CRITICAL ADVICE FOR PRESIDENT-ELECT BIDEN:
A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH FOR DISPLACED WOMEN AND GIRLS

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December 2020

A displaced woman and her child in Syria's northeastern city of Hasakah (Photo by DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP via Getty Images)
INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian crises and forced displacement disproportionately affect women and girls. They exacerbate existing gender inequalities. They also expose women and girls to risks of violence and exploitation. There are more than 79.5 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, about half of whom are female. And there are even more people who need humanitarian assistance. Threats to the safety and well-being of women and girls globally have never been more acute. And now, the coronavirus has further intensifying these risks.

As the world continues to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls worldwide are facing enormous challenges. These include a dramatic increase in the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV), the loss of livelihoods, disrupted education, and reduced access to essential health services, including sexual and reproductive health services. Women and girls who have had to flee their homes also face barriers to seeking asylum. Yet global support for programs to address these issues falls short.

The United States has a crucial leadership role to play. But the policies and rhetoric of the Trump administration have significantly undermined global efforts to improve the situation for displaced women and girls and those in humanitarian crises. The Biden administration will shortly inherit the damage wrought by his predecessor. The good news is that the incoming administration has a headstart. Throughout his presidential campaign, President-elect Biden developed and articulated important commitments to reverse the harmful consequences for women and girls resulting from the current administration’s policies and to make the protection of both refugees and women and girls a priority.

While President-elect Biden’s campaign commitments place great emphasis on both women and girls and on refugee protection and humanitarianism, his incoming administration should provide additional clarity and detail on a range of critical issues. The Biden administration should make clear that 1) domestic and global policies and commitments directed broadly on gender equity and women include a focus on the needs and rights of displaced women and girls, and 2) policies and commitments directed broadly on refugee protection and humanitarianism include a gendered analysis of their impact on the rights and interests of women and girls.

In addition to the direct impacts of critical policy changes, the changes we recommend would, if implemented, go a long way toward achieving the broader objective of reinvigorating U.S. leadership in the global effort to promote gender equity in the broad context of humanitarian response.
Asylum

The Trump administration developed and implemented dozens of policies and practices that have made seeking and obtaining asylum in the United States virtually impossible for the vast majority of would-be asylum seekers. For women and girls fleeing persecution—including severe domestic violence—obtaining asylum is a fundamental step to safety.

Former attorney general Jeff Sessions’ 2018 decision to effectively disqualify domestic violence victims from eligibility for asylum has been particularly detrimental. By viewing domestic violence as almost always a matter solely involving private actors (with highly limited state responsibility) and effectively excluding survivors as part of a distinct social group, the Trump administration ignored “the systemic abuse of women’s rights in countries where authorities cannot or do not protect women threatened with domestic violence.” Moreover, by offering his views and position by diktat, the attorney general disregarded the evolution of administrative case law without reasonable justification.

To rectify this, President-elect Biden has committed to restoring asylum eligibility for domestic violence survivors by reinstating “explicit asylum protections” for survivors through the Department of Justice. Ensuring that survivors might be fairly considered for asylum in the United States when their home countries are unwilling or unable to protect them is critically important, especially as so many women and girls are seeking protection in the United States after fleeing gender-based violence (GBV) in Central America and other countries.

The Biden administration should explicitly recognize that reference in the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees to “membership in a particular social group” provides critically important space for asylum claims from those who risk severe mistreatment on return. More importantly, perhaps, the new administration should also recognize that, as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has advised, “the term membership of a particular social group should be read in an evolutionary manner, open to the diverse and changing nature of groups in various societies and evolving international human rights norms.”

A broad and detailed listing of measures to effectively reinstate domestic violence as a possible ground for asylum is beyond the scope of this issue brief. But a new administration should, at a minimum:

- Immediately rescind former attorney general Sessions’ June 2018 opinion in the Matter of A.B. This opinion stated that “generally, claims by aliens pertaining to
domestic violence or gang violence perpetrated by non-governmental actors will not qualify for asylum.”

