>8</sup> The re/active approaches show promise that humanitarian actors can engage with the religious dimensions of fortitude and vulnerability when supporting displaced survivors, despite the predominantly secular interpretation of humanitarian standards. Staff engaged with religion due to different reasons, including contextualising interventions and to 'do no harm'. New pathways for constructive religious engagement to strengthen protection outcomes for displaced survivors are needed, particularly in relation to VAW and MHPSS programming.

## The challenge facing policymakers

With religion directly impacting displaced women survivors, governments and international organisations must strategically consider how policies and programmes respond to women's lived experiences of VAW and religion to ensure inclusive humanitarian outcomes.

## Recommendations

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals and 'leaving no one behind' requires concerted efforts to strengthen humanitarian protection, prevent VAW, and support displaced populations. This research offers the following recommendations to governments, humanitarian agencies and funders:

1. Consider religion as an important matter of forcibly displaced women in age, gender and diversity policies and programmes. Recognise the significance of religious influences on displaced women's resilience and vulnerability and adopt contextual gender and faith-sensitive approaches.

2. Integrate religion into intersectional and socioecological approaches to resilience building and risk reduction in VAW programming by:
  - A. Integrating religious factors into situational analysis, needs assessments, and project and policy design, monitoring and evaluation;
  - B. Adapting gender analysis to religious contexts by including religious, social and cultural factors.
3. Develop religiously-sensitive risk mitigation strategies to draw on religious resources to reduce intersectional vulnerabilities, prevent VAW and religion-based discrimination, including working with informal women leaders and women's faith organisations to dismantle misconceptions around VAW and seeking help.
4. Integrate religion into MHPSS and resilience building to support survivors who use religious coping mechanisms, for example, by facilitating access to the religious resources they need.

## About the author

Dr Sandra Iman Pertek, s.m.pertek.1@bham.ac.uk, sandra.pertek@gmail.com  
 ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Birmingham  
 Independent Gender and Protection Consultant  
 Project website: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/departments/social-policy-sociology-criminology/research/projects/2023/integrated-intersectional-and-socioecological-approach.aspx>

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## Endnotes

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