- Withdraw the proposed regulation, “Procedures for Asylum and Withholding of Removal; Credible Fear and Reasonable Fear Review.” As Refugees International has indicated, this regulation represents a particularly broad and ambitious effort by the Trump administration to end asylum as a practical matter. Significantly, it provides implementation guidance that is consistent with the attorney general’s June 2018 opinion. Thus, the rule would prohibit adjudicators from considering important evidence to support GBV claims. Asylum seekers would be prevented from presenting evidence to document the cultural context in their countries of origin as it relates to race, religion, nationality, or gender. And adjudicators would generally deny asylum to those whose membership in a particular social group is based on “interpersonal disputes” and/or “private criminal acts of which governmental authorities were unaware or uninvolved,” which would often apply to survivors of GBV. Under this rule, very few women and girls seeking asylum in the United States—indeed, very few people at all—would be approved.1
- Train asylum officers within the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to handle gender-related asylum claims fairly and effectively. Refer to UNHCR’s guidance and training documents, including their 2002 guidelines on gender-related persecution and their 2012 guidelines on claims to refugee status based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity to support this training. These documents detail that “the refugee definition, properly interpreted...covers gender-related claims” and decision-makers can, and in many cases should, grant asylum based on someone’s “actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity.”

Refugee Resettlement

The Trump administration has fundamentally altered the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP)—the program through which the United States annually determines the number of refugees it will admit from countries hosting those in fear of persecution around the world. In particular, President Trump has dramatically reduced the number of refugees resettled in the United States and has significantly limited the percentage of resettled refugees from Muslim-majority countries.

Before 2017, the United States was a leader in refugee resettlement worldwide, admitting on average about 72,000 people in the preceding ten years. Indeed, between 2003 and 2018, the United States resettled 63 percent of all submissions sent to resettlement

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1 This regulation “would dramatically curtail eligibility for asylum in the United States by barring or discrediting broad categories of claims and making it extremely difficult for asylum seekers to get a fair or full hearing.” It would prohibit people from seeking asylum in the United States if they had lived at least a year in a transit country, and it would dramatically raise the bar of what the U.S. government considers to be persecution.
Read more from Refugees International: https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/7/28/a-primer-on-the-trump-administrations-most-ambitious-effort-to-end-asylum
countries for consideration by UNHCR. But by the 2021 fiscal year, President Trump had reduced the annual refugee admissions ceiling to 15,000, the lowest number in the history of the program.

Between January through October 2020, UNHCR identified 18 percent of its resettlement cases as “women and girls at risk” because they face severe protection challenges. Resettlement to the United States could be lifesaving for these displaced women and girls. At a time when nearly one percent of the world’s population is displaced, the dramatic U.S. reduction in its refugee ceiling severely limits the ability for those refugees at greatest at risk to access safety. For overwhelming numbers of women and girls that UNHCR and NGOs identify to be in need of resettlement, it means that access to protection and a durable solution in the United States is nearly impossible.

The significant reduction in refugee admissions has also damaged the infrastructure of the USRAP. As of April 2019, at least 100 out of 325 domestic resettlement offices were forced to close or suspend their refugee resettlement programs because not enough refugees were arriving to the United States, which reduced resettlement offices’ caseload and associated federal funding. In fiscal year 2020, only 11,814 refugees arrived in the United States through the USRAP, despite an already low refugee admissions ceiling of 18,000 for that year. Of those, it is likely that NGOs and UNHCR submitted between 10 and 20 percent of the cases under the resettlement criteria, “women and girls at risk.” Yet, in mid-2020, the Trump administration stopped accepting resettlement referrals from UNHCR altogether.

Once refugees arrive in the United States, domestic resettlement offices’ capacity to provide specialized services for women and girls is impeded by both a lack of specific information about each case and inadequate funding. Even prior to the Trump administration’s decision to stop accepting resettlement submissions from UNHCR, information sharing between domestic resettlement agencies, UNHCR, and resettlement NGOs operating overseas was limited at best. This, despite the fact that some of the NGOs overseas are affiliated with U.S.-based resettlement agencies. According to several staff and directors at domestic resettlement offices, when receiving incoming refugees, the resettlement offices only receive a few words about the background of each case—and only if the refugee has a significant and easily identifiable need such as a serious medical condition. To effectively provide services to refugees resettling in the United States—especially women and girls at risk—the resettlement agencies would benefit from more detailed personal background information that could impact their integration.

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2 “Women and girls at risk” are “women or girls who have protection problems particular to their gender, and lack effective protection normally provided by male family members. They may be: single heads of families, unaccompanied girls or women, or together with their male (or female) family members.” For more information: https://www.unhcr.org/46f7c0ee2.pdf.
In addition to a lack of information, domestic resettlement offices also lack funding specifically designated to serving the unique needs of arriving women and girls. Virtually all of the federal funds the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provides to domestic resettlement offices through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) focus on vocational training and employment support. The Preferred Communities program provides some funding to support intensive case management for at-risk populations including single parents, survivors of violence and torture, survivors of GBV, and women at risk. However, intensive case management does not include counseling from a licensed practitioner, adequate psychosocial support, or clinical management of GBV. The Survivors of Torture program also provides additional services to some refugees. But there is no distinct federal funding to support these types of services specifically for women and girls at risk. According to staff at several domestic resettlement offices, a funding source specifically for women and girls is needed, appropriate, and would be well utilized.

The Biden administration should:

- Reaffirm its commitment to reaching an overall annual refugee resettlement ceiling of 125,000 no later than fiscal year 2022. To signal immediate support for increased international responsibility sharing in refugee resettlement, amend and significantly increase the Trump administration’s 15,000 ceiling to 100,000 for 2021 (while recognizing that damage done to the U.S. Refugee Admissions program may make it impossible to reach that total in the current fiscal year).
- Accept resettlement case referrals from UNHCR. UNHCR has longstanding expertise in identifying vulnerable women and girls who will benefit from third-country resettlement.
- Improve information sharing between the organizations submitting resettlement cases for consideration (including UNHCR and designated NGOs) and domestic U.S. resettlement agencies receiving cases. While respecting the need for applicant consent and privacy, seek to ensure that resettlement agencies in the United States receive more information about cases they are being asked to manage, including cases involving serious issues such as GBV.
- Provide funding through the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to domestic resettlement agencies specifically earmarked to provide services to women and girl refugees whom UNHCR has designated as “women and girls at risk.” Resettlement offices should tailor services to each individual case. Still, available services need to include access to critical health care, trauma counseling, psychosocial support, and clinical management of rape or other forms of GBV as necessary.
GBV takes many forms, including intimate partner violence (IPV), conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), sexual assault, human trafficking, forced and early marriage, and other types of exploitation. Risks of women and girls experiencing these harms increase in situations of forced displacement and humanitarian emergencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to contain it have further exacerbated these risks. For example, among a group of 852 displaced women and women living in post-conflict communities across 15 countries in Africa, 73 percent reported an increase in IPV, 51 percent reported an increase in sexual violence, and 32 percent reported an increase in forced and early marriage since the first part of 2020 when the pandemic began. This increase in GBV among displaced women and girls is emerging as an alarming trend around the world. A UNHCR-led network of NGOs and UN agencies working on behalf of people affected by humanitarian crises reported that in August 2020, the frequency of GBV incidents increased in 90 percent of its operations. And in Latin America, the Colombia Ministry of Health reported that incidents of GBV among its Venezuelan population increased by almost 40 percent between January and September 2020 in comparison to 2019. These numbers are cause for concern and immediate attention.

Leadership

To confront this surge in GBV globally—especially against displaced women and girls—the Biden administration must make the prevention of and response to GBV a top priority. Leadership should start within the White House, and the new administration must take a government-wide approach to address this problem.

By the end of the Obama administration, there were several effective strategies and measures in place. This was reflected, for example, in the 2016 Update to the administration’s GBV strategy, referred to as the 2016 GBV Strategy. That document emphasized that GBV is a human rights abuse and undermines “the public, health, economic stability, and security of nations.” Therefore, as the Strategy affirms, the United States has a strong interest in preventing GBV worldwide. The Strategy was issued pursuant to Executive Order 13623, “Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Women and Girls Globally,” which ensured that the administration directed specific attention toward effectively addressing GBV through a multi-year strategy and mandated the 2016 review. This order also asserted that the administration must make preventing and responding to gender-based violence a “cornerstone” of its “commitment to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment.”

Over the past four years, many of the prior administration’s efforts were disregarded or undermined. The Trump administration made it much more difficult for displaced women and girls to access sexual and reproductive health care, despite evidence that this kind
of care is essential for those at risk of GBV. Furthermore, President Trump did not identify GBV as an issue that mandated focused White House attention and concern.

President Biden must make clear that these issues will once again represent a key priority for the U.S. government, even as the new administration updates the strategies to reflect the new and evolving circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing, urgent humanitarian needs globally.

President-elect Biden should:

- Recommit—through an updated Executive Order—to the principles and the major provisions of Executive Order 13623, “Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Women and Girls Globally.”
- Establish a Presidential Task Force to Prevent and Respond to GBV Globally (PTF), composed of senior-level staff from relevant administration agencies including the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Homeland Security. The PTF should update the 2016 GBV Strategy, which aimed to integrate GBV prevention and response efforts across all U.S. government work, agencies, and programs. The PTF should also be responsible for overseeing its implementation as it coordinates and evaluates global GBV responses.
- Allocate at least $300 million of new funding for implementation of an update to the 2016 GBV Strategy. This recommendation is informed by civil society requests for at least “$229 million for international programs to address GBV, female genital mutilation/cutting, and child, early, and forced marriage, as well as an additional $71 million for special interagency initiatives.” This funding should include resources for necessary personnel, capacity building, and training.

**Multilateral Engagement**

“The Biden Plan to End Violence Against Women” notes that displaced women and girls are especially disadvantaged because they have limited access to education, work, and health care—especially sexual and reproductive health care. Of course, they are also at increased risk of gender-based violence and exploitation. The president-elect has pledged to use diplomacy and development programs as tools to address gender-based violence and exploitation experienced by women and girls, particularly those affected by conflict or forced displacement.

As part of his plan to address GBV globally, the president-elect has committed to re-engaging with multilateral institutions engaged in preventing and responding to GBV. This is a critical commitment that will have far-reaching impacts on improving protection for women and girls. It will also mark a significant change in approach, from an administration that has demonstrated both hostility toward multilateral institutions supporting sexual and reproductive health and a willingness to distort the policies and
practices of such institutions—such as by claiming that the UN was promoting a “pro-abortion” agenda. A new Biden administration approach will reflect a welcome departure from what Refugees International has described as “continued hostility toward sexual and reproductive health care [which] plays a critical role enhancing the well-being of women around the world.”

Beyond rejecting these confrontational approaches toward international institutions, the new administration has important opportunities to promote collaboration through support for a range of global initiatives. For example, the “Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies” is a significant, relatively recent initiative made up of a diverse set of stakeholders worldwide. It takes an innovative approach as it aims to “transform the way gender-based violence is addressed in humanitarian emergencies.” The main objective is to ensure that prevention, mitigation, and response to GBV is included in all policies and programs from the beginning stages of a crisis. Members of the Call to Action just approved a new roadmap for 2021 through 2025 that builds upon lessons learned. It is an ideal time for President-elect Biden to encourage and support more robust U.S. engagement in this global initiative.

To re-engage with multilateral institutions, the Biden administration should:

- Take a leadership role in the Call to Action, for example, through senior level participation in the States and Donors Working Group and the Steering Committee for the initiative.
- Ensure that the nominee for Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues is an individual who has worked with distinction on gender and women’s issues at the global level, is prepared to prioritize U.S. engagement in global coalitions and initiatives, and has experience addressing challenges faced by displaced women and girls.
- Create within the U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN), a senior advisor position dedicated to women’s issues, including concerns particular to displaced women and girls. The advisor would seek to coordinate policy within USUN and collaborate with other UN missions in New York on these issues.

Localization and Inclusion

President-elect Biden has committed to “a comprehensive initiative” to support and elevate local women leaders globally. This will be a welcome initiative on several levels. And it could bolster measures already in process, like that of “supporting local capacities and commitments,” included in USAID’s 2019 Policy Framework. However, President-elect Biden’s commitment must translate into additional resources in the hands of local women leaders who are pushing back against GBV. Local women’s organizations are especially well placed to respond to GBV in their communities because they are always present, they have already built extensive networks, and they understand the context in which the violence occurs. The COVID-19 pandemic has further reinforced the
importance of localization as movement restrictions have limited the abilities of service providers to access women and girls in need. Therefore, supporting women leaders in displaced communities is crucial to identifying and responding to GBV.

In practice, this will require some changes to the U.S. model of foreign aid as it now stands. Many locally led organizations do not have the funds or capacity to handle burdensome reporting requirements, thus eliminating them from consideration for U.S. funding. Although the United States signed up to the Grand Bargain in 2016—an agreement between 63 UN member states, UN agencies, inter-governmental organizations and NGOs—progress toward meeting the commitment to provide 25 percent of foreign aid directly to local organizations by 2020 has been dismal. As a general matter, donors such as the United States have a long way to go to meet this objective. In 2016, 3.1 percent of global humanitarian funding went to local organizations. Since then, the percentages marginally increased until 2019, when funding to local actors actually decreased by 2.1 percent.

To effectively work towards U.S. government objectives and global Grand Bargain commitments, U.S. government agencies need to do a better job of investing in the administrative and financial infrastructure of local women’s organizations. That way, these local organizations will be better equipped to “engage more directly in humanitarian action without international intermediaries.”

Supporting local organizations that provide a variety of humanitarian services is an important goal. Of these, however—particularly in the short-term—the United States should prioritize organizations involved in local GBV prevention and response. Given the dramatic rise in GBV and the disruption of services due to the pandemic, support to local, women-led organizations that continue to operate within their communities is crucial to ensuring the safety of women and girls.

UN Secretary General Guterres referred to intimate partner violence as the “shadow pandemic” during this time of COVID-19 and noted that, “for many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: in their own homes.” Subsequently, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) issued guidance reaffirming the absolute necessity to “strengthen relationships with community workers and volunteers,” support local women responding to GBV, and to treat GBV service actors as “essential workers.” Prioritizing sufficient funds for these actors is therefore also incumbent.

To ensure that U.S. government funding supports local, women-led organizations addressing GBV, under President-elect Biden’s direction, relevant U.S. government agencies should:

- Build the capacity of local, women-led organizations by providing funding directly to these organizations, especially to develop their administrative and financial infrastructure.
• Translate rhetoric about reducing unreasonable reporting requirements into reality in overseas programming. This can be done by reviewing the experiences of organizations (like UNHCR) that have made progress on localization, by studying lessons learned relating to alternative reporting (such as through field visits, joint reviews, and standardized templates), by articulated cost-benefit analysis that adapts obligations based on the context and amounts of funds disbursed, and through other means.

**Legislative Action**

The incoming administration will have the power to dramatically improve the U.S. government’s influence and effectiveness in preventing and responding to GBV among displaced women and girls. However, the Biden administration cannot address these challenges as effectively as possible without legislative support from the Congress.

President-elect Biden should encourage the reintroduction and passage of key legislation addressing GBV globally, including:

• The International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) H.R. 5267, which ensures that addressing violence against women is a key component of U.S. foreign policy.
• The Safe From the Start of 2019 Act H.R. 4092, which increases U.S. support for programs that address GBV from the onset of emergencies and builds capacity to address root causes of this violence.
• The Support UNFPA Funding Act H.R. 4722, which ensures annual U.S. contributions for at least five years to support this UN agency responsible for sexual and reproductive health.

**SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

Within three days of his inauguration, President Trump expanded the so-called “Mexico City Policy,” which prohibited U.S. funds for global family planning from supporting any organization that provided abortion services or information about abortion using funds from any source including non-U.S. funds. This policy, which President Reagan introduced in 1984, has largely been in effect during Republican presidential administrations and rescinded by Democratic presidents.

In 2017, the Trump administration expanded this policy. The “Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance” policy, like the “Mexico City Policy,” does not allow U.S. funds to support organizations that provide any information about abortion. The Trump administration initiative expands the former policy and applies it not just to family planning organizations, but to a wide range of global health funding, including funding for
HIV treatment, maternal and child health care, nutrition programs, etc. In 2019, the administration extended this policy even further, requiring recipient organizations to ensure that even sub-grantee organizations do not provide information about abortions. This has had devastating effects on the health and well-being of some of the most vulnerable women worldwide, including displaced women and survivors of GBV. A State Department review acknowledged that the policy adversely affected many critical health care services because local service providers declined U.S. funding rather than deny women information about abortion.

The Trump administration further politicized sexual and reproductive health by cutting off support for the most important global institution providing this essential care globally: the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

In 2016, the United States provided nearly $70 million of support to UNFPA. Yet within months of President Trump taking office in 2017, his administration cut all U.S. funding for the agency. This decision has stood throughout his presidency. UNFPA serves some of the world’s most vulnerable women and girls, including displaced survivors of sexual violence. It does so by providing sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, maternal health care, and treatment for HIV/AIDS. Therefore, President Trump’s decision to zero out financial support to UNFPA for the last three years has been harmful to the health and safety of millions of displaced women and girls, as well as many other groups like men and women living with HIV.

In particular, these funding cuts have had tremendous negative effects on displaced women and girls, many of whom are affected by conflict. UNFPA provides maternal health care and menstrual hygiene materials to displaced women and girls in places like Jordan, Syria, Yemen, and Venezuela. Cutting off funding to UNFPA and other sexual and reproductive health care providers only makes it more difficult for displaced women and girls to access these already scarce services and resources. Moreover, it is striking that the Trump administration’s strategy to implement the Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017 omits sexual and reproductive health. This omission denies an essential part of women’s recovery from conflict.

In light of these developments, President-elect Biden’s commitment to “restore U.S. support for women’s health” could have substantial implications for women and girls in a humanitarian emergency or in displacement crises. Displaced women and girls are at increased risk of GBV and often find it difficult to access desperately needed sexual and reproductive health care. To this end, President-elect Biden has promised to resume U.S. funding for UNFPA. Considering several years during which the United States provided zero support, the Biden administration should significantly increase the U.S. fiscal year 2020 contribution to UNFPA from levels in previous years. To further improve displaced women and girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health services, President-elect
Biden indicated he will rescind the “Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance” policy. Fulfilling this latter commitment is particularly urgent.

To support displaced women and girls’ access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, the Biden administration should:

- Withdraw the “Protection of Life in Global Health Assistance” policy and restart the provision of U.S. funding to organizations that provide critical sexual and reproductive health services globally.
- Immediately restore U.S. funding to UNFPA, reversing the Trump administration’s April 2017 decision to terminate all U.S. support for UNFPA. Significantly increase U.S. contributions to UNFPA from previous levels to at least $111 million for fiscal year 2022, as recommended by, a coalition of more than 90 humanitarian, development, women’s rights, legal, and health organizations.
- In policy documents that address the issue of women in conflict (such as USAID’s 2020 Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Policy and UN Security Council Resolution 1820 on Women, Peace, and Security), include a focus on sexual and reproductive health for women and girls in emergencies. Language recognizing the need for sexual and reproductive health care should include reference to access to contraception, and family planning services for all women and girls, not just for those in traditional family structures.

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

COVID-19 has affected virtually every corner of the world, with more than 67 million infections and 1.5 million deaths. For displaced women and girls, the effects of COVID-19-related mitigation measures have been especially pronounced, including the loss of livelihoods, financial insecurity, interruption of education, a lack of child care services, difficulties accessing sexual and reproductive health services, increases in GBV, and enhanced movement restrictions.

**Gender-based Violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

GBV is increasing among displaced women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic, while at the same time, measures to control the spread of the disease have disrupted programs to address this rise in GBV.
The Biden administration needs to include preventing and responding to GBV in COVID-19 response plans. It should:

- Ensure that all U.S.-funded global COVID-19 response plans include specific GBV strategies with built-in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.
- Require that all multilateral global health efforts the United States supports—including the World Health Organization (WHO) and UN COVID response efforts—contain a specific GBV objective. This will help to ensure that agencies allocate funds directly to GBV programming.
- Develop rapid response plans to prevent GBV spikes during COVID-19 and future global health and humanitarian crises. Through USAID or other relevant agencies, create GBV response teams—similar to the Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DART)—to quickly deploy GBV-specific technical assistance and support to governments with less capacity to respond. These rapid response plans should be up to date, and U.S. government agencies should be ready to utilize them in the future.
- Encourage Congress to include funding to support GBV prevention, mitigation, and response activities as part of any future COVID-19 supplemental appropriations bill.

**Economic Sustainability**

COVID-19 is severely challenging the economic well-being of women worldwide. This of special concern in itself, but also because women generally contribute large amounts of their earnings to their families’ health and well-being. Even before the pandemic, women faced some overarching challenges limiting their financial stability and economic inclusion. Some of these include performing most of the unpaid care work, often being paid less than men, facing widespread violence and harassment, and regularly working in the informal economy with limited legal protection.

President-elect Biden has committed to addressing these challenges and improving women’s economic sustainability globally. The Biden team aims to do so by improving women and girls’ access to education, promoting inclusive banking that welcomes women, improving women’s access to capital, and removing legal barriers that bar some women from formal employment.

Refugee women are among the most economically marginalized groups in the world. Refugees and other displaced women often face additional regulatory, legal, administrative, and practical barriers on top of the obstacles that women face generally. As the pandemic hit, refugees were “60 percent more likely to be working in the sectors highly impacted by COVID-19 and the economic downturn,” according to a study from Refugees International, the Center for Global Development, and the International Rescue Committee. Among refugees, women are even more likely to be working in these sectors. As a result, they are more likely to lose their jobs as the pandemic affects
businesses worldwide. The challenges women face, the additional obstacles that displaced women face, and the disproportionately negative effect the pandemic has had on refugees’ livelihoods, combine to make this economic impact especially hard on displaced women.

To improve displaced women’s economic sustainability, the Biden administration should:

- Include displaced women and girls in global initiatives aimed to improve women’s access to decent jobs, education, financing, and capital.
- Increase investments in programs aimed at promoting economic inclusion for refugees with a specific focus on displaced women’s needs. These programs should ensure displaced women’s safety, empower their financial decision-making, and promote burden-sharing of unpaid household work.
- Provide additional incentives to host country governments to permit refugees access to the formal labor market now and after the pandemic subsides, emphasizing women’s economic inclusion and the rights of women and all others who are provided such access.
- Use U.S. influence in multilateral financial institutions—especially the World Bank—to increase financing for host countries linked to their willingness to promote refugees’ economic inclusion, with a particular emphasis on inclusion of refugee women. Invest in programs aimed to counteract the impact of COVID-19 on refugee women’s inclusion and well-being.
- Promote the inclusion of refugees in host countries’ national COVID-19 response plans. Increase U.S. foreign aid to countries that meaningfully include refugees and asylum seekers in their national COVID-19 response plans, granting them access to social safety nets comprising health care, financial support, etc.

THE WAY FORWARD

Each of the commitments outlined above is important to ensure that going forward, the United States, humanitarian organizations, and host country governments more effectively address the needs of displaced women and girls. The very welcome commitments President-elect Biden made during his campaign are largely (and understandably) of a general nature. As the transition moves forward, it is time to make each of these commitments more specific, actionable, and inclusive.

The Biden campaign signaled important commitments to displaced women and girls. They include promoting access to protection, prevention and response to GBV, access to comprehensive health care, and improvement of economic sustainability. In addition, the campaign has outlined dozens of important initiatives to address the needs of vulnerable women and girls around the world more broadly. The Biden-Harris administration should
ensure that they expand these initiatives to include displaced women and girls as beneficiaries of these efforts. Past policies to protect and assist women and girls have often left out those who are forcibly displaced. The new administration must not make that mistake. And at the same time, all policies on asylum, refugees, and humanitarianism should be subject to continual gender analysis.

President-elect Biden has an opportunity to dramatically improve the lives of displaced women and girls while re-establishing desperately needed U.S. leadership and credibility on these issues. With more than 40 million displaced women and girls, the stakes are high, and the time is now.